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The Leonardo Electronic Almanac is proud to announce the publication of its first Leα book, titled "Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism." The publication investigates the relevance of socialist utopianism to the current dispositions of New Media Art, through the contributions of renowned and emerging academic researchers, critical theorists, curators and artists.

RED ART
New Utopias in Data Capitalism

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Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

BOOK SENIOR EDITORS
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Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Volume 20 Issue 1

Commonist Red Art:
Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

Does Red Art exist? And if so, who creates it and where can we find it? This special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac addresses these questions and collates a series of perspectives and visual essays that analyze the role, if any, that Red Art plays in the contemporary art world.

Red Art, these are two simple words that can generate complex discussions and verbal feuds since they align the artist to a vision of the world that is 'Red' or 'Communist.'

Nevertheless, even if the two little words when placed together are controversial and filled with *animus*, they are necessary, if not indispensable, to understand contemporary aesthetic issues that are affecting art and how art operates in the context of social versus political power relations within an increasingly technological and socially-mediated world.

Red Art could be translated – within the contemporary hierarchical structures – as the art of the powerless versus the art of the powerful, as the art of the masses versus the art of the few, as the art of the young versus the old, as the art of the technological democrats versus the technological conservatives, as the art of the poor versus the art of the rich... Or it could be described as the art of the revolutionary versus the status quo. In the multitude of the various possible definitions, one appears to stand out for contemporary art and it is the definition of art as bottom-up participation versus art as top-down prepackaged aesthetic knowledge. And yet, what does Red Art stand for and can it be only restricted to Communist Art?

The contemporary meaning of Red Art is different from what it may have been for example in Italy in the 1970s, since so much has changed in terms of politics, ideology and technology. It is no longer possible to directly identify Red Art with Communist Art (as the art of the ex Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or of its satellite states and globalized Communist political parties which were and continue to be present in the West – albeit in edulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geopolitical perspectives. [1]

If today's Red Art has to redefine its structures and constructs it becomes necessary to understand who is encompassed within the label of Red Artists and what their common characteristics are. Red Artists – if we wanted to use this category – and their aesthetic production cannot be reduced to the word 'Communist,' borrowing passé ideological constructs. An alternative to the impasse and the ideological collapse of communism is the redefinition of Red Art as the art of the commons: **Commonist Art**. [2] If Red Art were to be defined as the art of the commons, Commonist Art, thereby entrenching it clearly within technoutopias and neoliberalist crowd sourcing approaches for collective participation, this would provide a contradictory but functional framework for the realization of common practices, socially engaged frameworks, short terms goals and 'loose/open' commitments that could be defined in technological terms as *liquid digital utopias* or as a new form of permanent dystopia. [3]

The XXIst century appears to be presenting us, then, with the entrenched digitized construct of the common versus the idea of the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby offering a new interpretation of the social space and an alternative to traditional leftist/neoliberal constructs. The idea of the common – as an open access revolving door, is opposed to the concept of the commune – as a highly regulated and hierarchical structure.

The 'semantic' distinguo between commons and communes becomes important since both terms are reflections of constructions and terminological frameworks for an understanding of both society and art that is based on 'likes,' actions and commitments for a common or a commune. The commitment, even when disparagingly used to define some of the participants as click-activists and armchair revolutionaries, [4] is partial and leaves the subject able to express other likes often in contradiction with one another: e.g. I like the protests against Berlusconi's government and I like the programs on his private TVs.

I find the idea of the commons (knowledge, art, creativity, health and education) liberating, empowering and revolutionary, if only it was not expressed within its own economic corporative structures, creating further layers of contradiction and operational complexities.

The contradictions of contemporary Red Art and contemporary social interactions may be located in the difference between the interpretations of common and commune – the commune upon which the Italian Communist Party, for example, based its foundations in order to build a new 'church.'

The relationships in the commune of the Italian communists (oxymoronically defined Cattocomunisti or Catholic-communist) rests in faith and in compelled actions, in beliefs so rooted that are as blinding as blinding is the light of God in the painting *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

> *[..] and from the leadership an aggressive unwillingness to allow any dissent or deviation. 'That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left,' the historian E. P. Thompson would recall from personal knowledge of the CP...* [5]

It is this blind faith that has generated the martyrs of communism and heretical intellectuals, accusations from which not even Antonio Gramsci was able to escape. The vertical hierarchical structure of the commune and of the Communist Party produced heretics and immolations, but also supported artists, intellectuals, academics and writers that operated consonantly with the party's ideals: people that sang from the same preapproved institutional hymn sheet.

> **Stefania:** *This young generation horrifies me. Having been kept for years by this state, as soon as they discover to have two neurons they pack and go to study, to work in the US and London, without giving a damn for who supported them. Oh well, they do not have any civic vocation. When I was young at the occupied faculty of literature, I oozed civic vocation. [..] I have written eleven novels on civic duty and the book on the official history of the Party.*
>
> **Jep Gambardella:** *How many certainties you have, Stefania. I do not know if I envy you or feel a sensation of disgust. [...] Nobody remembers your civic vocation during your University years. Many instead*

remember, personally, another vocation of yours that was expressed at the time; but was consumed in the bathrooms of the University. You have written the official history of the Party because for years you have been the mistress of the head of the Party. Your eleven novels published by a small publishing house kept by the Party and reviewed by small newspapers close to the Party are irrelevant novels [...] the education of the children that you conduct with sacrifice every minute of your life ... Your children are always without you [...] then you have - to be precise - a butler, a waiter, a cook, a driver that accompanies the boys to school, three babysitters. In short, how and when is your sacrifice manifested? [...] These are your lies and your fragilities. [6]

To the question, then, if Red Art exists I would have to answer: YES! I have seen Red Art in Italy (as well as abroad), as the Communist Art produced in the name of the party, with party money and for party propaganda, not at all different from the same art produced in the name of right-wing parties with state or corporate money – having both adopted and co-opted the same systems and frameworks of malfeasance shared with sycophantic artists and intellectuals.

In order to understand the misery of this kind of Red Art one would have to look at the Italian aesthetization of failure – which successfully celebrates failure in the *Great Beauty* by Paolo Sorrentino when the character of Stefania, and her 'oozing civic duty,' is ripped apart. It is a civic responsibility that is deprived and devoid of any ethics and morals. [7]

This is but one of the multiple meanings of the concept of Red Art – the definition of Red Art as Communist Art, is the one that can only lead to sterile definitions and autocelebratory constructs based on the 'aesthetic obfuscation of the lack of meaning' as a

tool for the obscurity of the aesthetic to act as a producer of meaning when the artist producing it is inept at creating meaning. [8] Even more tragically, Red Art leads to the molding of the artist as spokesperson of the party and to the reduction of the artwork, whenever successful, to advertising and propaganda.

