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MAKEART POD

Learning the Right Lessons

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 1990’s are a classic demonstration of how cultural politics can have real power.

Telestreets’ 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 ‘90s 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 ‘90s 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 ‘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 ‘80s and ‘90s 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’ 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.'³

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.

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)
2. 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>
3. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, (Penguin 2003)
4. <http://womenonwaves.org>

DIY Survival, eds. Betti Marenko & Leon C6, C6, 2005
<http://www.c6.org>

Coded Utopia

By Brian Holmes

Makrolab is one of the more seminal and enduring projects to have developed out of the tactical media canon. Brian Holmes sets the project in the context of epochal shifts underway in the former Yugoslavia during its inception and fixes our vision firmly on the utopian horizon that this living laboratory probes

'Khlebnikov built a very complex system.... On the one hand it is based on historical research, and on the other on the research of language, that is, its material quality and composition. We may safely say that Khlebnikov changed the language; he changed the basic unit of thought and used it in accordance with the system he had invented. This is one of the paths I find extremely important, and one which, as such, may serve as a code, as a matrix for all the activity at the end of this century, when we are again facing a fundamental tectonic movement in the social spheres.'

Marko Peljhan¹

Moving away from the creation of recognizable works, art becomes an experimental territory for producing subjectivities â according to the "ethico-aesthetic paradigm" of Felix Guattari.² But what does that paradigm entail? How do forms of contemporary artistic practice lead their participants outside the dominant modes of subjectivation? How do they lend a different structure to cooperation? How do they take up threads from the past, displacing them onto the terrain of experience?

Makrolab is a collaborative project that emerges from the vision of the Slovene artist Marko Peljhan. It offers some answers to these questions â singular answers. To make them useful in any general way, one would first have to approach the project in its multiple dimensions, to discover its stakes and challenges, to locate its contexts and learn to read its codes. Is it sculpture or architecture? A concept or a performance piece? A nomadic war machine, or a theater to replay history? The difficulty, when you want to perceive a project like this, is to let yourself enter the horizon of its possibilities, even while analyzing its specific features.

Makrolab

LIVING LABORATORY

What strikes you first is the object's technical aspect, its glistening, futuristic exterior, bristling with sensors and aerials. Makrolab has been designed on a modular principle, for easy disassembly and transport by container. It comes together as an extruded octagon with a flattened base, outfitted with wooden floorboards, sheathed in translucent plastic panels, lined with silvery insulation and raised off the ground by tubular legs. Inside, it is divided into four functional zones: kitchen, workspace, dormitory (8 bunks), shower and toilets. In front, a metal staircase leads up to a narrow airlock, which rises vertically at the push of a button. On the other side, a larger hatch opens up like an awning over a gridworked terrace. Solar panels and a windmill furnish electricity, with backup from a generator; a waste-treatment system allows for minimal water consumption; communication is assured across the electromagnetic spectrum, notably by satellite links. Mounted in desolate environments, it looks a meteorological research center, or even more, like a stranded space station.

The project dates back to December 1994, when Peljhan made a trip to the island of Krk, off the Croatian coast. The landscape was strange, almost lunar; warplanes shot through the sky above. Eyewitness to the destruction of Yugoslav society, he read the poem *Ladomir* (1920) by the Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov. The title of this violent revolutionary epic combines the Russian words for harmony and peace.³ Between two radically different kinds of vision, optical and poetic, Peljhan imagined the form of the theater to come: 'A stage appears on the horizon and walks slowly forth. On it the sailors of *Ladomir* work the spinnaker of thought. Large sails propel it forward, a complex mechanism allows its legs to lift and twist. There are no metal noises. The materials are new and unknown. It does have legs and looks like an insect. It has the functionality and energy balance of a bee and the armor of an Armageddon cockroach.'⁴

Makrolab

>> Makrolab crossection drawing

1994 is the year when the Internet boom began, on the transnational markets but also in our imaginations. Peljhan had already entered the art scene with a series of performances; now he moved toward the world of media activism, as a cofounder of *Ljudmila*, a group devoted to autonomous uses of the new communications technologies. Inspired by the Russian aesthetic of *faktura*, which calls for a mix of sensory qualities and abstract ideas, he worked on the design of the laboratory with two architects, Bostjan Hvala and Jurij Krpan, and with Luka Frelj for the communications systems. A

prototype, Makrolab Mark I, was included in the program of Documenta X and installed for the summer of 1997 on Lutterberg Hill, several miles away from the city of Kassel.

