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Communication Guerilla - Transversality in Everyday Life?

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Several years ago we coined the term "communication guerilla" to designate a number of political praxis forms - praxis forms that traverse the old boundaries between political action and the everyday world, subjective anger and rational political action, art and politics, desire and work, theory and practice. In other words, the term does not denote an organization like Globalize Resistance, nor a political network like Attac, nor any of the more complex, rhizomatic and continuously newly constituted formations of the global protest movement, such as People's Global Action [www.agp.org] or the European noborder network [www.noborder.org]. The imaginary brigades of communication guerillas are not necessarily networked with one another. What joins them is a specific style of political action drawing from a watchful view of the paradoxes and absurdities of power, turning these into the starting point for political interventions by playing with representations and identities, with alienation and over-identification.

As it emerged in the 90s, the concept "communication guerilla" was, not least of all, a response to the exhaustion of traditional leftist activism after the fall of the Berlin wall. The search for new forms of praxis led (at least in some points) to a new, transversal praxis beyond the realm of the "old" activism - even though the point of departure for this search was the experience of a seminal defeat of the left. Today, following the rise and possibly already the incipient downfall of a new global movement, the situation is a different one, and the question arises as to the extent to which this concept from the 90s is still useful. The new activism has become more global, more networked, but most of all, it has developed a new dynamic beyond political and national borders. At the same time, however, this activism still evinces many features of the old polit-activism, not only in the neo-communist party version of the SWP (Socialist Workers Party) and Globalize Resistance. Despite all the rhetoric, activism often still has a stance that is strangely separated from people's everyday life, even that of its own protagonists. The future of this global activism will depend on whether it succeeds in being capable of action at the local level, the level of everyday life, while continuing to develop its transversal, border-crossing character at the same time. The most important border that has to be crossed is the border that constitutes the activist her or himself in a separation from the "rest" of society. We think that the praxis of the communication guerilla can contribute to this kind of border-crossing. This is our motivation for discussing in the following text experiences with this praxis along the lines of flight that are inscribed in it, along the border-crossings, through which it is constituted.

Art and Politics

A web site [www.gatt.org] that turns the self-presentation of the WTO right side up: an inattentive conference assistant enters the words WTO into a search engine - and a representative of the Yes Men can appear as a representative for the World Trade Organization at a congress for international law [www.theyesmen.org], transforming the conference into a slapstick scenario. We encounter the same Yes Men shortly after the protests in Prague, costumed as "Captain Euro" at a demo against repression and arrests in front of the Czech consulate, but also at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, at art events in Barcelona, Vienna or London - is it all an artistic end in itself or political action? The campaign against the German deportation airline Lufthansa [www.deportation-alliance.com] starts with a poster exhibition ("Deportation Class") that attacks the airline's self-presentation and links it with the theme of deportations. This exhibition tours through German art institutions, while the corporation simultaneously attacks the Internet version of the same pictures with furious legal threats. This, too, is an uninhibited way of dealing with the border between art and politics. It is not the question of which of the two fields a project should be attributed to that is interesting, but rather: Does it work? How does one manage to make a fool of a seemingly over-powerful institution or person and possibly even partially force them to take a defensive position?

Communication guerilla differs from traditional political forms of action in that it consciously draws from the density of meanings of images and narrations. We are tired of private security services and the omnipresent purchase obligation, the removal of park benches that forces passers-by into cappuccino bars or to just move on. We know about the privatization of inner cities, the disappearance of public space. But how is it possible to intervene against the

apparent automatism of these processes - with an information event? A demonstration? A blockade of the pedestrian zone? Or how would it be, if there were suddenly an obstacle, a break in the Saturday business of the pedestrian zone - not a colorful street theater or exhibition project providing information about the limitations and constraints of privatized urban space, but rather something else that makes it possible to see and experience these constraints, a test arrangement, in which the users of the shopping street are assigned their actual roles, but in an exaggerated form?

The images: a pedestrian zone -- lifestyle shops, cafes, buying, street musicians and idlers, who are discreetly expelled from the square, advertising stocks, black-clothed security at the portals of noble shopping passages ... construction sites .. red and white barriers in the flow of the promenading crowd ... a large square area in the middle of a city square is blocked by red and white ribbons, flanked by security guards in black jeans and white T-shirts. Friendly employees wearing the company logo address passers-by, the same logo is repeated at an information table. Information sheets with a questionnaire about the use of the pedestrian zone are distributed: How often do you come into the city? How much do you expect to spend today? Which method of payment do you prefer? The questionnaires are used to determine permission to cross the area or not. The narration: "We are conducting this survey for the company Bienle, which is contemplating the purchase of the entire Castle Square. We are using this test arrangement to determine the user profile of the area to be purchased, in terms of profitability." [1] What is important is that the picture is right. The barricade is executed precisely, the body language of the security guards radiates uncompromisingness, the company employees operate smoothly and in a friendly manner, but firmly; the corporate identity is

thoroughly and professionally styled, all the way from the company logo to the outfit for the "staff". The activists adapt the language of power, the plausible over-identification is implemented through precise and reflected observation, an eye for aesthetic details and a professional way of dealing with materials.