Commonist Art, founded on the whim of the 'like' and 'trend,' on the common that springs from the aggregation around an image, a phrase, a meme or a video, is able to construct something different, a convergence of opinions and actions that can be counted and weighed and that cannot be taken for granted. Could this be a Gramscian utopia of re-construction and re-fashioning of aesthetics according to 'lower commons' instead of high and rich 'exclusivity,' which as such is unattainable and can only be celebrated through diamond skulls and gold toilets?

Commonist Art – the art that emerges from a common – is a celebration of a personal judgment, partially knowledgeable and mostly instinctive, perhaps manipulated – since every 'other' opinion is either manipulated by the media or the result of international lobby's conspiracies or it can be no more than a reinforcement of the society of the simulacra. Conversely, it may also be that the image and its dissemination online is the representation of a personal diffidence towards systems of hierarchical power and endorsement that can only support 'their own images and meanings' in opposition to images that are consumed and exhausted through infinite possibilities of interpretation and re-dissemination. [9]

If Commonist Art offers the most populist minimum common denominator in an evolutionary framework determined by whims, it is not at all different from the minimum common denominator of inspirational/ aspirational codified aesthetics that are defined by the higher echelons of contemporary oligarchies that

have increasingly blurred the boundaries of financial and aesthetic realms.

Commonist Art – if the current trends of protest will continue to affirm themselves even more strongly – will continue to defy power and will increasingly seek within global trends and its own common base viable operational structures that hierarchies will have to recognize, at one point or the other, by subsuming Commonist Art within pre-approved structures.

Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional 'approval' and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional imageries that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionally re-processed and receive hierarchical stamps of approval.

Red Art can also be the expression of people whose blood and tears – literally – mark the post-democracies of the first part of the XXIst century. Non-political, non-party, non-believers, [10] the crowds of the Internet rally around an argument, a sense of justice, a feeling of the future not dominated by carcinogenic politicians, intellectuals and curators, that present themselves every time, according to geographical and cultural spaces, as Sultans, Envoys of God, or even Gods.

Red Art, the Commonist Art that perhaps is worth considering as art, is the one that is self-elevated, built on the blood and bones of people still fighting in the XXIst century for justice, freedom and for a piece of bread. Art that rallies crowds' likes and dislikes based

on the whims of a liquid Internet structure where people support within their timelines an idea, a utopia, a dream or the image of a kitten. [11]

This piece of writing and this whole volume is dedicated to the victims of the economic and political violence since the beginning of the Great Recession and to my father; and to the hope, hard to die off, that some utopia may still be possible.

Lanfranco Aceti
Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery

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1. Larry Ray, "At the End of the Post-Communist Transfor-
    mation? Normalization or Imagining Utopia?," *European
    Journal of Social Theory* 12 (August 2009), 321-336.

2. Commonism was used by Andy Warhol. In this essay the
    word is rooted in Internet 'commons,' although similarities,
    comparisons and contiguities exist with the earlier usage.
    "Thus Warhol's initial preference for the term 'Commonism'
    was as ambivalent, and ambiguous, as the oscillating signs
    'Factory' and 'Business.' Although it flirted with conflations
    of the 'common' with the 'Communist' (from cheap and
    low to 'dignity of the common man'), the term betrayed
    no hidden, left-wing agenda on Warhol's part." Caroline
    A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar
    American Artist* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago
    Press, 1996), 205.

3. "For one thing, utopia has now been appropriated by
    the entertainment industry and popular culture – what
    is termed the contemporary liquid utopia – as a kind of
    dystopia." Anthony Elliott, *The Contemporary Bauman*
    (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 17.

4. The blurred lines between real and virtual do not exempt
    click-activists or armchair revolutionaries from the
    persecutions and abuses of the state police. The sitting
    room within one's home becomes the public space for
    conflict and revolts. One example of many around the
    globe: Alexander Abad-Santos, "Turkey Is Now Arresting
    Dozens for Using Twitter," *The Wire*, June 5, 2013, http://
    www.thewire.com/global/2013/06/turkey-twitter-ar-
    rests/65908/ (accessed January 10, 2014).

5. David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London:
    Bloomsbury, 2007), 342.

6. The English translation from the Italian is from the author.
    La Grande Bellezza, DVD, directed by Paolo Sorrentino
    (Artificial Eye, 2014).

7. "Anti-communism was never accepted as the moral equiva-
    lent of anti-fascism, not only by my parents but also by the
    overwhelming majority of liberal-minded people. The Left
    was still morally superior." Nick Cohen, *What's Left?: How
    the Left Lost its Way* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007),
    3. La questione morale or the 'moral issue' in English is

the problem indentified by Enrico Berlinguer and that
questioned the role of the Communist party and the Left
in general in Italy. The moral issue has not been resolved
to this day and is at the core of the current impossibility
to distinguish between the ideological frameworks of
Left and Right – since both political areas are perceived
as equally and intrinsically corrupt as well as tools for
an oligarchic occupation of democracy. For the original
interview in Italian of Enrico Berlinguer see: Eugenio
Scalfari, "Intervista a Enrico Berlinguer," *La Repubblica*,
July 28, 1981 available in "La questione morale di Enrico
Berlinguer," Rifondazione Comunista's website, http://web.
rifondazione.it/home/index.php/12-home-page/8766-la-
questione-morale-di-enrico-berlinguer (accessed March
20, 2014).

8. "Under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth;
    behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues
    the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the
    circuits of communication are the supports of an ac-
    cumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of
    signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the
    beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed,
    altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual
    is carefully fabricated in it..." Michel Foucault, "Panopti-
    cism," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*,
    ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New
    York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 78.

9. There are those who think that the image is an extremely
    rudimentary system in comparison with language and
    those who think that signification cannot exhaust the im-
    age's ineffable richness. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the
    Image," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans
    and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 33.

10. Non-believers stands for skeptics and does not have a
    religious connotation in this context.

11. Lanfranco Aceti, *Our Little Angel*, Lanfranco Aceti Inc.,
    personal website, January 10, 2014, http://www.lanfran-
    coaceti.com/portfolio-items/our-little-angel/ (accessed
    January 10, 2014).

