Network culture and the aesthetics of dissension[1]

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Abstract: This article addresses the complex relationship between digital activism and Internet art, from the initial proposals in the 1990s up to the present day. The analysis focuses on those projects that have most impacted the convergence of net art and "net-activism" during this period, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between artistic practice and hacktivism. Likewise, phenomena such as virtual sit-ins, DDOS-based strategies and several others that have emerged in the new context of social networks and participatory online platforms (memes, flash mobs, etc.) are analysed, in order to reflect on the new practices of social media art and their potential for specific critical action.
Keywords: Internet art; net art; hacktivism; online activism; social media art; virtual sit-in.

[es] Cultura red y estéticas de la disensión

Resumen: En este artículo se aborda la compleja relación entre el activismo digital y el *Internet art* desde los inicios de este en la década de los noventa del pasado siglo hasta la actualidad. El centro del análisis lo constituyen las propuestas que de forma más intensa han reclamado a lo largo de este periodo la confluencia entre *net art* y "net-activismo", poniendo especial énfasis en las relaciones entre práctica artística y *hacktivismo*. Asimismo, se analizan fenómenos como las *virtual sit-ins*, las estrategias basadas en DDOS, los surgidos en el nuevo contexto de las redes sociales y de las plataformas participativas en línea (*memes*, *flash mobs*, etc.) para, finalmente, abordar la capacidad de actuación crítica específica de las nuevas prácticas de *social media art.*
Palabras clave: Internet art; net art; hacktivismo; activismo digital en red; arte de medios sociales; sentada virtual.

Summary: 1. Internet art and social criticism; 2. Online activism as "performance art" on the Internet?; 3. The "anti-system" possibilities of the "network-system"; 4. The critical manifestation of the connected multitude; 5. Hacktivism and artistic practices; 6. Social media art and dissent; 7. Bibliography.

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1. Internet art and social criticism

A great deal of Internet art, from its inception in the mid-90s, has actively sought to establish, as its focal point, this new medium's inherent potential for social and political transformation. Those artists and collectives at the forefront of this emerging trend for digital creation took on the challenge of thinking about the Internet critically, by analysing the politics of its operations and contemplating the ways in which communication technologies might be able to evade their own colonisation by economic interests.

In their revisiting of the aims set out, decades prior, by those initiatives linked to the more politicised conceptual art, many proponents of Internet art hoped to defend the role of artistic creation beyond a reflection on the meanings that may have become damaged, lost or improbable in the consumer society. They carried out an intense thematisation of the processes of inclusion of the subject within the network culture and economy, and of how the subject adapts to it, as well as the possibilities offered by the Internet for critique and social transformation.

More specifically, based on the arguments that called for a new dissolution of what we understand as "artistic practices" in the ever-expanding sphere of activities within digital political activism, we might even claim that there has been no such thing as Internet art, but rather an "artistic" use of it, just as there was no situationist painting or music per se, but rather "a situationist use of these media"[3].

2. Online activism as "performance art" on the Internet?

Most of the strategies used in early digital activism came from taking certain activist tactics, i.e. forms of protest on the streets[4], and transferring them to the world of the Internet.

The clearest example of this is the so-called "virtual sit-in", an action in which a large group of people come together to attack a particular targeted website, causing it to crash and leaving it inoperative for a certain amount of time. To achieve this, the many thousands of participants must continuously reload the site in question, on their own computers, often through various applications tailor-made for this purpose. If the number of simultaneous participants is large enough, the server becomes saturated, and access to the website is blocked. In this type of action, the computer screen was deemed a possible space for the joint act of protest. In any case, the dissemination of the news that preceded and followed these types of actions, with the aim of reaching the largest number of people possible, was undoubtedly more relevant than the direct effects, always temporary and, in any case, reversible, of the action itself.