This action was carried out by the politically active artist group 01, but it was not identified as an art action -- except to a few irritated members of the police force, who had obviously not been informed by the "Bienzle Company" ahead of time. The art label was thus employed here only instrumentally as camouflage and protective shield. For the passers-by, the action was an irritating reality resulting in a subjective experience of the fact of the privatization process in their city, forcing them to take a position more than an information or protest event would have done. It is also imaginable that a project like this could be conducted in the framework of an art festival -- there, however, the predominant framework of interpretation for outside observers would not have been "privatization" or "intervention in the freedom of movement", but rather "art": the same project, conducted within the boundaries of an art space, produces tame artistic social criticism, not communication guerilla. It is also imaginable that a project like this could be exhibited in a museum -- the art business' current greed for contact with "authentic" actors makes it possible. [2] The Yes Men subsequently exhibited their appearance as "Captain Euro" as a video installation at worldinformation.org in Vienna [www.theyesmen.org]. At the same event, a technical device for checking irises regulated the turnstile at the entrance. Here criticism of the surveillance possibilities of the control society take the form of technical playfulness in keeping with the site of the presentation, the Technical Museum. The potential of an action

depends on the context, this determines which codes the audience uses to read it.

Communication guerilla pursues a political concern. It attempts to criticize the rules of normality by creating irritations and ambiguities, thus enabling new ways of reading familiar images and signs. The criticism of naturalized power structures first requires making these visible -- and they become visible where the smooth functioning of the sign systems and interpretation mechanisms starts to get stuck. This is hardly possible, however, within the framework of art operations: the general interpretation framework of "art" has the effect of a kind of lubrication that makes it possible for the viewer to easily swallow even the crudest provocation. Radically slandering the established art scene, for example, has long since been legitimized and thus defused as a modus of the artistic avant-garde. Mixing up images and signs by employing artistic techniques first becomes exciting, when it leaves the integrating framework of art behind.

"Is it not better to distort the signs than to destroy them?" Roland Barthes once asked. The militant leftist scene works hard at signs, too, their actions are also symbolic -- yet here it is a matter of the gesture of a military attack, of the destruction of signs: paving stones into the windows of banks, the obligatory trashing of a McDonalds branch, the battle with robo-cops. The significance of this praxis of signs with its staging of battle, revolts, tumults, should not be underestimated. It is not without reason that the Seattle riot functions as a sign, simultaneously symbolizing and catalyzing the emergence of a new global movement. The media treatment of this riot catapulted the image of a militant resistance against the abstract lack of alternatives of the capitalist economy into the eye of the public. This image -- a war machine opposing the abstract war machine of global capital -- developed a huge

mobilizing impact. At the same time, though, militant resistance is always already integrated in the mythology of parliamentary western democracy. In the bourgeois media, the images dwindle into an illustration of basic democratic principles: the ones to "blame" for the street battles are a few wicked hooligans, who functionalize the peaceful, colorful protest for their own purposes. The "Black Block" does not uphold the basic rules of non-violent protest, the recognition of private property, the democratic game rules, and must therefore be restrained with a massive police presence. This figure of argumentation legitimizes not only the violent appearance of state power, but also the right of the globalization managers to continue to make their decisions without public scrutiny.

However, the example of global protests can also be used to show the effectiveness of the tactical distortion of signs. At the protests against the World Bank meeting in Prague in September 2000, the hip-swinging fairies of the "Pink Block" not only managed to penetrate into the symbolic "heart of the beast" (the conference center of the World Bank meeting) -- which neither the Tute Bianche in their cushioned overalls, nor the black-clothed warriors of the Black Block had succeeded in doing -- in addition, they also created images that took the icon of the stone-throwing street fighter against the police to the point of absurdity. The warrior is a fighting woman in pink, she is a samba dancer. A year later in Genoa, it was martians, UFOs, the U-NO men and women soldiers of the PublixTheatreCaravan, bikini girls, tire men, and others that distorted and alienated the firmly fixed image of what a radical demonstration is supposed to look like and how it is to act.