Changing the Game: Towards an 'Internet of Praxis'

There is a new spectre haunting the art world. Not surprisingly, it has been put forward in recent arti- cles, panel discussions and books as the 'ism' that could, possibly, best describe the current disposi- tions of contemporary art. The name of the spectre is "post-internet art." [1] Unlike, however, its counter- part that was released in the world by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, [2] this contemporary spectre has not arrived in order to axiomatically change the established order of things; conceivably, it has arrived in order to support it.

Post-internet art refers to the aesthetic qualities defining today's artistic production, which is often influenced by, mimics, or fully adopts elements of the Internet. At the same time, the term incorporates the communication tools and platforms through which contemporary artworks reach their intended (or non- intended) audiences. Notably, in his book *Post Internet* (2011), art writer Gene McHugh suggests that regard- less of an artist's intentions, all artworks now find a space on the World Wide Web and, as a result, "[...] contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it." [3] Quite naturally, this would seem like a strong oppositional force directed against the modus operandi of the mainstream art world. Yet, further down in the same page, McHugh characterizes this acknowledgement as a constituent part of the much larger "game" that is played by commercial gal- leries, biennials, museums and auction houses.

Thus, there are inevitable contradictions and chal- lenges in the role that post-internet art is called to fulfil as a movement and/or as a status of cultural production. Firstly, there is an easily identifiable 'anxi- ety' to historicize a phenomenon that is very much in progress: the Internet is changing so rapidly, that if we think of the online landscape ten years ago, this would be radically different from our present experience of it. Furthermore, the post-internet theorization of contemporary art runs the danger of aestheticizing (or over-aestheticizing) a context that goes well beyond the borders of art: in the same way that we could talk about post-internet art, we could also talk about post- internet commerce, post-internet dating, post-internet travel, post-internet journalism, etc. Therefore, the role and the identity of the post-internet artist are not independent of a much wider set of conditions. This false notion of autonomy is quite easy to recognize if we think, for instance, of 'post-radio art' or 'post- television art' or, even, 'post-videogames art,' and the inherent structural and conceptual limitations of such approaches. [4]

Most importantly, however, any kind of aestheticiza- tion may readily become a very effective tool of de- politicization. The idea of distributing images, sounds and words that merely form part of a pre-existing system of power, inescapably eradicates the political significance of distribution. The subversive potential- ity inherent in the characterisation of a network as 'distributed' was systematically undermined over the 1990s and the 2000s, due to the ideological perva-

siveness of neoliberalism during the same period. Distribution – not to mention, *equal* distribution – could have enjoyed a much more prominent role as a natural fundament of the Web and, accordingly, as a contributing factor in any investigation of digital art. Last but definitely not least, one cannot ignore the crucial fact that apolitical art is much easier to enter the art market and play the 'game' of institutionalization (and vice versa).

To the question: could the Internet and new media at large become true 'game changers' in the current historical conjuncture? What does 'red art' have to propose, and how does it relate to the previously described 'post-internet condition'?

Interestingly, the term "post-internet art" was born and grew parallel to the global economic crisis and the Great Recession of 2009. One the most important objectives of the social movements that were engendered by the crisis has been the effort to "reclaim" and "re-appropriate." This aspiration referred not only to economic resources, but also to social roles, democratic functions, human rights, and – of course – urban spaces. Syntagma Square in Greece, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, as well as some of the most iconic public locations around the world saw diverse, or even 'irreconcilable' in some cases crowds demand change. Within the reality of Data Capitalism and its multiple self-generated crises, people increasingly felt that they have now been totally deprived of a place ("topos" in Greek).

It is worth remembering that the coiner of "utopia," Thomas More, chose an island as the location where he placed his ideal society. [5] Any island constitutes a geographic formation that privileges the development of individual traits through a natural process of 'appropriation.' This encompasses both the material and the immaterial environment as expressed in the landscape, the biology of the different organisms, and – most relevant to our case – culture. Notably, when it comes to connecting utopianism with the cultural paradigm of new media art, we should not focus merely on the lack of a physical space (as articulated, for instance,

through cyberspace); rather, we should address the juxtaposition of "topos" with a potentially 'empty' notion of "space." The transcendence of space in a 'digital utopia' absolutely necessitates the existence of a 'topos.' In a similar way to the one that Marx sees capitalism as a stage towards a superior system of production (communism), [6] the construction of a 'topos' is a prerequisite for the flourishing of utopianism.

'Red Art' can be understood as a tool for the creation of such 'topoi.' The lesson that new media artists can learn from the political osmoses catalyzed by the economic crisis is that, in order to be effective, cyberspace should become part of a strategy that combines physical and online spaces, practically and conceptually, whilst taking into account the individual traits of both. The necessity expressed through this combination constitutes (at least partly) a departure from the developing discourses around the 'Internet of Things' or the 'Internet of Places.' [7] Alternatively, or additionally, what is proposed here is the formulation of an 'Internet of Praxis' (including, of course, artistic praxis). This approach is vividly reflected in several of the projects examined in this publication, as well as in the theoretical frameworks that are outlined.

Digital art is today in a position to capitalize on the participatory potentialities that have been revealed by the socio-political events that defined the early 2010s. The reconceptualization of cyberspace as a 'cybertopos' is a constituent part of this new ground on which people are called to stand and build. Accordingly, the emergence of a culture of 'post-net participation' in which digital media transcend physical space by consolidating it (instead of 'merely' augmenting it), may allow us to explore "concrete utopias" [8] to a greater extent than ever before in recent times. It is by actively pursuing this objective that we would expect to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

