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By David Garcia

Whatever happened to tactical media? David Garcia, one of the genre's early formulators, takes C6's recent publication *DIY Survival* as an opportunity to reflect on the general state of cultural politics after its net propelled reinvention in the '90s. Concerned with the commercial cannibalisation of tactical media, he identifies a need to connect its hit and run ephemerality with more permanent structures of resistance.

In 2005, the London based artist/activist outfit C6 published *DIY Survival*, a short book to coincide with their show, *Sold Out*. In the intro C6 declare their aim to 'produce a guide of tactical means for collective art making'. The result is an amalgam of bits and pieces, ranging from the serious and helpful through to the self-mocking and frankly trite. This material has been helpfully divided into three sections: DIY Theory, DIY How To and finally DIY Case Studies. Part of the book's patchiness might be the result of a decision to minimise editorial intervention. Whether there was any selection is not quite clear. The intro tells us that the contents are the result of an open call put out to a number of sympathetic internet mailing lists, but it is unclear whether there was any further editorial selection or intervention. We are simply told that they were 'immersed in a flood of responses' and 'decided that their task was to let chance take over'.

It is clear from the outset that this book addresses the area of practice that, a decade ago, some of us dubbed 'tactical media' although C6 wisely avoid a term that has already become quasi-institutionalised. Nevertheless most aspects of what could be described as tactical media are represented in this book.

The term was originally coined to identify and describe a movement which occupied a 'no man's land' on the borders of experimental media art, journalism and political activism, a zone that was, in part, made possible by the mass availability of a powerful and flexible new generation of media tools. This constellation of tools and disciplines was also accompanied by a distinctive set of rejections: of the position of objectivity in journalism, of the discipline and instrumentalism of traditional political movements, and finally of the mythic baggage and atavistic personality cults of the art world. This organised 'negativity' together with a love of fast, ephemeral, improvised collaborations gave this culture its own distinctive spirit and style and helped to usher in new levels of unpredictability and volatility to both cultural politics and the wider media landscape. But this was long ago and the practices have long since become a familiar part of the media diet. So the question arises as to whether or not C6's *DIY Survival* is taking us anywhere new. Whatever the answer, it should at least give us the opportunity to take stock, and ask whether any parts of this kind of practice retains value or credibility in a world it helped to change.

The cover of *DIY Survival* is sharp and funny and immediately raises expectations. It is a clever simulation of an 'Airfix' style model building kit, featuring one of those ubiquitous plastic frames to which the components of model Apache helicopters, Sherman tanks and so forth were attached. But in this version we find instead the miniature parts needed to construct today's media 'freedom fighter': camcorder, lap-top, balaclava, graffiti spray can etc. Although the book's cover can compete for attention with anything on the magazine rack, once inside we are transported back into a ghetto - the world of the 1970s fanzines. There is even an ironic (I hope) nod to the punk godfathers of DIY culture, with endless images of safety pins appearing to hold the disparate bits of content together. Of course it's all very knowing, displaying a desire to recuperate the fast and furious punk ethos using 21st century Print On Demand technology. The trouble is C6's *DIY Survival* suffers badly in comparison with the angry high-octane visual flare of punk. It is not that this uniquely English sense

of failure, madness and defiant hedonism has disappeared, but you'd be better off looking for it on the NeasdenControlCenter website or watching an episode of Black Books or even listening to the Baby Shambles.

But if we are able to turn a blind eye (and it's difficult) to the style problems, there is some useful and informative stuff to be found, particularly in the DIY How To section which includes the hacklab mini-manual for building Linux networks from cast off terminals and a piece with tips for creating a wireless node. But all too often the good stuff is undermined by cheesy, cop out, self-mockery such as the 'How to be a Citizen Reporter' photo-style guide or the risible cardboard cut out for 'Robot Buddies'. The accumulated effect does little more than suggest an enclosed micro culture every bit as self-regarding as the white cube art it purports to undermine.

The Homeopathic Option

In the DIY Theory section there are some valuable moments, but it would have been so much more accessible (or just readable) with a more active editorial presence. For instance, it is great to have some of the distinctive rhetorical style of Brazilian 'Midia Tactica' in Hernani Dimantas's piece 'Linkania - The Hyperconnected Multitude'. But the text's value is undermined by too many unexplained references, such as one to Globo - Brazil's near monopolistic media giant. On the level of detail this is a trivial complaint, but more importantly without some clearer context we lose a sense of the uniquely Brazilian 'cannibalistic' interpretation of media tactics.