We have the feeling that the self-image of many militant activists holds the danger of thinking of oneself as separate from the rest of society: an activist subculture is emerging with its own signs, its

own values, and its own patterns of legitimization. Resistance derives its legitimacy from the authenticity of the use of one's own body, the intensity of one's commitment. There are lamentations about the isolation of the activist ghetto, but at the same time, the "purity" of one's own side is anxiously maintained, the rhetoric of confrontation and the apocalyptic millenarianism of the activists camp clearly separates it from mainstream society. This separation also finds expression in the turbulent discussions about contacts with the mainstream media, or in the laboriousness of attempts to make contact with the neighborhood of squatted houses. Despite occasional collaboration, one is distrustful not only of the often narcissist art world, but also of the "geeks", the cyberactivists of the 90s, who flocked around events like the "next 5 minutes" congress in Amsterdam. A playful way of dealing with signs, images and meanings, allowing for hybridity and complexity, could contribute to partially breaking down these demarcations. In an optimistic scenario, the paradoxical meeting of two marginal social fields, the art scene and polit-activism, could lead to the emergence of a transversal art-polit-activism that overcomes the boundaries and limitations of the respective scenes. In October 2000, the Museum for Contemporary Art in Barcelona held a series of curated workshops on the theme of "Direct Action as one of the Fine Arts", which evolved into a two-week meeting of activists [www.lasagencias.net]. Watched at first distrustfully by many "veteran" activists, this event resulted in several political projects that are still active today -- ninguna es ilegal organized a border camp in 2001 at the southern tip of Spain [www.sindominio.net/ninguna], where thousands of African refugees arrive; indymedia Barcelona [barcelona.indymedia.org] was founded, and a coalition was formed that took part with graphical and theatrical means in the protests against the planned and then canceled World Bank meeting. It is not a coincidence that communication guerilla forms

and techniques are often used with projects that arise on occasions like this, forms that can stimulate the pleasurable appropriation of artistic methods in political work as well as the politically effective employment of artistic potentials.

The environment of the global protests creates a social space of its own in the form of an activist subculture that transgresses national borders and is constituted through manifold digital and physical networks. Sometimes it seems that the networking itself and the mastery of its tools are (still) the most important result of this movement. The "art scene" provides a room on the side in this social space, too. People meet again -- not only at the next global protest, but also at biennales and film festivals, at Documenta and Ars Electronica. The interaction between art and political scenes is still intermittent, communicated through a few hyperactivists oscillating between art and politics. A stronger interaction, which could become the starting point for a broader transversal praxis, still needs to be developed in concrete projects. The art scene's current interest in "real social life" can provide an impetus for this; the possibilities for succeeding in the art market with resistive practices will also play a role. Whether or not more will come of this remains to be seen.

Activism, Everyday, Work

The media image of the activist, as well as his self-image (for the person represented is usually a "he") reduce the activist to the practice of action. It seems as though these people do nothing else but occupy buildings and organize demonstrations -- just as the artist is also reduced to his projects and products in the public view. Both, however, the artist and the activist, are normally quite different. They work in agriculture or in construction, as seasonal

laborers, professional charity donation collectors, in social work, or as part-time employees in offices and call-centers; they teach at language schools, adult education centers or universities. Not least of all, they work in the field of new media -- graphics and web design, network administrators, computer specialists. They move in the working world and simultaneously in an activist world that has its own calendar, its own temporal and spatial order. This is nothing new (the artist Franz Kafka was an administrative employee, too); what is new though, in our opinion, is the increasing integration of knowledge, lifestyle and resources from both areas.

Just as it is still customary in some trades to take tools during the lunch break in production for one's own needs, office copy machines are used for the production of flyers, information material is run through the company postage machine. Various indymedia sites are largely updated from places of work. On the other hand, many media workers have their means of production, like computers and video cameras, at home and can use them not only for work, but also for political actions. Most of all, though, the knowledge of the dominant discourse and the predominant aesthetics constantly glides from one area to another, can be used both for reproduction and for criticism of existing power relationships.

Here the border-crossing goes in both directions: knowledge about how to arrange texts that activist desktop-publishers acquire through faking city information brochures or official letterheads, is also useful for paid commissioned work. Those who conversely reproduce the design and ideological structures of the advertising world day after day in their professional everyday life, can turn the statement of advertising aesthetics upside-down with just a little twist in a successful fake. The knowledge of the "language of

power" that is required in professional life can be turned into resistance and into subversion at any time. For communication guerillas, this knowledge is central. One of the reasons why the campaign against the deportation airline Lufthansa was so successful was because the form of professional self-representation was imitated so perfectly, while the meaning was turned into its opposite through consistent exaggeration - from Lufthansa's "we fly you there" to the " we fly you out" of the Deportation Class.