Bill Balaskas

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1. The term 'post-internet art' is attributed to artist Marisa Olson. See Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* (Brescia: LINK Editions), 5.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in London, on February 21, 1848.
3. Gene McHugh, *Post Internet*, 6.
4. The etymological comparison between the terms 'post-internet art' and 'postmodern art' could also highlight this context. Notably, in the case of this juxtaposition, 'post-internet art' puts a tool (the Internet) in the position of a movement (Modernism). If we were to consider the Internet as a movement, then, the natural historical link that would be established through the term 'post-internet art' would be with net art. Nevertheless, such a decision would assign net art to a status of 'legitimization,' towards which major museums, curators and art fairs have shown a rather consistent hostility. In this instance, historicization becomes a foe, since it would refute a 'neutral' relationship of the Web with art. This perspective is closely connected with the formation of an abstract notion of universalism, to which I refer further down (see endnote 8).
5. Thomas More's *Utopia* was first published in 1516, in Belgium. There are several translations of the book.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, with an introduction by David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 51: "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."
7. The Internet of Things represents a vision in which physical items become 'smart' objects by being equipped with sensors that can be remotely controlled and connected through the Internet. The Internet of Places focuses on the spatial dimension of the capacities that Web 2.0 offers. For an account of the Internet of Things, see Mattern, Friedemann and Christian Floerkemeier, "From the Internet of Computers to the Internet of Things," in *Informatik-Spektrum*, 33 (2010): 107–121, http://www.vs.inf.ethz.ch/publ/papers/Internet-of-things.pdf (accessed February 20, 2014). For an account of the Internet of Places, see Giuseppe Conti, Paul Watson, Nic Shape, Raffaele de Amicis and Federico Prandi, "Enabling the 'Internet of Places': a virtual structure of space-time-tasks to find and use Internet resources," in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Computing for Geospatial Research & Applications* (New York: ACM, 2011), 9.
8. For more on the concept of 'concrete utopias' see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch differentiates between 'abstract utopias' and 'concrete utopias,' associating the latter with the possibility of producing real change in the present. 'Concrete utopias' should not be confused with seemingly similar theorizations such as Nicolas Bourriaud's 'microtopias,' which structurally aim at preserving the existing status quo. Bourriaud asserts in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) that "it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows." Quite evidently, this approach stands far from the universalism that he advocates in his *Altermodern Manifesto* (2009) as a direct result of new technologies and globalization. At a time when neoliberal capitalism was entering its worst ever crisis, Bourriaud chose to largely ignore this context and build on a concept that – in the end – is apolitical and counter-utopian. 'Post-internet art' appears to follow a comparably dangerous trajectory.

Suggestions for Art That Could Be Called Red

What is Red Art? Or rather: what could Red Art be in today's post-communist, post-utopian world, a world shaken by conflicts engendered by contrary beliefs and ideologies which have little to do with communism? A world in which countries and societies are disrupted by territorial disputes, and by bloody fights about questions of religious identity, national identity, and ideology? Where communism has been overrun by capitalism with rare exception; where the European left movement is weak. Where the post-industrial era has produced an economic reality that is orders of magnitude more complex, transnational and therefore more difficult to control or change, than history has ever seen. In this situation, can there (still) be art that deals with ideas of communism constructively, or does contemporary art look at communist ideals only with nostalgia?

And let's be clear: is art that simply speaks out against capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism from a leftist position – is this kind of art 'red' per se? Do we expect Red Art to be 'red' in content, for instance, in directly addressing topics such as class struggle, the negatives of capitalism and a new neo-liberal world order? And if it does, is it enough to be descriptive or do we want art to be more than that, i.e., provoking, forward-thinking or even militant? In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard drafted a 39-point manifesto *Que faire? What is to be done?* that contrasted the antagonistic practices of making political films and making films 'politically.' It called unequivocally for art that actively takes up the position of the proletarian class and that

aims for nothing less than the transformation of the world. With his legacy, what kind of objectives do we request from Red Art? Do we really still think that art can change the world or is that another idea from the past that has been overwritten by something that we like to call reality? Can art that is for the most part commercialised and produced in a capitalist art market be 'red' at all, or does it have to reject the system established by galleries, fairs and museums in order to be truly 'red'?

Decades ago, when artists started to use new media such as video and the computer, their works were 'new' in the way they were produced and distributed, and changed the relationship between artists and their collaborators as well as between the artworks and their audiences and 'users' respectively. Most of this new-media-based art circulated outside the ordinary market and found other distribution channels. The majority of works were inspired by a quest for the 'new' and consistently broke with old aesthetic principles and functions. Much of it was also driven by a search for the 'better,' by overthrowing old hierarchies and introducing a more liberal and inclusive concept of the world, based on self-determination and active participation. Last but not least the emergence of the Internet brought us a fertile time for new and revisited utopias and artistic experiments dealing with collaboration, distribution of knowledge, shared authorship, and appropriation of technologies. Today we know that neither the Internet nor any other new technology has saved us, but that the hopes for a more demo-

cratic world and alternative economies sparked by it have come true, if only to a minor degree.

So how do artists respond to this post-communist, post-utopian condition? What can be discussed as Red Art in the recent past and present? In this issue of Leonardo we have gathered some answers to these questions in the form of papers, essays and artworks, the latter produced especially for this purpose. Bringing together and editing this issue was challenging because we decided from the start to keep the call for contributions as open as possible and to not pre-define too much. We were interested in what kind of responses our call would produce at a moment when the world is occupied with other, seemingly hotter topics, and it is fascinating to note that the resulting edition quite naturally spans decades of art production and the respective 'new' technologies as they related to ideas of social equality and empowerment – from video art to net art to bio art. This issue shows that the search for alternative ideas and perspectives, and an adherence to leftist ideals is neither futile nor simply nostalgic. But that this search is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when European politics is seemingly consolidating and wars around the world are establishing new regimes of social and economic inequality.

Susanne Jaschko

Why Digital Art is Red

The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable. Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations. [1] Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more evidently compromised world of technological tools (Turing Land). [2] Power relations are where the divide appears starkest: in one world, special individuals known as artists make exceptional objects or events with clear boundaries that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill life; and through elite ownership and expert curation, these works are presented for the enlightenment of the rest of us. In the new media world, some 'artists' but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode. [3] Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of production and reproduction. [4] Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.

So where is Red Art and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset much of the Left in Europe and the US, the development of the digital realm stands out as an extraordinary gain. It allows for the direct communication, without the intermediary of newspapers and TV, of masses of people globally – who turn out to be more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alexander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world's press. Not anymore. We can get a news story from [..] Gaza or Ramallah or Oaxaca or Vidarbha and have it out to a world audience in a matter of hours. [5]

It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed by some to Lenin – that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them – is still relevant. [6]

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals – in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects – tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich. [7] Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos: individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment

value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of 'artist.'

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident. [8] The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world). [9] Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission – 'my art has no political effect.' They have to say it, even when it is patently absurd; and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art – that puts collectors and critics to flight – it is deeply and incontrovertibly political. [10] They run headlong from the red.