There are many examples of this kind of peaceful online protest, or "netstrike". Since 1995, when one of the first and most well-known netstrikes took place (namely the one launched by the Strano Network on 21st December of that year, in protest of France's nuclear experiments in Mururoa, and which managed to slow down some

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3   Debord, G. «Theory of the Dérive and Definitions», in Gieseking J. J. & Mangold, W. (eds.), *The people, Place, and Space Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 68.
4   See Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance* (1993) [http://www.critical-art.net/books/ted/] and *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular ideas* (1996) [http: //www.critical-art.net/books/ecd/].

of the French government's websites), dozens of them have been carried out with a range of different objectives.

One of the most widely-discussed virtual sit-ins was SWARM, coordinated in 1998 by the "artivist" group Electronic Disturbance Theater. They aimed to block, temporarily, via a Java applet called Floodnet, various institutional websites, such as those of The Pentagon, the Frankfurt Stock Exchange and the website of the Mexican presidency (being, as they were, supportive of the Zapatista cause). In this case, when prompted, their application provided the user with messages such as "human_rights not found on this server".

In the purely political sense, these types of online actions would clearly be meaningless without mass participation (in SWARM, for example, around 75,000 protesters took part). For members of the Critical Art Ensemble, such widespread support was key: something that might otherwise have been interpreted as a straightforward act of computer vandalism was transformed into a model exercise in solidarity, all in the name of political denunciation and the demand for justice. The result was a form of activism that only ever sought to speak from the position of the victim – a protest which aimed, above all, to amplify the defiant voices of the multitude.

In terms of the issues raised in this section, it is highly revealing that Carmin Karasic, co-creator of Floodnet with Brett Stalbaum, insisted that "this isn't cyberterrorism - it's more like conceptual art"[5]. Similarly, other leading proponents of cyber-activism, such as Ricardo Dominguez, have stated that these cyber-protests are "performance art" on the Internet. Ascribing them to the concept of "art" (note the clear importance of the fact that, in order to channel this connection, the central theme of the 1998 Ars Electronica festival was "Infowar") would allow for the artistic activity to be identified with a model of collaborative and critical practice, as a producer of collective action and active resistance within the technoculture. This practice entailed disrupting a given information system (an institutional or governmental page), in order to make "symbolic" statements to reflect the people's indignation. This artistic action would therefore have a somewhat traditional purpose, that is to "represent" (in the literal sense of "making present") a shared mood: in many cases, the anger and dissatisfaction of tens of thousands of people.

In March 2010, when Electronic Disturbance Theater, in collaboration with bang. lab, proposed a "virtual sit-in" at the website of the Office of the President of the University of California, in protest against budget cuts, hikes in tuition fees, and what they interpreted as the privatisation of the University, academic authorities took immediate measures to try and criminalise this action. In response, at some of the protests that took place at the University of California campus in San Diego in support of Ricardo Domínguez, he was heard declaring that "online protest is not a crime. Online protest is art"[6].

However, the absolute consolidation of art and political action, as suggested by projects like this, risks being interpreted as a mere strategy for survival in itself. That is, the concept "art", when applied to this form of protest, would only serve, in

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[5]   Quoted by Harmon, A., «"Hacktivists" of All Persuasions Take Their Struggle to the Web», *The New York Times* (31st October 1998) [https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/31/world/hacktivists-of-all-persuasions-take-their-struggle-to-the-web.html].

[6]   See the video entitled «Ricardo Dominguez, UCSD Library Walk» (April 8th, 2010) on YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Yr2RH_dNEY].

reality, to act as a decoy for the criminal implications that these acts could imply. In fact, some of Domínguez's own statements seem to reinforce this hypothesis: "the reason they can't stop us is that we always frame all these gestures within the poetic frame"[7].

