The Politics of Making
Effective Artistic Tools

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Media researcher and artist David Garcia is dedicated to achieving effective media tactics by artists and internet activists. Despite the dominance of the commercial, absorbing services industry in which media are pervasive, Garcia believes that they are nonetheless able to offer ethical and critical services by developing *tools*. He discusses projects by Bricolabs and Mongrel, among others.

The dilemma is simple and perhaps devastating: for decades artists and other critical media makers have laboured to bring about an ethos of mass participation in media making (the DIY media ethos) in the belief that challenging the centralized information monopolies would undermine the grip of corporate and state tyranny. But we are faced with the fact that though we are clearly witnessing the dawn of an era of mass participationn in media, the very opposite of a progressive agenda continues to dominate our world. We must face the possibility that a worst-case scenario has arisen in which by contributing to 'the big conversation', by becoming 'citizen journalists' by making 'tactical media' we may simply be victims of what political and media theorist Jodie Dean describes 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.[1]

I will engage with and counter this critique, with arguments illustrated through a number of case studies. It is my contention that these, along with many other examples, not only provide powerful alternatives to the dominant models of participation, but also help to demonstrate how impoverished and exploitative the dominant model of a participatory culture actually is. If we look beyond the projects circulating around the Web 2.0 hype, we can already find a wealth of impressive projects and communities of practice demonstrating that another world is indeed possible. But I will also argue that these progressive, practice-based initiatives must find ways to coordinate that generate far greater traction and impact. But before examining the ways in which this might happen we must begin by examining the dynamics behind the profound transformation that the media landscape has undergone since the emergence of the era of multimodal 'pervasive media' networks. (*Pervasive computing* is the trend in which more and more objects in our direct vicinity go on-line and communicate among themselves and with us - Ed.) No initiative can succeed without resonating effectively with this changed landscape.

Promises, Promises

As far back as 1996, the usually sober-minded political scientist Manuel Castells described in momentous terms what he believed to be happening. 'We are witnessing,' he declared, 'the formation of a hypertext and a meta-language which for the first time in history, integrate into the same system the written, oral and audio-visual modalities of human communication. . . . The human spirit reunites its dimensions in a new interaction between the two sides of the brain, machines and social contexts. For all the science-fiction ideology and commercial hype surrounding the so-called information superhighway, we can hardly underestimate its significance.[2] The problem, however, was that at the time that Castells wrote these words, he (along with many commentators) was wildly overselling the internet as it then was. The grindingly slow dial-up connections of the pre-broadband era could not even begin to match the inflationary narratives of the 1990s. Indeed, at least part of the dotcom crash and subsequent 'tech winter' can be attributed to the disappointments of the actual experience delivered compared to the expectations generated by this kind of boosterism.

But a decade later the internet has started to deliver on a scale that brings the danger that today's critical commentators might make the opposite mistake. The default setting of 'knowing scepticism' in the face of any hint of inflationary claims can too easily prevent us from noticing when something really momentous is happening right under our noses. And this is the case now, as an ever-widening broadband rolls out and vastly improved compression rates mean that the premature claims made by the tech boosters of the 1990s are being repaid with interest. Not only has the multimodal communications universe described by Castells come to pass, but the modalities have also expanded to include 'touch' as we enter the era of the touch screen and thus of *tangible* pervasive media. The concept of the 'media landscape' has been transformed into something far more complex and multidimensional, what might be called a 'media ecology'. A new generation of mobile devices has meant that media have become ambient, rhizomatous, prosthetic; like Elvis, the media have left the building.

The Service Model

This era of pervasive media includes, but also takes us beyond either the Web 2.0 hype of user-generated content or even multimodality. It is sometimes called the 'internet of things'. In this multidimensional space, where the tangible and intangible are entwined, no device or website exists in isolation; all artefacts exist as part of a system or a network. To be successful, every device must become an interface to a 'service'. This fact has given rise to a new level of dominance for a particular industrial paradigm, the 'service industry'. The social relationships emphasized in service industries differ from the traditional marketplace in one crucial respect: while the typical market relationship is 'episodic, formed only for the purpose of a well-specified transfer of goods and resources and ending after that transfer [3] the service model is entirely dependant on sustaining long-term and highly responsive relationships with their consumers.

