

SUBJECT: COUNTERSTRATEGIES AGAINST ONLINE ACTIVISM: THE BRENT SPAR SYNDROME

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Shell is not going to forget lightly its misadventures with the Brent Spar. The Oil Major was taken by complete surprise when the Greenpeace campaign against sinking that former drill platform achieved its goals. What happened to Shell can in fact happen to any corporation. Losing control of the situation as result of the activities of a pressure group has become a nightmare scenario for the modern multinational enterprise.

SHELL DID TOO LITTLE TOO LATE

The Oil Major's first reactive measures have meanwhile become the perfect example of how not to do it. But Shell has learned a lot as well. A comprehensive review of what has become known as the PR disaster of the century indicates that Shell had it all wrong about its own influence on the media. There was a new factor in the game, which had been completely missed out: the role of the internet. That would not be allowed to happen a second time. From July 1996, Shell International sports an internet manager. His name is Simon May, he is 29, and responsible for Shell International's various presences on the internet, and for monitoring and reacting to what is being written and said about Shell in cyberspace. He also helps formulating the Shell group's strategy for how the internet should be used.

May's career began in journalism, and more recently he did a four-year stint in the Sultanate of Oman in charge of the English-language communications for the state-owned oil-company. With him Shell's got a premium catch: May is young and eager, smart and fast, open-minded and nice, everything the image of the Company ought to be. And he understands like no other the internet's potential—also what it could mean for a company like Shell. Simon May openly admits that Shell was

beaten in the new-media war. The Brent Spar affair was one, but the Nigeria situation has also prompted a “massive on-line bombardment” of criticism. To quote May: “There has been a shift in the balance of power, activists are no longer entirely dependent of the existing media. Shell learned it the hard way with the Brent Spar, when a lot of information was disseminated outside the regular channels.”

The Brent Spar affair has brought quite some change of attitude to Shell. Ten years ago the Multinational could afford to blatantly ignore campaigns against the South African Apartheid regime. Although concerns were brewing in-house, to the outside world Shell maintained that the campaigns against Apartheid were not significantly damaging the company. And for the rest Shell kept haughtily mum. Then came the Brent Spar incident and car owners were taking en masse to boycotting Shell's petrol pumps, and such an attitude no longer paid off. Shell came to feel the might of the mass market, and bowed down. An alternative would be worked out for the platform's fate.

But developments did not stop there. A few month later opposition leaders were executed in Nigeria as result of their attacks on the environmental disaster Shell was causing in Ogoni-land, and this caused a renewed storm of protest against Shell. The intimate links between Shell and the military regime came under severe criticism. The Oil Major then went for a new tactic and opened a PR offensive. CEO Cor Herstroter took the initiative in a debate on politically correct entrepreneurship. At the shareholders meeting in 1996 the new chart of business principles at Shell was unveiled, a comprehensive code of conduct with due allowance for human rights.

Does this all point out to a major shift in policies? Or are we witnessing a smart public relation exercise intent on taking some steam from the pressure groups' momentum?

In the beginning of June 1998, Brussels saw a conference devoted to pressure groups' growing influence, organized by the PR agency, Entente International Communication. Entente did research about the way corporations were interacting with pressure groups and vice versa. The findings, presented in a report titled "Putting the Pressure on" are harsh: "Modern day pressure groups have become a major political force in their own right, and are here to stay. They manifest themselves in the use of powerful communication techniques, and they succeed in attracting wide attention and sympathy, projecting their case with great skill via the mass media—they understand the power of PR and of the media "soundbite." And now, increasingly, they do so over the global telecommunication networks.

Their power and influence is bound to grow inexorably over the next years.

Pressure groups are small, loosely structured and operate without overhead or other bureaucratic limitations, they move lightly and creatively. They pursue their aims with single-minded and remorseless dedication. To be on the receiving end of a modern pressure group can be a very uncomfortable experience indeed, sometimes even a very damaging one.

Multinational companies are ill prepared to face this challenge, their responses are often slow and clumsy. There is a "bunker" mentality, and a reluctance to call in experienced help from outside which is surprising—and potentially dangerous. This failure could cost such companies dearly in the future.

At the conference in the SAS Radison Hotel in Brussels, attended by some seventy participants from the corporate world and the PR industry, fear for the unknown prevails. The unpredictable power of pressure groups, consumers, or even normal citizens can take the shape of boycott campaigns, but also of commuters on the (newly privatized) British Railways to move out from a train that has been canceled on short notice. The biggest question remains unanswered: whose turn will it be

next? The Brent Spar affair has left its mark here. By way of illustration the story of Felix Rudolph, an Austrian national who worked himself up from farm hand on his father's estate to manager of a factory producing genetically modified grain. Pioneer Saaten ("Pioneer Grain," the company's name) was not aware of doing anything wrong. The company produces for a small market niche in Central Europe and strives for optimal quality, so as to enable farmers to obtain better yields. All products have been tested extensively, and all test results have been duly registered. So nothing to worry about, that is until the company became the focus of a protest campaign, triggered by an impending referendum in Austria on genetically manipulated foodstuffs. "We suddenly had to engage in debate with the public, something we never had done before. Who's interested in grains anyway?" Felix Rudolph, as he holds his presentation at the Brussels conference, still looks dumbfounded about what overcame him. "Your products are unhealthy and dangerous asserted the pressure groups, and we had no clue what we had to say in return. As soon as you try to explain the extent of a risk, you admit that such a risk exists. In that referendum, 90 percent of the people turned out to be against gene technology, the majority of whom did not know what they were talking about." It is only later that Herr Rudolph understood that his company merely served as an example for the pressure groups. "By engaging in a dialogue, we provided them with a platform to put forward their case. The discussion itself went nowhere." This realization came too late, however. The campaign so much impressed the government that it enacted laws regulating genetically manipulated foodstuffs. An embittered Herr Rudolph: "Now the farmers may foot the bill, and the pressure groups have vanished into thin air!" Pioneer Saaten had to temporarily suspend the production of modified grain. "We will try to explain things better next time we apply for a license."

According to Peter Verhille from the Entente PR agency, the greatest threat to the corporate world's reputation comes from the internet, the pressure groups newest weapon. "A growing number of multinational companies—such as McDonalds and Microsoft—have been viciously attacked on

the Internet by unidentifiable opponents which leave their victims in a desperate search for adequate countermeasures.”

The danger emanating from the new telecommunication media cannot be over-emphasized, says Mr. Verhille. “One of the major strengths of pressure groups—in fact the leveling factor in their confrontation with powerful companies—is their ability to exploit the instruments of the telecommunication revolution. Their agile use of global tools such as the Internet reduces the advantage that corporate budgets once provided.” His conclusions made a hard impact on the participants of the conference. In fact most companies appear slow to incorporate such tools into their own communication strategies. When asked what steps they planned to take to match pressure groups mastery of these channels, most respondents simply repeated their intention to expand into this area or admitted that their preparations were still in a preparatory stage.

As came to light in Brussels, there is one exception to this picture however: Shell international. Internet manager Simon May gave a smashing presentation, which showed very well what Shell had come to learn about the new media. Simon May was also very open in an interview we held with him (befittingly, by email), even though he could understandably not answer all of our questions.

Pressure on the Internet, Threat or Opportunity was the core issue at his presentation. The internet may be a threat to companies, it also offers big opportunities. Simon May states that the fact that anyone can be a publisher cheaply, can be seen, or at least searched and looked at worldwide, and can present his/her viewpoints on homepages or in discussion groups is not merely a menace, but also an unique challenge. “Why are pressure groups so active on the Internet? Because they can!”

Companies should do the same, he argues, but must do it professionally. “On-line activities must be an integral part an overall communication strategy, and should not be simply left to the care of the computer department.”

The basic tenet of the Shell internet site (launched early 1996) was a new strategy based on openness and honesty. Dialogue was the core concept, and sensitive issues were not side-stepped. May is quite

satisfied with the results of this approach and illustrates this with some facts and statistics.

[Http://www.shell.com](http://www.shell.com) receives over 1,100 emails a month, a full-time staff member answers all these mails personally and within forty-eight hours; there is no such thing as a standard reply. There are links to the sites of Shell’s competitors and detractors, and also to progressive social organizations (nothing there more radical than Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, but this aside). Shell also allows opponents to air their views in forums- those are uncensored. Not without pride, Simon May states that Shell is still the only multinational to do this. There is no predetermined internet strategy at Shell, flexibility is the name of the game. “It’s all about being able to react, listen and learn.” His advice to the Brussels conference-goers: “Be careful, technology changes fast, and your audience changes and develops even faster. And think before acting: anything you’re putting up on an Internet site you make globally available.”

Taking care of Shell’s presence on the web is only one of the internet manager’s tasks. He must also monitor and react to what is being written and said about Shell. “The on-line community should not be ignored” was part of his advice in Brussels. “Pressure groups were aware of the potential of the Internet far earlier than the corporate world. There are pressure groups that exist only on the internet, they’re difficult to monitor and to control, you can’t easily enroll as member of these closed groups.”

Listening to the internet community can be an effective barometer of public opinion about your company. The Shell headquarters in London are making a thorough job of it. Specialized, external consultants have been hired who scout the web daily, inventorying all possible ways Shell is being mentioned on the net, and in which context. Things are not made easier by the fact that search engines will assign forty-eight different well-known uses of the word “shell”...

Simon May gladly explains how the work is done. “We use a service which operates from the US, E:Watch, who scan the Web world-wide for references to certain key words and phrases we supply to them. In the U.K. we use a company called Infonic, who does the same thing from a European

perspective. The results they come up with can be completely different, although they have been given the same search criteria, and the search has been done at the same period of time. This can be for a number of reasons, including the methods which they use to search, and the times of day they enter a site to index it.”

Shell also uses so-called intelligent agents. These are search programs that can be trained to improve their performance over time. Simon May: “This is particularly useful for us since our company name has so many different meanings. We can tell the “agent” which results are useful and which ones aren’t, the next time the agent will go out and come back with only those documents which are relevant.”

This monitoring can not be for 100 percent truly effective, but has to be carried out nonetheless, according to Simon May. “You need to keep track of your audience all the time, since you may learn a lot from it.”

Visiting the Shell website, the first surprise is the measure of openness about issues previously wrapped in taboo. There are carefully written features on human rights, the environment, and even the devastation and exploitation of Ogoni-land in Nigeria. The somewhat defensive character of some stories gives an indication as to which issues are still sensitive. Speaking for instance of the massive oil spills in Ogoni-land, for which Shell is held responsible (“totally exaggerated and unproved accusations”), there is always the mention that 80 percent of those have been caused by sabotage by radical resistance groups (this percentage is contested by the groups concerned).

At the site’s discussion forums arranged by subject everybody is allowed a say about Shell’s practices. It is ironic then to see Shell collaborators from Malaysia and Nigeria reacting with dismay about what they read in those forums about their employer.

The question is of course whether this form of openness really yields results. The forums are not intended for people to question Shell; the email facility is provided for that. “The forums are intended for people to debate issues relevant to Shell among themselves, so to speak,” says Simon May. The email service is actually being used quite

intensively to put questions to Shell—these are the 1,100 emails coming in every month. The nature of these questions and their answers remains a secret held by Shell and the emailers.

All in all, one might conclude that this amounts to a fake openness, for show purposes only. After all, in public true discussions are being eschewed. But Simon May would deny that the forums are merely window-dressing: “We do believe quite firmly that people have the right to debate these issues and we provide a place where they can do that in an environment which might just lead to their view being heard in an organization that can make a difference.” Of course these forums function as barometer for what certain people think, May admits, although this is not their primary aim.

At Earth Alarm (the foreign affair project of the Dutch environmental organization Milieudefensie) these rather embellished representations of reality do not cut much ice. “They’ve changed a lot in their communication, they’re far more careful about how they present themselves to the outside world. But that is mostly addressed to their customers here, in the Western world,” says spokesperson Irene Bloemink. “Profits and principles, the first issue of the totally overhauled Shell International Yearly Report, has been only distributed in the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States. That’s where the people are that Shell sees as a potential threat.”

The situation in Ogoni-land has not improved in the two-and-half years since Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged; on the contrary, things have only gone worse, at least till the death of the military dictator General Sani Abacha. Scores of people have been arrested in the beginning of this year by a special military unit, founded specially to “ensure Shell comes back to Ogoni-land.” This would at least suggest some kind of involvement. Yet Shell has done nothing to stop the latest wave of arrests.”

Adopting a code of conduct regarding human rights and the environment is simply not enough. What counts is implementation and enforcement. Shell has not in any way made clear how they intend to translate their good intentions into concrete practice. There is no independent body to monitor the implementation of the code of conduct. Shell is self-congratulating about their first

environmental Annual Report, which they claim, has been thoroughly reviewed by KPMG Management Consultants. Shell considers this a fully independent review. But then, KPMG's environment CEO George Molenkamp goes further in *de Volkskrant* (a Dutch daily newspaper) to say that "accountants don't vouch as such for Shell's policies. Anything that comes in the report is as Shell has decided." Some contradictory viewpoints, I may say," says Irene Bloemink.

It is doubtful whether Shell has really learned anything from its mistakes in Nigeria. There is a new Shell venture in the West African country Tshad that looks as big as the Nigeria operation, and with the same possible consequences. And everything seems to go wrong again. Shell joined in a partnership with Esso and Elf (stakes are 40-40-20 respectively) and intends to start drilling new oil fields in the unstable South of that country. A report on the environment assessment came as an afterthought, according to Earth Watch: the agreements were signed and test drillings had already begun. The local population was informed of what was in store for them as the invading oil-men were underway, and the operators came to the villages to bring the news accompanied by a heavily armed

military escort. In March of 1998, over a hundred civilians were killed by the army as it tried to regain control over an area from the FARF separatist movement, which in its turn highlights its own existence by attacking this oil project. The FARF claims that the earnings of the oil production will exclusively benefit the presidential coterie in the north.

Until now, Shell has been hiding itself behind Esso as the local executive partner responsible for external relations, and has declined to engage in public debates on the subject. Even Simon May doesn't want to burn his fingers on the Chad issue. Not yet, that is.

[Translated by Patrice Riemens, and edited by Renee Turner. This text was written and translated for this volume; it also appeared in the online magazine *Telepolis*, and a two-part version in Dutch appeared in the magazine *Intermediar*. A supplement to this text, focusing on the Shell pipeline in Chad and its World bank financing, can be found at <<http://www.xs4all.nl/~evel/>>.]

SUBJECT: SONGS FROM THE WOOD: NET CULTURE, AUTONOMOUS MYTHOLOGY AND THE LUTHER BLISSETT PROJECT

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DATE: SEPTEMBER 1998

AS DOWN HOME AS I CAN GET

The prime mover was a loose-knit current of Italy's Marxism labeled *operaismo* [workerism], which had absolutely nothing to do with the Communist Party.

In the early sixties the *Operaisti* started to investigate changes in the sociological composition of the working class. At that time, the young mass-

worker of Fordist-Taylorist factories was still the tongue of the compass, the most important segment of the proletariat. The *operaista* intervention in class struggle was based upon a participant observation of the mass-worker's behavior. The mass worker explicitly refused the older generation's work ethic and discipline. This insubordination was the main mover of conflict in the work-

place. Sabotage was not invisible anymore: along with moments of open struggle (strikes and demonstrations) there was a flourishing of micro-tactics to slow down or stop the assembly line.

Operaisti were committed to studying those behaviors and defining the dialectics between class struggle and capitalist development which I'm going to sum up—taking some shortcuts. The continual confrontation between capital and living labor was the cause of all technological innovations and changes in management, which would provoke further changes in the class composition, therefore the conflict would continue on a higher level.

After the so-called Hot Autumn (1969), a season of general strikes and radical struggles with millions of workers taking the streets, proletarian insubordination increased. Struggles became more and more “autonomous” (this was the adjective by which wildcat strikers would describe their occupations: *assemblea autonoma*). In 1973 the self-disbanding of the post-operaista group *Potere Operaio* [Workers' Power] gave origin to the scene renowned as *autonomia operaia organizzata* [organized workers' autonomy]. During the seventies, Italian Autonomia theorists (Toni Negri first among equals) started to investigate and define the existence and subversive behavior of the *operaio sociale*. Such an ambiguous collective noun—hardly translatable into English—served to describe both the youngest generations of industrial workers who had broken away from the work ethic once and for all, and the whole cast of frustrated service workers, “proletarianized” students and white collars, unemployed wo/men and members of youth subcultures whose conflict was clearly “antidialectical.”

“Antidialectical” means that self-organization, wildcat strikes, occupations and acts of sabotage did not take place within the realm of negotiated class struggle, indeed, they even cut loose from the traditional dialectical bond between struggles and development, and challenged the recuperative function of the unions and the Left's political control.

In order to repress those uncontrollable eruptions and outbursts (the 1977 movement above all), the ruling class had to impose a state of emergency. It was a bloodbath. By the end of the decade, most

militants had been killed, thrown in prison, escaped from the country or started to shoot up heroin. But that's another story.

As some have suggested, from now on I'm going to use the term *composizionismo* instead of “[post-] *operaismo*,” because the former is more precise and does not automatically correspond to a particular segment of the working class (the “blue collars”). The so-called third industrial revolution made capital supercede the Fordist-Taylorist paradigm, and turned information into the most important productive force. Appealing to those passages of the *Grundrisse* where Karl Marx used the expression “general intellect,” compositionists began to use such descriptions as “mass intellectual” and “diffused intellectual” making reference to multifarious subjectivities in the new class composition.

“Mass intellectuals” are those people whose living labor consists, broadly speaking, in a subordinated output of “creativity” and social communication (in compositionist jargon: “immaterial work”). This segment of the *operaio sociale* ranges from computer programmers to workers of Toyotist factories, from graphic designers to copy writers, from PR people to cultural workers, from teachers to welfare case-workers etc.

Negri's analysis in particular is based upon the “prerequisites of communism” immanent to post-Fordist capitalism. By “prerequisites of communism” Negri means those collective forms that are created by past struggles and are constantly reshaped by the workers' tendencies, attitudes and reactions to exploitation. Some of these forms even become institutions (for example, those of the welfare state), then they go through a series of crises: social conflict created them, social conflict keeps them open and necessarily unfinished. Their crisis reverberates on the whole society, so conflict continues on a higher level.

The most important prerequisite of communism is the collective dimension of capitalist production, which brings about more social cooperation.

The stress must be laid upon the most strategic form of today's living labor, i.e. “general intellect,” immaterial work, “creativity”, you name it. “General intellect” (unlike labor in Taylor's “scientific management”) is *self-activated*. The mass intellectual's workforce is not organized by capi-

tal, because social communication is prior to entrepreneurship. Capital can only *recuperate* and *subdue* social communication, control the mass intellectuals *from the outside* after having acknowledged and even stimulated their creativity and far-reaching intelligence.

The conflict continues on the highest level: capital's "progressive" spur is over, autonomy is becoming a premise rather than a goal.

THE COMMON BEING AND THE NET

A compositionist approach to computer networking reveals that:

- the net's horizontal and transnational development brings about a potentially autonomous social cooperation.
- most netizens fall within the anthropological, sociological and economical descriptions of "mass intellectuals."
- today's net landscape is the synthesis of many *molecular* insubordinations and some important *molar* victories, (e.g., the anti-CDA "Blue Ribbon" campaign) and is continually reshaped by conflict.
- the net is also shaped by software piracy and copyright infringement: private property of ideas and concepts is challenged and often defeated. If any one of you is without copied or cracked programs, let them be the first to throw a stone at me.
- as an "institution," the net is going through a growth-crisis that is reflected upon the whole society. In its turn, this crisis is a mover of conflict.

In plain words, the net seems to be the prerequisite of communism par excellence. This is not an uncritical utopian view of computer networking, of course there's a huge gap between the potential and the actual: work-force vs. work, *langue* vs. *parole*, capital vs. living labor, consumerism vs. social communication. The net is the OK Corral. It's paradoxical that, after all the schmoozing about "molecular revolution," we're heading straight to a new *molar* impact.

The global anti-"paedophilia" mobilization is the *state of emergency* by which the powers that be want to gag netizens. The reappropriation of knowledge and the self-organization of mass intellectuals

require the defense of the net from slanders and police raids. We must keep this "institution" unfinished and open to any possibility, prevent capital from filling the above-mentioned gap with censorship and commodification. It isn't just a liberal battle for free speech: it's class war.