But perhaps the biggest hurdle to considering this type of action as artistic practice is the fact that the concept of "art" barely seems compatible with what is effectively the forced silencing (widely acknowledged as a manifest form of violence) of some of the parties involved in the "situation" generated. This same criticism was also shared by many who had evaluated such actions strictly in terms of their political aspects. In fact, actions like this have encountered strong opposition in many currents of digital activism, precisely because of the confrontational nature of the blockade, which, in some way, threatens the free expression of the opponent. Although, on the one hand, we might consider that blocking or restricting access to certain websites could be seen as a way of retaliating against governmental policies of restricting communication, these blockades have been interpreted, by many sectors of digital activism, as actions that go against the basic principles of the anti-globalisation movements, characterised by their reverence for absolute freedom of expression.

As such, it should not be overlooked that many of these interventions have been strongly criticised for not consulting the opinion of the social groups they intend to help, and for representing yet another form of political interventionism of the most technologically advanced countries over the less developed ones. A mistaken act of paternalism, as the Ame la Paz association said of the SWARM action, which evoked long-standing colonial attitudes, by ignoring the capabilities and strategies developed by the Mexican activist groups themselves. These groups called for the end of interventions of this kind, stating that any external help would be better in the form of training, in helping develop their websites, translating their content into other languages, protecting their mailing lists, and preventing the collection and diversion of their emails, as well as offering advice on the surveillance procedures and systems through which governments monitor the movements and activities of activist groups on the Internet.

Another web-based adaptation of street protest strategies is that of virtual protests. As with virtual sit-ins, many of these "cyber-demonstrations" were also proposed and considered by many to be "artistic" practices in themselves. This is the case, for example, of *MayDay Net Parade*[8] (2004), a project by Molleindustria, and a critique of the precarious labour market in the European Union. The protest featured a digital representation of European May Day 2004, in the form of an online protest of digital avatars, in which 17,000 people participated. Another example would be *Tweet4Action.com* (2011) by Les Liens Invisibles, an ironic initiative defined as the ultimate tool for "sofa activism"[9] and only comprehensible in the context of the "Twitter Revolution" at the end of the 2000s.

A greater level of technical sophistication, beyond that needed for virtual sit-ins, is required for the creation of botnets. This strategy entails the "kidnapping",

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7   Quoted by Ramey, C., «Artivists and Mobile Phones: The Transborder Immigrant Project», *MobileActive. org*, (November 17th, 2007). [http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ucsd/tenure/Artivists%20and%20Mobile%20 Phones_%20The%20Transborder%20Immigrant%20Project%20%7C%20MobileActive.org.pdf].

8   [http://www.euromayday.org/netparade/]

9   As described in the presentation of the work on the *Turbulence.org* platform [http://turbulence.org/archives/11. html].

by whoever is coordinating the protest action, of hundreds or even thousands of computers, which are then used to participate (without, of course, the consent of their owners or users) in an attack on a designated website, with a view to blocking it – the targeted site is hit again and again, in what has been called a "distributed denial-of-service" (DDOS). One of the best-known cyberattacks of this kind was the one launched by several of the world's governments against the website Wikileaks, in December 2010, in an attempt at preventing the much-dreaded release of the US government's cache of over 250,000 confidential documents. This action ultimately forced Wikileaks, founded by Julian Assange, to move onto other servers. Later that month, in a show of solidarity with Wikileaks, the collective Anonymous, coordinated via the platform 4Chan.org (founded in 2003), would attempt to block the pages of companies that subsequently refused to provide services to Wikileaks, such as Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal, among others, in an action that came to be known as *Operation Payback*. This strategy of causing denial-of-service failure, first proposed by Leonard Kleinrock in 1994, has often been used in many of the best-known "artivist" projects, such as in the well-known *Toy War* campaign (1999), launched by the Etoy collective against the company Etoys.com. More recently, this technique was employed in the action *4'33* (January 2011) by the Colombian artist Jocelyn Bernal. In this project, she managed to block the websites of a number of Spanish and Latin American artistic institutions (almost all of them museums), for just over four minutes. There was a clear allusion, on the one hand, to the four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence in John Cage's 1952 piece of the same name, and, on the other hand, to the scarce interest shown by these artistic institutions in supporting an artform as radically opposed to the logics of the art market (to which, according to Bernal, the museum institutions are still subject) as is net art.