All aspects of production and social organization, from government downwards, are reorganizing themselves around this model of service provision. The service industry model puts the consumer – in this industrial discourse everyone is constructed as a consumer – at the centre, and we even hear talk of the era of consumer lead design. Many media artists and tactical-media activists would prefer to ignore the dominance of this powerful paradigm or dismiss it as a new kind of commodity fetishism, but to underestimate the seductions and also the real values embedded within the service model condemns oppositional practice to the margins. I will argue that critical engagement with the underlying dynamics of this new media ecology is essential to make critical practice more pertinent. Beginning with *Cool Media Hot Talk Show*, we will look at a number of exemplary projects by artists and media activists who in different ways are reshaping their

practice to resonate more forcefully with the multimodal, service-orientated spaces we inhabit.

Revealing Antagonisms

Quietly, below the cultural radar, with a minimum fanfare, a remarkable tactical media development has been progressing at De Balie Centre for Culture and Politics in Amsterdam. In this remarkable organization, a top-notch team of ad-hoc developers, including Mauz Zero, Gerbrand Oudernaarden, Erik Kluitenburg and Michiel van der Haagen, Reza Tahmai, and Jeroen Joosse, have been rethinking the possibilities of archiving audiovisual content. Working with MMBase, an open-source content management and database tool developed by the Dutch broadcaster vpro, the Balie media team has been using the opportunities offered by De Balie's infrastructure to web-cast its live events to develop experimental hybrid media services. And to-date the most adventurous of these new Balie hybrids is the *Cool Media Hot talk Show* project (http://www.coolmediahottalk.net/), initiated by media-art scholar Tatiana Goryucheva.

At its most basic, the *Cool Media Hot Talk Show* is a real-time, interactive multimedia channel for art and media theory. Or, in Goryucheva's own words: 'A series of diy interactive talk shows, where the public proposes and selects the topics, speakers, questions, and determines the final scenarios of the show. [4] The project seeks to reflexively embody in its own structure the advanced questions it seeks to raise.

Fully experiencing the *Cool Media Hot Talk Show* means engaging with the project on a number of levels. Firstly, the website is an interface to the live events in which artists and thinkers do short presentations at De Balie to a live audience and, of course, to the on-line public as well. But this is not simply a case of live lectures being screened through a website. The essence of the project depends on the public engaging with the speakers by putting questions to them through the website, either in advance or in a real-time response to the live talk. The questions are 'read out' (in order of popularity) by a digital simulation of a female voice. The speakers respond to each question in a set time of a couple of minutes, after which they are interrupted by this 'cyborg' moderator and must go on to the next question.

The results are occasionally humorous and frequently clumsy, but the comic-book style of the interface (dominated by an eye-catching montage of a leggy cyborg in hot pants) is quite a strong hint that we are not supposed to take things all too seriously. Particularly amusing have been the rebellious speakers who find ways to subvert the *Cool Media Hot Talk Show* system. One of the more memorable was when artist and writer Armin Medosch rebelled against being asked questions by a 'machine' and responded with his own random selection of recordings. However, by refusing to answer questions from a so-called machine he also missed the point. It was not the machine that was asking the questions but people; the machine is simply mediating.

The apparent defects of *Cool Media Hot Talk Show* are inseparable from its qualities. Every glitch poses a new question for those exploring the different issues at stake when we try to develop alternative spaces for discourse. Above all, the project problematizes the power position of the traditional moderator, the power of the one who holds the microphone or the pen at the whiteboard, the disguised filtering techniques that are routinely deployed by human moderators, privileging some speakers and questions above others. Clearly stating rules and rigorously automating their implementation in this way does not provide answers to these power questions, nor does it pretend to; but by clarifying the protocols it holds up a lens enabling us to see, in sharpened relief, something of what is at stake in public discourse.

Both public debate and interactive multimedia products are frequently judged a success if they can be said to create 'flow'. A host of terms have been generated in the industrial

sector to express the value of smoothly integrated and apparently effortless connection between elements in any system, terms such as seamlessness, friction-free media and blended media. One of the values of the *Cool Media Hot Talk Show* is precisely that it does not flow: it is an experiment that flies in the face of the requirement to be seamless. Neither its use of media nor its framing of discourse are in any sense 'blended'; rather, it proposes an aesthetics of juxtaposition which allows for maximum friction, dramatizing differences and amplifying the structural antagonism attendant on all genuine pluralism. Unlike the classical Web 2.0 spaces, the domains of user-generated content and social networking, the *Cool Media Hot Talk Show* is not for everyone; it is for 'anyone. [5]

Multimodality and its possibilities for expanded forms of expressive discourse is one important dimension of an enhanced internet. But there is a second and the even more powerful property emerging: the advent of pervasive or ubiquitous media.