That is where the choreographer Johannes Birringer discovered the mobile laboratory, and wrote the first significant text about it. Paradoxically, this stage performer, known for his digital dances, seemed only to perceive the technical and activist sides of the project: 'Launching an artistic process that yields knowledge and insight into the evolution of the electronic public sphere, Makrolab intervenes into the radio and telecommunications circuits to test the conditions under which transmission technologies operate and under which the relations between communicating individuals can be empowered,' he wrote.⁵ The empowerment came through the reception and decoding of civil and military transmissions, carried out in collaboration with the American artist Brian Springer. The early experiments of 'tactical media' were in full swing: it was a rush to appropriate and transform the functionalities of the new computerized media tools, before they disappeared beneath the surface of commodified forms that would permit no further improvisation. Birringer locates Peljhan and Springer's practice on the borderline between the new technologies and the techniques of the historical vanguards (collage, readymade, cut-up, drift). The specific difference of the contemporary mixes, in his view, was the framework within which they were exchanged: no longer did the artists address the classical institutions (magazines, galleries, museums) but instead the new public spheres of the NGOs, and above all, the 'gift economies' of the net activists.

Makrolab at Documenta X 1997

>>Makrolab at Documenta 1997

Five years later, the writer Kodwo Eshun also noted this change of address. But he sensed something more elusive as well. His text describes the atmosphere of the laboratory during its installation on the hunting grounds of Blair Atholl in Scotland. In June and July of 2002, Makrolab hosted five different crews — artists, writers, scientists, hackers — for research into its three broad fields of investigation: climate, telecommunications, human and animal migration. The work would be carried out under conditions of insulation/isolation which, for Peljhan, define the essential parameters of the project. What Eshun recounts is the production of a 'very particular subjectivity': 'If Makrolab's public imperative is to conduct experiments in a post-media environment, then its private, not-quite secret imperative is to offer the participant the chance to become the experiment. To become the guinea pig. To experiment on the self as she or he adapts to the interpersonal dynamic of microcommunal life.' The public or 'epic' work of environmental and informational mapping becomes subtly secondary to the 'confessional mode,' recording the 'intricately funky daily routine of the Makronaut.'⁶

Makrolab

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Eshun understands the experience of the participants as a micropolitical transformation of the data yielded by the technical capacities of the laboratory, by the natural and cultural environment where it is installed, and by the informational sphere that it continuously probes. But what he means is that the artistic aims of the Makrolab find their most concentrated fulfillment, not in a work or a performance, but in the lives of its inhabitants. The artifacts they produce, the diaries, the photos, the maps, the streams of remixed information — in short, everything that could be displayed in a traditional museum — make up a flux of constantly evolving material, a 'dataesthetic' that seeks to 'immerse the insensitive and impervious viewer in the information networks that provide the operating systems of the planet.' What distinguishes artist from viewer would be the degree of immersion. The change of address thereby comes to signify a mutation in the very concept of art, which no longer exists to be contemplated from the outside, to be appreciated as bounded whole (in its form, its complexity, its

internal harmonies or disjunctions), but only appears as a by-product, a kind of secondary trace â raw material pointing back toward the immanence of lived experience.

