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The GHI of Tactical Media

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Abstract: Tactical media are the field being worked by artists adopting a positive attitude towards contemporary digital technology, in a critical, innovative spirit. Media artists reveal a preoccupation with aesthetics as a concept, not with a particular style. This trend is part of the creation of a new language for the communications network era, a user language which is successful as art because it transmits an effective activism. Media activists are a hybrid of artist, scientist, theoretician and political activist that shuns labels and categorizations. Their creations are characterised by integration of user and machine in the work itself, so that interactivity has an important place within it. The concept of tactical media allows Art with a capital and grassroots political activism to be combined and, in this sense, we could include in it the tactical struggle that is part of anti-globalisation movements. Media activists point to the power of tactics as a means of breaking down the barriers between mainstream values and alternative ones, between professionals and amateurs and even between people who are creative and those that are not.

Andreas Broeckmann: In 1997, you wrote "The ABC of Tactical Media", and at that time the concept of "tactical media" was already a few years old. It had grown out of the co-operation of media artists and activists in Amsterdam and has been closely identified with the Next 5 Minutes conferences, although important models of tactical media usage have also come from elsewhere. And then the concept was first related mainly to video and TV activism, which have been eclipsed in the last years by the Internet. A follow-up that you wrote in 1999, "The DEF of Tactical Media", tried to sketch some of these changes. Do you think that it makes sense to speak of tactical media as a general attitude and practice that pervades different media, or is "tactical media" a summary term for a whole host of different media practices, each with their own culture and politics?

Geert Lovink: Or even aesthetics? No, I don't think so. Tactical means tactical. It's a really open, short-term concept, born out of a disgust for ideology. It is pretty much a post-1989 phenomenon, surfing on the waves of events, enjoying the opening up of scenes and borders, on the lookout for new alliances. Curious, not afraid of differences. I am not sure if tactical media are bound to certain media or platforms. It is about a form of art that meets activism with a positive attitude towards contemporary digital technology. It is more exploratory than confrontational, and to some extent, self-reflexive. There are a lot of rituals and phrases which have to be thrown out in order to be able to make a new start and reach new audiences. This excitement has grown and resulted in a whole new generation of (net) activism, covered by the mainstream media. We are living in interesting times. This cannot be said of new media art which was at its height in the early to mid nineties, although today's activism has profited from it. There is no noticeable fall-back towards a grey dogmatic non-aesthetics, which really surprises me.

Andreas Broeckmann: The "grey dogmatic non-aesthetics" of earlier tactical media? Is this the result of a more pop-oriented attitude in activism? A new generation that is less tied up in clean, fundamentalist ideologies? Java activists versus the telnet-generation?

Geert Lovink: No, I think the distinction is a more primitive one: online versus offline (which, by the way, are not contradictory practices). It is not even punk versus techno. The DIY aesthetics I am referring to here is one which cares for the self (image), it has grown out of a curiosity, and is done with precision. It is against the sloppy attitudes which implicitly say that form doesn't matter anyway. I am talking about an activism with style. Not a particular style. Having, and maintaining, a style is quite something these days. It is hard. I am not sure if I would call it "pop", because that term, for me, is referring to "popular". That's not what I mean. Sophisticated and rich styles used by activists are often unpopular. The aesthetic program does not even have to be about a certain "look". I am talking about a higher, critical awareness of style rather than the correct usage of this or that contemporary icon, software, colour set, patterns or typography font.

Andreas Broeckmann: David, you have always strongly advocated a tight linking of media activism and art. This relationship has been very strong in a particular segment of media art practice, but it has sometimes fallen between the camps of established contemporary art and political activism. How would you describe the link between the two—or the complex in which they articulate each other?