Julian Stallabrass

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From Tactical Media to the Neo-pragmatists of the Web

by

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In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis.
— Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*

As the early days of the Internet become a distant memory it can now seem passé or naïve to speak of "the Internet revolution," but it should not. [1] The art and activist movements that have arisen in the wake of the internet, have come closer than any of the avant-garde groups of the last two centuries to realizing the modernist utopian dream of universal collective participation in cultural production and the rise of a 'mass intelligentsia,' attaining what romantic modernists from Novalis to Joseph Beuys aspired to when they declared "every one an artist."

The proposition that electronic media could facilitate such a transformation of both culture and democracy precedes the net by several generations. As far back 1932 Brecht's lecture on the *The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication*, famously proposed a participatory model in which he described radio as the "finest

ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that despite the powerful forces seeking to domesticate the internet, transforming it from the bio-diversity of a 'creative commons' into a network of carefully managed 'walled gardens,' the drive to expand and intensify the ideal of democracy remains the 'true north' of the internet revolution.

I further argue that an expansion of the ideal of democracy based on widening the circle of participation and collaborative expression is linked to the emergence of the 'user' as the lead player and primary agent for change replacing both the worker *and the more static concept of the* consumer. *I suggest that the emergence of a 'user language' is best understood through the theories developed by the cultural theorist de Certeau whose work became influential in the cultural studies milieu of the 1980s. I show how a decade later a media orientated interpretation of de Certeau's ideas inspired the 'tactical media' movement; a distinctive combination of art, technological experimentation, and political activism that arose in the early 1990s and successfully exploited the cracks already appearing in the edifice of traditional broadcast media as the internet began to take hold.*

Finally I examine the possibility that unlike the failure of utopian ideals associated with 20th century broadcast media the equivalent ideals associated with the Internet are proving far more resilient. I conclude by suggesting reasons for the persistence of these emancipatory narratives and examine various experimental platforms suggesting that the utopian avant-garde perspective of the early Internet, though continually under threat, remains a potent force whose energies are far from exhausted.

possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him." [2]

Although this drive for mass participation has been at the core of utopian avant-garde art for generations it was generally believed that this possibility of mass dis-alienation existed only as potential, a potential that the masses simply did not have the power to actualize. However an alternative view emerged with the publication in 1980 of The Practice of Everyday Life, in which the Jesuit Scholar Michel de Certeau proposed that an invisible world of mass cultural participation far from being a distant utopia already existed albeit surreptitiously in a twilight realm of what he called "the tactical."

Although computer technology was not a primary concern to de Certeau, it was he who substituted the term "user" for the less active "consumer" describing the purpose his work as bringing to light "... the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers.'" [3] This substitution was influential in creating an alternative to academic cultural studies based on the politics of representation shifting the emphasis towards a more active practice orientated 'user language.' This prescient emphasis on user participation contributed to the emergence of a new perspective in which the consumer was recognized as equally important as the worker and in which the key power relations were analyzed in terms of the dichotomy he introduced between strategies and tactics.

THE USER LANGUAGE OF EVERY DAY LIFE

"Every day life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others." [4] So wrote de Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life," a book which arrived at a much richer and more supple picture of the realities of cultural politics than were available as the staple diet of the Cultural Studies movement of the period. In place of an identity politics based on critiques of media representations, de Certeau introduced a less deterministic emphasis on the uses to which audiences put media representations, the multiple ways in which these forms are tactically appropriated and repurposed by consumers.

For de Certeau cultural production could only be fully understood as multiple acts of co-creation in which the consumer was never passive recipient but rather an active though unequal, participant in the creation of meaning. Above all he saw the act of consumption as a form of production. "To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called "consumption." [5] de Certeau provide a language appropriate to profound changes in social, economic, and power relations taking place "where the figure of the consumer takes center stage alongside (or even instead of) the worker, or better where these two figures are merged. Hardt and Negri thus speak of "affective labor." [6]

At the core of The Practice of Every Day Life is the distinction between tactics and strategies. Although consumers are full participants in the creation of meaning it is nevertheless a highly unequal relationship. He defines strategy "as a calculus of force relationships when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.'" [7] ...a place where it can "capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances." [8] In contrast he describes the tactical

in more labile, and poetic terms that suggest a distinctive style in which the weak are seeking to turn the tables on the strong.

Tactics must depend on:

> clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, 'hunter's cunning,' maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries poetic as well as warlike they go back to the immemorial [...] intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of the modern megalopolises, there is a continuity and permanence of these tactics. [9]

When de Certeau began to write of tactics in the late 1970s he was describing a largely speculative and barely visible twilight realm. Invisibility and subterfuge was part of the point, to a degree he was making a virtue out of a necessity. As he put it:

> The "making" in question is a production, a poesis' – but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of "production" (television, urban development, commerce, etc)... ...it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order. [10]

FROM INVISIBLE TACTICS TO TACTICAL MEDIA

Although de Certeau's ideas became influential among cultural studies theorists of the 1980s it was not until the early 1990's that mass access to cheap and easy to use media put these powerful expressive tools in the hands of users. It was this fact that propelled de Certeau's twilight world of barely visible tactics into

the light of day. With visibility came the reflexivity that enabled a new and increasingly self-conscious form of cultural practice to emerge. A constellation of distinctive but overlapping practices: artists, hackers, political activists, independent media makers coalesced into a previously un-named movement which a network of artists and activists associated with the Amsterdam based festival The Next 5 Minutes, dubbed tactical media. [11] The name stuck and (for better and for worse) the 'brand' stubbornly persists.

Tactical media gave a temporary home to a growing number of artists who whilst repudiating the politics of the contemporary 'art world' were unwilling to relinquish the utopian legacy of the avant-garde which (in contrast to the disciplinary regimes of party politics) placed a high value on the liberating power of expression in politics. This 'Expressivism' can be traced back to the eighteenth century Romantic rebellion against the rationalist utilitarianism of the Enlightenment and was the first major social movement in which artists played a central role. In part this was because of the inspiration drawn from the movement's founding philosophers particularly Herder and Novalis whose writings gave a new significance to the power of language (or expression), proposing that "in a world of contingent horizons, our sense of meaning depends, critically, on our powers of expression..." and "that discovering a framework of meaning is interwoven with invention." [12] The centrality of the expressive dimension in Romanticism accounts for the important role played by artists, but with the important caveat that the spiritual freedoms and possibilities of self-creation enjoyed by artists were also the rightful legacy of all human subjects. Connecting these deeply rooted historical aspirations of universal expressive participation to new media is a key factor in understanding how the ideal of democracy has been transformed ever since its fate became linked to the internet.