In support of this argument, Eshun quotes an article by Boris Groys entitled *Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation*. Groys remarks that the effectiveness of biopolitical technologies is to give form to life itself, conceived as 'a pure activity that occurs in time': 'If life is no longer understood as a natural event, as fate, as Fortuna, but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned, then life is automatically politicized, since the technical and artistic decisions with respect to the shaping of the lifespan are always political decisions as well.'⁷ Art documentation is a record of these life-decisions, 'the only possible form of reference to an artistic activity that cannot be represented in any other way.' Groys makes an important step for art criticism, by adopting Foucault's understanding of the way that technical devices 'artificially' configure human subjectivity; and he stresses the uncanny side of that relation, through the extreme example of cloning procedures that make it impossible to distinguish the technological reproduction of genetic code from the unique destiny of living beings. Such procedures, he says, have become ubiquitous. His article concludes with a Benjaminian notion of the documentary installation as a way to relocalize our approach to experience â or to 'resingularize' it, in Guattari's terms â through 'strategies of resiting and inscription based on situation and context, which make it possible to transform the artificial into something living and the repetitive into something unrepeatable.'

There is certainly a connection between this line of thinking and a project like Makrolab, which constantly creates a difficulty of approach, so as to offer an initiatory path from distant spectatorship to direct collaboration. At stake is a resingularization of the dominant semiotic codes, whose capacity to structure society has become so visible with the spread of computerized networks. Still the most interesting questions seem to disappear, when all the attention comes to focus on an ontological divide between the uniqueness of being and the sterility of digitized repetition. If technological decisions shape our lifespans, don't we need to know what they are and how they are taken? According to which priorities, which orientations? How can a critical distance or disjunction be achieved, without losing the immanence of lived experience? Isn't it necessary to distinguish between biopower and biopolitics?

Makrolab

>>Makrolab, interior

ENTROPIC SOCIETIES

'Insulation/isolation is understood as a vehicle to achieve independence from and reflection of the actual entropic social conditions.... The thesis is that individuals in a restricted, intensive isolation can produce more evolutionary code than large social movements.'⁸ This is Makrolab's ethico-aesthetic program: it is a generative matrix, a device for producing evolutionary code. But it is impossible to grasp the specific language of this device â its crisscrossing of scientific and artistic experiments within a retro-futurist architectural vehicle â without recalling the full political and cultural complexity of the crisis of the former Yugoslav state, then the 'transition' to Western (i.e. capitalist) democracy. What's missing from the earlier studies of Makrolab is an account of its departure points.

Marko Peljhan grew up in the Federal Republic of Slovenia in the 1980s, where he studied theater and radio. It was the heyday of the industrial rock band Laibach, then of the broader art movement known as NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) â a time when cultural revolt took place through what philosopher Slavoj Zizek called an 'over-identification' with the most explicit symbols of authoritarian power.⁹ In 1986, Peljhan saw the NSK theater spectacle *Baptism under Triglav*, staged by the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater, with music by Laibach and scenography by the painting collective Irwin. For an entire

generation it was an initiation to the transgressive powers of art â but also to its utopian potential: 'The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater regards the utopian instinct as an innate, but not acquired, value which exists in man in the form of a desire for a unity with the Cosmic, Aesthetic and Moral elements. That is why the creation of the Style of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater cannot originate in the Actor, Space or Staging, but only in Culture and Civilization, renewed and recurrently traumatized...' ¹⁰ The paradox of Slovene art in the 1980s was to express its utopia through a merciless âretro-productionâ of the historical traumas of civilization.

The cultural ferment of the time included an explosion of social movements: punks, pacifists, feminists, homosexuals, ecologists, joined after 1986 by the official youth organization, with its dissident newspaper Mladina. Soon came the 'Slovene Spring' of 1988. Democratic elections, followed by national independence in 1991, ushered an entire society to the other side of the authoritarian curtain â and into the dissolving embrace of postmodern capitalism.