But this is not enough yet. We've got to make history, no less—fill that gap with autonomy and self-organization. We also need myths, narratives that incite mass intellectuals to take action. Each historical phase of class war needs propelling mythologies, there's nothing wrong with that. Georges Sorel has been slandered and misunderstood for too long. As Luther Blissett put it:

...the trouble is not the "falsehood" of myths, but the fact that they outlive the historical forms of the needs and desires they channelled and re-shaped. Once ritualized and systematized, the imaginary becomes the mirror image of the powers that be. The myths of social change turn into founding myths of the false community built and represented by the power [...] The myth of the "Proletariat" was rotten as well: instead of fighting for the *self-suppression* of proletarians as a class, the communist movement had mystical wanks over any sign of "proletarianism", such as the "hardened hands" of the workers, or their "morality" [...] proletarians were defined according to sociology and identified with blue collars themselves at best, or with the "poor" of the Scriptures at worst, or even with both figures, while Marx had written: 'Either the proletariat is revolutionary, or it is nothing'. The direct consequences were Zdanov's Socialist Realism, puritanism, sexual repression vs. bourgeois "decadence", and all that shite. However, [...] the "destruction of myths" makes no sense, we must concentrate our efforts in another direction: let the imaginary move, prevent it from crystallising, try to understand when and how myths are to be deconstructed, dismembered or forgotten before the plurality of images is reduced to one and absolute. (*Mind Invaders: Come Fottare I Media*, Rome, 1995; partial translation available at:

<<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Rampart/6812>>)

We need open, interactive... rhizomatic mythologies. But mythologies are always created, modified and retold by some *community*. What community are we talking about here? Let's start again from "general intellect." "General" means "common,"

literally “belonging to the *genus*,” i.e. wo/mankind, our species. In *On The Jewish Question* and the *Economic And Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx appealed to two important concepts: *Gemeinwesen* (common being) and *Gattungswesen* (species-being). Class struggle, the *self-suppression* of the proletariat as a class and, eventually, revolution were to overcome the alienation of human beings from their own *Gemeinwesen* and *Gattungswesen*, in order to build a global human community that coincided with the species itself, beyond races and state-nations, beyond citizenship. We cannot understand the compositionist theory which stems from the *Grundrisse* if we don't stick to Marx's *humanistic* idea of community.

THE WALDGÄNGER'S BLACK GAME

The Luther Blissett Project consciously started as an experiment of networking *as* myth-making. “Luther Blissett” is a multiuse name that can be adopted by anybody. The goal is an *anthropomorphization* of “general intellect”: since 1994 many people who don't even know each other have endlessly improved the reputation of Luther as a *Homo Gemeinwesen*. And yet, as Bifo put it: “One must not overvalue the importance of Luther Blissett. We could even say that Luther Blissett doesn't count for anything. All that really counts is the fact that we're all Luther Blissett.”

Here are some sub-mythologies studied and put into practice by Luther Blissett:

1. The nordic myth of the *Waldgänger*, the rebel who “takes to the woods.” In 1951 the German reactionary writer Ernst Jünger wrote a pamphlet titled *Der Waldgang*. Jünger described the society as ruled by plebiscitary patterns and panoptical systems of social control. In order to escape from control, the rebel must go to the woods and organize resistance. In nineteen-fucking-fifty-one! What should we say nowadays? Echelon, interceptions, video-surveillance everywhere, electronic records of our bank operations... Taking to the woods is more necessary than ever.

Some hacks have compared “Luther Blissett” to Robin Hood. Actually that hazy myth has much to do with multiuse names. In eighteenth-century England, Saxon peasants ill-treated by the

Norman ruling class expressed their malcontent and everyday resistance by ascribing many anonymous actions (real and imaginary) to one outlaw whose figure gradually became that of “Robin Hood.” The surname suggests that this folk hero (at least at the beginning) wore a hood—he had no face, he represented anyone. That's the way the myth works, though in the Middle Ages it could only bring temporary consolation for a very limited *Gemeinschaft*.

2. Some other journalists described Luther Blissett as a “pirate” or a “buccaneer.” It is an error. OK, net-culture and orthodox underground culture are clogged with maritime metaphors and, yes, “pirate” also means someone who illegally copies material protected by copyright. But Luther Blissett is a terrestrial myth. You don't breathe brackish air in the woods. The sea is far away, maybe a utopian horizon to which the outlaw gradually moves.

If there's a utopian element in the Luther Blissett narrative, it is the utopia of the criminal class: *fuck them over and take the French leave*, as melancholically evoked in Gary Fleder's *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*, a gangster-movie whose characters greet each other saying: “Boat drinks!” This is the happy end of all the movies whose protagonists manage to pull a fast one (a fraud, a robbery...). In the last sequence you see them sailing around the Antilles, quietly sipping their Daiquiris.

Of course “boat drinks!” can only be a propelling sub-mythology, certainly not a realistic project, because there is no “elsewhere” left—misery is all around. The epilogue of Jim Thompson's *The Getaway* is very instructive. Sometimes one can achieve “boat drinks!” though. Ronald Biggs, the Englishman who made the Great Train Robbery of 1963, fled to Brazil and, as far as I know, he's still there. But the *Waldgänger* is too far from the sea, indeed, only those who stand in the middle of dry land can cultivate “boat drinks!” as their utopia: “This is Denver, what do you need a boat for?”

3. The last recurrent description is “cultural terrorist,” which is less unacceptable but it is improper all the same, because “terrorism” is a term that the ruling class uses to defame anything and any-

body, and also because “terrorism” and state repression always mirror each other (the ETA vs. the GAL, the Armed Islamic Group vs. the “ninjas” of the Algerian Army and so on). The dialectic between police state and “terrorism” is based upon emulation.

And yet, even the apparatus of the state can provide us with some useful images. I’m talking about “intelligence” and black propaganda. Multiuse name bearers from Italy and other countries often mention and cite a book, Ellic Howe’s *The Black Game: British Subversive Operations Against the Germans During the Second World War* (Queen Ann Press, London, U.K., 1982).

During WW2, Mr. Howe was the secret Political Warfare Executive’s specialist for the manufacture of printed fakes and forgeries. PWE’s instructions were to undermine the morale of German soldiers and civilians, by means of disinformation and psychological warfare. Thanks to a network of agents in the enemy-occupied territories, PWE issued fake NSDAP circular letters about feuds in the Party, bogus government edicts about desertion, a frightening *Plague Booklet* supposedly published by the German Ministry of Health and leaflets advising

the female army personnel not to have sex with soldiers because of venereal diseases. PWE even produced half a dozen issues of *Der Zenit*, a bogus astrological magazine that dissuaded sailors from weighing anchor on a certain “inauspicious” day (of course it was the date of some important naval operation). PWE also invented Gustav Siegfried Eins a/k/a *Der Chef*, a nonexistent German dissident talking on a bogus clandestine radio station (actually the broadcasts were from the U.K.), entertaining the audience with invectives against nazi politicians and detailed (albeit false) gossip about their sexual perversions.

Since the dawnings of the project, Luther Blissett has been playing a black game like that. This is another viable mythology for mass intellectuals. Given the new *molar* dimension of conflict, this is the *molecular* we can find and work with. Try to figure all those tricksters, impostors and transmaniacs meeting up in the woods, spreading rumors and black material, inoculating lethal viruses in the territories of this global electronic Fifth Reich and then... “Boat drinks!”

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SUBJECT: RECYCLING ELECTRONIC MODERNITY

FROM: RSUNDAR@DEL2.VSNL.NET.IN (RAVI SUNDARAM)

DATE: WED, 16 SEP 1998 13:29:02 +0200

Marx, now long forgotten by most who spoke his name but a decade or two ago, once said the following in his brilliantly allegorical essay on the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. “Bourgeois revolutions.... storm quickly from success to success; their dramatic effects outdo each; men and things set in sparkling brilliants; ecstasy is the everyday spirit; but they are short-lived; soon they have attained their zenith, and a long crapulent depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm-and-stress period.” In Asia, reeling under the current crisis, the moment of ecstasy has long passed, and the “long crapulent depression” is here to stay.

India, a poor cousin of the East Asians, tried to ignore the crisis through its traditional West-centeredness. But the crisis has finally arrived in South Asia as the Indian rupee has dived steadily since last year and inflation is raging.

But in the area of electronic capitalism, the mood is buoyant. Software stocks have risen 120 percent and soon software will become India’s largest export. Many fables have emerged as a response to the irruption of electronic capitalism in a country where 400 million cannot even read or write. The first fable is a domesticated version of the virtual ideology. In this Indianized version, propagated by the technocratic and programming elite, India’s

access to western modernity (and progress) would obtain through a vast virtual universe, programmed and developed by “Indians.” The model: to develop technocities existing in virtual time with U.S. corporations, where Indian programmers would provide low-cost solutions to the new global technospace.

The second fable is a counterfable to the first and quite familiar to those who live in the alternative publics of the net. This fable comes out of a long culture of Old-Left politics in India and draws liberally from sixties dependency theory. The fable, not surprisingly, argues that India’s insertion in the virtual global economy follows traditional patterns of unequal exchange. Indian programmers offer a low-cost solution to the problems of transnational corporations. Indian software solutions occupy the lower end of the global virtual commodity chain, just as cotton farmers in South Asia did in the nineteenth century, where they would supply Manchester mills with produce.

All fables are not untrue, but some are more “true” than others. Thus the second fable claims, not unfairly, that most Indian software is exported, and there is very little available in the local languages (ironically the Indian-language versions of the main programs are being developed by IBM and Microsoft) The alternative vision posed by the second fable is typically nationalist. Here India would first concentrate on its domestic space and then forge international links.

In a sense both fables suffer from a yearning for perfection. While the first promises a seamless transition to globalism, the second offers a world that is autarchic. Both are ideological, in the old, nineteenth-century sense of the term, which makes one a little uncomfortable. “Down with all the hypotheses that allow the belief in a true world,” Nietzsche once wrote angrily.

There is no doubt that for a “Third World” country, India displays a dynamic map of the new technocultures. The problem for both the fables mentioned above is that they remain limited to the elite domains of techno-space in India. This domain is composed of young, upper-caste, often English-speaking programmers in large metropolises, particularly emerging technocities like Bangalore and Hyderabad. This is the story which Wired loves to

tell its Western audiences, but in a critical, innovative sense most of these programmers are not the future citizens of the counter net-publics in India.

What is crucial in the Indian scenario is that the dominant electronic public has cohered with the cultural-political imagination of a belligerent Hindu-nationalist movement. Hindu nationalism in India came to power using an explosive mix of antiminority violence and a discourse of modernity that was quite contemporary. This discourse appealed to the upper-caste elites in the fast-growing cities and towns, using innovative forms of mechanical and electronic reproduction. Thus it was the Hindu nationalists who first used cheap audio-cassette tapes to spread anti-Muslim messages; further giant videoscapes were used to project an aestheticized politics of hate. Some of the first Indian websites were also set up by the Hindu nationalists. To this landscape has been added that terrifying nineteenth-century weapon, the nuclear bomb.

This is an imagination that is aggressive, technologically savvy, and eminently attractive to the cyberelites. The cyberelites may be uncomfortable with the Hindu nationalists’ periodic rhetoric of “national sufficiency,” but such language is hyper-political and has less meaning on the ground. Outside the universe of the cyberelite, is another one which speaks to a more energetic technoculture. This is a world of innovation and nonlegality, of ad hoc discovery and electronic survival strategies.

But before I talk about this, a story of my own.

Two years ago, I was on a train in Southern India where I met Selvam, a young man of twenty-four, who I saw reading used computer magazines in the railway compartment. Selvam’s story is fascinating, for it throws light on a world outside those of the technoelite.

Selvam was born in the temple town of Madurai in Southern India, the son of a worker in the town court, who came from the Dalit community, India’s lowest castes. After ten years in school, Selvam began doing a series of odd jobs, he also learnt to type at a night school after which he landed a job at a typists shop. It was there that Selvam first encountered the new technoculture—Indian-style.

In the the late eighties, India witnessed a unique communicative transformation—the spread of public telephones in different parts of the country.

Typically these were not anonymous card-based instruments as in the West or other parts of the Third World, but run by humans. These were called Public Call Offices (PCOs). The idea was that in a nonliterate society like India, the act of telecommunication had to be mediated by humans. Typically literates and nonliterates used PCOs which often doubled as fax centers, xerox shops and typists shops. Open through the night, PCOs offered inexpensive, personalized services which spread rapidly all over the country.

Selvam's type shop was such a PCO. Selvam worked on a used 286, running an old version of Wordstar, where he would type out formal letters to state officials for clients, usually peasants and unemployed. Soon Selvam graduated to a faster 486 and learnt programming by devouring used manuals, and simply asking around. This was the world of informal technological knowledge in most parts of India, where those excluded from the upper-caste, English-speaking bastions of the cyber-elite learnt their tools. Selvam told me how the textile town of Coimbatore, a few hours from Madurai, set up its own BBS by procuring used modems, and connecting them later at night. Used computer equipment is part of a vast commodity chain in India, originating from various centers in India but, the main center is Delhi.

Delhi has a history of single-commodity markets from the days of the Moghul empire. Then various markets would specialize in a single commodity, a tradition which has continued to the present. The center of Delhi's computer trade is the Nehru Place market. Nehru Place is a dark, seedy cluster of gray concrete blocks, which is filled with small shops devoted to the computer trade. Present here are the agents of large corporations, as also software pirates, spare parts dealers, electronic smugglers, and wheeler-dealers of every kind in the computer world. This cluster of legality and non-legality is typical of Indian technoculture. When the cable television revolution began in the nineties, all the cable operators were illegal, and many continue to be so even today. This largely disorganized, dispersed scenario makes it impossible for paid cable television to work in India. This is a pirate modernity, but one with no particular thought about counterculture or its likes. It is a

simple survival strategy. The computer trade has followed the pirate modernity of cable television. Just as small town cable operators would come to the cable market in the walled city area of Delhi for equipment, so people from small towns like Selvam would come to Nehru Place as a source for computer parts, used computers, older black and white monitors, and motherboards out of fashion in Delhi.

This is a world that is everyday in its imaginary, pirate in its practice, and mobile in its innovation. This is also a world that never makes it to the computer magazines, nor the technological discourses dominated by the cyber-elite. The old nationalists and left view this world with fascination and horror, for it makes a muddle of simple nationalist solutions. One can call this a recycled electronic modernity. And it is an imaginary that is suspect in the eyes of all the major ideological actors in technospace. For the Indian proponents of a global virtual universe, the illegality of recycled modernity is alarming and "unproductive." Recycled modernity, prevents India's accession to World Trade Organization conventions, and has prevented multinational manufacturers from dominating India's domestic computer market. For the nationalists, this modernity only reconfirms older patterns of unequal exchange and world inequality. In cyberterms this means smaller processing power than those current in the West, lesser band width, and no control over the key processes of electronic production. I suspect that members of the electronic avant garde and the counter net-publics in the West will find recycled modernity in India baffling. For recycled modernity has not discrete spaces of its own in opposition to the main cyberelites, nor does it posit a self-defined oppositional stance. This is a modernity that is fluid and mocking in definition. But is also a world of those dispossessed by the elite domains of electronic capital, a world which possesses a hunter-gatherer cunning and practical intelligence.

The term "recycling" may conjure up images of a borrowed, unoriginal modern. Originality was of course Baudelairian modernity's great claim to dynamism. As social life progressed through a combination of dispersion and unity, the Baudelairian subject was propelled by a search for new visions of

original innovation, which was both artistic and scientific. A lot of this has fallen by the wayside in the past few decades, but weak impulses survive to this day. It is important to stress too that recycled modernity does not reflect a thought-out postmodern sensibility. Recycling is a strategy of both survival and innovation on terms entirely outside the current debates on the structure and imagination of the net and technoculture in general. As globalists/virtualists push eagerly for a new economy of virtual space, and the nationalists call for a national electronic self-sufficiency, the practitioners of recycling keep working away in the invisible markets of India. In fact given the evidence, it could even be argued that recycling's claim to "modernity" is quite fragile. Recycling lacks none of modernity's self-proclaimed reflexivity, there is no sense of a means-ends action, nor is there any coherent project. This contrasts with the many historical legacies of modernity in India—one of which was Nehruvian. This modernity was monumental and future-oriented, it spoke in terms of projects, clear visions and argued goals. And the favorite instrument of this modernity was a state plan, borrowed from Soviet models. Nehruvian modernity has been recently challenged by Hindu nationalism, which too, has sought to posit its own claims to modernity, where an authoritarian state and the hegemony of the Hindu majority ally with a dynamic urban consumption regime.

While recycling practices' claim to modernity lies less in any architecture of mobility, but an engagement with speed. Speed constitutes recycling's great reference of activity, centered around sound, vision and data. Temporal acceleration, which Reinhart Koselleck claims is one of modernity's central features, speaks to the deep yearnings of recycling praxis. But this is a constantly shifting universe of adapting to available tools of speed, the world infobahn is but an infrequent visitor. Consider the practice of speed, where the givens of access to the net, the purchase of processing power, all do not exist. They have to be created, partly through developing new techniques, and partly through breaking the laws of global electronic capital. Recycling's great limitation in the computer/net industry is content. This actually contrasts with the other areas of India's cultural industry—

music and cinema. In the field of popular music, a pirate culture effectively broke the stranglehold of multinational companies in the music scene and opened up vast new areas of popular music which the big companies had been afraid to touch. Selling less from official music stores as from neighborhood betel-leaf (paan) shops, then pirate cassettes have made India into one of the major music markets in the world. In the field of cinema and television, content has never been a problem with a large local film industry which has restricted Hollywood largely to English-language audiences. What accounts for this great limitation in the net and the computer components of recycled modernity? Recycling practices have, as we have shown been very successful in expanding computer culture, by making it inexpensive and accessible. Most importantly recycling provided a practical education to tens of thousands of people left out of the upper-caste technical universities. But content providers are still at a discount. But perhaps not yet. The last time I went to Nehru Place I met a young man from Eastern India busy collecting Linux manuals. In a few years the recyclers, bored with pirating Microsoft warez, will surely begin writing their own. Given that such has taken place in every other dimension of recycled modernity in India there is no reason why it should not do so here.

SUBJECT: LONG TIME NO HEAR

FROM: IVO SKORIC <IVO@IGC.APC.ORG>

DATE: THU, 11 JUN 1998 23:51:37 -300

Yes, I am back. True, I won't be writing as often, since I kind of have a job now, and I have less time to look at the big picture, which, however fascinating (at least for those who can find humor in human's inadequacies), never paid off much anyway.

Both in the *New York Times* on May 2 and in the ABC "Nightline" on May 4 there was much talk about ramifications of showing a tragedy on the network TV, but nearly not a word about preventing the tragedy from happening in the first place. I have a piece of advice for the society that believes that whether was it right for the TV to show a man blowing his head off *live* or not, is more pressing social issue than examining the justifiability of reasons why the poor fellow did it: don't create tragedies, then you won't have to worry about showing them. Whether showing a real-life suicide on TV good or bad journalism, I cannot tell. Media in general are a mirror of society. If society is sick, the media shall reflect that sickness. Trying to prevent that was one of the gravest mistakes of communist societies, which all by now have paid for the attempt with their lives. What really is the bad journalism is not talking about why this man actually committed suicide: getting screwed by his "health maintenance organization" (HMO), which happens to millions of Americans every day. I can completely understand that the health-care administrators may easily drive an otherwise sane individual to the act of suicide, since I am being systematically driven crazy by the system myself. At one point it occurred to me that it is better *not* to have any insurance. If you are a private patient, the doctors will at least tell you the truth, and then if you have ten thousand dollars, they will treat you; if you don't, they will let you linger in your misery, which is an ultimately perfect application of the *laissez-faire* capitalism. If, however, you belong to an HMO, your doctor will give you a diagnosis

that will justify a treatment that your HMO is willing to pay for so that your HMO will be pleased by his or her shrewdness—and continue to send him/her new patients. HMOs don't like expensive treatments, so your doctor will not resort to anything radical unless it is an absolute life-threatening emergency. It doesn't pay for him or her, because your HMO agrees to pay less than he or she would normally ask for such treatment (however absurdly inflated that sum might be). Therefore, as an HMO patient, you are bound to receive second-class care. And if the cheapest possible treatment that you are getting ultimately shows no results—that is, your health does not improve—the good doctor will change the therapy, keeping you constantly in a limbo between health and sickness, so that you keep coming back for more until you die or drop the HMO. HMOs apparently have no problems with indefinitely long treatments as long as they are low-budget ones. That means that many doctors consciously provide inadequate care to the patients in order to keep a cozy relations with the HMO. This is very disturbing. It was disturbing for this man to the point that he decided to commit suicide. And the only thing we can talk about is the inappropriateness of showing that on TV? What should have the TV done? Sweep the event under the carpet? Well, should I ever come to that point, I promise you all a good television.