For communication guerillas, it is not enough to know the adversary -- the point is to master the forms and signs that constitute "the language of power", so to speak, ourselves. Communication guerill@s are not spies or undercover agents in the working world or the world of bourgeois consensus. In their life praxis, they are often part of it, accepting roles as teachers or colleagues, assuming functions in the capitalist system. Yet it is precisely in this way that the oscillation between radical criticism and camouflage becomes possible. The recipient-journalists and their readers, potential customers, everyone confronted with the advertising material of the Deportation Class, are automatically drawn into the contradictions of the capitalist system and its western humanistic ideology: Is Deportation Class really a cynical special offer from Lufthansa for cheap seats on deportation flights? Or is it in fact a particularly successful criticism of their deportation practice? If the recipient decides on the first reading, then they are confronted with the question of whether this entails money-making at the expense of human dignity or a legitimate marketing instrument. If they see through the Deportation Class as a fake, then they cannot simply dismiss it as an absurd slander -- it is too close to the logic of the narration of the real Lufthansa ideology. Regardless of which reading the recipient decides to take, once the questions are posed, they stick to Lufthansa. In this way,

soiling an image breaks open what is widely accepted and taken for granted in the capitalist system, thus opening up an unmediated view of contradictions between reality and representation.

The communication guerilla must have no fear of contact: she has to dare to completely enter into the logic of the detested dominant discourse, in order to turn it around from the inside. And he has to trust in the effectiveness of signs, not give in to the temptation to offer explanatory information after all and thus dropping the mask. In the course of the warring escapades of the German SPD government, which was also supported by the Greens, a poster turned up with the familiar dying soldier ("Why?") [www.contrast.org/KG]. A slight distortion turned the "Why?" into "Why not?". The logos of the SPD and the Greens at the lower edge of the poster suggested that the poster could be a publication from these parties -- although the knowledgeable reader of signs understands very well that political parties would never state the cynicism of their politics that openly. Through the choice and montage of the images, the poster clearly said: a cynical "Why not?" is the attitude of these parties, whether they admit it or not. With the addition of a reproachful text, however, this intervention would have left the space of the communication guerilla to become propaganda/agitation. Its function would have been an explanation with a grin factor, rather than irritation, which forces reflection in the best case.

Globalization

There is no doubt about it: we are in the midst of globalization, particularly as activists. The skills that are practiced with the protests of the often so-called anti-globalizers, are exactly the ones that every corporate boss would wish for in his employees:

capability for teamwork in time-limited projects together with previously unknown colleagues. Flexibility, cultural competence, knowledge of foreign languages. Flat hierarchies, optimum use of limited resources, ability to improvise. Mastery of digital communication tools. Speed, full dedication. Transversality here too -- the only question is, to which end?

If it is true that we find ourselves in the midst of a transition to the control society, then in the future it could be even more important to hone our subversive potential at the molecular level, to make it even more targeted. In the emerging Empire, it will become even less possible for us to direct our displeasure to individual governments -- the game with images and representations will become increasingly important in the networked parts of the world, but without a decrease in the importance of vehement actions in public space. It is a matter of a political positioning that is not limited to theoretical analysis in the terms of sociology and cultural theory, but rather which also thinks in images and knows how to use sign systems. Fury and irritation and the desire to flip off power often lead more effectively than rational reflection to recognizing the cracks and contradictions in dominant discourse. Yet the communication guerilla does not stand still in a self-referential temporary confusion -- she continues to link it with argumentation in bourgeois and own media, is connected to counter-public spheres and refers to the themes and concerns of social movements. In recent years, these movements have taken over new technologies, from mobile phones to the use (and faking) of increasingly interactive web sites and videos, to live streaming.

Information technologies, useful instruments of the control society, can be subversively turned around, activists can make use of the skills they acquire in their paid work for other purposes as well. Conversely, the ways of working that they learn in the scene world

can also be useful to them in the neoliberal, flexibilized everyday world of work. Time-limited, project-oriented teamwork and spatial flexibility are only two examples from many. Particularly in a societal formation, in which signs, branding, images are increasingly important not only in the business world, but also for governments and multinational structures such as the WHO or the G8, the communication guerilla can carry out efficient attacks. The world of activism is not located outside the globalization process, the transition from the age of bourgeois democracies to something else, something not yet defined. It is part of this -- and it is in the intimate knowledge of the structures to be fought that its potential to at least question their legitimacy is found -- even if the next grand narrative is yet to come.

[1] cf. S. Brünzels, Dos ejercicios tacticos para hacerse con el espacio publico, in: Modos de Hacer, ed. P. Blanco et. al., Ediciones Universitad de Salamanca 2001

[2] Although an art project by "Everyone is an Expert" at the Turin Biennale in Italy was thrown out after publicly criticizing Berlusconi, cf. www.expertbase.net