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David Garcia on Mon, 22 Feb 1999 19:24:41 +0100 (CET)

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<nettime> The DEF of Tactical Media

- *To:* nettime-l {AT} Desk.nl
- *Subject:* <nettime> The DEF of Tactical Media
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The DEF of Tactical Media
By David Garcia and Geert Lovink

[or part two of the ABC of Tactical Media, posted to nettime in the spring of 1997, <http://www.nettime.org> and the zkp4 reader, <http://www.desk.nl/~nettime>]

Campaigns and Movements

Although a global conference, the first Next 5 Minutes, held six years ago (1993), was dominated by the first large scale encounter between two distinctive cultural communities. On the one hand, Western European and North American campaigning media artists and activists and on the other hand their equivalent from the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, dissident artists and samizdat activists, still basking in the after glow of the role they played in bringing down the communist dictatorships. In the excitement of discovering each other, these two communities tended to gloss over their ideological differences, understandably emphasising only the shared practice of exploiting consumer electronics (in those days mostly the video camcorder) as a means of organisation and social mobilisation. We referred to these practices, and the distinctive aesthetic to which it gave rise, tactical media.

Although the differences between these two groups were under-played at the time, they were nevertheless profound and illuminating. In the United States and Western Europe, tactical media, both then and now, are overwhelmingly the media of campaigns rather than of broadly based social movements. They are not a megaphone representing the voice of the oppressed or resistance as such. Once upon a time in the West, there were movements without one specific campaign. They were into questioning every single aspect of life, with 'the most radical gesture.' "We don't want a piece of the cake, we want the whole bloody bakery." But now there are a plethora of campaigns detached from any broadly based emancipatory movement. In contrast, central and eastern European media tacticians, or the "samizdat media", had been very much part of broad social movement. A movement that resulted in the dismantling the Soviet Empire. They tended, in the early days, still to be if not exactly starry eyed, then uncritical, about their future under a market economy.

Six years later, the consequences of unaccountable global capital flows have bitten deep. And although less utopian about the emancipatory potential of new media there is a general convergence of many tactical groups around the principal of learning the lessons of global capitalism.

While refusing to leave globalism to the investment houses and multinationals, these groups combatted global capital with global campaigns. And present in these strategies is the faint hope that if a campaign generates enough velocity and resonates with enough people, it might just take on some of the qualities of a movement.

Simulation Vs Real Action

For many, the urgency of some of the questions we are facing generate an angry scepticism around any practice that raises art or media questions. For real actionists the equation is simple, discourse = spectacle. They insist on a distinction between real action and the merely symbolic. From this perspective media tacticians are accused of merely talking not doing anything. By focusing on the media question we are accused of just creating more empty signs. And there is much in the current European political reality to support this critique. After all the expansion of the media realm has not automatically resulted in an equivalent growth in emancipatory movements and critical practice. It has merely resulted in an accumulation of self-referential topics. Media these days are accused of fragmenting rather than unifying and mobilising. Paradoxically, that is partly because of their discursive power to elaborate on differences and to question rather than just voice propaganda.

Although our favourite topic remains the end of media, the era of a total implosion of the whole spectacular media circus. This however remains the utopian option (which should not be mistaken for abandonment or surrender). Meanwhile at least for the Next 5 Minutes, we continue to languish in a world in which many struggles appear to have left the street and the factory floor and migrated into an ideological space of representation, constructed by and through the media. This is often characterised as a shift from public space towards virtuality or a shift from social action towards the mediated. In a time where we can see such growth in media channels where there is a tremendous expansion of various cyberspaces it is a nonsense to talk about "a return to the real". In fact one might even ask whether any meaningful politics can exist outside of the media sphere. The current debate about "net activism" is the focus of the "merely" symbolic Vs the "real action" discussion, with critics voicing scepticism about whether you really can provoke a campaign by just sending out hostile commands via the internet or whether on your own, you can construct a movement via technical means or through mediation only.