On May 7 my account was charged a \$17 "maintenance fee." No, I don't have a brokerage account; this is a "Lifeline" checking account, which name correctly suggests that all my miserable earnings and modest survival expenses are recorded there. The basic fee for that account is \$4.50 a month, which covers only the enormous privilege of keeping your money in a bank. U.S. banks are the only banks in the world to charge their customers for *taking* their money. Maybe this makes sense considering the overall U.S. corporate

arrogance in the world. This basic fee will also cover up to ten transactions during one month. Transactions are checks, electronic payments, or cash withdrawals. Once you engage in more than ten transactions, which is hardly avoidable unless you are a retired person, your monthly fee will shoot up to \$9.50 a month *and* you will be charged \$0.50 per transaction. Customer service clerk explained to me that the \$17 included the \$9.50 service fee in my fifteen transactions in last month: $15 \times 0.50 = 7.50 + 9.50 = 17.00$. My question was: Did I engage in fifteen transactions *over* my lifeline "limit" of ten, or did I have fifteen transactions *total*, meaning I was five transactions over the limit? Her answer: A total of fifteen transactions. The fact that I had more than ten transactions automatically raised my monthly service fee from \$4.50 to \$9.50—a \$5 penalty for having five more transactions, or \$1 per transaction. Also, since I was over ten, my account was automatically charged a \$0.50 per transaction fee. Now, here is my point: I was charged the per transaction fee for *all* fifteen transactions, not just for the five that were over the lifeline limit of ten. I was penalized once—\$5 for five transactions. I was penalized twice \$2.50 for the same five transactions. And I was penalized for the third time for the same five transaction by being asked to pay \$5 for the previous ten transactions, which would otherwise, should I have not made those five transactions over my limit, be included in my Lifeline checking agreement. In fact, those five transactions cost me \$12.50, which is a whooping \$2.50 per transaction, that in a case of a let's say an ATM withdrawal of \$20 represents more than a 10 percent of that transaction. This is a triple penalty for five transactions. I deem such harsh penalties unreasonably cruel and unusually unfair to lower-income customers. Again, the customer service person asserted that this charge is a part of the agreement I have signed, and that it is a Chase Manhattan bank's *policy* to charge its Lifeline checking account customers \$9.50 monthly service charge should they exceed their ten-transaction monthly limit *and* a \$0.50 per transaction fee *retroactively* including the first ten transactions. I never understood that the per transaction fee can or will be applied retroactively. I doubt I would have signed the agreement had I under-

stood that. Furthermore, having a policy does not necessarily make it right. Nazi Germany had a policy of exterminating Jews, for example. Chase has a policy of driving its customers to the poorhouse with unreasonable and unfair fees. To protest I renamed Chase Manhattan Bank on all my checks as Chase Fascist Bank and I reduced the Chase corporate sign on my ATM card to a swastika. Unsurprisingly, it reminded me of a swastika to begin with, didn't it?

Something just occurred to me: There is a dynamic relationship between hardware and software industry, sort of a bidirectional pull. New software makes old hardware obsolete and new hardware makes old software obsolete. When new software is written for the new hardware, it is written to make that hardware useless soon. When new hardware is built to support that new software better, it is built also to provide for even better software yet to be written. This is how Microsoft and Intel rule the world. The hardware industry had to try to keep prices at a general level (which drops every year), so now most of the chips are made and boards printed in Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and so on. The cheap labor there drove the price of software down, so now the software companies contract labor in Eastern Europe or Ireland. The turnaround of the new software and hardware used to be three or four years; now it is about a year. Microsoft expects you to upgrade your operating system every year, and that means you will need all-new hardware (which make Intel happy) and all new software, because the new operating system will be written for the new hardware requirements and require new software to be written for it. Once the new software is out, files produced by the new software are usually not readable with old software—and sometimes even vice versa—so everybody has to get the new operating system, an all-new computer, *and* new software. That's why others in the computer industry, though they bitch about Gates cornering the market, don't really want to get rid of him. When one follows this cycle, one soon sees one of its logical conclusions: the price of hardware becomes so low that it is becomes less practical to repair a computer than to buy a new one. The price of labor in the country of production was substantially lower than it is in

the country of service (in the U.S., for example). Usually, manufacturers keeps making parts for their old models for maybe a year (sometimes less) after the model goes out of production. For example, I can't get a new battery for my seven-year-old 286 notebook, and the old trusty battery is dead; the computer still works fine. Or: ATI wouldn't update the Windows 3.11 drivers for its three-year-old "Winturbo" video card (the old drivers are not supported by the 16-bit RealAudio player version 3.0 or higher. New ATI cards are built to support new Windows 95 features, and RealAudio is concentrating on 32-bit versions of its software. Radio 101 sent me RealAudio file of a thirty-minute broadcast of the Weekreport from Zagreb: my old version of RealAudio 2.0 couldn't read the file. I called RealAudio, and they pointed me to a download of RealAudio 3.0. I had to pay for it, of course, about \$30; but it wouldn't work on my computer because of a conflict with ATI Winturbo driver. While I was trying to solve this problem, my Windows 3.11 irretrievably crashed; I can't get it back on, nor I can install a new version of Windows on the same disk—so I get a new computer. The new computer is a laptop, and it comes

with Windows 95. But it is a one-year-old refurb, because Winbook corporation, from which I purchased it, doesn't manufacture or sell "outdated" Pentium 166 MMX models anymore. But the unit came with a defective floppy drive and printer port. They agreed to fix it. They send FedEx to pick it up instantly; but now it's been over ten business days that they've had it. Last week they said they were replacing the motherboard and passing it to the quality control department for a burn-out. Today they said that they are replacing the motherboard; as soon this was done, they'd pass it to the quality control department for a burn-out test. Neither time could they give me an estimate of when the unit would ship back to me. And all this for...the ability to access and edit my data. Bill Gates, who holds more power and controls more money than a pope in the ninth century—he may not tell us what the truth is, but he *is* showing us the only way to the truth, and the truth is just a click away. Where do you want to go today? To the nearest technical support person, thank you.

[Edited by Geert Lovink and Ted Byfield.]

CONTESTATIONAL ROBOTICS

FROM: CRITICAL ART ENSEMBLE AND RICHARD PELL (BY WAY OF STEVEN KURTZ
<KURTZ+@ANDREW.CMU.EDU>)

DATE: FRI, 9 OCT 1998 15:49:59 -0400 (EDT)

PART I

Since the modern notion of the public space has been increasingly recognized as a bourgeois fantasy that was dead on arrival at its inception in the nineteenth century, an urgent need has emerged for continuous development of tactics to reestablish a means of expression and a space of temporary autonomy within the realm of the social. This problem has worsened in the latter half of the twentieth century since new electronic media have advanced surveillance capabilities, which in turn

are supported by stronger and increasingly pervasive police mechanisms that now function in both presence and absence. Indeed, the need to appropriate social space has decreased in necessity with the rise of nomadic power vectors and with the disappearance of borders in regard to multinational corporate political and economic policy construction; however, on the micro level of everyday life activity, and within the parameters of physical locality, spatial appropriations and the disruption

of mechanisms for extreme expression management still have value. Each of us at one point or another, and to varying degrees, has had to face the constraints of specific social spaces that are so repressive that any act beyond those of service to normative comportment, the commodity, or any other component of the status quo is strictly prohibited. Such situations are most common at the monuments to capital that dot the urban landscape, but they can also be witnessed in spectacular moments when extreme repression shines through the screenal mediator as an alibi for democracy and freedom. The finest example to date in the US was the 1996 presidential election. A protest area was constructed at the Republican National Convention where protesters could sign up for fifteen-minute intervals during which they were permitted to speak openly. This political joke played on naive activists had the paradoxical effect of turning the protesters into street corner kooks screaming from their soapbox about issues with no history or context, while at the same time reinforcing the illusion that there is free speech in the public sphere. Certainly, for anyone who was paying attention enough to see through the thin glaze of capital's "open society," this ritualized discontent was the funeral for all the myths of citizenry, public space, or open discourse. To speak of censorship in this situation or in the many others that could be cited by any reader, is deeply foolish, when there was no free speech or open discourse to begin with. What is really being referred to when the charge of censorship is made is an increase in expression management and spatial fortification that surpasses the everyday life expectation of repression. Censorship and self-censorship (internalized censorship) is our environment of locality, and it is within this realm that contestational robots perform a useful service.

THE FUNCTION OF ROBOTS

While robots are generally multifunctional and useful for a broad variety of duties such as rote tasks, high precision activities, telepresent operations, data collection, and so on, one function above all other is of greatest interest to the contestational roboticist. That function is the ability of robots to insinuate themselves into situations that are mortally dangerous or otherwise hazardous to humans.

Take for example three robots developed at Carnegie Mellon University. The first is a robot that can be affixed to pipes with asbestos insulation; it will inch its way down the pipe cutting away the asbestos and safely collecting the remains at the same time. For a robot, this one is relatively inexpensive to produce, and could reduce the costs of removing extremely carcinogenic materials. The second is a robot designed in case of a nuclear accident. This robot has the capability of cutting into a nuclear containment tank of a power plant and testing for the degree of core corruption and area contamination. Once again, this method is certainly preferable to having a person suit up in protective gear and doing the inspection him/herself. Finally, an autonomous military vehicle is under development. The reasons for the development of this vehicle are not publicly discussed, so let's just imagine for a moment what they might be. What could an autonomous military vehicle be used for? Let's make the fair and reasonable assumption that it has direct military application as a tactical vehicle (it is a Humvee after all). It could have scouting capabilities; since the vision engines of this vehicle are very advanced this possibility seems likely. At present, the vehicle has no weapons or weapon mounts. Of course, such an oversight could be easily remedied. If the vehicle was used as an assault vehicle it would still follow the model set by the prior two robots. In other words, it could go into a situation unfit for humans and take action in response to that environment. However, one element distinguishes the potential assault vehicle from the other two robots. While the other two are primarily designed for a physical function, the latter has a social function—the militarization of space by an intelligent agent. Of modest fortune is the fact that this model can be inverted. Militarized social space can be appropriated by robots, and alternative expressions could be insinuated into the space by robotic simulations of human actions. While autonomous robotic action in contestational conditions is beyond the reach of the amateur roboticist, basic telepresent action may not be.

THE SPACE OF CONTESTATIONAL ROBOTS

Like the physical dangers of being irradiated or breathing asbestos, there are specific social spaces

which are too dangerous for those of contestational consciousness and subversive intent to enter. Even the tiniest voice of disruption is met by silencing mechanisms that can range from ejection from the space to arrest and/or violence. For example, being in or around the grand majority of governmental spaces and displaying any form of behavior outside the narrow parameters designated for those spaces will bring a swift response from authorities. Think back to the example of the convention protest space. Using the designated protest area was the only possibility, as no protest permits (an oxymoron) were being issued. Those who attempted to challenge this extensively managed territory were promptly told to leave or face arrest. These are the hazardous conditions under which robotic objectors could be useful by allowing agents of contestation to enter their discourse into public record, while keeping the agent at a safe distance from the disturbance. (The remotes can work up to ninety meters; however, the robot has to be kept within the operator's line of sight.)

PERFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES

What could a robotic objector do in these spaces? We believe that it could simulate many of the possibilities for human action within fortified domains. For example:

Robotic graffiti writers. These robots are basically a combination of a remote control toy car linked with air brushes and some simple chip technology. When running smoothly, this robot can lay down slogans (much like a mobile dot matrix printer) at speeds of 15 mph (see Part II).

Robotic pamphleteers. Simply distributing information in many spaces (such as malls, airports, etc.) can get a person arrested. These are the spaces where a robotic delivery system could come in handy—especially if deployed in flocks. Remember, that people love cute robots (the anthropomorphic, round-eyed japanimation cute is a recommended aesthetic for this variety of robot), and are more likely to take literature from a robot than from most humans. At the same time, the excessively cute aesthetic can lead to robotnapping.

Noise robots. Very cheap to make from existing parts. Particularly recommended for indoor situations. By just adding a canned foghorn or siren to a remote toy car one can create a noise bomb that can disrupt just about any type of small- to medium-scale proceeding into which it can be insinuated.

These are but a few ideas of how relatively simple technologies could be used for micro disturbances. Given the subversive imagination of Nettime's constituency it's easy to believe that better ideas and more efficient ways of creating such robots will soon be on the table. However, it also has to be kept in mind that robotic objectors are of greater value as spectacle than they are as militarized resistance. After all, they are only toybots. Yet these objects of play can demonstrate what public space could be, and that there are other potentials in any given area beyond the authoritarian realities that secured space imposes on those within it.

COSTS

There is a triple cost to this type of robotic practice. First, it does require a modest amount of electrical engineering knowledge, and as we all know, education costs money. Second, it requires access to basic tools, but a machine shop would be better. Third is the cost of hardware. Robots are expensive, and there is no getting around it. In the field of robotics proper, it is barely possible to build a toy for less than US\$10,000. We have brought the cost down to US\$100–1,000, but this could add up very quickly for a garage tinkerer or for underfunded artists and activists. It seems safe to assume that a robot will be used more than once in most cases, but even so, robotic objectors are outside the parameters for a common, low cost, tactical weapon. To be sure, this research is in its experimental stages.

PART II

HOW TO BUILD A ROBOTIC GRAFFITI WRITER

This article is the first in a series of robotic objector projects for the home roboticist/anarchist. This design combines the integrated perception and autonomous navigation skills of the human dissi-

dent with the efficiency and compact size of a robot specifically adapted to the tactics and terrain of street actions. The basic design calls for a roughly shoebox-sized trailer to be drawn by a remote controlled vehicle. The trailer consists of an array of five spray paint units that are controlled by a central processor. The vehicle is navigated into the target area by its human operator. At the appropriate time a switch on the controller is thrown, signaling the start of the “action.” As the vehicle rolls along the ground, the row of spray cans prints a text message in much the same way that a dot-matrix printer would. For example, the word “CAPITALIST” would be written as:

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Depending on the nature of the action, the vehicle can either be navigated to a secluded “safe zone” or considered a worthy sacrifice in the name of robotic objection. The skills needed to build this robot do not require an engineering degree, although they do require a reasonable amount of experience in building circuits, programming micro-controllers (Basic STAMP), and shop skills/metal working; the project might best be accomplished by a small group of individuals.

Materials:

REMOTE CONTROL CAR (This will be by far the most costly aspect of this project. When coupled with the radio controller and essentials such as a battery charger, the vehicle represents a roughly \$500 investment. What makes this car exceptional is that it needs to be capable of pulling 3-4 kilograms of additional weight and still maintain a top speed of 10–15 MPH. This generally means a scaled-down version of a “Monster Truck,” that is, multiple engines, Consult your local RC enthusiast—they love these sort of specialty problems. It also must be able to receive three channels instead of the usual two.)

RADIO CONTROLLER (Any three channel controller will do.)

2 WHEELS (Lightweight street wheels from an RC catalog)

5 INTERMITTENT SOLENOIDS (The surplus variety will be more than adequate here. Something in the neighborhood of 24v [.25–.3 amp] that can hold itself shut against fairly vigorous tugging.)

BATTERIES (One to power the solenoids (probably 24v) and one to power the circuitry [9v].)

5 SPRAY CANS (The 3 oz miniature variety is best for reasons of weight and size. However, the industrial paint that road workers use could be used if the weight is less of a problem. Remember to choose a color that complements the terrain.)

MICRO-CONTROLLER (Almost any standard chip [i.e., BASIC stamp] will suffice as long as it has at least two inputs and five outputs.) **LED/OPTOTRANSISTOR** (For use as an encoder.)

TRANSISTORS, RESISTORS, CAPACITORS, and **WIRE** (Specific values cannot be given here, as there are too many variables to worry about.)

RAW MATERIALS (1/32” aluminum or plastic sheet, lightweight plastic or wood square stock [1/4” by 1/4”].)

Construction:

There are too many variables at work here to describe the construction or components in extreme detail. Availability of surplus goods and access to means of production will vary from group to group.

As with any robotics project, the strategy is to work on individual parts AND the overall product AT THE SAME TIME. One needs to be building working sub-systems, while continually evaluating them to ensure that they will work together.

The project is divided into four subsystems.

1. Micro Controller (+software)
2. Encoder
3. Structure of Trailer
4. Solenoid->Spray-can system

The Micro Controller:

A plethora of microcontrollers exist that are easy to use and learn. Any of the more popular packages that clutter the pages of “hobbyist” magazines will suffice as long as they meet the requirements of having at least two inputs and five outputs. The first input pin is used for the signal that comes from the controller and tells the microprocessor to start performing its task, that is, print the text. The second input pin is for the encoder that attaches to one of the wheels or axles. The encoder tells the processor how fast the vehicle is moving in terms of “clicks” (see encoder section). Each “click,” or 1/4 turn of the wheels, will mean that one column of a letter is to be printed. This allows the processor to adjust the space of the letters according to how fast the car is moving. The five output pins are all used for controlling the solenoids that activate the spray cans.

The Text:

As mentioned earlier, the text is printed as if by a dot-matrix printer. Each individual letter is printed with a 5-by-3 grid of dots and therefore requires a minimum of 15 bits to be rendered. The most cost effective method of storing this data in terms of RAM would be to use 16-bit blocks (type SHORT) for each letter in your array and simply ignore the last bit. However, if you have the RAM, it may be more elegant to use one byte for each column (three columns per letter). This abstracts things a bit, making it easier to print simple graphics instead of text or to use the extra bits in each column as a kind of control character. For instance, you could have a bit that controls how long the can sprays, making it possible to have dots and dashes. Depending on how much RAM the microcontroller has, you could build a function into the chip that translates the text into a binary stream using a lookup table—for instance, 11111010011100 for the letter P, as in the example earlier. Such a table would use only around 52 bytes or so (2 bytes per letter times 26 letters). Or translation could be done offline and the stream hardcoded into the chip at programming time.

The following is some pseudo-code that should give a fair idea of how the components interact with each other.

```
Typedef COLUMN = a byte

pin1 = GO signal
pin2 = wheel encoder
pin3-7 = solenoids

COLUMN the_text_array[* of letters] =
convert_text("THE MESSAGE TO PRINT")
COLUMN col

while(1){
    if(GO signal ON) //If it gets the GO
                    //signal, the loop
timer + 1 //must run 5 times with the sig-
nal ON
    if(GO signal OFF) //before it will GO.
                    //This prevents false signals
timer = 0
    if(timer > 5){
for(i = 1 to # of letters){
for(j = 1 to 3){ //The number of columns
                    //in a letter
col = read_next_column(the_text_array)
paint_column(col) //writes the bits to
                    //pins 3 thru 7
wait (for encoder click)
}
all pins OFF //puts a space between
                    //letters
wait (for encoder click)
}
}
}
```

Signal from Controller: (i.e., GO!)

The average remote control car uses a minimum of two channels in order to be controlled by the remote. That is, one channel controls forward and backward motion, and the other controls left and right motion. It is very easy to add channels by using standard parts from an RC hobbyist catalog. In this case, we need one more channel that will be used to trigger the text printing function. The signal that comes out of the receiver on the car is most likely going to be PWM (Pulse Width Mod), in

which case the supplied code should be sufficient to direct the signal straight into the micro-controller. Should the signal happen to be analog, most micro-controllers have at least one pin that can receive an analog signal.

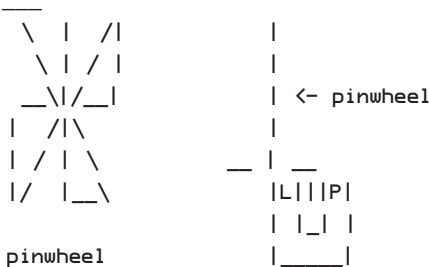
Encoder:

There's no need to run out and buy a 600-degree optical encoder for this. All we need is a standard LED and phototransistor pairing. They tend to look like this:



There are two standard ways of implementing these as an encoder. In one version, the principle works like thus: When the LED light hits the phototransistor, it is ON. When something is stuck in between them, it is OFF. All we do is attach a pinwheel divided at 45-degree intervals to the axle of one of the wheels and have it pass through the center of the pairing, like this:

Fig 1.



This is where the “clicks,” described earlier, originate. Each space in the pinwheel causes one click in the phototransistor. The signal from the transistor is then passed on to pin 2 of the microcontroller. In another variation on the same theme, the LED/phototransistor pair are pointed at a black and white pinwheel (potentially the wheel hub). The light from the LED reflects off the white parts and triggers the phototransistor, sending it into an ON state. The light is absorbed by the black sections, sending it into an OFF state.

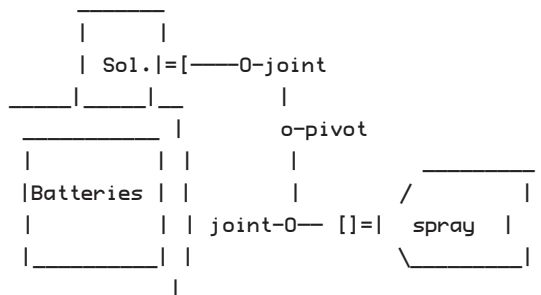
Trailer Construction:

Anything more than a cursory description would be impossible here without the use of mechanical drawings or photographs (see upcoming web version). The basic idea is that we have a trailer chassis resting on two wheels. It is connected to the rear of the vehicle via some type of flexible joint. The chassis can be made out of a sheet of lightweight plastic or aluminum with plastic or aluminum supports. The spray cans are secured, lying flat on the trailer between the wheels. A slot or window runs the width of the trailer below the spray nozzles and perpendicular to the spray cans (this is what they spray through). The solenoids are mounted on a shelf raised an inch or so above the spray nozzles. This allows room for the batteries and electronics to be stored underneath (see Fig. 2).

Solenoid-spray-can mechanism:

Mechanically speaking, this portion will be the most difficult to construct and will require a lot of kludging to get it right. What we've got is a row of five spray-cans facing downward and another row of five solenoids that must use their “pulling” motion to “push” the buttons of the spray cans. This is probably most easily achieved by a simple system of fixed-pivot linkages. The solenoids are arranged so that they are facing (plungers toward) the spray nozzles, and probably raised an inch or so above the nozzle center. The linkages should in the form of the letter Z, with joints at the corners and a fixed-pivot point somewhere in the Z diagonal. The plungers of the solenoids should be attached to the upper portion of the Z and the lower one will touch the tip of the spray can.

Fig. 2 (Side View)



The placement of the pivot point on the linkage determines how much leverage is placed on the nozzle. This may take some tweaking to get enough pressure to make it spray on command.