3. The "anti-system" possibilities of the "network-system"

The sheer breadth of social potential and political action offered by the rise in digital connectivity is something to be celebrated. Social networks have played a decisive role in the political struggle for new, effective forms of organisation and large-scale mobilisation. These networks have also been crucial in the resistance efforts against forms of governmental censorship, demonstrating thus their remarkable capacity for boosting, instantly, the dissemination of news and events, and for gaining unprecedented access to particular causes. This became especially evident, for example, in the acts of protest amid the Iranian electoral process of 2009 (to such an extent that the media and press agencies went as far as baptising this phenomenon the "Twitter Revolution"), and in the North African revolutions of 2011.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that these "anti-system" possibilities are managed, paradoxically, from within the structure of late capitalism itself, represented by a handful of American companies (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). This leads to a situation, ever paradoxical, in which the users' statements may well be of submission or protest, but they still form part of the exact same "machine", i.e. the machine of informational capitalism. The paradox is evident: if, today, somebody were to launch a campaign against Twitter or Facebook, they would have to circulate it via Twitter or Facebook. This power, or rather the way that these systems absorb even that which opposes the system itself, is fundamental to what we could call

the "network-system". There are, then, certain paradoxes that must be taken into account when evaluating the true "anti-system" potential of this "network-system". Corporations such as Twitter and Facebook have reaped vast economic benefits while serving as catalysts for all kinds of popular revolutions, all over the world and yet, the informational capitalism they represent and advocate, however, has almost always been left unquestioned.

The context in which these massive new critical movements arise today is, of course, very different to the early days of the Internet, as mentioned above. In the 1990s, online political resistance invariably meant programmed actions (such as virtual sit-ins), promoted by activists with extensive technical knowledge and who, on occasion, would emphasise certain similarities between their own work and the practices of "performance art". In fact, it can even be claimed that the close connection between contemporary art and online digital activism, in the 1990s, was precisely because of the highly professional nature of these initial actions, and, above all, because many of them were promoted and made public in international artistic contexts, such as festivals, electronic art meetings, etc.

4. The critical manifestation of the connected multitude

In the current second phase of the Internet, which revolves around social media, anyone can use social networks and shared platforms to propose an action in which tens or even hundreds of thousands of people can participate. A common feature of the protests instigated on social media is the out-and-out creativity and humour on display, making use of inventive slogans and images to get their point across.

Of particular importance in this regard is the emergence, from within the context of social networks, of new and potent visual typologies, such as the meme. Memes can be defined as a form of visual expression, not far removed from the situationist *détournement*, and as such they are loaded with the potential for political critique and even culture jamming. As a result, there are countless ongoing debates about the political power of memes[10]. Given that they are easy to read and simple to interpret, using memes became an informal way of reacting to current events, uniquely revealing of the connected multitude's hunger for satire and humorous criticism. Therefore, memes soon found their sweet spot in the social and political debate, as seen, for example, in movements such as 15-M in Spain or Occupy Wall Street, when certain memes served as vital catalysts in the propagation of ideas[11]. There are many examples of how memetic processes can become active forms of manifesting subversion or complicity. However, the hyperhumoristic and ironic discourse of memes can also conceal their true political intentionality. This phenomenon has been referred to as "Poe's law", which asserts how difficult it can be, on the Internet, to distinguish between declarations of political extremism and parodies thereof[12].

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[10]   See Lovink, G., «Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design», *e-flux Journal*, 83 (June, 2017). [https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/141287/overcoming-internet-disillusionment-on-the-principles-of-meme-design/].

[11]   See Milner, R. M., «Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement», *International Journal of Communication*, 7 (2013), pp. 2357-2390. [http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1949].