Another level of critique addresses the problematic nature of self referential campaigns, that is campaigns that do not go beyond the media, such as the open source movement or the "WE WANT BANDWIDTH" campaign (<http://www.waag.org/bandwidth>). Although we believe that there can be no effective campaign if you have not tackled the media issue we are aware that this is just our assumption, perhaps our arrogance. We know how easy it is to lose oneself, to dive into an attractive and fatal media trap. Attractive because it is so vast, there is always more information, more channels, more software and the political issues within that sphere of contestation, the severe struggles within the media industry is a universe in and of itself. So yes we must be wary of the self-referential campaigns that are friction free, appropriating the glamour of activism without the sweat and tears... It is true we are vulnerable to the accusation of being trapped in the same old safe assumption that all power struggles are being fought out in the media space. However to believe this would be to believe that the campaigns to damage Shell, Nike or McDonalds have just been fought on the level of pure semiotics. It is a too easy and luxurious position to disdain the media question altogether. The point is to ask the right questions about what has more effect and what brings us nearer our goals? These questions imply analysis and in the end a judgement.

In part the trick is to emphasise topics which lie outside of the media realm whilst at the same time retaining sophisticated media tactics. The Maclibel campaign is a classic example of a campaign which would like to

construct itself into a movement. Like every group it depends of the willingness of local groups to identify itself with it. The Macspotlight site is a collection of links to sites, bringing together this variety of local groups. The whole project makes a dialectical move whereby a single a campaign organised from Oxford is translated into a translocal movement with broad appeal addressing billions of people.

Temporary Alliances and Hybridisation

Although a shared agenda may be emerging we should also be realistic about the differences. We have no unique overriding identity around which to organise. We create no positive models for anyone to identify with, let alone follow. Our alliances are still relatively loose with a tendency to fragment into an infinite number of gangs and subcultures. This why we still do not have this "world federation of tactical media practitioners". Perhaps we are just a diverse collection of weirdoes both men and women, who are off-topic by nature. Of course there is an element of pleasure in knowing that you are with your 20 dearest friends on your own "real audio" channel but this is swiftly accompanied by the realisation that it will be indefinitely confined to these twenty friends and what seemed like an opportunity has become a ghetto. We are then faced with the question of how to leave the safety of our own self created biosphere.

So we begin again, looking for new coalitions while trying to avoid falling into the traps and limits of institutionalised politics. Unfortunately, the Internet has not freed us from the necessity or perils of having to deal with institutional politics. Indeed there is no Internet without power, cable policy, money and access rights.

Beyond analysis and judgement the tactical is also about reclaiming imagination and fantasy. The classical rituals of resistance are no longer reaching large parts of the population, this is the crisis of direct action, which is in part a failure of imagination. An exception is the epidemic of pie throwing. The ritualised humiliation of power with a pie in the face. A highly mediatised practice, the pie does not exist without the image, its only meaning is as a media event. We could see it as a primal way of attacking power. You identify a locus of power and you pie him (<http://www.gloup.gloup.com>) A leap into perfect simulacra, creating the perfect sign, or rather the poisonous countersign. The pie is the perfect poisonous countersign. The secret wisdom of the tactics of radical alienation, in which the further you go, the more likely you are to implode into reality. Its time to intensify our semiotic guerrilla wars on corporate images.

Tactical media in the context of The Next 5 Minutes is a deliberately slippery term, a tool for creating "temporary consensus zones" based on unexpected alliances with people whom you might normally never meet based on a desire to be released from the tiredness of self satisfied groups and communities. But at the same retaining the right, when the time has come, to disconnect. Our aim is to retain our mobility, and our velocity, to avoid the paralysis induced by the essentialistic questioning of everything, in which everyone is an object of suspicion and nothing is any longer possible.

One of the most well trodden of tactical routes remains hybridisation, connecting old with new, the street and the virtual. We should be clear that hybridity is neither our ideology or our goal it is more like our dirty realism. Hybridisation is often seen as per se good, generative of infinite possibilities to switch between channels, mix up the signals, intentions and disciplines, naturally operating in accordance with the economic and technological shift towards synergy. Let us be clear, in our case hybridisation is about survival, it is not really our choice. For those who make the mistake of treating it as an ideology, there is simply no way back, there is no place for negativism. Taking this route we inevitably arrive at the dialectic free zone of Europe's new politics.

Hybridity in this world is about connectivity in the sense of promiscuously connecting everything with everything, the neo-liberal idea of anything goes as long as its connects. In this world the critic is seen as a destructive trouble-maker, failing in their sacred duty to connect. This is where tactics end and choices will have to be made. Is this the end of the roaring media age? Not for the time being... But for sure a reconsideration what we are actually intending to transmit on all these channels.

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