CONCLUSION

The intentions of this article are two-fold. First, it presents one concrete example of how a robotic

objector can be built to be useful to resistant forces. Second, it should open up critical discussion of the value, implications, and design of these tools. Several prototypes are already in the construction phase of development and collective discourse can only enhance the process.

SUBJECT: HACK IT '98, INFORMAL INFORMATICS: THE LAST DAYS OF MARGINALITY (FROM *IL MANIFESTO*, JUNE 21, 1998)

FROM: ERMANN0 GUARNIERI (GOMMA)
DATE: THU, 17 SEP 1998 23:18:59 +0200

Marginal considerations of the first large-scale Italian meeting of the people who freely surf the net knowledge.

As for certain big events, a big storm happened at the end of Hack It '98, the first real hacking and alternative informatic culture meeting set-up on a large scale in Florence (Italy). It seems the storm would to symbolically underline the liberation of an electric desire of being a community compressed for too much years in the nets *anfratti*, at the end of seminars, workshop, debates and computer experimentation, but today, a little bit far from the end of the event, apart from trying the impossible effort of summarize in a few words the dozens of "digital events" that happened one after the other, I think it's the time of trying to analyze the reasons of this contents and spectators success, and what seems to be a sure big improvement in all the scene. The alternative Italian informatic scene is born ten years ago, thanks to a flourishing of microgroups, that were strong enough to sustain and improve passing time: the ones that will create Strano Network in Florence—The group behind the unforgettable occupation of the Bologna's Isola nel Kantiere—the Turin scene, the Trento one, the Rome's BBs groups, "Decoder" (which I belong to), the Leoncavallo group and all

the other meeting points in other Italian cities, as Bologna and Rome, and the others, that then founded the ECN net. Small collectives, often blocked in their action by modernity fear more or less distributed: mass-media, control and repression organizations, institutional parties, even, sometimes, some large movement areas that just didn't understand the aims of the proposed social action, and in the end also the mainstream informatic panorama that felt and still feel as a bother the critic position of these situations. At this follow a sort of isolation, even if in the early nineties, were organized big events as *Piazza Virtuale* in Milano, "Ink 3D" in Bologna, or the hacking kermesse with high level debates at the Sociology Faculty in Trento, the "mutant" meeting in the S. Arcangelo di Romagna Festival, and the meeting at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Pecci in Prato. Moreover much years ago were watchwords and lifestyles of fundamental importance even today: as the need to share information and knowledge, to start nonprofit entry-level course, to create network and digital art directed from and to everybody, to work on new rights, and to start writing analysis on the transformations of work. From then yet a lot of people contribute to these initiatives or public opinion campaigns, that

obtained the press attention and very often the fears of secret services and Ministry of the Interior, as their annual reports on the “antagonist telematics” from 1991 to today testify. But even in the myriad proposals, of the provoked expectations of new opened fronts, till now seems that the famous “new person” in the embrional stage, more developed in some European countries, here was still far off. And the situation, though all the efforts, seemed to don't move from the marginality zone in wich it was self-confined: maginality that was the obstacle to the start of dynamics worth of going beyond, with a certain costancy, the mere presence of the events owners. Every event, in the end, became in such a way, for the elite, the avant-garde, for the young, hard to understand for the “external observer” not skilled enough to see the real significance of the event itself.

The 1998 hackmeeting represented a turning point, giving clear signals on how the nation situation is evolved. First of all for the great organizational abilities of the Firenze's CPA, social center that even “under forced evacuation,” in totally self-organized way had made available all the needed large areas for the debates, courses, meetings, full-time radio and TV pirate station, dozens of networked computers, and food and eating locations. This great potential to self-organized and financed telematics have no equals in the other countries of the world, where the local authorities don't make evacuations, but provides for free the needed logistical structures. The event has been defined as a “horizontal event” by the organization. “There are no organizers, teachers, public or users, but only people who take part.” The event has been substantially built through a collective discussion on the net, especially on the “*Isole nella Rete*” and in the mailing list <hackmeeting@kyuzz.org>.

Another winning point is given noting the quality of the competence showed: the knowledge passed level was very high, equal to the one of too much paid professionals, but the hackit strength is that all this became collective, with the necessary interaction. The market force the pro to divide the knowledge into tiny parts, jealously protecting them, and fearing the users to leave them in the dust in case of need. In the hacker-dome, on the other side, the access to knowledge is expanded to minimum,

because everyone teach to others everything he knows. And the gathering of the knowledges, as Pierre Lévy states, it's a lot more of the sum. of the single parts. It's something more, new, and with more strength, and the system can't emulate it, due to the anticommercial nature of the sharing.

Another winner tactic has been realized in the focusing on themes on which making free and open courses on techniques available to everyone, but often misunderstood by the people as too much difficult and then abandoned. Among the others the crowded daily course about the personal encryption communications and the use of the cryptographic application Pretty Good Privacy (PGP), that clarified how to defend ourselves from the intruders, a problem often discussed and feared by the attendants. Finally, back to the people involved, these days showed that even here something has started. The networked computers shed, crowded twenty-four hours a day with people who could finally experiments with the machines, has expressed a clear sign: technical competence, belonging to a working or studying sector, will to have relationship with others, desire to meet face to face; the wide space of the social center was always crowded with dozens of people that switched from the computers to the debates.

These are the future perspectives: the event have to become annual, possibly in Milan for the next year; start national initiatives, thinking globally and acting locally, as the “Day for the free programming” against the world presentation of Windows 98: to create a coordination about the digital legal rights and a project of inquiry (survey) about the working conditions in the national telematic. A group of initiatives that seem to think about the marginality days as gone.

[Translated by Alessandro Ludovico.]

SUBJECT: MOVEMENTS AGAINST NETWORK DOMINATION IN JAPAN

FROM: TOSHIMARE OGURA <ORG@NSKNET.OR.JP>
DATE: THU, 8 OCT 1998 22:08:08 +0100

The internet has generally been described as a decentralized system. Within it, people have immense power to communicate and to distribute their messages—in particular the ability to communicate with complete strangers, something previously monopolized by mass media. This is correct from a bird's-eye view of the internet. But from each user's point of view, the internet has a different form.

The conditions and rules of participation in the network imposed upon the user also define access conditions to the internet. The system manager of the network is able to decide almost everything independently from the ordinary user. The environment of the user is very much subject to change according to the attitude this "superuser" takes. It is not so easy to protect ordinary users from the decisions of the superuser employed by government or company.

THE ENCLOSURE MOVEMENT IN INFORMATION CAPITALISM

The innovation of computer communication network (CCN) has had a dual character from the beginning; one is the grass-roots character, the myth of Apple computer and radical hackers in U.S. hippy subculture; on the other hand, ARPAnet created by the Pentagon. Hackers and media activists have struggled for their freedom against state interference and they have tried to disconnect from hierarchical networks and construct a computer counter culture with a tradition of freedom of cyberspace based on the grass roots. But many countries, including Japan, introduced CCN as a state policy. Therefore, the viewpoint of freedom within CCN only has a very fragile basis. Freedom in CCN is not a de facto standard for network users. In the case of Japan, the spread of the internet opened a possibility of various previously inexperienced information traffics. At the same time however, the mass of users retain the passive habits made during the mass media age. The inter-

active character of CCN does not function sufficiently. We have not only to construct economically, socially and politically concrete free-access conditions, but also to create new values of network use—self-valorization for the cyberproletariat.

CASE 1. MOVEMENT AGAINST THE WIRETAP BILL

For Japanese network activists, one of the biggest themes in recent years was a movement against a government-proposed wiretapping bill. As a result of the opposition movements, the Government has not yet legislated the bill. The Japanese Government insists that wiretapping is indispensable to investigate criminal organizations such as Yakuza and cult groups like AUM. But, this is only a poor excuse. It is well known that most of the wiretap investigations so far have been carried out illegally against left-wing political groups and various autonomous radical movements. (The Japanese Constitution asserts that the privacy of all communication should be protected; the police can monitor communications legally only in very rare cases.) Large-scale electronic surveillance by police needs a secret connection to the network backbone. Nippon Telephone and Telegram (NTT) monopolizes the fundamental part of the communication infrastructure in Japan and has supported illegal wiretapping by police in several cases. Moreover, the backbone of the internet passes through Nagatacho where government agencies are concentrated. From an infrastructural point of view, these conditions give an advantage to the large-scale surveillance of CCN.

Anti-wiretap-bill movements have been developed using the internet. Specifically, we disclose the records of proceedings in the Laws Council of the Ministry of Justice and internal materials from the discussion in the Assembly. We criticize articles of the bill in detail including the understanding of the criminal situation and the government's emphasis on the fear of terrorism to justify the law. Various

statements opposing the law from network activists, lawyers' organizations, labor unions and journalists' organizations appear on the webpages of the Anti-Wiretap-Bill Project. By using the internet, we realize the connection and cooperation of small groups—something impossible using phone, fax, mail, printed news letters and other traditional communication tools because of their technological character as one-way or one-to-one communication as well as the burden of their cost. However, the importance of action in the real world also remains. Mass protest action in the national assembly, mass meetings and demonstrations are indispensable in order to change real politics.

STRUGGLES IN THE REAL WORLD OF JAPAN

How are the conditions of the real world related to CCN in Japan? The situation has become very serious for us. NTT can already track the phone number and location of someone using a mobile phone. The phone number and address or location of the caller was previously private. Now it is outside the range of the legal protection of privacy. The traffic surveillance system, the so-called "N System" reads license plate of passing vehicles and transfers the data to a police mainframe. The system is an enormous database that can confirm which car ran through where and when. The police state that the N System is used for the investigation of traffic violations such as speeding. But, after the system was introduced, there was no increase in the arrest rate for violation of traffic regulations. The N system was however useful in the case of the AUM Shinri Kyo. It functioned as a system to sense the movement of the adherents' cars. There is a suspicion that the N System is being used as a surveillance system for public order, not for criminal investigation.

Not only cars but bicycles have to be registered with the police. Using the police online computer system, bicycle theft can be confirmed from the registration number within moments.

In Japan, private relationships tend to depend on public relationships—not as something cooperative but as a relationship dominated by the state. The concept of the family is used not only for kinship but for company organization and state constitution. Therefore, private space is invaded by the

state and public spaces like the street and community facilities are considered, not as belonging to people, but as possessions of the state. We must construct rights to the city as a fundamental human right—something established for several centuries in the West.

DOMINATION BEHIND CHAOS

This may seem strange because Japanese cities have a chaotic face—an exotic and disordered image—like the movie *Blade Runner*, or as Chiba City appeared in the science fiction novels by William Gibson. The big cities like Tokyo and Osaka have wooden houses like temporary shelters alongside high buildings, narrow, winding and labyrinthine paths intermingling with subways and highways. Address indication is insufficient. People from outside get lost easily. Though such disorder is visible, control of city space by the government and police is exhaustive. Street graffiti and posters are hardly seen, and there are few street vendors. The temporarily vehicle-free promenades on Sunday are being abolished one after another. The subway in New York recently got cleaned up—but the Japanese one has never been decorated with graffiti until now. Public transportation stops around midnight.

The database of inhabitants is complete. The family registration system (*koseki seido*), which is characteristic for Japan, is the system of control by the state over the individual based on the patriarchal family. Now, this traditional patriarchal system works via a database. Movements in Japan have developed a struggle against such oppressive control: no family register system; no isolated education for handicapped people; no computers for surveillance and control; street rights for the homeless, and so on.

Control and surveillance of the real world are done through the world of the computer network. The real world and CCN are seamlessly connected. We do not live in the dual worlds of the real "and" the "cyber." Both worlds form an inseparable, intertwined, one world. From the viewpoint of the information surveillance system of the state, our body is a terminal for CCN and a checkpoint in the real world. Our body belongs to the world of the real and the cyber. Therefore,

our real/cyber body is a battlefield for liberation movements for one world.

FAILURE OF INFORMATION MANIPULATION

Just as eighteenth-century industrial capitalism established the work ethic, postindustrial information capitalism has to establish a communications ethic.

The freedom to send information as a fundamental right didn't get firmly established in Japan in the age of mass media. Free radio stations hardly exist except for a few, such Radio Home Run, and experimental practices by Tetsuo Kogawa and Jun Oenoki. There are no free radio stations by radicals. On the other side, the internet expanded the circuit of information for individuals by using web, mail, newsgroups and so on. Network users come to doubt the mass media system through the experience of hypertext and interactive communication on CCN. But, this is not enough to guarantee the formation of new and alternative circuits of information in the real world. The Japanese police arrest users who link to sites abroad upon which appear contents that would be illegal in Japan.

Counterculture has shaped alternative information network behind the scenes of the mass media. CCN allows people a similar power to publish information to mass media. Accordingly, counter cultures become increasingly independent and form their own communication networks.

Dominant cultural capital cannot create new cultural product by their own effort, they need to exploit counter/subculture. But, The cultural industry faces the loss of their resources. In response, they try to integrate counterculture and to restructure the order of the networks. The monopolization of so-called intellectual property and copyrights is their prime strategy for forcing an enclosure movement on CCN. This new enclosure movement tries to establish information structures along capitalist lines; tracing the line of property, sorting according to possibilities for commodification and criminalizing some forms of information. Electronic surveillance and wiretapping by police, and the information enclosure movement by mass media are in close cooperation with each other. Both are processes of a new cyber/real world order of information. If network users are inte-

grated into this order, they are forced to exploit their communicative work and depend on the moral standards made by this new master.

CRISIS OF DOMINATION

The modern system of domination in the twentieth century has been based on a one-way information system. The modern nation state has reproduced nationalism by the mass media and mass democracy. The effective function of universal suffrage was guaranteed only by such one-way information systems. The public receives a large quantity of information one-sidedly through the mass media. The mass media behaves as if it represents public opinion and forms a stereotypical view of the world. The election system quantifies public opinion by the votes cast. Minority groups realize their interests only by the sympathy of majority groups. The people's will is quantified and reduced to national will, national identity. The necessity of the reduction of people's opinion to quantified data is dependent on the level of data-processing technology. Individuals turn into a countable mass. Computer technology overcomes such a limit of data-processing. From the management of customers to public welfare policy, individuals recover their own characteristic attributes. At the same time, computer technology has been developed for the interactive communication of individuals. People need not necessarily present their opinions solely by voting or entrusting them to a candidate. They can make them themselves by using CCN.

TOWARD A REVOLUTION OF SINGULARITY

CCN gives a means of expression to minority groups without depending on the paternalism of the majority or of the representative system. Various connections amongst minority groups across state boundaries realizes worldwide solidarity. The geographical border becomes meaningless. People who have the same interest cross borders and cooperate. As a result of this, national identity begins to vacillate. People prefer direct expression in the network to a quantified voting system. The limits to a political system of decision by the majority come into the open. Young people's voter turnout is very low in Japan. They distrust the representative system. They become not

apolitical, but refuse quantification of their political will. They try to constitute self-valorization of their own information.

This is a possibility for a new and radical politics of singularity even though it is still perhaps at an

unconscious level. It may even become an opportunity to dismantle the nation state, patriarchy and nationalism in Japan.

[Edited by Matt Fuller and Diana McCarty.]

SUBJECT: INTERVIEW WITH HARWOOD AND MATSUKO OF MONGREL

FROM: GEERT LOVINK <GEERT@XS4ALL.NL>
DATE: THU, 8 OCT 1998 08:01:57 +0100

First of all, this is what Mongrel has to say about their activities:

Mongrel is a mixed bunch of people and machines working to celebrate the methods of an "ignorant" and "filthy" London street culture. We make socially engaged cultural product employing any and all technological advantage that we can lay our hands on. We have dedicated ourselves to learning technological methods of engagement, which means we pride ourselves on our ability to program, engineer and build our own software and custom hardware. The core members are Matsuko Yokokoji, Richard Pierre-Davis, and Graham Harwood.

As well as starting and producing its own projects, Mongrel also works as an agency through which projects by other people can be set up and coordinated. This means that who does what isn't as important as what gets done. network We are as much about hip hop as about hacking. Mongrel makes ways for those locked out of the mainstream to gain strength without getting locked into power structures. Staying hardcore means that Mongrel can get the benefit of sharing the skills and intelligence of people and scenes in similar situations, as well as dealing with other kinds of structures on our own terms. collaborations Mongrel rarely operates as just a core group. We

prefer to work on a range of specific collaborations. These can be with organizations, individuals or groups. The ability to plug into different skills, structures or ways of doing stuff means we get to stay fresh.

Natural Selection is a project put together by Harwood and Matthew Fuller. This project takes on the use of new communications technology for the dissemination and organization of various forms of eugenics, nationalism and racism. The project invents cultural strategies and uses of digital technology to undermine and play with the expectations of racialization in a manner which usurps or destroys it. Mongrel has hacked a popular internet search engine. When any searches are made on that engine for racist material the user gets dumped into a parallel network of websites set up by Mongrel. This parallel network has been made in collaboration with a vast global network of collaborators. It is the nightmare the whites-only internet has been waiting for.

National Heritage is a international project that commits audiences, artists and collaborators to a confrontation with their interpolation within cultural, biological and technologized racisms. The project as a whole operates by means of street poster/newspaper publication, a web search engine "Natural Selection," and a gallery installation. In accomplishing its aims, the project will

engender interpretive methods of collaborative working between audiences, artists and project contributors that exploit the possibilities presented by new communications technology for art-working within a social context.

GL: What is your heritage?

H: It is mongrel. The first category is “don’t know.” A bit of Irish and English. My granddad is a bastard. People think he might be a bit Jewish. Then there are a few incestuous births. My dad really did not know who he was because he got thrown out into the “care” of the authorities at the age of four. His parents could not feed him. He did not know until he got shot in Korea, so after that he went to find them. They were more or less peasants. Heritage in the wider sense meant poverty. My parents taught me that we could be proud of having nothing. To come from nothing is a fine place to be. I come from the land of fiddling. You can always fiddle, get away with it. My family was involved in a lot of gambling. We never had a place in society. They always had illegitimate children. My niece just had a child at fifteen. There are five generations of women that are, more or less, close to each other. They support each other, and the men are there to make some fertilizer.

M: The national heritage of Japan, what it did to other countries and my own, personal history are inseparable. There is an interesting period, last century, when surnames were being introduced. At that time people “bought” their heritage, so to say, by choosing a name associated with a wealthy family.

GL: Could the history of the working class also belong to the national heritage?

H: It is an antiheritage. It was a way of existing outside. In the U.K. there is very much a collective identity. England is 007, James Bond, the crack of leather on the willow of the cricket bat. Strawberries and cream. If that image is not yours, then it is there to exclude you. It is a bit loose because there is no monolith. There has never been a single nation or grouping in the U.K.

GL: You recently published a poster/paper. Along with a black and white insert with material related to the Search Engine project, which we’ll talk about later, there are forty full-color heads, organized into some kind of grid. It’s almost like a database with

two available gender categories and four racial “types” and with what appear to be racialized masks actually sewn into the faces below. The paper also has a large logo—“National Heritage”...

H: This aspect of our project is a reference to the Department for National Heritage. It allocates all the arts funding in the U.K. We decided to make a project with that name, in order to make a direct reference to where the money comes from. 76 per cent of all that goes to class A and B, people earning over £30,000 a year. That tax money only goes to that wealthy class. The reason we have the white face with a black mask, covered in spit on the poster, with the words “National Heritage,” points directly to this particular department. A revised version of their logo is on the poster. This racial dichotomy is the heritage of the nation. We make them complicit with us.

GL: Do you want this department to become “multicultural”?

H: That is their excuse for keeping power. Multiculturalism is their method of classification, to maintain identities that are long since gone and not useful anymore. They would like to keep a binary authority, which no longer works. Recently, a think tank close to the Labour government gave out a statement, saying that embassies abroad should no longer have any politically incorrect pictures. Cover the walls with Brit art and remove the portraits of old colonial rulers. Remove all reference to British colonial rule. Do they really think that people in Egypt or India can be fooled, by thinking that the British empire never existed? Such emphasis on image! Art is not that useful. But for them it is seen as a major prize.

GL: How did you construct the images on the poster?

M: Out of a total of a hundred faces we made eight faces and divided them into four colors: black, brown, yellow and white, both men and women. It is all montage, digital photography. We tried to construct a white male, or black woman, according to what we think these categories look like. We can never prove that somebody is a white male person. How would you define a black person? There are no characteristics according to medical terms. There are no “real” categories, only stereotypes.

H: On TV there was a program about people of mixed race, let's say 1/4 or 1/8 black. They were complaining because for them there is no classification. One of their grandparents are black, but most of them do not even know.

M: I had never seen a Western person, for real, until I was eighteen. Only since the beginning of the eighties, when many people from all over the world started coming to Japan, did I start to recognize people of different color in the streets. Only then, we became aware of the problem of racism. Before, the Americans were only on television.

H: These days, many young Japanese do not show much interest in where they are from. They see themselves as the future, not the past, the old Japanese culture. They live in the future. Any return to the past is horrifying because you will hit the brick wall of the Second World War. Japanese are good at hiding. The society can leave unresolved problems.

GL: It sounds liberating, to leave the Benneton identity politics behind. ("I am from Ethiopia, look how beautiful—and pure—I am.")