In an essay written in 2006 I described how in the early phase of tactical media. The power some of us attributed to this new 'media politics' appeared to be borne out by the role that all forms of media seemed to have played in the collapse of the Soviet Empire. At the time it seemed as though old style armed insurrection had been superseded by digital dissent and media revolutions. It was as if the Samizdat spirit, extended and intensified by the proliferation of Do-it-yourself media, had rendered the centralized statist tyrannies of the Soviet Union untenable. Some of us allowed ourselves to believe that it would only be a matter of time before the same forces would challenge our own tired and tarnished oligarchies.

As late as 1999 in his Reith lecture, Anthony Giddens could still confidently assert that "[t]he information monopoly, upon which the Soviet system was based, had no future in an intrinsically open framework of global communications." [13] Since then it is not only the advent of the Chinese firewall that might make him less certain of his case, it is also that the corporations which effectively mediate the access to the internet (Google and FaceBook) have themselves exhibited monopolistic tendencies.

The principal point I was making in 2006 when the social media were still embryonic, was to plea for this generation of media activists to relinquish the cult of 'ephemerality' – one of the shibboleths of both contemporary art and tactical media. I argued that the time had come to replace hit and run guerrilla activism with "longer-term commitments and deeper engagements with the people and organisations networked around contested issues."

Subsequent manifestations of the spirit of Tactical Media have indeed succeeded in both consolidating their platforms and scaling up their ambitions. Large scale platforms such as Indymedia, WikiLeaks, Moveon.

org and Avaaz have in a various ways succeeded in challenging the status quo and leveraging world public opinion in ways unimagined by previous generations and transcending the culture of small scale homeopathic interventions that were the signature of the early period of tactical media.

RECUPERATING THE UTOPIAN MOMENT

Tactical Media had succeeded in re-igniting the impulse behind successive generations of avant-garde utopian art movements in which the role of artists was envisioned as being to liberate a potential for art making (or the creative principal) in everyone. A potential whose field was aesthetic but whose horizon was political. [14]

And perhaps most surprising of all, in the second decade of the new millennium it is this most radical interpretation of the cyber-prophets which has succeeded in capturing, under the general rubric of, 'user generated content,' mainstream public enthusiasm and even commercial success. Clay Shirkey is not untypical of the many scholarly cheer leaders (including Manuel Castells, Yochai Benklar) when he claims that we are witnessing "the greatest enhancement of communicative expression since the invention of the printing press." [15]

In stark contrast to these euphoric narratives however we see an increasing number of skeptical voices emerging. Commentators such as Evgeny Morozov have suggested that those of us attributing revolutionary potential to these media are living through a 'net delusion.' An even more cogent critic is media theorist Jodie Dean, who has characterized the narratives of tactical media as "communicative capitalism's perfect lure 'in which' subjects feel themselves to be active, even as their every action reinforces the status

quo. Revelation can be allowed even celebrated and furthered because its results remain ineffectual." [16] Providing these critiques with an important historical perspective is the book *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*, by scholar and policy advocate, Tim Wu, in which he described what he called the "long cycle" a process whereby open information systems become consolidated and closed over time. In this process whenever a new and radical media technology arises (print, film, radio, television, internet) it is inevitably accompanied by utopian visions of social and political transformation (as we saw with Brecht and radio) only to move inexorably to a closed and controlled industry, "a typical progression from somebody's hobby to somebody's industry to somebody's empire." [17]

NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

It is possible to imagine that de Certeau would have been initially gratified by the degree to which the tactical 'user' he championed has emerged as the 'prime mover' of the web 2.0 era. He would however have noted that not only is his dichotomy between the tactical and the strategic positions still intact, it also continues to be accompanied by the asymmetrical balance of power. Closer analysis would however have revealed that the Internet's distributed architecture means that the rules of engagement have changed, creating new spaces for both user agency and their control in equal measure.

Unlike the settled domesticated parklands of the broadcast media world, the Internet has been compared to the raucous bio-diversity of a rainforest. This can sometimes lead to suggestions of chaos or lack of structure, and have lead to metaphors suggesting a landscape that is 'out of control.' But nothing could be further from the truth. The Internet works

because of not *despite* structure. Like any language, its technological grammar simultaneously constrains and enables. Media theorist, Alex Galloway has named this enabling and constraining structure of the internet a *Protocol*, in his illuminating book of the same name. Eschewing narratives of 'the virtual' Galloway's staunchly materialist description demonstrates how the Internet's historically unique features are founded on a set of technical and behavioral arrangements: "Standards governing the implementation of specific technologies. Like their diplomatic predecessors, computer protocols establish specific points necessary to enact an agreed upon standard of action." [18]

Adding a new layer of technical understanding and analysis to Manuel Castells's concept of the "network society," Galloway distinguishes different kinds of network identifying the specific form of the "distributed network" as the basis for 'the protocol' behind the Internet. According to Galloway, "[b]y design protocols such as Internet protocols cannot be centralized." [19] In part III of *Protocol*, Galloway proposes what he calls "Protocol Futures" resistance not to reject the technologies but to "direct these protocological technologies, whose distributed structure is empowering indeed, toward what Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls an "emancipated media" created by active social actors rather than passive users." [20]

Those who control the infrastructure and configure the protocols of the social web may preach open standards but they are in reality far from transparent. Drawing on the work of media scholar Felix Stalder, we could locate the tactical and the strategic domains of the web.2.0 era in what Stalder calls the *front-end* and the *back-end*. The *front-end* where the actions may be "decentralized, ad-hoc, cheap, easy-to-use, community-oriented, and transparent" and the b*ack-end*, which are "centralized, based on long-term planning, very expensive, difficult-to-run, corporate, and

opaque. If the personal blog symbolizes one side, the data-center represents the other." "...there is a growing tension between the dynamics on the front-end (where users interact) and on the back-end (to which the owners have access)." [21]

An example of how the contradictions between back end and front end are playing out in practice could be observed in a skirmish, which took place during the media coverage of the London Olympics. In this incident the Los Angeles based journalist Guy Adams, reporting for the Independent, an important UK national daily, tweeted about the poor coverage given to the opening ceremony by NBC. Adams concluded his tweet by transmitting the corporate address of the boss of NBC urging people to send tweets and e-mails. Twitter immediately suspended his account. It later emerged that Twitter had alerted NBC in order to trigger a complaint and so legitimize the suspension. Behind this apparently trivial conflict was the fact that Twitter and NBC had established a commercial partnership to transmit the Olympics. It was the first content partnership Twitter had ever established with a broadcaster of this size. The kinds of tensions on display are clear enough, the avowed commitment of Twitter to being an open platform committed to free speech trumped by the need to keep an important commercial partner happy. The immediate consequence of the suspended account was an uprising from the Twitter user community with hash tag, "NBC fail" or "fail NBC." As a result three weeks later the account was reinstated along with an apology in a Twitter blog post saying "we apologize we did alert NBC official and that was wrong." The same kind of tensions between stated ideology and the realities of strategic power relationships could be seen on a much larger stage when state power is threatened by the new power of apparently weaker players.