Wisely the book chooses to kick off with its most coherent and tightly argued essay, Marcus Verhagen's 'Of Avant Gardes and Tail Ends'. This piece is worth closer examination not least because it could be assembled into if not exactly a DIY Survival manifesto then at least an articulation of its core belief in art's sovereign role as subversive agent. For the most part the text is a brief history of the gradual erosion of the avant garde's subversive bite. Verhagen makes useful but overly simplified distinctions, such as his opposition between the 'critical' and the 'hermetic' avant garde. One of his most telling points is to have identified the way in which art has relinquished any aspiration to depict utopias in anything but ironic form. 'The utopian imagery', he writes, 'once conceived by Signac and Leger as force for social renewal, is now the preserve of Benetton and Disney. How often are utopian visions offered without irony in contemporary art?'

This is just one of the arguments Verhagen mobilises to insist that the critical art and media which orientate themselves to traditional fine art contexts are pointless since the real power now lies elsewhere. He describes the contemporary landscape thus, 'Hollywood film, the magazine advertisement, or hit single: these constitute a more powerful force than the concert hall or the museum, they more faithfully represent the dominant values of the day and are better suited to co-opting avant-gardist work; after all commoditisation is more effective than canonisation'.

In the last few paragraphs of the essay, Verhagen advocates deploying Frederic Jameson's 'homeopathic strategies' that seem to consist of a Foucault-like process of 'unmasking' power - a form of ideology critique carried out with images. It is hard to see how this differs from the approach which has become a familiar part of visual art's currency since the first wave of critical post-modernism of the 1970s and 80s where mass cultural phenomena are examined and reproduced to 'reveal their internal workings, their means and objectives.'

Verhagen goes on to claim that 'homeopathic works are more difficult for the mainstream culture to appropriate because they are already in some sense part of it.' This is all too true but, far from representing the ultimate in subversion, such an approach results in producing mere epiphenomena of communicative capitalism not only tolerated but consumed by it with relish. It is not that cultural or information politics are not important, it is just that outside of a broader context and strategy of

meaningful confrontations they are simply not enough.

In his final clarion call Verhagen declares that the grand subversions of the nineteenth century are coming to seem almost quaint, homeopathic tactics are surely more effective. I would argue that the direct opposite is the case. It is only when the ideology critiques of image (or code) are deployed as part of a more general strategy of direct action that things start to move. The case of the AIDS activist campaigning group ACT UP's use of visual tactics in the 1990s are a classic demonstration of how cultural politics can have real power.

Telestreets's Dilemma

The report on the Italian Telestreets movement by Slavina Feat (mysteriously placed in the DIY How To section) encapsulates the limitations of the book whilst at the same time pointing to an instructive example. The report is about the Italian micro TV movement Telestreets and a sister organisation New Global Vision, a collective of Italian hackers who have used BitTorrent to disseminate an archive of radical political video on the net whilst also helping Telestreets to distribute local content nationally.

Feat's report is another of *DIY Survival's* missed opportunities. It goes no further than re-cycling the familiar Telestreets hype that has been doing the rounds for a couple of years. It fails to raise the questions that we need to ask about this movement. To begin with what is the status of the network today? Is it growing or shrinking, or did it, (as I suspect, but do not know) reach its high watermark nearly two years ago? Is Telestreets now in decline, or worse, in the process of fragmenting under the weight of its own internal contradictions? Surely a book with a critical agenda must aspire to more than publicity puffs like this.

The Telestreets example is important because it embodies some of the starker choices for those involved in tactical media. These dilemmas were already visible in a Telestreets meeting, which took place in Senigallia in 2004. This meeting coincided with the moment that the infamous *Gasparri* law was being pushed through the Italian parliament. This law, named after the then minister of communication, allowed Berlusconi to consolidate his domination of the Italian mediascape.

Nothing defines the connection between media power and political power so well, because so crudely, as the Berlusconi phenomenon and the passing of this bill. So given the fact that this was a defining moment for Telestreets, the choice to hold the meeting in Senigallia, a small coastal resort was surprising. Although there were good reasons for this choice, Franco Berardi (Bifo) led a number of dissenting voices in arguing that Telestreets had missed the boat and that they urgently needed to raise the stakes and focus their energies on mobilising resistance against the Berlusconi regime. By over emphasising expressive or artistic interventions and micro-media at the expense of direct confrontation, Telestreets was slipping into irrelevance. Bifo ended his 'hair raising' speech by declaring 'the last thing we should be doing is embrace our miserable marginality'.