H: In the sixties, my parents used to say things like, "Don't touch it because a black person has had it, you will get ill." At the same moment, they would say, "Martin Luther King, he is a great bloke, he is going to free black people." Two complete opposite views expressed at the same time. We are moving from that level of confusion. I grew up with ska music and black friends—and this black music was being sold to us, white skinheads. So, the level of confusion concerning race is OK. The single thing that seems to categorize white people was fear. The fear to even talk about race. Or to express difficulty about it. We clearly come out as antirace, not so much as "antiracist." We are against the classification of race. That's what a mongrel is—somewhere between two things, someone of mixed blood. Or it refers to a dog that has no category. Dogs in the U.K. are very much a class issue.

M: I lived for the last twelve years in London, so culturally I am mixed now, always fighting between Japanese and English. So I suppose that I became a mongrel. Since the eighties more and more Japanese started living abroad and brought back their mongrel culture to Japan. That's the positive side of the use of technologies.

H: Matsuko and I are of the same year. Despite all the differences, much of our media references are the same. The Thunderbirds. We both grew up under the imperialism of the United States. But then, Richard is bringing a lot of different elements into the group! He is a Black-Indian-Welsh-French person from Trinidad. He is not so confused about his identity as perhaps others are: he is a black cockney—much more so than me. Compared to him, Matsuko becomes an honorary white person.

M: In 1987, when I was visiting South Africa, which was still under Apartheid back then, showing my passport, I was being treated as a white. But if Chinese people would go there, they were categorized as "colored."

GL: "Natural Selection" is another project by Mongrel, an internet search engine. Did you come up with this idea because well known search engines, like Altavista, are no longer useful because they always come up with thousands of references if you type in a keyword?

H: We are looking at classification from another point of view. We created a search engine that sits on top of other search engines. We strip out what they are saying and return the URLs. If you type in any word which has got to do with race, eugenics or sex, you are dropped into our content. This means a whole load of websites being produced in collaboration with a variety of people and groups from a lot of different places: in London, around the world and from different situations which they bring in to flavor the work—academic theorists, street activists, poets, artists, nutters, whatever.

If users look around carefully, they will find the right keywords to access these sites—or they might do it without realizing. On the other hand, you might end up in a "real" Ku Klux Klan site, but you will not find out anyway whether you are reading one of our constructions, or not. You need to be alert all the time as to where all the information you are reading is coming from.

GL: What does the term "eugenics" mean to you?

H: It was used recently by a friend who has brittle bone disease. She talked to me about it because she went to a hospital where they were killing off anyone like her. She made me aware that there was a certain type of human that was to be valued, while

others weren't. At what level of disability do we discard those people? Critical Art Ensemble looked at how eugenics are coming into play within fertility treatments. We two went through such treatments, together with Critical Art Ensemble, and found out that a lot of such eugenic decisions had to be made. It was a hard project to go through.

M: We are not judging what is good or bad, we are trying to give information. We don't say, killing life in this or that stage is justified, or not. There is no answer. We do not value life or race. We are showing that it exists.

H: We are struggling to find images that deal with the complexities of the kind of lives that we are living now. There is no longer black and white.

There are no longer binary arguments. So the right wing can jump on us and say: "So you are confused." We are just struggling to find images. Sometimes they are complex and take a long time, like those faces on the poster. It is much harder to think about the same problem from six, maybe opposing, points of view, and hold them all equally. For me, all of this comes from Matsuko's influence, from Japan, where you are able to accept something before you judge it. In the West, I have been brought up to judge something before I have accepted it. One could even say that of antiracism and antifascism. A lot of the identity politics were useful, at the time. But the holding on, imagining the problem would be solved, instead of it slipping it through, like water through your hands, is what actually happened. That antifascism no longer works. It has become a way to sell a product. Not a way to deal with complexity in society.

At the same time, I have absolute admiration for people that sleep on the floor of immigrant's homes in trouble, defending them with their bodies when the fascists come around. We engage in the imagery that forms around these topics. We are in realm of producing troubling images. Often our actual enemies turn out to be politically correct people. The very name "Mongrel" is too difficult for them, let alone our intentions.

GL: You've also produced some software—let's see how it works. Here we have got a package called "Heritage Gold" on the screen. It is an ironical, bastardized version of Photoshop. We have imported my image into the system, and now you

are going to give a new heritage. It's a good idea, let's go for it.

H: This is family-oriented heritage changing software. You need some black and female. You can invent a new family. You can have a bastard birth, revert your genes, you can have immigration, repatriation, whatever. I am pasting the new color into your skin. It reminds you how easy it is to manipulate all this data from other people. There will be a huge demand in the West for this software when it goes on full release as people feel a general discontent about their heritage. It will become important to have racial mobility. This menu allows us to add more Chinese and African into your makeup. You never have to have a sun tint again. In order to make you even more dark, we go to the "fleshtone adjustment" dialogue box. We will extract some of the Aryan elements—and you are really beginning to show through now. We will add some social elements too. We are offering a social filter of "police." You look a bit more criminal... We also add some historical relations. A bit less imperialism. Put in some more Afro. We can resize your family by a certain percentage, raise your class consciousness. And then there are the different file formats in which we can save you: genetic index, pixel punish, raw, regressive... There you are—here, you got your brand-new heritage.

[National Heritage and the Natural Selection Search Engine Interview with Harwood and Matsuko of Mongrel (London) at OpenX, Ars Electronica, September 9, 1998. See <<http://www.mongrel.org.uk>>.]

SUBJECT: WHAT ABOUT COMMUNICATION GUERRILLA? A MESSAGE ABOUT GUERRILLA COMMUNICATION OUT OF THE DEEPER GERMAN BACKWOODS (VERSION 2.0)

FROM: "AUTONOME A.F.R.I.K.A.-GRUPPE" <AFRIKA@CONTRAST.ORG>,
LUTHER BLISSETT, AND SONJA BRUENZELS
DATE: WED, 16 SEP 1998 22:20:09 +0200 (MET DST)

This message is directed to those who are fed up with repressive politics at their doorsteps, who are not frustrated enough to give up a critical position and a perspective of political intervention, and who also refuse to believe that radical politics need to be straight, mostly boring and always very serious. It also addresses those who are interested in artistic expression, using all kinds of materials and techniques such as wall-painting, woodcarving, or the internet to bend the rules of normality.

It is sent by some provincial communication guerrillas as an invitation to participate, criticize, renew and develop a way of doing politics which expresses the bloody seriousness of reality in a form that doesn't send the more hedonistic parts of ourselves immediately to sleep. Of course, this is a contradiction in itself: How can you be witty in a situation of increasing racism, state-control and decline of the welfare state, to name only a few. On the other hand, even Karl Marx didn't postulate boredom as revolutionary.

The starting point for our reflections around guerrilla communication was a trivial insight from our own politics: information and political education are completely useless if nobody is interested. After years of distributing leaflets and brochures about all kinds of disgraces, of organizing informative talks and publishing texts, we have come to question the common radical belief in the strength and glory of information. Does it really make sense to take on the attitude of a primary schoolteacher while the kids have become skinheads, slackers, or joined the rat race?

Traditional radical politics strongly rely on the persuasive power of the rational argument. The confidence that the simple presentation of information represents an effective form of political action is

almost unshakable. Critical content and the unimpeded spread of "truth" are supposed to be sufficient to tear up the network of manipulating messages, with which the media influence the consciousness of the masses. Well, since the declaration of postmodernism it has become a bit involved to insist on The One And Only Truth. But the main problem with traditional concepts of radical political communication is the acceptance of the idea: "whomsoever possesses the senders can control the thoughts of humans." This hypothesis comes from a very simple communication model which only focuses on the "sender" (in case of mass communication usually centrally and industrially organized), the "channel" which transports the information, and the "receiver." The euphoria around information society as well as its pessimistic opposition—which worries about information overkill—do not face the crucial problem of citizens' representational democracies: facts and information, even if they become commonplace, do not trigger any consequences. Face it, even if stories of disasters, injustice, social and ecological scandals are being published, it has almost no consequences.

Everybody knows that the ozone layer is fading away. Everybody knows that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer... To us, who believe in Communism, it is hard to understand why such knowledge doesn't lead to revolution and fundamental change—but it definitely doesn't.

Reflections on the interrelations between the reception of information, knowledge and the options to act within a social context have tackled how information becomes meaningful and how it then becomes socially relevant. Information by itself has neither meaning nor consequences—both are cre-

ated only through the active reception and through the scope of action of the audience. But this basic banality has far too rarely been taken into consideration within the framework of radical politics.

Guerrilla communication doesn't focus on arguments and facts like most leaflets, brochures, slogans or banners. In its own way, it inhabits a militant political position, it is direct action in the space of social communication. But different from other militant positions (stone meets shopwindow), it doesn't aim to destroy the codes and signs of power and control, but to distort and disfigure their meanings as a means of counteracting the omnipotent prattling of power. Communication guerrillas do not intend to occupy, interrupt or destroy the dominant channels of communication, but to detourn and subvert the messages transported.

But what's new about all this? After all, there have been the Berlin Dadaists, the Italian Indiani Metropolitani, the Situationists. The roots of communication guerrilla can be traced back to legendary characters like the Hapsburgian soldier Svejik and Till Eulenspiegel, the wise fool. Walking in the footsteps of the avant gardes of earlier times, we do not attempt to boast about the invention of a new politics or the foundation of a new movement. Rather, guerrilla communication is an incessant exploration of the jungle of communication processes, of the devoured and unclear paths of senders, codes and recipients. The method of this exploration is to look not just at what's being said, but to focus on how it is being said. The aim is a practical, material critique of the very structures of communication as bases of power and rule.

The bourgeois system takes its strength—beyond other things—from the ability to include critique. A government needs an opposition, every opinion needs to be balanced with another one, the concept of representative democracy relies on the fiction of equal exchange. Every criticism which doesn't fundamentally shatter the legitimacy of the ruling system, tends to become part of it. Guerrilla communication is an attempt to intervene without getting absorbed by the dominant discourse. We are looking for ways to get involved in situations and at the same time to refuse any constructive participation. Power relations have a tendency to appear normal, even natural and certainly inevitable. They are

inscribed into the rules of everyday life. Communication guerrillas want to create those short and shimmering moments of confusion and distortion, moments that tell us that everything could be completely different: a fragmented utopia as a seed of change. Against a symbolic order of western capitalist societies which is built around discourses of rationality and rational conduct, guerrilla communication relies on the powerful possibility of expressing a fundamental critique through the non-verbal, paradoxical and mythical. To be quite clear: guerrilla communication isn't meant to replace a rational critique of dominant politics and hegemonic culture. It doesn't substitute counterinformation, but creates additional possibilities for intervention. But also, it shouldn't be misunderstood as the topping on the cake, a mere addition to the hard work of "real" politics and direct, material action.

In its search for seeds of subversion, guerrilla communication tries to take up contradictions which are hidden in seemingly normal, everyday situations. It attempts to distort normality by addressing those unspoken desires that are usually silenced by omnipresent rules of conduct, rules that define the socially acceptable modes of behavior as well as the "normal" ways of communication and interpretation. To give just a simple example: most people will say that it is not okay to dodge paying the fare, even if there is a widespread feeling that public transport is over-expensive. If, however, some communication guerrillas at the occasion of an important public event like the funeral of Lady Di manage to distribute fake announcements declaring that for the purpose of participating, public transport will be free, the possibility of reducing today's expenses may tempt even those who doubt the authenticity of the announcement.

Communication guerrillas attack the power-relations that are inscribed into the social organization of space and time, into rules and manners, into the order of public conduct and discourse. Everywhere in this "cultural grammar" of a society there are legitimations and naturalizations of economic, political and cultural power and inequality. Communication guerrillas use the knowledge of "cultural grammar" accessible to everybody in order to cause irritations by distorting the rules of

normality: It is precisely this kind of irritations that put into question seemingly natural aspects of social life by making the hidden power relations visible and offering the possibility to deconstruct them. Using a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, one might say that guerrilla communication aims at a temporary expropriation of cultural capital, at a disturbance of the symbolic economy of social relations.

Go Internet, experience the future! Many communication guerrillas feel a strange affection towards living in the backwoods of late-capitalist society. In the field of communication, this causes an inclination toward the use and abuse of outdated media, such as billboards, printed books and newspapers, face-to-face, messages-in-a-bottle, official announcements, etc. (Even Hakim Bey has advocated the use of outdated media as media of subversion). Thus it is hardly astonishing that communication guerrillas are skeptical about the hype in and around the internet.

Of course, we appreciate ideas like the absolute absence of state control, no-copyright, the free production of ideas and goods, the free flow of information and people across all borders, as they have been expressed by the Californian net-ideology of freedom-and-adventure: liberalism leading us directly into hyperspace. But we also know that real neoliberalism is not exactly like this, but rather: freedom for the markets, control for the rest. It has become obvious that also the internet is no virtual space of freedom beyond state and corporate control. We are afraid that the still existing opportunities of free interchange, the lines of information transmission beyond police control, and the corners of the net which are governed by potlatch economy and not by commercialism, will fade away. The aesthetics of the internet will not be dictated by cyberpunks but by corporate self-representation with a background of a myriad of middle-class wankers exhibiting on corporate-sponsored homepages their home-sweet-homes, their sweet-little-darlings and garden gnomes.

The structures and problems of communication in the net do not differ fundamentally from those encountered elsewhere, at least not as much as the net hype wants to make believe. A product of net thought, like Michael Halberstedt's "Economy of Attention" starts out from a quite trivial point: The

potential recipients are free to filter and discard messages. (They may do even much more with them!). And they do this not mainly according to content, but using criteria which may be conceived in terms of cultural grammar and cultural capital. This is completely evident to anybody (except SWP militants) who has always distributed leaflets to people in the street though media hacks seem to have discovered this fact only since the net offers everybody the possibility to widely distribute all kinds of information. In simple words: the basic problems of communication are just the same on both sides of the electronic frontier.

Focusing on the influence of the social and cultural settings on the communication process, communication guerrillas are skeptical toward versions of net politics and net criticism, which hold an uncritical belief in the strength and glory of information. "Access for all," "Bandwidth for all": these are legitimate demands if the net is to be more than an elitist playground of the middle classes. In the future, access to adequate means of communication may even become a vital necessity of everyday life. But information and communication are not ends in themselves; first of all, they constitute an increasingly important terrain of social, political and cultural struggle. Inside and outside the net, communication guerrillas seek to attack power relations inscribed into the structure of communication processes. In the dawn of informational capitalism, such attacks become more than just a method, more than merely a technology of political activism: When information becomes a commodity and cultural capital, a most important asset, the distortion and devaluation of both is a direct attack against the capitalist system. To say it in a swanky way: This is class war.

Increasing attempts to police the net, to establish state and corporate control will, paradoxically, increase its attractiveness as a field of operation of communication guerrillas: Possibly, even those of us who until now do not even own a PC will get *Wired* then. Fakes and false rumors inside and outside the net may help to counteract commodification and state control—after all, the internet is an ideal area for producing rumors and fakes. And, of course, where technological knowledge is available there are innumerable opportunities to fake or

hijack domains and homepages, to spoil and distort the flux of information. Guerrilla communication relies upon the hypertextual nature of communication processes. (Also a newspaper or a traffic sign has plenty of cross-links to other fragments of “social text”; a medium transporting plain text and nothing else cannot exist.) Communication guerrillas consciously distort such cross-links with the aim of recontextualizing, criticising or disfiguring the original messages. In the net, hypertextual aspects of communication have for the first time come to the foreground, and the net hypertext offers fascinating possibilities for all kinds of pranks. (Imagine a hacker leaving on a homepage of, say, the CIA not a blunt “Central Stupidity Agency” (see http://www.2600.com/cia/p_2.html) but simply modifying some of the links while leaving everything else as before. There are terrible things one could do in this manner..)

But the fascination of those possibilities should not lead to a technocentric narrowing of the field of vision. The mythical figure of the hacker represents a guerrilla directed towards the manipulation of technology—but to which end? The hacker gets temporary control of a line of communication—but most hackers are mainly interested in leaving web graffiti or simply “doing it” (see the Hacker Museum <http://www.2600.com>). Others, however, rediscover guerrilla communication practices of the ancient—recently in [nettime](http://www.nettime.org) net-artist Heath Bunting slated himself in a fake review (“Heath Bunting: Wired or Tired?” <http://www.desk.nl/~nettime/>), thus re-inventing a method that Marx and Engels had already used when they faked damning reviews by first-rank economists to draw attention to *Das Kapital*.

Communication guerrillas are fascinated by possibilities offered by the internet in a very different sense: beyond its reality, the net is an urban myth, and perhaps the strongest and most vital of all. Social discourse conceives of the net as a “place” where people, pleasures, sex and the crimes of tomorrow are already taking place. *Go Internet, learn the Future!* Fears and desires are projected onto the net, the mythical place where we can see the future of our society. Paradoxically, the gift of prophecy attributed to the net gives credibility to any information circulated there. The “real world” believes

it because it comes from the realm of virtuality, and not *despite* this.

For a long time in the German backwoods, there has been a game called “the invention of CHAOS days,” a rather simple game: someone posts a note on saying that, on day X, all the punks of Germany will unite in the town of Y to transform it into a heap of rubble. The announcement is made, and a few leaflets (a dozen or so) are distributed to the usual suspects. And on that day, a procession of media hacks of every kind encounters hosts of riot squads from all over Germany on their way to Y: Once again the forces of public order were on their way to protect our civilization against dark powers. The most astonishing thing about this little game is that it actually worked—several times, no less. Obviously for the guardians of public order and public discourse, the net is a source of secret knowledge too fascinating to be ignored.

We do not mention in detail the innumerable occasions when journalists, state officials, secret services agents, and so on were taken in by false rumors circulating in the net—for example, the major German press agency DPA, which fell for a homepage of a fake corporation offering human clones, including replicas of Claudia Schiffer and Sylvester Stallone. This effect can be reproduced: the next time it was the prank about “ourfirsttime.com” (<http://www.ourfirsttime.com>). There’s little danger that media hacks will ever learn.

The net is a nice playground for communication guerrillas. But we, out there in the backwoods, are telling those living in the netscapes of electronic communication: don’t forget to walk and talk your way through the jungle of the streets, to visit the devastated landscapes of outdated media, to see and feel the space and the power and the rule of capitalism—so you shall never forget what pranks are good for.

[All rights dispersed.]

SUBJECT: MONGOLIA ONLINE: FROM GENGHIS KHAN TO BILL GATES

FROM DRAZEN PANTIC <DRAZEN@OPENNET.ORG>

DATE: MON, 02 MAR 1998 19:46:44 +0000

The Open Society Institute offices of Budapest and Mongolia organized a training course in electronic publishing in February in Ulan Bator, Mongolia. The purpose of the training was to impart the necessary skills to newcomers in the world of electronic publishing and electronic media. Mongolia has been online for almost a year—a quantum leap into a new era. Years of living behind the curtain (whatever curtain) had left their mark: very few people in Mongolia were in a position to take advantage of the new possibilities of global self-expression.

The participants were impressive, both in their sheer numbers and their determination to learn new facts and acquire new skills. From an initial enrollment of 25, the group jumped to 150, of all ages and occupations. A large number of young people were included, but there were more from older groups actively participating. The reception of each new technique or area of knowledge was unique and touching. By way of example, after a lecture on copyright and privacy issues on the internet, the whole group of more than 100 participants stood and applauded in an emotional outburst. Only in this place at this time could a lecture of this kind induce such an emotional reaction. And in the face of such a reaction, a lecturer is simply overcome by his own personal limitations. Almost all the time, contact with the group was an open, two-way street: the trainers would impart the facts and practice of the new media, while the participants would lead us toward really important matters.

At present, Mongolia has just one internet service provider, Datacomm. The company is young and is owned and managed by a very intelligent and progressive group of people. Besides the obvious possibility of monopolistic behavior, Datacomm

still acts, to a large extent, as a missionary organization. They are also providing daily training as far as the human limitations of the staff permit. The company has more than a thousand users. There are two places for access by the general public: a classroom of the Technical University, with more than 50, and a Center for internet education. This provides the broader public with a venue for cyber-gathering. The overall bandwidth in and out of the country is 128 kbs, which is adequate, but Datacomm has announced a planned expansion. New providers are also about to set up. The price for internet access is still high, even by international standards. This is the consequence of extremely expensive satellite time and international telephone lines.

Internet and satellite technology are seen in Mongolia as multipurpose. On the international scale, the principle is to present the country to the world and forge closer links with people worldwide, as well as entering electronic commerce (whatever that is). On the domestic scene, the new technologies are a vehicle for internal cohesion. Mongolia is a huge country, with an area almost as great as Europe, but a population of only 2.5 million. The telecommunications infrastructure is very poor, and some regions have no connection at all, beyond poor-quality lines to the capital, Ulan Bator. So email exchange and satellite links are a must if the country is to function in a normal way. The media scene in Mongolia is particularly unclear, at least to the casual visitor. Both print and electronic media are very keen to keep the public informed with modern news programs, in what they see as a world standard package. State television dominates all the other media. Domestic news preoccupations are more or less educational, ranging from advice to eat more vegetables, to discus-

sion on whether prostitution is good (for tourism) or bad (because of the danger of AIDS). All television channels, including the state broadcaster, carry regular soap operas—which, judging by their quality and apparent budget, have their origins in Russian anticopyright corporations. On the other hand, state television, which leases eight hours of satellite time per day, is willing to allow independent media to use the four hours of that time it has not programmed. Mongolian Television called on the private broadcasters to provide programming, preferably nondocumentary, for the unused hours. There are four independent radio and television stations operating in Mongolia. They carry little

information or political programming, offering a daily fare of MTV-like broadcasts, serials, and films. It is very difficult to talk about critical independent media in any sense we are used to. The reason for this situation is not necessarily suppression, nor any reluctance to indulge in critical discourse; rather, Mongolia is to a large extent a society very free of conflict. There is basic social consensus on the major questions of state legislation, economy, and religion. There may well be more profound conflicts concealed by the belief that economic development without turbulence will achieve the most for the welfare of the nation.