At the beginning of 2010 Hilary Clinton gave a speech lauding the internet revolution along with the role of the web 2.0 platforms in the uprisings in the Middle East, in terms that would have been recognized by both the father of media theory Marshal McLuhan as well as later tactical media theorists, when she described the net not only as "the nervous system of the planet" but also as the "samizdat of our day."

If nothing else, her direct appeals to global public opinion demonstrated the degree to which the Internet has transformed mainstream ideas about what constitutes a modern democracy. However, the contradictions at the heart of the current landscape were revealed within a matter of months when Clinton was to be found addressing a hastily convened state department press conference to condemn the WikiLeaks Iraqi exposé as "not just an attack on America's foreign policy interests it was an attack on the international community." Clearly the "Samizdat" culture she had been celebrating just a few months earlier was to be celebrated until it impinged upon American power.

PEOPLE DON'T WANT MASTERS

In a much quoted piece of research carried out in 2003 the renowned sociologist of networks Manuel Castells identified an example of how behavior and attitudes of Catalonian computer users were being mirrored in behavior away from computers:

The more an individual has a project of autonomy (personal, professional, socio/political, communicative) the more she uses the Internet. And in a time space sequence the more he/she uses the Internet, the more autonomous she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions. [22]

Increasingly this horizontal networking and increased autonomy also expresses itself as a deepening distrust of traditional models of governance and leadership. One of the primary observable characteristics of the new social movements such as Occupy, is that they are largely *movements without leaders*. It would be inconceivable for any of them to say, as the British Labour party said on winning the election in 1945 "we are the masters now." "It just happens that people don't want more masters. And that is both very complicated but is very interesting." (*Manuel Castells in conversation with journalist Paul Mason at the LSE.*) [23]

In 2012 at a public discussion Paul Mason touched the nub of the issue when he put the following partly rhetorical question to Castells: "Mandela *did*, Martin Luther King *did* [working with] hierarchical movements, working with a goal, a program and a leadership. Why do we worship the spontaneity of the network protest?" "Because" replies Castells "people don't trust leaders anymore.." "It took 20-30 years from the arrival of mass industrialization to the point when the union power and the labor movement became part of political institutions [...]" "It is a long journey from the minds of people to the institutions of society." Castells is arguing that the transformation he believes to be underway is occurring "not through organized politics in the same way. Because networks are different, networks don't need hierarchical organizations." [24]

People may not want masters or hierarchies but for now the established concentrations of wealth and power remain impervious to change. For those whom the 'true north' of the internet revolution remains the pursuit of expanded forms of democracy, this lack of progress leads us to continuously return to the same question: how do we organize democratic governance differently in a digital age? There is no teleogical guarantee of progressive outcomes. Neither will progress be the outcome of neatly implemented strategies.

It will be hit and miss, trial and error. Install, update, crash, restart, de-install, a digital version of Becket's dictum "Fail, fail again, fail better."

THE NEO-PRAGMATISTS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

In order to bring about radical change in the world you don't need to be controversial. You can stand squarely with the vast majority of people and still have a revolutionary agenda for change.
        — Ricken Patel, Co-founder and Director of
           Avaaz (interview, BBC's "HARDtalk," 2007)

Communication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring.
        — Clay Shirkey, *Here Comes Everybody*

So where are the organizational experiments, the trial and error stories?

In an ambitious extended essay, Digital Solidarity, Felix Stalder has recently set out to link the newly emerging forms of agency and subjectivity associated with the digital realm to the collective arrival of major new forms of solidarity. He goes on to draw up what he calls "an inventory of forms, reduced to four basic types: commons, assemblies, swarms and weak networks." [25]

Alongside this inventory I would add the well established genre of the *'succès de scandale'* such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous, a genre whose stock in trade is 'provocation.' This is a well established ritual that has been the signature tune of modernism since the riot that attended the premier of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* guaranteed subsequent packed houses. Ever since to be *radical* has become indistinguishable from being *controversial.* We also see how the disruptive impact that the internet has wrought on the retail

sector is now beginning to be felt in the mainstream political sphere as insurgents and upstarts such as the Italian maverick anti-politician Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) has undercut the Italian political establishment by deploying the web (initially through his blog which effectively bypassed Berlusconi's domination of traditional broadcast media) to aggregate opinion and votes without recourse to a conventional party political structures.

At the other end of the spectrum we have what I argue are best described as the 'Neo-pragmatists' of the web. This is a tendency, which began in 1998 with the launch of MoveOn.org. This project was founded by two successful silicon valley entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, who after selling their software company, Berkeley Systems for a close to $14 million, went on to found the web based campaigning and advocacy network MoveOn.org. MoveOn developed the techniques later adopted and adapted by numerous imitators that represent a key development in nature of how to do political activism and enact democracy through the Internet.

By successfully mobilizing millions of users around *issues* rather than party affiliations or affinity groups, MoveOn and their ilk highlight the way in which it is the objects of politics (the issues) that call the subjects of politics (the public) into being.