Service Design

The advent of pervasive media has fatally undermined the Cartesian divide between the tangible and intangible domains of production. The once-airy realm of media becomes ever more *tangible* as a new generation of tactile 'mobile devices' have propelled into prominence a new aesthetic of multiple 'touch-points'. We no longer think in terms of isolated artefacts or gadgets but of devices, and devices are above all interfaces to services. It is no longer possible to categorize the service industry as a sector apart. It has become the organizing paradigm for all industries, and is increasingly expressing itself through the important but deceptively banal-sounding discipline of 'service design'.

Service design is a critically positioned meta-discipline, orchestrating the domains of interaction design, product design, industrial engineering, consumer research and marketing. 'The need for a new category stems from the fact that production in a modern economy can no longer be seen in terms of the creation of isolated devices or websites, rather they exist as a system of tangible and intangible elements that together make up the service design experience. The by-now classic example of service design is the iPod with the iTunes software and the iTunes music online store. The overall service consists of tangible and intangible elements woven together to allow consumers to feel they are being offered the maximum in flexibility [6]

The perception (largely, but not entirely mythical) that the consumer is now in command has put the goal of creatively reshaping the relationship between producer and consumer at the heart of the new discipline of service design. This fact has lead to service design deploying increasingly sophisticated array of techniques and pedagogies that revolve around notions such as 'critical' or 'inclusive design'. These techniques have been developed, among others, at the Helen Hamlin Research Centre at London's Royal College of Art and at Goldsmiths College's Interaction Research programme (University of London). They borrow heavily from the 'subject centred' research methods pioneered by ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists. In the product design world, these practices often take the form of 'domestic probes' and 'design documentaries'. These methods provide inspiration and insight for designers based on techniques that create empathy through enhanced forms of dialogue and even partnerships with consumers. These practices have become something of an orthodoxy and are widely seen in the design community as being more effective than earlier techniques of market research based on surveys and focus groups, which tend to objectify consumers.

A recent example is the project *Cultures of Mobility*, [7] in which Goldsmiths College and France Telecom collaborated to investigate the lives of people working away from home for extended periods of time. The study focused on students from Eastern European countries who came to the uk as summer fruit-pickers. Every year for up to six months they become inhabitants of transient communities. For the probe study, some of these student-workers were given materials to complete and customize, to give the design team

a feel for their home lives away from home. 'In combination with a design documentary and the continuation of the study in the homeland of the participants,' it was claimed by the researchers, the results provided 'a rich and inspiring mix of research data was gathered'. [8]

Radical practitioners might argue that it is wrong to treat that most exploited and marginalized of groups – migrant labour – as a subject for an exercise in market research. But Bas Raijmakers (one of the researchers involved) stoutly defends the project from these attacks, declaring that those who watched the documentary were soon revising their assumptions. Those who viewed the film did not see a new class of victims, but rather students from Eastern Europe making what for them was good money, which would be used to create a better future for themselves in the new member countries of the EU. Raijmakers also argued that it is an inherently progressive position for a designer to be serving less well-off members of society.

Activist Makers

Political activists may do their work through networks of protest, combining direct action with media and information politics. But increasingly, radical politics is also being carried out through networks of *production*, in which 'social techno hackers' collaborate in processes of 'open making'. We must define this new category of 'activist makers' carefully. It is not simply a question of the protocols used; it is also a matter of the guiding motive or intention. Activist makers are not those – and there are many – who simply deploy 'open-source' methods as an expedient way of getting things made or done. The activist maker's primary motive is to demonstrate (in practice) that another world, a world not founded on exploitation, is possible. This includes, but goes beyond, the drive for social and economic justice – all these laudable goals; activist makers are driven by the vision of freedom based on maximizing creative participation for all.