David García: Yes, this is true and the reason for my position is not theoretical but the result of my first experience of seeing tactical media at close hand, in action, in what I still believe to be one of the most important and effective campaigns of recent years. This was ACT UP, a mobilisation against the AIDS policy of the Reagan administration of the time, which in choosing to ignore AIDS was a policy of silence. Artists played a critical role in both organising and giving shape and a kind of charismatic momentum to ACT UP. I believe it was the artist collective Gran Fury in their exhibition "Let the Record Show" who created the slogan (or equation) that became the symbol of the AIDS activist movement worldwide: SILENCE = DEATH. Activists carrying this statement on banners or wearing it on badges or sweatshirts were not delivering a simple polemical message from an earlier era of politics with its rigid command structures. They were developing a new language for the era of communicative networks. The activists were "wearing" a statement which required completion by others; to wear this logo was to draw people into conversation. Not a command but an invitation to discourse. Intimate media, a "user language" for both activism and the visual arts. This took the rhetorical tropes of the likes of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger into a new and tactical dimension.

Andreas Broeckmann: Do you mean what Geert refers to as a "style"—tactical media as an attitude more than a technical definition?

David García: Yes, rather than the use of any particular medium, it is this quality of creating effective user languages (virtual or otherwise) that "engage" and "deploy" rather than "authorise" and "require" that characterises the tactical practitioner. The posters, videos, installations, murals, graphics and television channels were not only successful as art and as

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activism but were successful as art *because* it was effective activism. The AIDS tactical practitioners, collectives like Gran Fury were true hybrids leaving behind the older categories to forge something else, something necessary, something which required a name. In N5M we chose to call it tactical media. Maybe the term itself is a tactical solution, an improvisation that has proved a curiously successful stopgap measure like the X in algebra.

In the introduction to "Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media", the Critical Art Ensemble describe what I think is still the best take on tactical media: "There has been a growing awareness that for many decades a cultural practice has existed that has avoided being named or fully categorised. Its roots are in the modern avant-garde, to the extent that its participants place a high value on experimentation and on engaging the unbreakable link between representation and political and social change. Often not artists in any traditional sense refusing to be caught in the web of metaphysical, historical and romantic signage that accompanies that designation. Nor are they simply political activists because they refuse to take a solely reactive position and often act in defiance of efficiency and necessity. (...) Those of us who are involved in tactical media felt a kind of relief that we could be any kind of hybrid artist, scientist, technician, craftsperson, theorist, activist; we could all be mixed together in combinations that had different weights and intensities. These many roles of becoming artist, becoming activist, becoming scientist, etc., contained in each individual and group, could be acknowledged and valued. Many felt liberated from having to represent themselves to the public as a specialist and therefore valued." I can't put it any better, so I won't try. But I will add that this model and its continued use makes it something more than simply a "short-term concept".

Andreas Broeckmann: Geert, in a new text called "The New Actonomy" which you wrote together with Florian Schneider, you describe the new possibilities of media activism that are emerging, but you also point to the potential dangers that people have to be aware of. The Internet as the master medium of the 1990s has, in the last two or three years, fallen into what looks like a depression. Some say that the party and the hype are simply over, others that we are entering into a more realistic stage where the importance of the Net as a medium will continue to grow, while the utopian hopes subside in the face of all sorts of critical reality checks. These reality checks are also closely tied to a crisis of the general belief in globalisation and the fast-ageing "new economy". Does this crisis create room for tactical media practices, or does it make the life of media activists more difficult?

Geert Lovink: It is indeed true that advanced net activism (not the adolescent "hacktivism") is much closer to dotcom business than many would suspect. The new actonomy is open for business, constantly searching for funds, just as tactical media no longer fully depend on state funding. For a good reason: there is a common interest in innovative net concepts, software, interfaces, usage of streaming media, free software, open source, etc. This might mean that the current wave of net activism will face a setback in a little while because it's just behind the dotcom wave. The stagnation of bandwidth is a real concern, for example, also for activists. The same counts for the e-cash crisis and the absence of a functioning micropayment system. Activists, sitting on their explosive content, would really benefit from alternative e-commerce systems, not based on credit cards. It is of course good for social and political work on the Net that the cyberselfish robber mentality of the dotcoms has gone. But do not forget the flip side of this. With libertarianism losing its hegemony there is also the danger of throwing away the baby with the tub water and giving away the cyber freedom to corporations and the state. That should never happen. It is also up to activists to fight against censorship, lobby against the flood of disastrous legislation, etc.