Makrolab

>>Zero Gravity

The exit from communism would be marked by a double imaginary, of boundless space and the capsule. How to move from a relatively closed, tightly-knit provincial society â bound together in resistance against the central government â to the wide-open, dizzyingly expansive environment of globalization? In 1992, in a video accompanying the release of the album Kapital, the musicians of Laibach appear in the guise of cosmonauts, inside a rocket ship decorated with Suprematist crosses. ¹¹ The year before, the members of Irwin had invented the NSK State in Time, and inaugurated the series of NSK Embassies in Moscow. In the absence of the totalitarian foil that had given meaning to the transgressive gestures of over-identification, they attempted to establish their own limits as a social entity, tracing borders that were no longer spatial but temporal: 'In Moscow this model of a voyage â as transposition of the entire group â was tested for the first time, and it confirmed our assumption that with such projects an autonomous NSK territory can be defined; a territory capable of moving, not confined by geographical, national and cultural borders; a territory realizing its own notional space.' ¹² But it was Dragan Zivadinov, the director of Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung (successor to the Scipion Nasice Theater) who went the furthest with the imaginary of the capsule, orchestrating in 1995 the first in a series of complex performances, carried out in a sculptural stage-set resembling a space vehicle. All this clearly resonates with the imaginary of Peljhan's work â and indeed, Peljhan would later collaborate with Zivadinov on the first-ever zero gravity theatrical performance, held in 1999 in an Ilyushin jet used by the Russians for cosmonaut training. ¹³ Yet a fundamental difference separates him from the generation of the 1980s, a difference involving the very conception of artistic practice, and of its role in society.

In an interview with Eda Cufer in 1999, Peljhan appealed at once to utopia and to the exercise of technologically assisted vision. Yet both of these were at a standstill: 'My declarative position in creative work, the "isolation of isolation" strategy, or two-fold isolation, is a very utopian position, and every time I present it I find it has no interlocutors.' ¹⁴ The absence of interlocutor also affected what he calls the 'satellite perspective,' which for the first time allows individuals to see everything, to become 'chroniclers of the entire global system.' 'It seems to me that we live in a time when reflection is not only desirable but necessary,' he remarked in the interview; 'however, what is happening at the same time is that the interlocutor, the recipient, no longer exists. The entire theoretical apparatus is practically shut down, frozen â in Slovenia and elsewhere.' Peljhan attributes this freeze of thinking to the overwhelming energy of the capitalist economy, victorious on a planetary scale. It was urgent to pursue the utopia of social evolution, while reactivating the theoretical apparatus by the creation of a vision machine. But that meant abandoning a purely theatrical approach: 'There was one defining

moment when I decided that this is not going to be a stage. This is going to be something different. It's not going to be a performance. It's going to be real.'¹⁵

Being real means obtaining funding, logistical support and cultural prestige for an expensive sci-art project that originates from a small Eastern country and operates on the fringes of the globalized exhibition system, drawing on the autonomous energies of the hacker ethic and the tactical media crowd to conduct 'civilian counter-reconnaissance' with high-tech equipment.¹⁶ This unusual position has led the Makrolab team towards a disarming critical pragmatism in negotiations with a wide range of partners, from the Documenta and the Venice Biennial to a British foundation (Arts Catalyst), a Slovene mobile phone company (Mobitel UMTS), or the Russian aerospace bureaucracy of Star City. Self-institutionalization under an ambiguous postnational identity becomes a way to slip through the cracks of the world-spanning technological systems. The contrast could hardly be greater with the transition strategy of NSK's Irwin group, culminating in the recent East Art Map. This vast and brilliant project aims to integrate little-known practices from the former Soviet bloc into expanded history of contemporary art â a history as yet unwritten, but henceforth plotted out as a network of names, dates and places, establishing a territory that can be slowly invested by complex institutional and historiographic processes of comparison, evaluation, legitimation. If the NSK project succeeds, the 'notional space' documented by the map will slowly be reterritorialized, inscribed within a supporting framework of museums, galleries, critical discourses, publications and collections.¹⁷ By contrast, Makrolab gathers its historical references and unrealized utopias into a semi-autonomous material structure that seeks to ride the deterritorializing wave of post-Cold War expansionism towards far-flung listening posts such as Rottneest Island, Australia (where the laboratory was installed in the year 2000), and ultimately, to the transnational space of Antarctica, where the conditions of insulation/isolation could be pushed to their limit. The vanguard ambition of 'overcoming art' here combines with the 'radical media pragmatism' of libertarian net-culture in the late 1990s, with its acute awareness of 'infowar' and its confrontational approach to all the established circuits of distribution.¹⁸