This way of doing politics has reached the kind of critical mass whereby we can realistically speak of a 'movement' of activist makers. Scale is no longer simply a background fact; it is *the* subject to be faced by activist makers, who need to learn how to collaborate more effectively across their differences if they are to better manage their transitions up and down the registers of scale.

In 2006, the Bricolabs project emerged as a way to address this need to 'scale up' through coordinating the tangible and intangible modes of activist making. It began as a 'collaborative exchange between Brazilian, Indonesian, uk, Chinese, Indian and Dutch open-source experts, building capacity and connections for existent groups of *bricoleurs*, public, private . . .' [9] In itself there is nothing very exceptional in any of this; what sets Bricolabs apart is its attempt to address the issue of scale through seeking to break open and connect all aspects of making, hardware as well as software, content as well as networks. They call this approach 'full loop' development; this kind of development is the norm in the commercial sector, but the price of the success stories is the creation of inherently 'closed' systems, where the only choices are the ones that are prescribed. By contrast, the aspiration of Bricolabs is to create awareness and opportunities and to connect the different interpenetrating layers of content, applications/services, operating systems, hardware, networks and so to shape a 'generic infrastructure' that is open and shared. Bricolabs is a valuable paradox, a space for developing strategies for remaining 'tactical'. It is, however, at an early stage of development, with a great deal still to prove. But there is one important collective of artist-activist makers, called Mongrel, which has been working for two decades, generating an inspiring collection of projects worthy of its own museum retrospective.

Mongrel's Poor to Poor Networks

Aesthetically and politically, nothing could be further from the antiseptic term 'service design' than the English artists' collective Mongrel. For more than two decades, Mongrel has been working on the frontline of street culture, art and media, not only in England but also as far afield as Jamaica and South Africa. The group's ability to collapse issues of techno-politics and class is encapsulated by the subtitle of one of their networking projects (*Skint*), which they dubbed *Poor to Poor*. Aesthetically, Mongrel's output is a potent fusion of politically engaged diy techno culture, whose aesthetic origins lay in the Fanzine culture of England's Punk movement of the late 1970s. Respected throughout the world, their antagonistic stance has had a price; in England at least they remain the perpetual outsiders. Mongrel is the very best of bloody-minded England.

Many of Mongrel's projects demonstrate in the most ethical and critical manner imaginable how artists can indeed produce work that provides a service. Mongrel's work is incredibly rich and varied. But for our purposes we will restrict ourselves to examining a small but significant part of their output, a series of projects they have dubbed 'social telephony'. This series of projects began in 2001 with *TextFM*, which involved turning text messages left on mobile phones into voice simulations which were then patched into local radio programmes. Since then they have developed a range of projects that combine phones, mobiles and free web-based calls with the flexibility of the internet. They use mobile technology to build networks between communities, which act as public interfaces for cultural projects. The latest and most developed example of their 'contagious' telephone-media projects is *Telephone Trottoire* (2006) (www.mongrel.org.uk/?q=trottoire), which follows the Mongrel philosophy of engaging communities who have fallen outside of the mainstream social networks.

Telephone Trottoire was a collaboration with the radio programme *Nostalgia Ya Mboka*, which serves the over 35,000 Congolese living in London, over 90 per cent of whom are political refugees or asylum seekers. Unlike so many projects from the radical free-software community, Mongrel's social telephony projects do not rely on unfamiliar computer systems and only require phone connectivity.

The *trottoire* of the project's title is taken from the Congolese practice of *radio trottoire* (pavement radio), the circulation of news and gossip between individuals on street corners. Using cheap telephony cards and free software, *Telephone Trottoire* allowed people to build social networks, passing phone calls to one another through auto-dialling and allowing them to transmit content among themselves through their phones.

Unfortunately, the project lasted for just six weeks, but as a proof of concept the results were remarkable. According to Mongrel, their user-base grew at a rate of 10 per cent every day, resulting in a total of 448 individual recorded messages from locations across the uk, including London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, as well as internationally from as far afield as Ireland, Canada, Belgium, France, South Africa and of course drc itself.[10]

Telephone Trottoire is inspiring but it also points to the limitations of many tactical media interventions. A commercially resourced service, for all its defects, might have been more likely to achieve a sustained relationship with its community of users. But it is not yet 'game over'. At the time of writing there are signs that Mongrel has plans to re-launch *Telephone Trottoire* on a larger scale.