Andreas Broeckmann: The French theorist Felix Guattari has used the term "post-media" to describe a potential system in which the mass media are pushed aside by a multiplicity of small, heterogeneous, digital media, a network or rhizome of practices that foster the emergence of more differentiated, less homogeneous subjectivities and group subjectivities. Howard Slater has taken this idea up and points out that the cheerful clutter of independent media activities on websites, music labels, in zines, at demonstrations, mailing lists, etc., are the kinds of post-media operations which Guattari saw the beginnings of in the Minitel and free radio movements in France in the 1970s and 80s. However, rather than fulfilling Guattari's utopian hope, the mass-mediatisation of digital media seems unstoppable and threatens to turn the Net,

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as well as the computer in general through the software door, into a one-way medium. Is the hope for "DIY media", which we also tried to promote through the **transmediale.01**, futile?

Geert Lovink: Not futile. It's a struggle. You don't get media freedom for free. And most of all: you can't buy "technological freedom". It doesn't come with the equipment or even with the software. It is only a matter of time until we will see the first full-scale civil war, fought with Linux software on both sides, causing thousands of deaths. Why not? Is there something like inherently good software? No. The Internet is beyond good and evil and simply mirrors human nature with all its flaws. A radical and open, independent media infrastructure is produced by people and their ability to connect with each other and create a "culture". DIY media do not go anywhere if it just means "Do It On Your Own". The trick is to create loose ties and provide a relative autonomy for separate units. The units can be individuals, groups, collectives, associations, circles of friends—from the same discipline and generation—in contact with the rest. The opposite of DIY is DBO (Done By Others). There is indeed a danger that Internet will become a professional medium, in the hands of others. But that's only the case at the macro level. On the micro level there is still so much possible, especially for those who want to stay off the radar for a while.

Andreas Broeckmann: David, in how far can education play a role for this kind of post-medial practices? You have been teaching at the art academy in Utrecht for several years now: has it been possible for you to translate the attitudes of art and media activism into the curriculum?

David García: I have been teaching at the department of Interaction Design in a building far away from the main art school and devoted to art, media and technology. To my surprise I have found key questions within interaction design highly applicable to the central problems of art and activism. These are the problems of action in relationship to observation. Historically there was a separation of observation and action in 17th century science and was mirrored in the same period by artists stepping out of the workshops of the artisan and into the isolation of their private studios. But in all areas of science and culture interest has again returned to the one area that was excluded, namely action. This can be seen by analysing the discipline of interactive art and design as action or "behaviour" lies at its core.

Earlier forms of art could be perceived as constructed out of three primary components: appearance, content and structure. To this triangulation interactive artists and designers have added a fourth and defining component, "agency". The notion of agency in this context includes not simply the actions of the user but of the system as a whole which is made up of machine *and* users. In this model, the work of art includes the whole system, the machines and the people. Success in these new forms of interactive art depends on being able to integrate a visualisation of the action or agency of the system into the work itself. It is in this context in both interaction design or tactical media that I apply the same maxim, "visibility is not achieved through prediction, but through support."

This summer at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the artist George Legrady and the computer scientist from Helsinki Timo Honkela worked together (with others) to produce the installation "Pockets Full of Memories"[url1] in which neural networks are used to create an artwork that evolves over time, refining its decisions in relationship to the different contributions that each museum visitor makes to the system. This is an artwork—and a supportive environment—that learns! Works like these are creating a new chapter in the history of culture. But we are confronted with the fact that along with this new chapter comes a new set of problems. As Gerard de Zeeuw, an important teacher and intellectual who recently retired from Amsterdam University, wrote: "Action remains the area of the unexpected, of the invisible, of that which changes without pattern. Stepping into the river still seems as unique as it was 2,500 years ago!"

Andreas Broeckmann: In my perspective, this conflation of interactivity in media art, action in a political sense, and behaviour—which seems to be a form of action that is non-subjective and driven by outside forces—is not unproblematic and I wonder whether it is possible to get all of this under the umbrella of "tactical media".