Knowingly or unknowingly this approach reflects and extends some of the key conclusions the American Pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey drew from his extended published dialogue with Walter Lipmann in the 1920s. The Dutch theorist, Noortje Maares has written extensively and illuminatingly on how concepts drawn from the Dewey - Lipmann debates can help us to re-think the nature and role of the public in the democracies of the internet age. Maares describes Dewey as arguing that you "cannot separate out the

content, the issues from the subjects ...the only way a public gets pulled into politics, is through content. The indirect consequences of action that people are affected by, is what calls a public into being." [26]

This is a position that flies in the face of those who believe that to give weight to *issues* is to instrumentalize the political passions at the heart of democracy. But for Dewey it was absurd "to assume that the political passions that are so revered by democrats can be isolated from the issues at stake in politics.... Political passions, Dewey argued, are evoked by virtue of being implicated in an issue..." [27]

From the outset MoveOn reflected these principles. It began as a single-issue electronic mailing list based on outrage at the paralysis of American politics due to the Monica Lewinski scandal. It began as simply passing around an e-mail petition to "censure President Clinton and *'move on'*" as an alternative to the impeachment. As they refined and developed their methods MoveOn evolved into an ongoing political experiment campaigning on a range of issues from policy on Iraq through to FaceBook's approach to user privacy. The key to MoveOn's success and continuing influence has been its capacity to use crowd sourcing to raise millions of dollars to support its campaigns. Their capacity to use the web to aggregate mass public opinion through petitions, polls and fund raising combined with more traditional forms of grass roots organizing has implications that shift the emphasis of politics from party politics to moving particular issues forward.

The background of Blade and Boyd brought a particular set of technical and organizational attitudes to the table, which helped to define the character of this movement. Their experience as new media developers with a strong business background meant that from the outset their activism was founded on a

pragmatic understanding of the dynamics required for this technology to engage with and broaden the circle of participants.

This professionalization or (as some would claim) corporatization of activism has spawned numerous imitators including 38Degrees and Change.org and most significantly, the MoveOn spin off Avaaz, which means 'voice' in a number of languages, founded in 2007. Avaaz began with the ambition of taking the philosophy and web savvy formulas pioneered by MoveOn to develop an international constituency to address global issues.

At the time of writing Avaaz has passed the threshold of 20 million members, making it the world's largest activist network, giving it a global reach and scale that has taken the concept of web-based activism to the next level. However the decision to situate Avaaz on the international stage is not only a question of scale, it also follows extends an important aspect of neo-pragmatist logic which is that appealing to a global constituency aspires to short circuit the power games that bedevil national politics.

The key characteristic of all of these groups is the low threshold of commitment required for membership. This policy was present at the outset at 1998 with MoveOn where to be a 'member' requires no subscription, in fact nothing other than a single action, which could be as little as signing an on-line petition or joining a forum discussion. It is this ease of entry that is in part responsible for enabling these organizations to accumulate such vast memberships. Their critics point to this fact as being their greatest weakness. But on the contrary it is their understanding of how the web enables the aggregation of millions of small contributions into large effects that represents their greatest innovation. In an interview with BBC's "HARDtalk" just a year after it was founded, Avaaz's

co-founder and director Ricken Patel described his core demographic as "the Mum with not a lot of time to spare [who] appreciates a service where she can use the small amount of money or time that she has to give..." [28] When challenged on the blandness of his corporate image Patel is unapologetic and made what I would argue is the core claim of the neo-pragmatists of the web, "In order to bring about radical change in the world you don't need to be controversial. You can stand squarely with the vast majority of people and still have a revolutionary agenda for change." [29] This statement captures the essence of this era's transformation from the heroic pioneering days of the net when only radicals and geeks participated to the era of the social web. As Clay Shirkey put it in his aptly named book, *Here Comes Everybody*: "Communication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring." [30]

It is precisely this ease of participation that radical commentators find so problematic. Traditionally the essence of radical politics has been personal sacrifice, solidarity and above all, commitment. For those who take their politics seriously the web pragmatists represent the junk food of politics, to be dismissed as "Slacktivism" the "Clicktivists" or as Žižek dubbed the process, "interpassivity."

As a result they have become a fashionable target of radical critics and artists such as Les Liens Invisibles who have generated a number of high profile works parodying these platforms, which they characterise as armchair activism. In one such work they developed an online petition service 31*Repetitionr*, commissioned by the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol. They developed an app to 'broaden your armchair activism horizons' to which they added the slogan 'Tweet for Action, Augment your Reaction' encouraging people to create their 'own insurrection' using the communications and image strategies of an advertising campaign. Parody-

ing what they believe to be the "illusion that corporate social networks can capture the democratic spirit that characterized the utopias of the early phase of the Internet." **31**

Witty, thought provoking as these projects are it is in fact the artists and the critical commentariat who are the real conservatives, clinging to their avant-garde rituals and tribal affiliations every bit as much as the mainstream Italian political parties who were put on the back foot by Beppe Grillo's M5S. If the disruptive technologies of the Internet have transformed every other sector from commerce to journalism why should avant-garde radical art and politics be the exception? Far from representing a philosophical contradiction the corporate look and feel of these groups is wholly consistent with the neo-pragmatist creed In order to bring about radical change in the world you don't need to be controversial. **32**

At the beginning of 2013 Avaaz continued their commitment to re-imaging democracy in ways that Dewey might recognize through the enactment of their annual consultation process, a large-scale experiment in democratic consultation. It combined a detailed polling exercise involving millions of its members, in 14 languages and in excess of a hundred countries, combined with intense online discussions covering numerous issues. The poll and accompanying on-line discussions covered questions of detail involving the identification of which specific campaigns to support. But it also looked at meta questions relating to the governance of Avaaz. For example it looked at how the permanent staff should respond to the results of the poll itself, asking whether it should be seen as a guide or a binding mandate. A large majority came out in favor of using the data as a guide rather than a binding mandate. The fact that the organization is entirely financed by contributions from members leads Avaaz to claim that its members are the bosses and it

has compared the role of Patel and his staff as that of the president or prime minister being briefed by informed civil servants. The question of how campaigns are selected and promoted is part of the key issue of governance and the balance between how nudges from the Avaaz staff in one direction or another is tricky and can all to easily lead to charges of bias.

As with Grillo and web guru Casaleggio's role with M5S, and Assange's role with WikiLeaks, Patel's charismatic presence with Avaaz is far from unproblematic, particularly where Avaaz appeared to be making excessive claims for its role in helping journalists to escape from Syria in 2012. Patel has recently put this error down to the fog of war. But mistakes are the inevitable price of genuine engagement and should not lead to the default position of knowing cynicism. All of these groups including Avaaz have had the vision to step out of the established conception of how to do democratic politics and into the new hybrid spaces that combine the virtual and the street, which inevitably entails risk and contradiction. It is only from this actual practice including a willingness to fail and fail again that the vital renewal of democratic politics immanent to the age of networks will emerge. ∎

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