From the start, Peljhan seems to have relished these contradictions. To close his first series of performances at the Galerija Moderna in Ljubljana in 1993, amidst the turmoil and uncertainty of the transition to capitalism, he called for a public debate between artists and businessmen. Among the latter was the art patron Andrej Drupal, the producer of Peljhan's own series and an associate of the Slovene public-relations firm Pristop, which had already begun to exert a decisive influence on the development of culture and communication in the newly independent country. Two words were written on a reflecting glass pane hung behind the invited guests: Power/Religion (PR). Peljhan arrived in the room, opened a suitcase installed on a pedestal, took out a hammer and violently shattered the mirror, then sat down among the public to let the debate unfold between equals.

Makrolab

>>Makrolab at Rottneest, 2000

HORIZONS

Makrolab is a sophisticated attempt to pass through all the ideological screens that configure the religion of power. In this respect once again it is a Khlebnikovian utopia, asserting the rights of the 'inventor-explorers' against the more assured claims of the 'investor-exploiters'.¹⁹ The utopia is encoded through the abstract materiality of faktura, which in this case means: conceptual art, flexible architecture, hi-tech engineering, computerized communication systems. But the project is also oriented by a reflection on the modulation of time, conceived as a control procedure: 'We are constantly defined by time, timetables, dates, our lives are planned, the time stamp of our computer messages, our electronic identifications place us in the abstract and immaterial space of the networks.... Space has in the first world lost its place in consciousness over time and with this loss, a

loss of orientation senses occurred too. A loss that has never occurred to the centers of power.²⁰ Discovering how life-decisions are made at the scale of globalization means locating the men and machines who control the human flow â a pragmatic response to Groy's concern with 'time artificially produced and fashioned.' Even while shrinking the intimate space of groups of researchers living in microcommunity, Makrolab enlarges its cartographic explorations to all the sites and frequencies of power. In this way, it participates in the groundswell of geographic activism that has attempted to track the expansion of transnational capitalism.²¹ Biopolitics â the consciously cooperative creation of life's artificial frameworks â defines itself in resistance to the coercive biopower that is exercised on human time.²²

Considerable stakes underlie this kind of project, though they are rarely formulated in any explicit way. No one can work on the recurrently traumatic structure of technological civilization without realizing how deeply its military origins reach into the fabric of our daily lives. Indeed, the American military expansionism of the Second Cold War (1980-89) is what sparked the globalization process, culminating in the events of September 11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. At the very outset of the eighties, Deleuze and Guattari conceived the heteronomous model of the 'nomadic war machine' as a way to dissolve the military hierarchies of contemporary civilization. This is what Peljhan more pragmatically calls the conversion to civil technologies. But to understand how this could even be attempted, is it really enough to say that art becomes life, and artwork becomes documentation?

The language of Makrolab suggests something else: a generative matrix, close to the models of social evolution developed in Guattari's complexity theory.²³ Guattari tried to understand how people can displace their embodied routines, their existential territories, by transiting through a machinic assemblage capable of producing collective enunciations. Makrolab achieves this by bringing the deterritorializing force of scientific formulas and artistic images into play on the experiential level, the level of temporary habitation. What results for the participants is not a simple 'decoding' of encrypted contents. Rather, within a device that itself encapsulates certain aspects of the Slovene artistic experience, fragmented images from a wider variety of vanguard projects can knit together into complex sensorial refrains, interrupting the normalized modulation of time imposed by the commercial and military cultures of transnational capitalism, and loosening up subjectivity for original work with the most challenging scientific and symbolic material, at variance with the dominant patterns. Each of participants then adds something to the device, to its pool of references, tools, algorithms and images â to its horizon of evolutionary code.