Geert Lovink: No. For me tactical is the expression of a nineties temporality, in search of a new alchemy, to break out of the high art versus raw activism of the outgoing eighties with its dogmatic infightings and institutionalised new social movements. For me the whole idea of tactical media geared up towards Seattle and the IMC (Independent Media Centre) phenomena. There's a phenomenal renaissance of media activism going on around the globe. I was just at the second Media Circus[url2] conference in Melbourne. I also attended the first one, in September 1999, a one-day event, during the East Timor crisis. Media Circus doubled in size. There were 350 mainly young people during the weekend. Last night, in Sydney, there was the first Active Sydney Fair[url3], with a crowd of at least 500. Naomi Klein spoke and she warned of summit tourism, the crackdown of authorities against the massive street protests. There is a gap between abstract topics of third world debt, world trade agreements, financial policies and the daily misery, with its concrete, local struggles. I don't think Internet activism, or tactical media for that matter, can fill that gap. What we can do is to exchange concepts. The rapid growth of anti-border groups, supporting illegalised migrants, is a good example there. A fight in which the tactical imagination[url4] plays a key role.

Andreas Broeckmann: David, when you started the Next 5 Minutes series 10 years ago, you were a free-lancing artist, whereas now you are teaching at an academy. Do you see areas where the academic system is opening up for more diverse and critical approaches to media in art and design?

David García: Recently my possibilities in the academic framework have been greatly expanded with the founding of the PhD program "Design for Digital Cultures" which is a European doctorate sited at three very different European colleges, the Merz Akademie in Stuttgart, Utrecht and Portsmouth University. My objective over time is to make spaces for the people, theory and materials which have emerged from tactical media into an active component within the "Digital Cultures" program. This is not simply a question of curriculum, but of supporting and enabling the researchers who are part of the program to contribute to tactical campaigns, projects and conferences. For me this program will only be successful if we are involved in "action-orientated research". The first stage of this will include explicitly linking the program to the development of the Next 5 Minutes edition 4.

The ball started rolling in a recent seminar in which I participated at New York University where they have launched a research program on tactical media. From this event came the notion of N5M4 as a loose alliance of rolling research groups. The aim is that these groups should form an active network of research nodes, each of which would be working on a specific synergy theme—ideally it should include groups such as NYU, Sarai, Critical Art Ensemble, Open Streaming Alliance, and Technics (UK), to name but a few. The process would involve a structure of regular "development meetings" and smaller planning meetings (on-line is fine but not enough—face to face is still the highest bandwidth) to ensure that the nodes keep each other informed and are able to borrow freely from each other.

In contrast to many previous tactical events, I favour experimenting with an approach in which the meetings identify *objectives* and come to (fasten your seat belts) *conclusions*. Under these circumstances, the Next 5 Minutes conference as a tribal gathering of indymedia would remain, but it would be informed by a less random approach to thematics. N5M would be the platform for presenting the results of our researches. The results could take many forms and be in many media, but it would also include programming the conference itself which would obviously want to draw from beyond its own network. I envisage this process beginning November 2001, with research and meetings proceeding throughout 2002 and culminating early in 2003, with the N5M4 event and conference in Amsterdam and possible related events in other locations.

Andreas Broeckmann: A final question. What David describes in relation to the development of the Next 5 Minutes as a research movement raises the question of the sites, institutional and informal, of tactical media practice. While institutions are no doubt necessary for creating a sustainable practice and infrastructures, the "tactical" always also seems to imply a "hit-and-run" attitude which cannot be tied down in such structures. How would you see this tension and how do you think the field can be developed most fruitfully? Do we see the emergence of new, stronger alliances?

Geert Lovink: I do not see it as a tension yet. Institutionalisation is a problem which only comes in time. Let's say after five or ten years when an original scene has broken up into fragments. There are indeed people who dig in and do not know how to move on. They are the power brokers. They end up taking all the credits, taking the money from ministries, foundations and sponsors. But in most cases it's power over a dead territory. Creative individuals can't deal with the kind of bureaucracy that comes with today's institutions. I would love to see more hit-and-run companies taking off in the new media arts and activist sector. In that sense the dotcoms can be a good lesson. This is mainly because the arts and culture still depend on government resources. It hasn't found ways to generate its own income, nor does it know how to negotiate with sponsors. The result is an incredible waste of time. I would love to see a fund where you could apply and get an answer in a few weeks time. We need art and activist ventures. The only way to do something quickly and initiate something new these days is to do it without any money, which sets off the well-known self-exploitation cycles. There must be ways to break out of that logic.