[12]   See Milner, R. M., «Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz», *The*

It must also be noted that many of the practices of online collective activism, which arise more or less spontaneously, still consider their ultimate goal to be the gathering of people in a certain place. This is, in essence, another example of the call for streets and squares to be reclaimed as media in their own right, and thus reactivated as key spaces for social interaction and political protest. Many of the flash mobs that have taken place in recent years have, in fact, had serious critical intent, with notable social and political engagement. This was true, for example, of the ones organised by Collective 8552 in Athens, in June 2011, to denounce the measures taken by the Greek government in dealing with the economic crisis, or those realised on the outskirts of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid in 2012. Proposals like these ones hark back to some of the slogans of the situationists in the 1960s, insomuch they tended to favour organised moments of shared life over object-based art. Flash mobs, and similar strategies, can therefore be seen as processes of collaborative activism, as well as the organisation of collective and festive situations and environments in the city's public space. A direct link can thus be made with some of the more politically engaged conceptualism of recent decades, or with their epigones in "contextual art"[13].

It is completely understandable that many are keen to see, in this gathering of the crowd, in this exercise in collective dissent from a peaceful and deeply creative standpoint, a certain form of social re-appropriation of the very concept of "artistic practice", or an attempt, at least, at its "realisation" in life.

It is easy to see, in social phenomena like this, in the materialisation of their own teleology of the common, as encouraged by the potential illuminators of the "general intellect" (and which could only be understood in political terms as a force of solidarity, of exchange and cooperation, as an active being-with-others) many of the pragmatic ideals of the most clearly committed art of the 20th century. What is certainly evident is that some of these mass movements, self-organised via social networks, are attempts at establishing new fields of freedom, of experiences in which reflection and expression can be shared, something that largely coincides with the most fundamental functions of many of the new artistic practices. It is certainly very tempting to draw a link between, on the one hand, those practices in which a multitude that begins to redefine itself as a new political and community-minded subject, fighting for both a more just society and a radical shift in the forms of organisation of life and the rules thus far imposed by the political system's forms of representation of, and, on the other hand, those words of Negri in his text *Art and Multitude,* where love was considered collective *poiesis*, and art was defined as a multitude of singularities in movement.

5. Hacktivism and artistic practices

In the 1970s, it was already evident that there was a progressive overlapping of the content industry and the media industry, as well as the worldwide media's

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Fiberculture Journal, 22 (2013), pp. 62-92. [http://twentytwo.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-156-hacking-the-social-internet-memes-identity-antagonism-and-the-logic-of-lulz/].

[13]   See Ardenne, P. *Un art contextuel*, Paris, Flammarion, 2002.

corresponding drift towards a more commercial "infotainment"[14]. This was closely linked, on the other hand, to the fact that the concept of "freedom" has invariably implied, within the logics of late capitalism, a greater freedom of trade, as opposed to greater freedom of expression, the latter always losing out to the former, albeit in subtle ways. This would explain why, at least in part, practices of online activism have focused so much on liberating the act of communication from those economic and commercial entities that parasitise it, as well as to creating new communication channels and platforms to counteract the hegemonic visions, ever biased and opportunist, of the traditional media.

Over the course of the nineties, the aim of creating a free voice, one that would be both critical and politically engaged, and that would make a genuine impact, was the driving force of many forms of online political activism. With demonstrated effectiveness, as could be seen in its early stages (especially during the support for numerous pro-Zapatista activists in 1997), these were practices aimed at strengthening the Internet's ability to correct and compensate for the serious dearth of information that was so commonplace in the traditional mass media. These initiatives were critical of the mainstream media's characteristic withholding and manipulation of information, so activists sought to create online spaces for social and political denunciation without any restrictions or censorship, via mailing lists and forums, encouraging thus a kind of critical thinking that, realistically, could not have been disseminated in any other way. These methods of critical action were barely organised in terms of their tactics, and as such they were nothing like the transnational strategies of the large corporations or the internationalism of the NGOs. Instead, they sought the transmission and reproduction of their operations on the Internet, similar to how a virus works: a broad dissemination, always spontaneous, and hardly ever seeking to establish a predetermined structure of operation nor a given identity as decreed and regulated by a specific representative body.