SUBJECT: SEMIFEUDAL CYBERCOLONIALISM: TECHNOCRATIC DREAMTIME IN MALAYSIA

FROM: JOHN HUTNYK <JOHN.HUTNYK@GOLD.AC.UK>
DATE: TUE, 27 OCT 1998 17:31:51 +0100

At the beginning of 1997, before the meltdown, the haze and the “illegals,” Malaysian tekno-dreamscapes reached high into the sky. Huge new airports, massive hydroelectric dams, mega shopping and apartment complexes, 2 million “foreign” construction workers building the future, and double digit projections in the 2020 Vision—Prime Minister Mahathir’s booster theme, now “delayed,” for working towards “developed nation status” by the year 2020. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad was only prevented by a virus from a planned promotional visit to the UK that year, but he did manage to make it to Hollywood. The dreaming schemes of hyper-modernity have been touring the world—LA, Tokyo, Berlin—and the future seems very close indeed. The “Multimedia Super Corridor” (a planned research and development facility with integrated educational, living and manufacturing components) is only a construction contract away, despite a few hiccups in monetary policy which have clouded the horizon.

The Koridor Raya Multimedia or Multimedia

Super Corridor (MSC) planned for Malaysia’s cyberfuture takeoff has always been an international project. In Los Angeles a cabal of the “great minds” (*New Straits Times*, January 18, 1997) met with Mahathir in a specially convened “Advisory Panel,” to flesh out the flashy proposals that would transform the urban skyline—and revitalize construction industry cash flows in difficult times. The assembled great minds included CEOs and Directors of multinational corporations such as Siemens, Netscape, Motorola, Sony, Compaq, Sun, IBM and more. The Chancellor’s Professor of UCLA was there, and Bill Gates was invited though didn’t come. (Gates announced in March 1998 that he will set up his “Asian” Microsoft operation in Hyderabad, India.) The discussion no doubt was convivial and deals floated, negotiated, traded and made.

What was under consideration at this LA talk-fest was an integrated high-tech development project designed to make Kuala Lumpur and surrounds—a fifteen by fifty-kilometer zone south from the city—the information hub of Southeast Asia. (The

Dream: the seven Flagship Applications of the MSC are Electronic Government, Smart Schools, Multipurpose Cards, Telemedicine, R&D Clusters, Borderless Marketing and Worldwide Manufacturing Webs. The first four Flagship Applications—Electronic Government, Smart Schools, Multi-Purpose Cards, Telemedicine—are categorized under “Multimedia Development,” while the other three are categorized under “Multimedia Environment.”) Trumpet headlines announced the future in the *Times*, the *Star*, and the *Sun*. PM’s speeches and supporting echoes from Ministers proclaimed that the MSC project would “harmonize our entire country with the global forces shaping the information age” (Mahathir’s speech in L.A. on January 14, 1997—from the special web page advertising the project—<http://www.mdc.com.my/>). Of course, harmonization with orchestrated multinational info-corps makes for singing pras in the press. The headlines scream: “Global Bridge to the Information Age,” “MSC immensely powerful, unique” and “PM’s Visit to US Triggers Excitement.” Big dreams indeed. Even the pop-electronic fanzine *Wired* got in on the buzz and called the project, quite favorably it seems, “Xanadu for Nerds” (5.08, August 1997). But in the context of Malaysia’s present “standing” in the international marketplace, and in relation to determined priorities and prospects for the peoples of Malaysia, what exactly is to be in this Multimedia Super Corridor? what are the serious prospects for its success? and by what criteria should it be assessed? I want to address these questions from several perspectives critical of the good news propaganda of the proposal itself. The promotional material, as can be expected, does not spare the hype:

Malaysia’s Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is a bold initiative—a regional launch site for companies developing or using leading multimedia technologies. Aiming to revolutionize how the world does business, the MSC will unlock multimedia’s full potential by integrating groundbreaking cyberlaws and outstanding information infrastructure in an attractive physical environment. (Webpage)

The key parts of the proposal include a series of research and development “clusters,” basically sci-

ence labs and info-technology factories, located near a new airport and a “cybercity” including state-of-the-art condos, shopping complexes, and transportation facilities, in a secure (everyone must carry an electronic “National Multipurpose identity Card”) and “attractive” garden city. Telemedicine, Electronic Government and full (“uncensored”) internet connectivity are also touted. All this overseen by the twin advisory bodies of the Multimedia Development Corporation—they put up the website—and the advisory panel of expert international “great minds.”

Why did the first MSC promotion meeting take place in Beverly Hills? Well, obviously the internet and international connectivity of the grand scale to attract the likes of Gates (Microsoft) and Gerstner (IBM) is not yet readily available in Kuala Lumpur itself. Similarly, Mahathir went direct from L.A. to Japan for another parallel high-level corporate luncheon. The point is to attract investment, or rather tenants, for the research laboratories that will be built. One does not want an empty corridor, so one travels to where the clients are. An open invitation.

But what is the invitation to? The development of Science City ventures such as this is not a new idea, though it has become something of a craze since the first versions of the concept of integrated science city living was spawned out of the heads of the planners at Japan’s MITI. Engineering new Silicon Valleys has become the grand vision of subsequent planners from “Silicon Glen” in Scotland, to the Multifunction Polis in Adelaide. Not always successfully do more than three hundred such ventures compete for relatively rare technology research pay-offs, as the cutting edge of such research is closely guarded and nurtured by the wealthy megacorporations. In this context, success of a Science City is initially about confidence—the importance of hype. Here, the future can seem very fragile indeed. From the beginning of the year when the prime minister was talking up the “2020 Vision” vision with super conferences in Hollywood, to the CNN televised roller-coaster of the virtual market stock exchange troubles, it’s been a dynamic time for futures in Malaysia.

The 2020 Vision “has been delayed,” Mahathir was forced to announce, as speculative capital

became more tentative and the projects which formed the core of the vision of achieving “Developed Nation status” in twenty-three years were put on hold. The complex repercussions of the slide of the Malaysian Ringgit and other stocks, along with controversies over projects such as the Bakun Hydroelectric dam in Sarawak, and “the Haze” problem afflicting the region, have clouded projections and predictions. Development and profitability seem less secure than before; the tallest building (twin towers Petronas), the biggest airport, the longest office, the undersea electricity cable and the Cyber-Malaysia Multimedia Super Corridor now all appear as costly monuments (whether completed, stalled or abandoned) to the precarious gamble of speculative development within very late capitalism. Of all the new big projects that marked Mahathir’s Malaysia as the go-ahead new tiger cub of Southeast Asia, only the MSC project, and related services attractive to international R&D such as the airport, have survived the imposed austerities of the currency crisis. Confidence and hype require more than big buildings and upbeat reviews on CNN.

The mass media soundbite context is not the only one in which I would want to assess the MSC. For starters, the MSC was planned well before the much-hyped “crisis” was even a gleaming twinkle in international imperialism’s eye. The Malaysian state has pursued a vigorous technological development program, ostensibly to “catapult” itself within the next thirty years into the fabled zone of “developed nation status.” On the back of the Asian Tiger rhetoric of vibrant Southeast Asian economies, this kind of advertised ambition was accepted by many, despite the obvious enormity of the task and despite the almost equally obvious lack of substance to these proclamations (even with massive double-digit growth over many years, the chances of the Malaysian economy reaching levels equivalent to that of major European, or any other Western, powers was slim). Here it’s worth noting the new comprador build-and-be-damned cowboy-styles of Mahathir and his cronies, with emphasis on the speculative opportunistic nature of ventures: the world’s tallest building, the longest submarine electricity cable, the empty tower blocks

of condos and the jammed road system filled with “Proton” cars (the millionth Proton rolled off the assembly line in January 1997). Corresponding kickbacks in contracts and short-term gains went to the favored few. (The scandal over the award of the prize Bakun Hydro-electrical dam project to Ekran Ltd., the company in which the Chief Minister of Sarawak’s sons had substantial holdings, was only one among many.) The mass of the population did not become “Asian Tigers.” The glamour projects could not hide the fact of increasing immiseration, the narrow and low nutrient day-to-day existence of the hawkers, farmers and peddlers who crowded the cities and towns, the worsening economic situation in the villages, and the years of repressive governmental corruption and favoritism which leached even the limited potential of prosperity from the hands of the poor into the overseas bank account of the elite. The context of the Asian Crisis, and the MSC, then includes the expanded parallel economy of food and goods hawkers, the illegal and undocumented workers, increasing sexual and other service work for many and uneven opportunities and exploitation, especially of women and “foreigners” and those excluded under the sectarian *brumiputra* legislation that favored Muslim Malays over Chinese, Indian or *Orang Asli* (indigenous) peoples in business, university, and government service.

How did the situation in Malaysia—and Southeast Asia more generally—come to the impasse where the “crisis” could so rapidly unravel the Asian Tiger hype as it has done? It is important to remember that the foundation of the “Asian miracle” which enabled the “tigers,” and even the “cubs,” to succeed was not some ethnic value or “Confucian” mindset, nor some trickle down effect of development finally reaching some of the non-Euro-American zones, under the auspices of globalizing capital. Such explanations, racist and self-serving on the part of the analysts who offer them, are disguises for the major disruption to imperialism occasioned by the mobilizations and success of postwar (Second World—imperialist—War) national liberation movements (of course with varied degrees of achievement). That the dual deceptions of comprador betrayal on the part of oppor-

tunist elite national leaderships on the one hand. and false promises—development aid, technology transfer—swift restitution—IMF loans, DFI and structural adjustment—on the part of Capital on the other hand, does not diminish the fact that what we see played out in Asia today comes as a consequence of global struggles.

It could be argued that the “Asian Tiger” fantasy routine was in effect a deployment of self-serving elite hype. It was the product of a confluence of necessary bluster on the part of Gung-ho development enthusiasts (in this case the comprador elite), and the opportunist specialist swagger of expat experts in the international finance and economics related subdisciplines (what some might want to call the neocolonial administration). The complicity of Mahathir (and Co.) in toadying to these “experts” in the pay of international capital is something that can be variously documented, though as always, the relationship between the comprador elite and the administration experts is sometimes a fraught one. Not surprisingly, since they are after all representatives of the competing interests of different sections of the capitalist system, there is sometimes hostility and disagreement on principles if not in practice (the dynamic of these contradictions is most clearly evident in Mahathir’s insistence that Malaysia would not need the intervention of the World Bank, as Indonesia seemed to require, because Malaysia had “already put in place the required measures” that the World Bank would have wanted in any case).

The role of experts and specialists in the pay, and also at times in “passive” critique of Mahathir and co., is a part and parcel of the development trick that lead up to the crisis. I would want to identify a range of specialist workers and several levels of expertise implicated in the project of fitting Malaysians up for participation in the international economy and its exploitative extraction frames. As a special illustrative case of the convoluted complicity of foreign experts, it is instructive to take up the rhetoric about women in technology and the MSC. So often expert development hype promises the advancement of the position of women through the liberating brilliance of technological advance. Parallel to the promises made to indigenous people about the viability of a market-

based future (postnomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyles, which were admittedly hard are to be replaced by the “new” opportunities of waged labor), the promise to women mouthed by the likes of Mahathir and some international women’s advocacy groups alike, was that new work opportunities would “free” women from the strictures and constraints of “traditional” oppression. It will of course be readily recognized that neither market economics of high-tech workplace jobs in themselves are liberatory when the context remains one of surplus value extraction and the fruits of advanced production only go to line the wallets of the administrative cliques. In this sense it is possible to make a critique of those who are concerned in cliché ways only with women’s labor in relation to the MSC and electronic industrialization in Malaysia—however much it is the case that old and restrictive “traditional” constraints are broken when women or indigenous people enter the waged workforce, this does not necessarily lead yet to liberation, and those who may think so in a naive way should look to the ways capital finds uses and subsumes such “nimble fingers” and exotic workers in its advertising propaganda.

But, after all this, who will be the high-tech workers in the Multimedia Super Corridor? A layer of technocrats and experts will need to be recruited, from in part the expat Malaysian elites schooled in the salons of Stanford, MIT, London and Manchester, but in large part, at least in the first phases, the already existing personnel of the multinational info-corps that are invited to “relocate” will provide staff for the most important posts. This layer of imported workers will have expat lives and an expat status which is not far from the old “colonial career” that has always been the hallmark of business empires under imperialism. These appointments will have several corresponding run-on effects. In this context consideration of the impact of recent technological innovation in the old metropolises upon those now engaged in the (neo)colonial manufacturing enclaves and the Special Economic Zones and so on, is required as a part of any assessment of tech-driven extension of exploitation in the “offshore” production sites of Southeast Asia. Given the range of projects abandoned in the wake of the Ringitt crisis, why is it

that Mahathir's dream is to go for the high-tech option instead of extending manufacturing for the local satellite regional economies (surely sales of medium-level manufactured goods to ASEAN partners holds strategic economic merit)? Is the high-tech only gambit not likely to open still further the path of super profits and speculative super exploitation? A less stark, but nevertheless important, question is why the Special Export Zone option with the tax breaks, cheap labor, low shipping excises, and so on is no longer the preferred path, and is instead replaced by a risky corridor venture-chasing the possibility of "technology transfer" and rapid transit to a Bill Gates-sponsored cyberfuture? The problem is that the conditions for such transfer are not quite worked out and there is nothing to really entice the key parts of such corporations to the KL Corridor, nor are the generous tax concessions, infrastructure developments and other State funded inducements calculated to lock in technology transfer in a way that Malaysia could exploit in the long term.

What, and who, is the MSC for? Is it again a project to make the elites rich, and one which does not contribute, except perhaps through the vagaries of trickle-down theory and a vicarious, somewhat quixotic, reflected glory which allows the Malaysian people to take pride in Mahathir's international notoriety? Or can it be demonstrated that the old international imperial production modes are magically reversed by the MSC, rather than continued in new format? Where once jungles were cleared for plantations, where these plantations were then cleared for condos and shopping malls (which lie empty or underused) and where the manufacturing sector was geared largely for export rather than ever for use or need, can it be that the multimedia development will somehow restore productive capacity to local priorities? Is multimedia the key to local content, local uses, local needs, or even to regional variants of these same priorities—the very priorities that we have too often learnt are always second to the goal of profitability, and which seem increasingly subject to the fluctuations and constraints of international competition? "The people's" interest in the trade in shares, the speculation on futures and the infra-

structure development company extractions, are all based on some future payoff that does not arrive, or at the least does not arrive for the majority of Malaysians. Of course there are a small few who have always benefited from exploitation of the country's economic efforts—be they the plantation owners, the condo contractors, or the new "big project" development engineers. The problem is that instead of moving towards a more adequate mode of production, given regional and local conditions, possibilities and necessities, those setting the direction of economic activity in Malaysia seem to favor older selective benefit structures and priorities. There is no indication that a leap forward into the MSC is likely to disrupt existing feudal discrepancies of income, lifestyle, or quality of life. Here the contradiction is the same one as that between colonial masters and peasant labor, such that I would suggest the designation "semifeudal, cybercolonial" for those situations where the most advanced technological capacities will benefit old social hierarchic formations that refuse to budge.

Who will work in the MSC? The departure of many of Malaysia's "educated" classes to countries like Singapore, the United States and Australia is considered by some to be "significant" in the context of the MSC dream (See Yee Ai, *Star*, October 6, 1997). That a potential "elite" entrepreneurial segment of the population left Malaysia to further their studies and careers overseas when quotas limiting University places for non-*brumiputras* were instituted under the "New Economic Policy" has had the consequence of positing a fabled brain-drain resource base of potential ex-Malaysian expats who could be enticed back to work in the IT labs of the MSC. In any case, supposing these brainy exiles were enticed back to the MSC, what is to stop the advanced layer of such workers being poached back to the superior labs of Silicon Valley? For that matter, what is to prevent the MSC from becoming the poaching ground for future Malaysian technology-educational cohorts to be shipped to the U.S.?

But to focus on these workers is only to consider a tiny portion of the "job-creation-programme" that is the MSC. Overwhelmingly, it is a kind of processed worker who will make up the majority

of those who will build and work in the multimedia corridor-fantasy city. These are people who must clean the labs and work the service sector, in the restaurants, in the apartment buildings, in the transport sector. They are the line-workers, the cable-layers, ditch-diggers, copper miners (insofar as the cybercity still runs through wires), the optic fiber-blowers (insofar as it runs on glass), the light monitors, the carpet-layers, the cola-dispensing machine-restockers, the logo-painters, corporate design staff at the level of uniform tailoring, carpark attendants, rubbish-removers, rubbish collation, white paper-recyclers, glorified garbage-shredders of sophisticated environmental mission statements, junk-mailers, home-shopping delivery agents, home-shoppers, wives, children, neglected pets. Oftentimes these workers will be in insecure employment, many of them overseas nationals, of those, many "illegals." In some sectors, whole communities that provide support and sustenance for productive workers, adjacent reproductive workers, those without community, those with only community, displaced communities, illegal workers, illegal worker entrepreneurs, police crackdown, anti-immigration hysterics, typists of government propaganda and opportunity, cogs in the machine. Sundry otherness. The wrong side of the international division of labor set out on the threshold of the condo, expat servants of all stripes...

What Mahathir's image manipulators want to make of Malaysia is a manicured paradise for multinationals, and so this requires a certain degree of interventionist manipulation of the workforce at several levels—intensive training to equip support staff and engineer-technicians with requisite skills, service economy provisions (requiring also the trappings of the spinoff tourist industry), intensive building programme for offices, condos, air-conditioned shopping centers, and last but not least, the efficient removal of unorganized labor and "street clutter" in the form of vendors and other "illegals." The removal of street vendors is conceived along something like the same lines as the landscape gardening of the science park site, a beautification designed to appeal to the supposed streamlined elegance of Western corporate expectations (little matter that this prob-

ably miscalculates the appeal of a Third World Malaysian site for Western corporations, who are in search not only of cheap labor and peripherals, but who also happily consume "clutter" as exotic, even when the street vendors curry is too hot, or the colors too garish.

Under the austerities imposed under the "crisis" (self-imposed, but they would be little different if the IMF had been invited to manage matters) the first adjustments to the aesthetic makeup of the work force has been to remove the vendors and illegals. In a perverse way this is only "really" about work permits and travel arrangements as the visas of all foreign workers are temporary. The free communication of freely active people is the slogan for generating the successful environment for the research and development community, but the free development of all the people does not compute in this scene. This is one of the major dysfunctions of the MSC in the context of the "crisis." The "foreign" workers brought to build such projects have now become a threat to the scheme. This has meant that one of the responses of Mahathir to the Ringitt crisis was to announce that significant numbers of foreign workers would have to be repatriated. This was not really a new call, but rather an older racist campaign given a new excuse. For some time the Malaysian Government has perpetrated a brutal crackdown on Tamils, Bangladeshis, and Indonesian workers in the Peninsula—from random stop-and-search leading to deportation, to a media campaign which creates resentment. This coupled with brumiputra policies favoring Malay ethnicity workers over Chinese and Indian Malaysian citizens makes the issue of race and opportunity a volatile one in Malaysia. Some 250,000 of the 2 million foreign workers brought to Malaysia to work the big development schemes are expected to be deported by August of 1988, mostly Bangladeshis, Tamils, and Acehnese. Reuters reported in March that:

Malaysia plans to deport some 200,000 foreign workers when their permits expire in August, a government official said Wednesday. The official Bernama news agency quoted Immigration Director-General Aseh Che Mat as saying employers had been told to prepare to send back foreign

workers in the ailing services and construction sectors. Malaysia estimates that some 800,000 of 2 million foreign workers in the country are illegal. Since the beginning of the year, authorities have detained more than 17,000 people who were attempting to enter the country illegally. (March 1998)

However, some kinds of foreign workers are OK. When it comes to the glamour projects of development capitalism certain of the experts, expats, and entrepreneurs are exempt from Mahathir's racist gaze. As the economic downturn leads to cutbacks at the MSC, its local workers, not expats, who are being retrenched. At risk of further racism, Mahathir and his cronies now find themselves in a double bind. They have invited "too many" low-skilled construction workers in to build twin towers, airports, and so on and want to get rid of them, while at the same time they want expert development and high-skilled expats to arrive in numbers in the hope that the future may arrive by way of that alchemy known as "technology transfer." It should be no surprise that workforce recruitment takes hierarchical and politically charged forms.