The end-products of the 'dataesthetic' can therefore be interpreted somewhat differently, outside the gap between raw documentation and the ineffable immanence of lived experience. For the vital activity of the researcher does not just produce data in the etymological sense, mere 'givens' excerpted from the dominant flux. Instead these maps, images, films, diaries, programs, soundscapes, texts and streaming signals are artistic and scientific gifts â offered to other sites, other devices, other possible futures.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Eda Cufer, 'An Interview with Marko Peljhan,' in *Geopolitics and Art* (Ljubljana: SCCA, 1999); online under a different name (and without the paragraph quoted here) at <http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta3/newsletter7.htm>

² Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An ethico-aesthetic paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)

³ The poem is included in *Collected Works of Velmir Khlebnikov*, vol. III: *Selected Poems*, tr. Paul Schmidt (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), under the title 'Lightland'

- ⁴ Marko Peljhan, 'Krak' in Makrolab (The Arts Catalyst/Projekt Atol, 2003); online at <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/vision/krk>
- ⁵ Johannes Birringer, 'Makrolab: A Heterotopia,' in *Performing Arts Journal* n° 60 (1998); online at <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/birringer.html>
- ⁶ Kodwo Eshun, 'Makrolab's Twin Imperatives and their Children Too,' in Makrolab, op. cit.
- ⁷ Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation,' in *Documenta 11*, cat. (Ostfildern: Cantz, 2002); online at www.ranadasgupta.com/notes.asp?note_id=34
- ⁸ Marko Peljhan, 'Isolation/ Insulation Proceedings,' lecture at Documenta X, online at <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/peljhan1.html>
- ⁹ On the theme of over-identification, see Laibach, '10 Items of the Covenant,' online at <http://www.ljudmila.org/embassy/3a/10.htm>; Slavoj Žižek, 'The Enlightenment in Laibach,' in Inke Arns, ed., *Irwin: Retroprincip, 1983-2003* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien et. al., 2003); and the film by Michael Benson, *Predictions of Fire* (1996).
- ¹⁰ Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater, 'The Founding Act' (1983), online at <http://www.ljudmila.org/embassy/4a/2.htm>
- ¹¹ Laibach, 'Wirtschaft ist Tod' (1992), in the DVD *Laibach - The Videos* (Caroline Distribution: 2004).
- ¹² Remarks by Miran Mahar, from 'The Symptom of the Vehicle,' interview with Irwin by Eda Cufer, in *Irwin: Retroprincip*, op. cit.
- ¹³ For an account see Michael Benson, 'Noordung Zero Gravity Biomechanical Theater' (1999), online at www.nskstate.com/noordung/noordung-benson.php
- ¹⁴ Eda Cufer, 'An Interview with Marko Peljhan,' op. cit.
- ¹⁵ Remarks by Marko Peljhan, quoted in Kodwo Eshun, 'Makrolab's Twin Imperatives and their Children Too,' in Makrolab, op. cit.
- ¹⁶ For an example of 'civilian counter-reconnaissance,' see <http://www.s-77ccr.org>
- ¹⁷ See *New Moment* #20, Ljubljana, 2002, special issue, 'East Art Map'; introductory text online at <http://www.nskstate.com/irwin/works-projects/eastartmap.php>
- ¹⁸ See Geert Lovink, *Radical Media Pragmatism*, in *Infowar* (Linz: Ars Electronica, 1998); online at http://www.aec.at/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=8436
- ¹⁹ These terms are from Marko Peljhan, 'Insulation/Isolation Proceedings,' op. cit.
- ²⁰ Marko Peljhan, *ibid.* For a study of control as the temporal modulation of attention, see Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004)
- ²¹ For considerations on the role of mapping in the critique of capitalist globalization, see my text 'Flowmaps: The Imaginaries of Global Integration,' online at <https://pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/pubsfolder/bhflowmaps>. Other references can be found at <http://www.u-tangente.org>
- ²² See Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Du biopouvoir à la biopolitique,' in *Multitudes 1*, Paris, March 2000, online at http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php?id_article=207. An English translation is available at <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcbiopolitics.htm>
- ²³ See *Chaosmosis*, op. cit., and *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989). For an

introduction to the way that complexity theory is deployed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, see Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy* (Edinburg University Press, 2004)

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