One of the most serious problems with the exercising of media freedom is the power that governments and corporations wield over Internet communications. The permanent and global control of Internet traffic, by means of powerful systems for digital surveillance, are now joined by many other forms of restriction and strong censorship (as materialised in the monitoring of search engines or other given content, among many other expressions of digital censorship), in numerous countries around the world.

Restrictions on web browsing have been thematised in many artistic projects, such as *China Channel* (2008) by Aram Bartholl, Evan Roth and Tobias Leingruber, which consisted of an add-on (an installable extension) for the browser Firefox, so that any user could surf the Internet with the same restrictions as if they were doing so from within the borders of China at that time.

The fight against restrictions on the supply of and access to online information already has a history of significant events. Of all the initiatives that have emerged, the most notable is "hacktivism" (portmanteau of the words "hacker" and "activism"), a strategy which came to the fore in 1998 thanks to some members of the Cult of the Dead cow (cDc). Oxblood Ruffin, who is credited with coining this term, even made a distinction between hacktivism and simple [h]activism. If the

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14   Portmanteau of the terms "information" and "entertainment". See Lovink, G., «Radical Media Pragmatism Strategies for Tecno-Social Movements», in *Infowar* (Ars Electronica Catalog 98), Vienna / New York, 1998.

latter was about making the Internet a space for the dissemination and exchange of information in order to organise protest actions, hacktivism would instead favour more transgressive interventions related to the Internet's access restrictions and control mechanisms. Dissemination, direct action and creative solutions are some of its main characteristics. Its central objective would be none other than to promote the right of freedom of opinion and expression, as set forth in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Proponents of hacktivism considered it to be "the use of technology to advance human rights through electronic media"[15]. It is not surprising that this set of practices and interventions has found widespread acceptance and support, even from some highly influential institutions of financial and industrial capitalism, at the international level.

Generally speaking, the most prevalent and controversial instances of hacking have been carried out without any political agenda: these hackers are generally motivated by profit, or, sometimes, by the purely personal challenge of breaking secret codes and protected data structures, i.e. some form of "cracking" (a term that usually refers to activities that corrupt digital data or steal information). Nevertheless, expressly politicised hacktivism, though less frequent, did become increasingly important in the second half of the nineties.

These socially and politically engaged hackers would formulate what is often called cyber-activism, using tactics and methodologies that would come under the banner of "ethical hacking". However, the efforts made by information agencies and government organisations to protect their networks and data, during the first decade of the 21st century, had the effect of drastically reducing the number and reach of actions that we might call "hacktivism". In fact, that decade's most significant data breach events, such as the release of 250,000 documents from the U.S. Department of State, by Wikileaks (and published by five international newspapers in December 2010), were not the result of hacking into the security mechanisms of the networks and computer systems that housed those files – they were, instead, straightforward leaks by people who already had access to the confidential information in question. All of this suggests that hacktivist practices are in fact more concerned with supporting this kind of already-infiltrated action, rather than releasing secret data and files per se. Many programmers and activist groups demonstrated their support for Wikileaks by blocking the websites of some of the companies or government agencies that had participated, directly or otherwise, in the efforts to stop the release of confidential information, as initiated by Julian Assange's organisation. As such, these would be the most paradigmatic examples of hacktivism developed in the early 21st century. As a practice in its own right, hacktivism was always intended to enhance or supplement the existing organisational efforts in the field of activism and political criticism. It has tried to foster the potential for action from absolutely anywhere, without geographical limitations, and it has managed to evade many systems of control and repression. Furthermore, it often receives widespread coverage in the media, which gives it a huge advantage over other types of protest.