Among the "service workers" one special category has often been singled out. These workers—young Malay women—are found to be particularly suited to high-tech process work by way of cultural conditioning, small-tasks competence, and the mechanics of basket-weaving. This kind of racist characterization appears in barely modified form in the MSC prospectus and other documents—"labour so easy to train" says a FIDA brochure on investment opportunities. This is the gendered version of the same stupidity that once upon a time would explain Japanese technical ascendancy in electronic goods manufacture by claiming that because the shorter Japanese worker stood closer to the workbench greater attention to detail produced superior products. The position of women in feudal structures does seem replicated in telematic times, yet explanation based upon the "cultural" would seem most suited to those who would occlude the political, and any talk of exploitation. What are the conditions of takeoff for Mahathir's proposed dreamscape? The prospects for synergy and innovative creative hyper invention rely upon

the relocation of corporate R&D which is less than likely to arrive. The "milieu of innovation" that fuels the successful ventures of this kind does not yet seem to exist in the Malaysian plan—though there certainly is the fab idea in the proposal to build a "cyberversity." The international division of labor, the agendas and opportunisms of the neoimperialist world order, the short term interests of monopoly capital and the inability to provide a lock-on to capital and technology which may relocate to Malaysia are not, none of them, addressed in the promotional or planning literature. There are very real obstacles which would need to be solved if any technology project were to succeed in the East Asian sphere, given that Gates has said that Microsoft will not shift its "fundamental" research outside the U.S., it is not a grand prospect. The realities of the international economy do not favor such projects outside the already entrenched centers. The cost to the Malaysian state, and so therefore the public purse, is likely to be greater than that which can be recouped in the short or long term.

At the risk of inviting the wrath of the "recalcitrant" prime minister, a different series of questions could be asked, ones that would be less generous, but not less plausible in their speculations: for starters, who will profit from the development of the MSC? Do Prime Minister Mahathir and his cronies, the elites and supporters of the good news propaganda in the press, have capital invested in the multimedia transnationals that may locate in the MSC corridor? If Malaysian elite capital is attached to Bill Gates's capital, then perhaps the MSC makes sense for them, if not it is just a corridor crying out (perhaps in vain) for Gates's profiteering. Or, alternately, do Mahathir and other members of the Malaysian elite have capital tied up in the construction industry? This we know is the case from the controversy around the company Ekran and its now stalled plans to build the Bakun hydro electrical dam in Sarawak (flooding the homes of 10,000 Orang Ulu peoples). But surely those that have holdings in construction could just keep on making money out of condos, dams, hotels, and roads, and so all this info and multimedia stuff is too risky speculation? Why go for this high-tech biz? Isn't building factories and ware-

houses for offshore assembly and export processing profitable enough? Is the writing on the wall in that sector—and does it say build corridors not factories, the end of manufacturing profit is nigh? Or, considering the most cynical case, will this Super Corridor actually have anything in it?—or is it just a flash way of selling more construction (with corresponding bribes and kickbacks etc.)? Even if the R&D firms were to locate some of their lower level R&D in the corridor, how long would it stay—high-tech production is very short on shelf life, and very mobile in terms of setups. What is the prognosis for the economics of the project if even these

simple questions are so obvious? Surely better analysts have seen that the gains are not there. What are the justifications? Is it so far off base to suspect the recent fluctuations of the share market indicate where the problems lie—this is a virtual, rather than actual, development, and 2020 is a very long way off.

[A longer version of this paper will appear in *The Planetary Work Machine*, edited by Franco Barchiesi and Steve Wright (forthcoming).]

SUBJECT: CITY OF DOGS, MERCEDES BENZES, AND A LOT OF POTENTIAL

DATE: THU, 8 OCT 1998 02:11:55 +0200

FROM: IGOR MARKOVIC (IGOR.MARKOVIC@ZAMIR-ZG.ZTN.APC.ORG)

Some Reporter's Notes on the Syndicate Meeting
"Piramedia," June 1998

The Albanian capital definitely offers a lot more "reality one can cope with," as Geert Lovink put it lately. Visitors with some previous experience with deep-East airports weren't very surprised at seeing cows and horses calm standing very near the planes, but for some Westerners that is definitely the first huge shock on such a trip. But, the airplane made a 180-degree turn, and then went back to the only runway leading to the airport building—something new for every one. But, it would be nice if the plane took us to the building. Passengers come off the plane some 300 meters from the building, and the road to it (if you are lucky enough to avoid all the parked planes) is more like some south American ministate. Arcades with palms, and a building the size of a smaller railway station somewhere in central Europe, sounds like a bad recommendation for future stays. But, what one sees at first look is usually wrong. Sure, The poverty present at the only

international airport is widely spread all around the town, but it's purely the result of decades of isolation, because the town is extremely interesting as soon as you are willing to look beyond the feeble facade.

First, the obvious thing on the streets is—coexistence. Animals and humans. If Trieste is known as a city of cats, Tirana is definitely the city of dogs. On every corner there are a lot of street dogs laying on the sun, and usually they are completely harmless, even if you decide to take a night tour. Perhaps they look a little bit different to someone with a "strange smell," but they refrain even from howling, not to mention from doing anything more serious. Beyond dogs, Tirana is also famous for its Mercedes Benz population; according to the receptionist in the Hotel California, the city has the highest number of Mercedes per capita in the world, and even more of the old diesel versions. Walking around it's not hard to believe that—every second car is really a Mercedes. There is no clear explanation for that passion, because Mercedes are driven not only by nouveau riche,

but by everyone who is able to collect some money. Which is not an easy task. Beyond smuggling everything possible (which should be patented as a Balkan occupation), there are very few possibilities for earning money. Industry is in ruins, which is obvious if a traveler goes to the coast, as we did.

People are a special story—the usual European and (especially) the old Yugoslavian stereotype of Albanians as a short, dark, dirty people is not only racist, but also completely wrong. It's true that you can spot some shorter people with darker skin, but not much more than in any European town; it's also a fact that there are a lot of blond people, particularly women. In the Museum of National History (which is outside of the newer, pathetic wing about victims of communism, which is arranged with lot of taste), it's possible to find a reason for that. Through the area that is today Albania passed many armies and many nations, and even the roots of today's habitants are somewhere in the deep, deep past B.C. Most of the people originate from Ilirians, and those nation definitely do not fit the "short, black" stereotype—these characteristics arrived with the Slavic migrations and after, and mostly in the northern part of the country.

The main street, a boulevard in the full sense, goes from one side of the town to another, and it's always rush hour. All of life is somehow placed on a street—in front of numerous bars, pizzerias, and restaurants, with here and there in-between some Admiral Clubs with slot machine. Everything is full of people: they are walking, sitting, talking, drinking, eating, kissing—the street is not only a public but a social space. One special advantage of Tirana is a huge park with a virgin lake only ten minutes from the university complex, which closes off one end of the main street. The most fascinating thing about that oasis of peace is that there is not a single bar on the shore—definitely a pleasant alternative in our fast-paced, stressful way of life. It's not surprising that people are more open, more communicative, with more happier faces, than anywhere else. In a middle of the boulevard is a main square with a huge hotel for foreigners, the national opera building (very much like similar buildings all around Russian and the East and the already mentioned National Museum. There's also

a big statue of the national hero, Skender-beg, and a national bank. A good proof of Albanians' extraordinary sense of humor is that they have built a small luna-park in the middle of the city center. The former residence of Enver Hoxha is, to be honest, nothing special. If the interior is in accordance with its size and external look, he was not so lucky, compared to other socialist leaders.

But if Tirana offers a picture of normality, outside of the capital it's not such a bright situation. Coming back from a small party outside of town, we passed a couple of police patrols, but Astrit, our host and driver, didn't pay any attention to them—except the one some five kilometers from the town. Every vehicle coming to town is stopped at that point and searched. Later I heard that this checkpoint is not formal but a real border, beyond which, in theory, no one can guarantee any kind of safety. The army does not have enough arms, and most of the policemen (there are a lot of them) carry them on a pro forma basis—they have no munitions. Almost everything was stolen during the rebellion time; in a video piece by one of the students, we even saw people taking a plane from storage. They had no clue about flying.

The common impression given of life on the edge, the permanent possibility of further political instability, also could be observed in the artworks that we saw. The video productions by students from the Academy prove the overall thesis that it's not technical richness, but content that counts. If I compare those low-tech works with, let's say, the usual Japanese productions for *Ars Electronica*—it's clear that the Japanese are (in most of the cases) just playing with technology, trying to reach "boundaries"; Albanian video was about art processing and the exploration of real life, which art is probably all about. In the three pieces we saw the problem of modest technical equipment was pushed aside by the content. The emphasis was on contemporary or very recent political situations, and on sociocultural trends, namely patriarchy and society's conservatism. Those pieces were not masterworks, but the second, for example, showed part of a day in one woman's life and illustrated women's perpetual work, the repetition of service to the family, no privacy, and so on, with its conclusion (women who'd been going in and out

of house front doors many times to pick up the laundry, to bring food, wood, etc., finally locked the door and metaphorically said no to the stereotyped roles of women in Albanian society); this work will definitely be a candidate for an award at any video festival.

It's clear that Albanian media art (at the moment mainly video and video installations) has incredible potential, which was proven again during the annual exhibition this year in June. The positive strategic point, in my opinion, is that the years of isolation with all the problems also brought with them freshness and originality, so rare in most of the better informed post-East countries. There is no tradition of following and copying "big authors" (for example, Bill Viola's influence on Polish video in the eighties—here "great masters" simply do not exist), so the authors have an open field for exploring, learning, and creating, without needing to pay attention to contemporary trends and fashion, or to follow a conformist history of art. In a sense, with no history of exiled art populations returning to the country after '89, with a lack of information about recent projects in Europe and around the world, artists here have more freedom to play, to enjoy their work, and don't have to pay so much attention to curators' and gallerists' demands; they can explore "pure" artistic visions, methods, and models. Their best chance lies in the fact that to a certain degree, they have already developed personal artistic character, and coming in contact with "outside" world may (and I strongly believe, will) result in playful and original works, not just in pure (or not so pure) copies of what is going on in the "centers of art," wherever they are. The peripheral position of Tirana and Albania in general might lead them to have a mixture of styles and techniques, with a strong emphasis on their own cultural capital, because they already are using ideas and concepts of western art, not blindly, but using methods of rethinking, reusing, recycling...recombinant culture indeed! The exhibition at the Academy by the students of textile department, was more or less the same story—freshness, originality, good content, and context, all at the same time.

We might observe a wide synthesis of arts with different origins in space and time, namely from

motifs that are not only from different places, but that also belong to different styles—all the things so desperately missing, let's say, from SCCA's annual exhibitions in so many countries. The general impression of Tirana, both on a "real-life" and "artistic" level, led us to the conclusion that this is definitely a country that will emerge very soon on the cultural map of Europe, and that visits to Albania will soon not just be restricted to those who are there by accident or those who want to make some money fast; anyone who will dare to consider themselves European will soon need to visit there. Often. Because Albania, and particularly Tirana, offers a different picture of the Balkans. It is different from the usual stereotypes created by "Europe" and by the "civilized West"—stereotypes about disorder, wars, dirtiness, the Orient in a negative sense. If Tirana is a good enough example of the Balkans, and it should be, then it's hard not to claim that Balkan is beautiful.

[Edited by Hope Kurtz.]

SUBJECT: BUY ONE GET ONE

FROM: SHU LEA CHEANG <SHULEA@EARTHLINK.NET> WITH LAWRENCE CHUA
DATE: WED, 17 DEC 1997 05:09:46 +0100 MET

“Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation (NTT) signs a joint venture to develop “Cyberjaya”, an intelligent city destined to become the center of Malaysia’s Multimedia Super Corridor.”
—NTT press release, May 7, 1997

BUY ONE GET ONE derives its name from happy hour at Sphinx in Soi Silom, Bangkok. The project explores a digital (co)existence that is borne out of net technology. While Southeast Asia builds Cyberjaya and Africa safaris on the net, we travel to test the limits of national and electronic border patrols.

A cyberhomesteader drifting, accessing with a borrowed password passing with a torn ID card, homepage, homeless page, buy one get one. As a matter of national security, we simply don’t allow people from certain countries to hop on a plane with an uninspected suitcase, leave the airport without going through customs, and walk into a bank. But today, there is nothing to stop a computer hacker in Iran from sitting at a terminal and traveling to that same bank over the Internet.
—Simson L. Garfinkel, on Electronic Border Control, *Hotwired*, July 14, 1997

Shanghai. 11.17.1997, NO VISA.
ENTRY DENIED.

Shanghai, November 17:
If you are Chinese, why do you have a U.S. passport?
—Immigration official, Shanghai International Airport

Taipei, December 2:
You conquered me. And me? I lost but I also triumphed. How could I not? I have learned so much from you. I can do anything now. You have edu-

cated me in the finer points of a civilizing empire. To savor the sound of the teapot’s wet bottom circling the lip of the warming bowl. You taught me the way to speak your language. To start thinking of myself as a human being. An individual. With skin in place of borders and 99 channels in place of a memory. You have taught me many things.

BACK TO BANGKOK

Bangkok, November 15:

Chai yen yen. Keep a cool heart. Something you say in the clogged arteries of the city of angels. Something you say to remind yourself you were not always hurtling forward. Listen carefully. Under the hum of the idling motor, the clatter of the fallen baht, there is a more insistent song. Something that calls you to reflect on the rampant materialism that’s permeated the core of life in this part of the world. To reflect on the echo of your empty bank account, the shopping bags in your hand, the price of the ticket.

Two digital suitcases modeled after Japanese style bentobox and equipped with powerbook, cameras, phonline and a *hino maru bento* (lunchbox with rice and ume/plum) are netcast ready for HoME delivery. One for the road, one for HoME in NTT/ICC gallery.

5 November, 1997, 5 p.m.

Uploading from CYBER CLUB, Maurya Sheraton, New Delhi, India. Hosted by hotel’s own leased phonline and 64 kbps server.
log on: saudia. password: welcome

Johannesburg, October 14:

You maneuver the streets, trying to lose your skin. With a suitcase of privilege in your once colored hands, you try to become another transborder data flow, skimming the surfaces of oceans, looted

banks, whole cities still glittering under siege. All this you try to do without staining your feet. But as the ground seeps in through your callused soles, you realize that technology is not a colorless media. Even as you try to jettison the essential encumbrances of the nation, the tribe, and the individual, the codes you have stored in your head become an anchor, fixing you to a place, a history, a system in which you are even now participating.

The Times of India, New Delhi, November 6, 1997
NEW INTERNET POLICY AIMS AT 2 MILLION NETIZENS BY 2000

The information market is a pattern of reprocessing, repackaging, and reselling that we're familiar with from colonial times: the colonies provide the raw materials which are made into "finished" products in the West and then sold back to the colonies.

—Leo Fernandez, IndiaLink, the country's first computer communications system dedicated solely to development issues pertaining to the environment, women, children and human rights.

Delhi, November 3:

The bottle of water in my hand promises that it's "Triple sterilized: No lead. No chlorine. No smell." I've been drinking religiously from it, but I'm still bedridden with a flu. My head is congested with the same traffic of viruses with which the Flatted Factory Complex is teeming. In this shabby, barely lit block of concrete, hundreds of electronic companies have set up shop. The stench of excrement competes with the perfumed promises of technology. It's here, in a cramped back office of an agent for the government run ISP, that we log on for the first time in Delhi.

Less than an hour away, the Maurya Sheraton's exclusive Cyber Club promises internet access in pristine, streamlined surroundings, facilitated by the hotel's own server. This is the promise of technology in this part of the world: a fantasy of ordered streets, access to information and security. But the reality is closer to the halls of the Flatted Factory Complex, a place that is always open to the threat and possibilities of contagion. Lee Chan's mother is seventy-two years old. She

recalled that during the wartime everyone had to bring a *hino-maru bento* for lunch to school on the first of every month. Called "Revival of Asia Day," no one was allowed anything but rice and the *umeboshi*. It was meant to train ordinary folks to experience the wartime "frontline."
—from Claire and Marou's email

Harare, October 19:

A Fanonian safari affair: tea served in the bush by tuxedoed Shona waiters, a tour through a game reservation with all these pruney English people. "That's a giraffe, isn't it? Giraffes eat their young for breakfast, don't they?"

Language becomes a mirror, where any attempt at dialog becomes merely an exercise in confirming the white man's expertise.

There is the appearance of an interactive economy on the web, but don't most folks use Web sites like Game Boys? In order to truly intervene and interact with this circuit, it's necessary to adopt a different kind of reflex.

Try this: shatter the mirror, then pick up the glass and use it like a razor to cleave yourself from yourself.

Seoul, November 23:

It is a condition of life in the Third World to deny your place in it. But no matter how high the skyscrapers or how well paved the road, no matter how fast the speed or sophisticated the violence, no matter how long ago modernity triumphed and raised its imperial flag here, no matter how many places develop where the word "cyber" can be affixed, nothing can hide the scent of teargas on your breath. The song in the *noraebang* remains the same. We still rule over the ruins of miracles.

Singapore, November 9:

I suppose this is as good a place as any to consider your paranoia and how it has shaped our journey. A state of paranoia is necessary for maintaining any identity. Without the fear of disappearing into the black world around you, the borders of our bodies would vanish. In Singapore, it feels like someone is always watching, monitoring your every indiscretion. Everything seems to try to reinscribe the permanent identity of a state

against the flows of travel and trade. Let's face it, without fear, you are nothing.

On the road, the digisuitcase is net transmission central, our last hold to a connection, an interface between travelers and marketplace locals, our attachment to HoME/System Mainframe. In the gallery, the bento suitcase serves as gateway for gallery visitors. When in doubt, PRESS. Memory chips scramble. Reprogramable autoagents shuttles down the assembly line.

The Daily Star, Beirut, October 24, 1997
ISRAELIS TRY TO SABOTAGE RESISTANCE WEBSITE

They try to send a virus to the page, a form of electronic detonation. They send a message millions of times—which could take up all our capacity. There is no dialog. This is not a struggle over a piece of land, it is a clash of civilizations

“Between Arab civilization and, if one exists, Israeli civilization. The media has always concentrated on the Islamic Resistance as a military operation, but resistance is not just a military matter. Combatting Zionism requires the most advanced technology in order to counter the directed media and to convey our views.”

—Hassan Naami, publicity director of the Islamic Resistance Support Association on the Moqawama website

Beirut, October 29:

Beirut is a fabric of ideas, different tenses that exist in the same sentence.

There is the Beirut before the war, the Riviera of the Arab world captured in the postcards that are still on sale everywhere. Then, there is the Beirut that will be, Solidere's Hong Kong of the next millennium, dreamed up on architectural plans and real-estate brochures. Then, there are the few remaining edifices of bombed out buildings. Across the street from the construction site for Sodeco Square, in a crumbling building that architectural activists have temporarily saved from demolition, we wander up a staircase into a sandbagged snipers' lair. The ground is littered with newspapers from 1978 and invoices from the eighties. I find a photo of someone's wedding under

some broken tiles. The urge to forget lives on the same street as the desire for nostalgia.

The existing ruling class in Malaysia forms an unbroken link with the colonial past. They operated with colonial categories of thought despite their anti-colonial pronouncements. Their concept of property, income tax, business institution and the state, are still dominated by colonial categories.

—Syed Hussein Alatas, “The Myth of the Lazy Native”
Asian cultural values will help bring Malaysia out of its current economic crisis.

—Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed

Penang, Malaysia, November 13:

My birthplace flashes by in a current of nostalgic bytes and futuristic promises. The lure of calling this place home again has never been stronger. Even in the midst of the depression, the excitement of the future is infectious: hearing Mahathir rail against Western hegemony, watching manicured offices rise like refined Javanese palaces out of the plantation oilpalm at Cyberjaya in KL. Wandering the backlots of the Free Trade Zone in Penang, I pass aisles of young kampung women boarding company hired buses that take them back home: every step of their lives is accounted for. There is the feeling here that the Third World can keep some of its own rightful harvest rather than deliver it all to overdeveloped nations. The Keretapi Tanah Melayu carries me across the promised land. A train pushing forward through the forest of signs. Its engines screeching out a nervous lullaby.

During the two month period of the NTT/ICC Biennial Exhibition, we claim our HoME in Tokyo gallery space and in the telecommunication mainframe. Tracing a route that recalls seeds of discontent, we'll be locating net connection and log on in every city. Recharging desire carried on trade winds between Africa and Asia, we'll be uploading and “furnishing” our HoME with wallpapers of the ever-developing, shuffling memory chips as we cross the borderlines of hyperlink (il)logics.

I.D. card. I.D. card

—Hong Kong policeman who stopped me in a park

Hong Kong, December 5:

Is it possible that a city could just disappear? That a friendship could vanish into the tabula rasa of a new year? Suddenly in this city with no precolonial past, there is no history: only a colonial present and the imminence of its disappearance. That's the dream, anyway: that there are no places left to live. Only spaces of transit. But the transients of Hong Kong woke up from a dream to find that in their restless sleep they had built a city that could never vanish: a glittering mainframe of glass, steel and speed. They rose to find they had become their colonial masters, hungrily feeding on newer forms of migrant life.

Just when you think you've reached the end of the line. When nothing more can happen to you. Just when you think you have returned to your motherland, a lovely witch curses you. Exiles you to forever live in a place called In Between. But this barren island turns out to be a paradise, linked to the mainland by twelve different superhighways and a multimedia supercorridor. You become a winged cypher, a stupid angel with no legs that flies forever and lands only when he dies.