The Old Split

This Telestreets anecdote illuminates three interconnected tendencies that have emerged since the tactical media of the '90s. Firstly there is a widespread rejection of the homeopathic and the micro-political in favour of ambitions scaled up to global proportions coupled with a willingness to move beyond electronic and semiotic civil disobedience and to engage in direct action, to literally 're-claim the streets'. This is almost entirely as a result of the emergence of the powerful global anti-capitalist movement that (from its perspective) has transformed tactical media into the 'Indy-media' project. But there is also a third less visible and more troubling tendency, a tendency towards internal polarisation. This polarisation is based on a deep split which has opened up between many of the activists at the core of the new political movements and the artists or theorists who, whilst

continuing to see themselves as radicals, retain a belief in the importance of cultural (and information) politics in any movement for social transformation. Although I have little more than personal experience and anecdotal evidence to go on, it seems to me, that there is a significant growth in suspicion and frequently outright hostility among activists over the presence of art and artists in the movement, particularly those whose work cannot be immediately instrumentalised by the new soldiers of the left.

So what is it that has changed since the 1990s to give rise to these tendencies? To understand we must cast our minds back to the peculiar historical conditions of that time. The early phase of tactical media re-injected a new energy into the flagging project of cultural politics. It fused the radical and pragmatic info politics of the hackers with well-established practice based critiques of representation. The resulting tactical media was also part of (and arguably compromised by) the wider internet and communications revolution of the 1990s which, like the music of the 1960s, acted as a universal solvent not only dissolving disciplinary boundaries but also the boundaries separating long established political formations. The power some of us attributed to this new media politics appeared to be born out by the role that all forms of media seemed to have played in the collapse of the Soviet Empire. 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 centralised 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. Furthermore the speed and comparative bloodlessness of the Soviet collapse suggested that the transformations that were coming would not have to be achieved through violence or personal sacrifice. This would be the era of the painless win-win revolution in which change would occur simply through the hacker ethos of challenging the domains of forbidden knowledge. It came to be believed that top down power had lost its edge. As late as 1999 in his Reith lecture, Anthony Giddens could still confidently assert that "The information monopoly upon which the Soviet system was based had no future in an intrinsically open framework of global communications".

Giddens and other third way social theorists were part of a wider movement who dreamed that the profound political differences that had divided previous generations had been put on hold. This was made credible through the ubiquity of one of the dominant myths of the information age, a myth shared by activists and new media entrepreneurs alike. The myth that knowledge will set you free. This founding narrative of techno-culture visible from Ted Nelson's Computer Lib onwards, recycles (in intensified form) the age old proposition that knowledge and freedom are not only connected but may actually entail one another.

The fact that a belief in the necessary relationship between knowledge and freedom has gone largely unquestioned is based in part on the depth of its lineage, "ancient stoics and most modern rationalists are at one with Christian teaching on this issue". And "ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free". As Isaiah Berlin pointed out in 1968, "This proposition is not self evidently true, if only on empirical grounds." It is, he asserted, "one of the least plausible beliefs ever entertained by profound and influential thinkers."¹ In addition to being fallacious the accompanying rhetoric of transparency, freedom, access, participation, and even creativity, has come to constitute the ideological foundation of "communicative capitalism", transforming tactical media's homeopathic micro-politics into the experimental wing of the so-called "creative industries" and "corroborating the temporal mode of post-Fordist capital: short-termism."²

Neo-liberalism's effective capture of the rhetoric of "freedom" and "creativity", has re-opened an old fault-line which the first wave of tactical media did so much to bridge; the fault-line dividing artists from political activists. The theorist and activist Brian Holmes described its origins as going (at least)

as far back as the cultural politics of the 1960s. He describes a split between the traditional working-class concern for social justice and the New Left concern for individual emancipation and full recognition and expression of particular identities. According to this account corporate foundations and think tanks of the 1980s and 1990s have succeeded in inculcating market-oriented variations on earlier counter-cultural values, rendering the interventions of artists (including tactical media makers) profoundly if unwittingly, de-politicising. Holmes goes on to describe (or assert, I am not quite sure which) a critique in which the narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality and identity become the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture. Artistic freedom and artistic license have led, in effect, to the neo-liberalisation of culture.³ The puritanical and authoritarian tone of this analysis is just a little unnerving. At the very least this tendency could lead to a crass and oppressive philistinism and might signal far worse to come.