David García: I want to emphasise that by N5M as a research process I mean *action-orientated research*, not research for its own sake. To Geert's emphasis on speed and mobility I would add (not substitute) a slowing down to analyse, reflect and evaluate; not so much digging in as digging deep. Let me illustrate with some local media archaeology; I have been re-reading the proceedings of the first event where I met and worked alongside Geert, "The Seropositive Ball", held in Amsterdam in 1990. The project arose out of a necessity for something that took us beyond the perception of AIDS as an exclusively medical problem. It combined activism and all the arts with an embryonic culture of computer-mediated communications. But at the time we were heavily, and to a degree justifiably, critiqued by New York activists. This is what Gregg Bordowitz said to us more than a decade ago: "The way the conference is organised is based on a utopian notion of a free exchange of information, instituted through technology; a use of technology that is unquestioned, uncriticised, unproblematised; the notion that a universal space can be established through phone links, faxes and modems. If there is one thing that is established through the kind of work we do is that there have never been such things as universal categories, principles or experiences. In future I would like to see conferences which reflected the interest of the people with the most at stake, in which there was some acceptance of difference that isn't evened out or erased through some notion of free exchange through some neutral means that remain unquestioned. To me this destroys community and collectivity." Next 5 Minutes 1 (1993), which followed "The Seropositve Ball" at Amsterdam's Paradiso, was to a degree driven by a desire to answer this critique. Despite other qualities, I am not sure whether any of the N5M conferences have succeeded in answering this critique.

Interestingly I recently re-met Gregg in the tactical media seminar in New York. He has remained an AIDS activist and video-maker and has been part of the successful campaign that fought the drugs companies who were trying to prevent the use of cloned drugs in South Africa (a case where the issue of intellectual property is a matter of life and death). Gregg is still fighting AIDS worldwide. To me the continuity of this struggle, this "digging in" with values other than "hit-and-run" is inspiring. Personally, I also found value in a closer scrutiny of the past of what Geert described as our fragmented "scene", not for history's sake but for the sake of making us less likely to repeat mistakes and re-invent the wheel. The time has come to question the assumption that ephemerality must always be a virtue. Manifestos of the tactical (including our own) assume that we must reject the permanent, the monumental. Defacing public monuments is a knee jerk reaction of many street protests. In contrast, I think there is something to be learned from the American Civil Rights movement and Martin Luther King when they appropriated the Lincoln Memorial as a means of tapping into a broadly based community memory. In Amsterdam we also have a great example, the Homo Monument, which is a beautiful and effective public site for reflection and mobilisation.

On the question of the relation between informal tactics and institutionalisation, like Geert I also don't see this tension, but for different reasons. The perceived tension is based on the misapprehension that tactical media is by definition always on the outside of institutional power. Power exists where it enacts itself and that may or may not be within institutions. I know plenty of "power brokers" who operate on the outside of institutions. Nor do I accept the romanticism of the statement "creative individuals can't deal with bureaucracy". An important reason for

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introducing the term tactical was to leave behind the rigid dichotomies of mainstream vs underground, amateur vs professional, or even "creative individuals vs uncreative individuals". From Paper Tiger to the BBC's video diaries we discovered that the tactical cuts straight across the marginal vs mainstream dichotomy. It is the contexts in which tactical media are made that influence the tactics deployed, and these contexts (and their tactics) are multiple.

URL list:

[url1]:http://www.pocketsfullofmemories.com

[url2]:http://www.antimedia.net/mediacircus

[url3]:http://www.active.org.au/sydney/fair

[url4]:http://www.deportation-alliance.com

Related links:

➡ Transmediale Festival:
   http://www.transmediale.de
➡ Next Five Minutes Festival:
   http://n5m4.org

Partners:

http://www.n5m.org

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