The networks of the future will be digital. They will be intelligent. They will be defined and controlled by software. They will offer high transmission capacity and flexible bandwidth. They will have open architectures so that they can be easily accessed and interconnected. They will convey information from every possible source—by putting us in touch with other human beings, information, by sensing what is happening in natural and man-made environments.

—Dr. Pekka Tarjanne of International Telecommunication Union (ITU) speaking on the subject of Africa and the Information Superhighway, March 18, 1995

Africans are good at playing with ideas, but not as good at actualizing them. But the Internet is the the only chance Africa has to narrow the gap; the first time the West can't use information to blackmail Africa. All the studies that are done on forestry and agriculture by UN bodies and foreign aid organizations would ordinarily be lingering in files in cities like Paris or London or Washington. But with the Web, Africans can access those reports in their home countries.

—Dr. Nii Narku Quaynor, Network Computer Systems, Ghana's home-grown ISP

Accra, October 24:

In order to send an email from Ghana to neighboring Cote d'Ivoire, a former French colony, the messages are rerouted through Paris. We leave Accra for Abidjan to make a connection to Beirut. The manager of Middle East Air reviews my passport and asks me if I'm of Lebanese origin. Too exhausted to lie, I say no, and he refuses to accept our tickets. The plane takes off with us still on the ground. The only way out of Abidjan is to go to Paris.

[“Buy One Get One was a two-month homesteading project for the NTT/ICC Biennial, Tokyo, October 25 – December 7, 1997. See <<http://www.nttic.or.jp/HoME>>.]

SUBJECT: RADICAL MEDIA PRAGMATISM

DATE: SAT, 10 OCT 1998 10:08:32 +0200 (MET DST)
FROM: GEERT LOVINK <GEERT@XS4ALL.NL>

“You’re only real with your make-up on.”
—Neil Young

It is my personal commitment to combine cyber-pragmatism and media activism with pleasurable forms of European nihilism. Celebrate the short heroic epics on the everyday life of the media, reporting from within the belly of the beast, fully aware of its own futile existence, compared to the millennial powers to be. We ain’t no salespeople, trying to sell the award-winning model among the digital cities, some exotic Amsterdam blend of old and new media or yet another disastrous set of ideas, made in Europe. Instead, we are trying to exchange models, arguments, and experiences on how to organize our cultural and political activities, finance media projects and create informal networks of trust that will make life in this Babylon bearable.

Do you think of the internet as a gnostic conspiracy against the rotting, material world we all would like to leave behind? Well, to be honest, I don’t. Seen from an anticapitalist, activist, and autonomous/anarcho point of view, media are first of all pragmatic tools, not metaphysical entities. The Ideology of New Media comes second and should not uphold any of our activities. Media theory, net criticism, computer archeology, cultural studies, digital art critique, and so on give us an understanding of the Laws of Media, but they should not become a goal in itself, despite all of passion for these heroic-marginal supra-intellectual enterprises. For me, it is too easy to make the fancy and at the same time fairly realistic statement, that we should disappear from the realm of the virtual and return to “social action.” This legitimate call to leave the Infosphere and appear again on the level of the Street, is making a false distinction between real and virtual policies. Social movements have always had a wide variety of media-

related activities. Each action (even the most direct one) has a high level of information, addressing different groups and targets. Media, in this respect, express social relations in a very strong way.

New media is a dirty business, full of traps and seductive offers to work for “the other side.” There are no ways to keep your hands clean. The computer is a deadly machine when it comes to inclusion and exclusion. We, the workers on the conceptual forefront of cyberculture, have to admit that we are not (yet) politically correct and have failed so far to pass the PC test. This is not because these criteria are deliberately neglected, but because the passions lie elsewhere. For the time being, the struggle is about the definition of the terms under which the Information Society will become operational. The Short Summer of the Internet, now rushing to its close, is about the production of cultural and political concepts, which may, or may not, be implemented on a much larger scale.

The gold rush is over. Prices of web design have fallen sharply. We can see the rise of the HTML slaves, employed without contracts or health insurance, producing code for little or no money. Small businesses disappear—not just ISPs but also in the art and design sector. On the macro-economic level we have witnessed an unprecedented series of mergers in the telecommunication and media sector. This has led, for example, to the near monopoly position of WorldCom. Or take the Spanish telecom giant Telefonica and its Intranet, which will soon control the entire Spanish-speaking world.

This may only be the return of the suppressed, after a period of postmodern comfort, in this case late monopoly-capitalism. The undermining of the promising small and decentralized many-to-many ideology comes from within the IT sector. The development of the ultimate multimedia

device, WebTV, turns out to be a classic trojan horse. The much hated one-to-many television, news and entertainment industries have now found a way to neutralize a potential competitor. Soon the content of web and TV will be the same. In this respect, all these push media are claiming all available bandwidth. Older features of the net, like the newsgroups, with their democratic and decentralized logic, are dying out and are being replaced by monitored and edited online magazines and chat rooms. Internal surveillance of net use and private email is on the rise due to the introduction of intranets of buildings, companies, and entire countries. Another alarming tendency may be the withdrawal from the internet of universities and research centers, which are now working with much faster and secure computer networks. We know the sad facts. But let's not let them set our agenda.

Media activism nowadays is about the art of getting access (to buildings, networks, resources), hacking the power and withdrawal at the right moment. It's not about the expression of truth or a higher goal. The current political and social conflicts are way too fluid and complex to be dealt with in such one-dimension models like propaganda, publicity, or edutainment. It is not sufficient to just put your information out on a homepage, produce a video or pamphlet, and so on and then just wait until something happens. The potential power of mass media has successfully been crippled. Today, reproduction alone is meaningless. Most likely, tactical data are replicating themselves as viruses. Programmed as highly resistant, long-lasting memes, the new ideas are being constructed to weaken global capitalism in the long term. No apocalyptic or revolutionary expectations here, despite all rumors of an upcoming Big Crash of the financial markets. Unlike the Russian communist world empire, casino capitalism will not just disappear overnight. Heaps of deprivation and alienation is ahead of us. But this should not be the reason to lay back and become console socialists. We need organizations of our time, like the global labor union of digital artisans, networks of travelers, mailing-list movements, a gift economy of public content. These are all conceptual art pieces to start with, realized on the spot, somewhere, for

no particular reason, lacking global ambition. These models will not be envisioned by this or that Hakim Bey. They are lived experiences, before they become myths, ready to be mediated and transformed on their journey through time.

Time to move on. The permanent digital revolution in danger of becoming a reformist project? The system is effectively taking over, even sucking itself into the intimate spheres of friendships and personal aims. The objective Wheel of Net History is taking subjective tolls. Time slips away and we are caught up in something we never really wanted in the first place. Web design for Dummies. Anxiety over nothing. Debates with nothing at stake. Rivalries when there is plenty of loot. But wait a minute. We know all this. The so-called unavoidable process of decay is not God-given or a Law of Nature. It is about time to introduce intelligent social feed-back systems. Indeed, a Collective/Connected Intelligence (thanks, Pierre Lévy and Derek deKerckhove!) that can overcome the rather primitive twentieth-century model of birth, rise, success, and fall that numerous groups and movements have gone through. It should be possible to resist both historical and technological determinism, or at least to play a game with these now predictable forces. This is the search for a media theory, or digital studies in which we can finally fit the charming or rather fatal wetware factor within the larger forces of hardware and software development.

Linking up real communities within a strong, local context, while strengthening the cultural identities remains one of the (secret) recipes of the internet. As Saskia Sassen points out, computer networks are not wiping out locality—quite the opposite. We will, most likely, find emerging virtual community networks in places where communities prosper anyway. Technology alone will not do the job. Sustainable networks will not emerge in places with poor/low local self-esteem. A persistent drive to escape will not result in the development of digital cultures, despite the official internet ideology which is celebrating the so-called global, dislocal qualities of new media. On the internet no one knows you are chatting with your nextdoor neighbor. Denying the really existing local qualities (or misery) is of little use. If isolation and despair are

widespread, and disorganization rules, this is not because of the computer, nor can digital equipment help us out of daily misery. It is too easy to blame the machines as the cause of the current Really Existing Vagueness. It's up to us to bring people together and start some new initiative, the machine won't do that for us. "There is only one good use for a small town. You hate it and you know You'll have to leave it." All digital technologies in the world will not change this bare fact. Computer mediated communication are like megaphones—but they can only amplify existing signals, no matter how weak they are. Eventually, something will grow out of it. If there is nothing, all the newness will remain stale.

Consciousness Regained. Radical media pragmatism demands that the actors remain cool. Who can still proclaim to be Multimedia after the monstrous misuse of this term? Yes. It should still be possible to ignore all market forces, cheap trends and keep on playing. There is a state of hyper-awareness, to transform, disappear, give up terrains that have been occupied, and continue at the same time. What now counts is integrity. It is becoming easy these days to become resigned. There are a thousand reasons to quit, or to continue on the same grocery level. The world, structured by precooked events, ready to be microwaved and consumed, can be rejected. Downright reality is unbearable these days. "No spiritual surrender," an Amsterdam graffiti says. Colorless digital existence can be softened by self-made utopias, hallucinatory experiences, with or without recreational drugs and technologies. Regular switching to other channels which are outside the cyber realm is an option. There are countless universes.

It is silly to fight over an artificially created scarcity. The freedom of expression and media will only be fulfilled once the capability to broadcast has been fully incorporated in the daily life "of the billions." In my view, every fight for liberation can contribute to the destruction of the media monopolies by putting out some messages themselves (graffiti, pamphlets, zines, paintings, songs, imagery). Complaining about the multinational media giants is not enough. The final goal should be the "democratization of the media" and even-

tually the "abolition of media." This goes further than to merely participate in other people's forums or plain "public access." It means an overall dispersion of equipment and knowledge into society. We should try to stop speaking for other people. It is no longer our duty, in the West, to produce their media items in a pseudojournalistic manner. Nowadays, we can make a step further. With the spread of camcorders, tape recorders, photo cameras, xerox copy machines and...computers, ordinary people now have the possibility to produce "content" themselves. Spread the knowledge of how to use and maintain the hard- and software and build up a common (global?) distribution system. A funny side-effect of this is that media will become less and less important.

What form of organization media activism could take? While some truly discouraging stories from the economic forefront are on the rise, it is good to keep returning to the old question: "What is to be done?" A return of negative thinking could play an important role in the development of strategies for media activism. There is plenty of goodwill, and ruthless cynicism. What lacks is playful negativism, a nihilism on the run, never self-satisfied. Tactical, an ever-changing strategy of building infrastructures and leaving them, when the time has come to leave the self build castles and move onward. The explorations into the fields of the negative not only imply the hampering the evil forces of global corporate capitalism, but also formulating a critique of the dominant alternative formula: the Non Governmental Organization. The NGO is not just a model for aid organizations that have to correct the lack of government policies. It is today's one and only option to change society: open up an office, start fund-raising, lease a xerox-machine, send out faxes...and there you have your customized insurrection. "How to make to most of your rebellion." The professionalism inside the office culture of these networked organizations is the only model of media-related politics if we want to have a (positive) impact, or "make a difference." (as the ads use to call it).

By now, third system/NGO networks have lost their virginity. The in-between sector is becoming an economic factor of importance. Unlike in the sixties and seventies, this culture is no longer radi-

cal, utopian, or even oppositional. This has mainly been due to their long-term success, not because of its failure, defeat or sell-out, as cultural pessimists would like us to believe. Yes, capitalism has phantastic ability to integrate and neutralize all sorts of movements and forms of political and cultural resistance. But there are also other, more objective, economic developments at stake. NGOs have taken over vital functions of the welfare state. There is a pragmatic style of professionalism. A managerial class has taken over from the activists of the early days, while maintaining, even extending the network of volunteers. With mass unemployment not being solved in the short run, ungoing budget cuts on the side of the government and companies laying off workers, the third system is condemned to grow. This also brings up a radical NGO-critique and a renewed interests in contemporary forms of movements (as campaigns), political parties and trade unions, beyond the closed NGO models. We will soon have to reject their often bureaucratic and ritualized models altogether, with its hierarchies, management procedures, its so-called efficiency. "The Revolution will not be organized." These are not the words of some chaotic anarcho-punkers or eco-ravers, calling for spontaneous revolt, right now, tonight. The crisis of the organization is our condition humane in this outgoing media age. And it may as well be the starting point for a new, open conspiracy that is ready to anticipate on the very near cyberfuture. Not anymore as a party or movement, nor as a network of offices (with or without headquarter), new forms of organization may be highly invisible, not anymore focussed on institionalization. These small and informal communities easily fall apart and regroup in order to prevent the group from being fixed to a certain identity.

We are not one, and there has never been unity, specially not these days. The We form in the age of the net is one of the few possibilities left to address groups, subnetworks and formulate common strategies, (if indeed people are interested in collaboration and exchange...). Heterogeneous policies are always in danger of falling apart. One of the tricks to avoid people organising themselves is to reduce their argument to their Private Opinion which is seen as a contribution to the general (dem-

ocratic?) discourse. In times of consolidation, dispersion and decay, the We is under debate, whilst at the same time more used than ever. It is the time of strategies. At the moment of the short highs there is only the unspoken, ecstatic We feeling. Later on, we do not want others to speak for others. This is anyway a more general tension, a feeling of discontent, between explicit ways of hyper individuality and loneliness on the one side, and the closed, sometimes claustrophobic atmosphere inside groups, collectives, companies and movements on the other side. This should be the starting point for every contemporary debate on new ways of organizing.

Now it is time for other options, in search for the genuine New that does not fit into known patterns of eternal return, being taken back into the System. Virtual voluntarism means being able to overcome moods of melancholy, perfectly aware of all possible limits and opportunities, looking for the impossible, on the side, out of reach of both futurists and nostalgics. Being able to present alternative realities, shocking the Johnsons, way out of reach of the Appropriation Machines. The market authorities will arrive too late. Yes, this is a dream, but we do cannot survive in a (digital) environment without options. In order to get at the point, we should reach a level of collective "self conciousness" to overcome the system of fear and distrust which is now spreading. No attempt to reconstruct what worked once. No glorification of the inevitable. In order not to throw away everything which has been built up we should invent concepts on top of it and not narrow all our options into making the world institutionally legible. The "Next Age," the name of a department store in Pudong/Shanghai, is hybrid: half-clean, somehow dirty, never entirely digitized, stuck between real growth and an even more real crisis. Obsessed with progress, in full despair. But there are other options, and we can realize them. Get Organized!

[Remixed and edited by Felix Stalder.]

SUBJECT: OTHER EUROCENTRISMS

FROM: LINDA WALLACE <HUNGER@LOOM.NET.AU>

DATE: FRI, 16 OCT 1998 17:25:22 +1000

This text originally began as a response to a discussion on the faces list re: is faces Eurocentric?

When something is labeled Eurocentric in Australia one needs to look to the context to see which one of the multilayered possibilities is being referred to.

The term has always had a very specific though virtual geography attached to it—that of a place very far away in <space/time>, though of course, paradoxically, right here/very close in <space/time>. Australia was initially colonized by Europeans: first by British/Western European, then massive post-World War II war migration from Eastern and Southern Europe. Large-scale “Asian” migration followed in the sixties and seventies, though Chinese people had been living in Australia from very early on.

So, given this history, the term Eurocentric when used in Australia can be applied to refer to “the mob over there” in Eurospace, or it may also include other Euro-like mobs such as the U.S. or Canada—it is always defined by what it excludes, for example, other mobs from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. (Aboriginal Australians commonly use the word mob to signify a language group, a community, nation.) Similarly, when applied internally, in discussions specific to Australia, Eurocentric again refers to the original colonizing meme-set, or this together with its global clonelike-but-different mobs, such as the U.S. or Canada. This ambiguity/collapse of the term stems from the fact that the Euro has been severely infiltrated by all of its other(s) in the Australian context, so that it can be both Euro as in Europe-the-real, the actual place, but also Euro as in Western, as opposed to Asia or South America, and so on.

One of the critical points in regards to the term Eurocentric in the local context is that, while it does imply Europe as a whole, it is not the

“Europe” in discrete parts as the present-and-true Euros would see it. The “Europe” that Australian-Europeans perceive themselves to be living, through their own personal backgrounds, is one of a mix of races now changed through the process of migration. So our personal “Australian Europe” is one of intertwined cultural amalgamations/family histories quite outside of the dictates of “Europe-the-real,” which seems to have proceeded along nicely inside its own glass bubble. So, here, in identity terms, there is a kind of doubling going on (that is, European/not-European). The situation that’s evolved in Australia in terms of Euroness is that which we mirror back to Europe-the-real. Hence we Australians are often surprized and amused to confront, in the flesh, so to speak, the often navel-gazing Euro-other with all its intransigent bickering. As, in a way, Australians are running their own hybrid, randomized European Union which is or has been further changed by other migration waves from Asia, the Pacific, Hollywood, and so on—and is, of course, underwritten by the Aboriginal people here prior to invasion. Which is what happens to all communities—as others become part of them—they change. Though not without a struggle. As it is and will be with internet list communities.

With this idea in mind, I would still say quite clearly that the list-object faces is, at its core, Eurocentric, in the “Euro-the-real” sense of the term. Or at least this is the way it began, but is now rapidly moving towards being northern hemisphere-specific. The use of English overlays the faces list to create another layer of complexity, though there are still some posts in German, which is nice. It may well be that there are people from many different parts of the world on faces, but the “critical mass” needed to form an imagined community or group identity is northern hemisphere-based; as such, the faces list-object largely

articulates the concerns of that group of people. And that is fine.

The question remains: How do list-objects like Nettime and faces become “more” global? What conditions are necessary so that the critical mass doesn’t get too thin and hence unable to recognize itself as a community?

Given that list-objects appear to be located in so-called cyberspace—that is, everywhere at once but nowhere at all—it is, therefore, the collection of subjectivities which feed into the system that construct the community. The ability of the list-object to include/exclude others and otherness will determine its shape and operating logic.

It was after returning from traveling in China for four weeks that I wrote part of this earlier dialogue to faces regarding the question of Eurocentrism. As seen through Chinese eyes, this argument would run along radically different lines.

A while after this I started posting mails to the list to do with an issue in Indonesia where, during the overthrow of Suharto, Chinese women had been and were still being systematically raped and abused by, it seemed, the Indonesian military. I tried to get closer to the heart of this issue, and put the results of investigations onto faces.

Interestingly, it was women from Australia and U.S. who responded to this issue. I felt that the reality of Chinese women in Indonesia, and also that of Timorese woman and so on who suffer the same kind of abuse from the Indonesian “special forces,” was maybe somehow too far away to women in Eurospace to trigger a response.

These observations are relevant to the idea of how associative meanings work within the list-object, that is, within the imaginary community of the list-object and its developing subjectivity/identity.

The imagined community never really knows itself, or who or what it is at any point in time, but the community may know that what it imagines itself to be is only a partial manifestation of itself—a glimpse of what it might be now and of what it could be at another time.

The list-object is always shifting as new subjects join, as mail is forwarded on to others outside of the list-object(space), and as each individual within the list-object lives their everyday(time).

So how to visualize this vector-laden object? How

to conceptually model trajectories of discussion, flames, jokes (like the running joke of Orlan’s nose and Stelarc’s ear on the 7-11 list)?

A useful metaphor or model may be to supplement four-dimensional volumetric semantic/discourse objects. When someone speaks (in)to the list-object—when a voice in the collective body of the imagined community speaks, with all the bodies listening at terminals in their varied time zones—it is as if a point is activated and pulled out to reshape the list-object in 4D space (that is, spatio-temporal).

And if this voice resonates, if it triggers something within the community, if the voice acts as a catalyst to launch the imagined community to speak itself/to respond and, therefore, to change the shape(space/time) of the list-object, or even if the original missive just generates a new idea in one or how many heads of the readers, or a laugh, or even the slightest trace of a smile, then this model goes some way towards how I imagine list-object communities changing their (information) landscape/bodies of signification—of changing themselves.

Which is all very well, but how does a place like China fit into it? That is, in a country where the internet comes in on one 512k line, is IP-number checked at the central gate, then fed off to the range of ISPs using 128k lines each. Where there is little internal connectivity between the ISPs. So if you are paying 60 yuan a month for three hours, and your wage is 200 yuan a week, you aren’t likely to be wanting to spend that long online each time, in lists or IRC and MOOSs, and so on. So a list-object, with all the noise and traffic of “bigcity” lists, would cost you a fortune to belong to. Coupled with the fact that so much of the blather is in English, which it is most likely you couldn’t read. And forget images and the web—they’d cost a fortune of your precious time to download. RealAudio or RealVideo? No way, not yet. However, inside the net of China, business is booming, and driving internet expansion. Inside the net of China, and the Chinese diaspora, the net in Chinese characters is rapidly growing. And, further, consider the scripts of an online India. Could the current list-objects, if not Eurocentric then at least primarily northern hemispheric, rec-

ognize and accommodate this kind of input? How?
What kinds of objects will begin to emerge?
Lack of infrastructure, speed and cost of access,
English as the dominant language, and state information controls prevent certain kinds of expansion of list-objects like faces, nettime, infowar, rhizome, and recode. It prevents the family growing. Such issues are not new. But they remain.