Bifo's plea at the Senegalia meeting in 2004 for Telestreets (and by extension all artist/activists) to scale up our ambitions is increasingly being answered. There is a growing number of inspiring cases which we can point to: the Yes Men's achievement in securing global distribution in mainstream cinemas, Yomango's high voltage contributions to the global, protest movement and Witness.org's extensive initiatives in which the provision of indigenous activists with DIY media with their campaigns is connected to the legal processes of human rights. These and many other interventions are pointing to the growing willingness to strategically globalise dissent. This process has been accompanied by growing willingness to relinquish the cult of ephemerality – one of the shibboleths of tactical media. In place of the hit and run guerrilla activism, the direct opposite is now required, duration. It's a time for longer-term commitments and deeper engagements with the people and organisations networked around contested issues.

One of the most extraordinary examples of these developments is Women on Waves – a Dutch Foundation initiated by the Rebecca Gomperts who studied medicine at the University of Amsterdam and specialised as an abortion doctor and then went on to study visual arts at the Rietveld Academy and Sailing at the Enkhuizen Zeevaartschool (Nautical College). The most celebrated achievement of Women on Waves is the Abortion Boat, a large floating clinic that tactically exploits maritime law, anchoring the boat just outside the 12-mile zones of countries where abortion is forbidden. On the Abortion Boat women can be given information and terminations performed by a team of Dutch medical practitioners (including Dr Gomperts) on Dutch territory. Thus, women are actively assisted and local organisations are supported and inspired in their struggle to legalise abortion.

Along with the practical intervention of the Abortion Boat, Women on Waves also uses art and design as part of their global campaign for abortion rights. For instance the *I had an Abortion* installation consisting of vests on wire coat hangers printed with this statement in all European languages. On their website a diary can be found of a Brazilian woman relating her experiences of wearing one of these t-shirts. The continued validity of the modes of political address pioneered by tactical media are apparent in her account of how the message on these t-shirts was preferable to something like 'Legalise Abortion!' that might have read like earlier forms of agit prop. These t-shirts function not as she declares to 'make myself a target. That was not the point; it was to give all those women without a face a support. As to say, don't worry, it's all right, you're all right.' This fulfils one of the prime directives of classical tactical media, unlike traditional agit prop, it is designed to invite discourse.

The example of Women on Waves is a reminder that cultural politics in its modern sense was in large part a creation of the women's movement. Those who question its value would do well to remember that feminism also served to transform the lives and politics of many men who were taught (sometimes painfully) that they were failing to live out in their ordinary lives the democratic values they publicly espoused. The way in which culture is central to feminism's demands and not peripheral is powerfully explored by Terry Eagleton in his valuable book *After Theory* which describes the

centrality of 'the grammar' in which the demands of feminism were framed. 'Value, speech, image, experience and identity are here the very language of political struggle, as they are in all ethnic or sexual politics. Ways of feeling and forms of political representation are in the long run quite as crucial as child care provision or equal pay.'⁴

This expanded political language was articulated not by activists and writers alone but by many important women artists. Women artists were critical in shifting the centre of gravity of the art world of the '60s and '70s from Greenberg's formalism to a new expressive and subject centred naturalism, which remains influential and important to this day. Whatever the ambiguities, impurities and problems, and there are plenty, we should not be tempted to relinquish the essential legacy of cultural politics.

DIY Survival is not alone in failing to face up to the dilemmas and choices that confront us. There is much in the realm of the activist/art scene that, like C6's book, uncritically replicates myths of the information age along with the twin obsessions of the ratings-driven news cycle 'spectacle and immediacy. If C6's *DIY Survival* has achieved anything it is as a timely reminder of the need not only to move on and learn new lessons but also, crucially to learn the right lessons.

Info

DIY Survival, eds. Betti Marenko & Leon C6, C6, 2005

<http://www.c6.org>

<http://womenonwaves.org>

Footnotes

1. Isaiah Berlin, 'From Hope and Fear Set Free', 1968

2. Ned Rossiter & Geert Lovink, 'Dawn of the Organised Networks', <http://www.nettime.org> (2005)

3. Brian Holmes, 'The Scandal of the Word 'Class': A Review of David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford UP, 2005)', <http://www.nettime.org>

4. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, (Penguin 2003)