Conclusion

It is time to return to our point of departure, to Jodie Dean's contention that the ideal of openness, upon which so much of the tactical media and activist making I have been describing are based, is 'not only ill-suited to a mass political age but is also part of the ideological apparatus that furthers the expansion of networked information technologies to consolidate communicative capitalism. [11]

Two years ago I put a similar argument to a group of pirate media activists in Brazil, who work in the *favelas* as educators creating free media spaces with pirate radio and other tools. 'No!' they objected. 'For us media is a vital battlefield, particularly in Latin America where monopolistic media giants like Brazil's Globo pump out an endless narcotic diet of soaps, game shows and football that help to keep poor people passive.' For these activists there can be no imaginable political strategy that does not involve the *expressive* dimension.

By an expressive dimension I am not only referring to 'cultural politics' in which an earlier generation of thinkers and artists addressed issues of 'representation'. An 'expressivist [12] politics deploys the power of language in the broadest sense of the word, (including the visual, sonic and motoric languages from which the arts are constituted). Expressivism is based on our awareness 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. [13]

This approach is captured by the Italian activist and autonomist thinker Franco Berardi 'Bifo', who wrote: 'What interests us in the image is not its function as representation of reality, but its dynamic potential, its capacity to elicit and construct projections, interactions, narrative frames . . . devices for constructing reality. [14]

But beyond Bifo's clarion call, the potential of new media does not lie in expression alone, but in *making*. New media are not just language channels; they are tool-making environments. Activist artists and makers are frequently toolmakers, committed to sharing their know-how; their most appropriate textual genre may not be the manifesto but the *manual*.

There is another argument to be made by those who would oppose those like Jodie Dean seeking to dismiss the ideal of openness as ideology. This argument champions openness as a protection against some of the more extreme forms of despotism that occur when we abandon a sceptical epistemology. This version of the ideal of openness is founded on the awareness that knowledge (even when armed with our most powerful knowledge-acquiring techniques) can only ever be partial. Žižek famously makes the distinction between 'knowing' and 'believing'. But in our world, 'neither knowing nor believing is enough. Claims have to be proven, every day, day after day, again and again. These are the constraints of politics in conditions of pluralism. [15]

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Footnotes

1. Jodi Dean, 'Credibility and Certainty', paper delivered at a seminar in conjunction with the exhibition *Faith in Exposure*, Nederlands Media Art Institute-Montevideo/Time Based Arts, 24 February 2007.
2. Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture. Volume 1 – The Rise of the Network Society* (London: Blackwell, 1996), 328.
3. Joe Podolny and Karen Page, 'Network Forms of Organisation', quoted in Felix Stalder, *Manuel Castells* (Key Contemporary Thinkers) (London: Polity, 2006), 177.
4. Tania Goryucheva's announcement on the *Spectre* mailing list, 21 March 2007.
5. Adapted from Jeff Wall's poster statement: 'Art is Not for Everyone, It is for Anyone', 2006.
6. Geke van Dijk, in: David Garcia, et al. (eds.), (*Un)Common Ground: Creative Encounters Across Sectors and Disciplines* (Amsterdam: Bis, 2007), 29.
7. See http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/interaction/mobility.html .
8. Van Dijk, op. cit. (note 6), 32.
9. See the Bricolabs website: http://bricolabs.net/.
10. Media Shed pamphlet, produced for Enter Unknown Territories Festival, Cambridge 2007.
11. Dean, op. cit. (note 1).
12. My use of the term 'expressivism' is taken from Charles Taylor's analysis of Herder's 'alternative anthropology, one centered on categories of expression'. In a footnote in Taylor's *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 13, he describes how he and Isaiah Berlin decided on the term 'expressivism' in a private communication. Expressivism was prefered to 'expressionism' so as to to avoid confusion with the twentieth century art movement.
13. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 22.
14. Franco Berardi 'Bifo', 'Limmagine dispositivo', quoted in Brian Holmes, 'Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World', in: Blake Simpson and Gregory Sholette (eds.), *Collectivism After Modernism. The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 273.
15. Noortje Marres, 'The Need (not) to Know: After New Media – Shifting Conditions for Democracy'. A review of J. Dean, *Publicity's Secret* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2002) in: *Space and Culture* (2004) 7, 119-125.

Tags

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