Hacktivism, with its propensity for symbolic action, is of course closely related to the field of art, and many of its interventions and proposals have been included within the wide range of practices that make up the history of net art. In fact, hacktivism, let's

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[15]   cDc (Cult of the Dead cow), «The Hacktivismo FAQ v1.0», (2001) [http://www.cultdeadcow.com/cDc_files/ HacktivismoFAQ.html].

not forget, was defined in 1999 as a convergence of activism, art and computerised communication. Therefore, for the defenders of hacktivist-led incursions, there is hardly any possible distinction between "net art" and "net-activism".

To consider hacktivism as an artistic activity in its own right would presuppose the rejection of any division or separation between the realm of the imaginary and the "real" in the field of the media, or between the political references contained within the artistic proposal and its true political effectiveness. Therefore, the concept of "art" in this context of interventions is identifiable not so much by what these actions provide in terms of language or expression, but rather by the language that liberates or helps to liberate. Thus, a certain transposition would take place between the traditional idea of art as an expression of what is "repressed" within the individual, towards a different conceptualisation of the idea that art is the expression of what is "repressed" within the wider social sphere.

Regardless of whether these hacktivist actions have been conceived and/or presented as "artistic works", or exclusively as acts of political protest, the most relevant point is that today's cultural criticism (as exercised both inside and outside the media and/or the sphere of the "artistic") may find a possible role model in the activity of hacktivism. It is about assessing their ability to rewrite codes and reprogram systems, to open them up or make them collaborate in the flowing of information and communication, because, far from being mere tools or instruments for work or production, they are, in essence, also cultural codes and social programs.

The act of opening up what is encrypted, or releasing what has been kept under wraps for political reasons, guarded by governments or corporations, is also an attempt at discovering what really lies beneath our society's own tendency to expose and reveal, to put everything on display.

It is also worth remembering that, in recent digital "artivism", the act of expressing or revealing that which had previously been covered up has often sought to emulate the methods used by corporations or institutions, all in the name of an unlimited freedom of information. The immediate precursors of this trend would be those projects that played around with the names or branding conventions of certain companies, as well as those web campaigns presented as pseudo-businesses and which have often been considered as a sub-genre within early Internet art. These initiatives, by appropriating the appearances, forms or dynamics of a given commercial endeavour, made use of the mechanisms and objectives that so characterise the system in question. Furthermore, they highlighted the general powerlessness of those at the other end of the spectrum, i.e. those who do not act – unlike these corporations – from a position of dominance.

Hence, in broad terms, one of the most significant avenues for this kind of online activism is that of parasitic actions, based on the concept of what today we might call "media tactics". A good case study here is the collective The Yes Men[16] and how they developed simulations of the websites of certain entities and companies, such as the World Trade Organization, ExxonMobil, Halliburton/KBR, British Petroleum, and the presidential campaign of George W. Bush (in collaboration with ®Tmark), among others. These simulated sites, with deliberately ambiguous addresses, sought to convince visitors that they were in fact on the genuine websites of these entities and corporations, and thus sow confusion. On these fake sites, the user would read

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[16]   The two members that make up this collective use the pseudonyms Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno.

texts and see images that revealed covered-up truths and schemes, including alleged criminal activities perpetrated by these people, institutions and companies, most of which were unknown to the wider public.

In a similar vein to The Yes Men, the group Les liens invisibles, using the same strategies of imitation that they had already tried out in projects such as *Fake is a Fake* (2008)[17], created the website *Peking 2008*, a near-copy of the official website of the Beijing Olympic Games of that year. However, when clicking any of the links on this fake official page, a single video came up in which Chinese political repression was denounced. This strategy focused on the act of counterfeiting, exploring thus the critical and subversive powers of simulation and imitation, through the effects of the ubiquitous and easily identifiable conventions of globalised news. This kind of counterfeiting and confusion therefore gave people a voice, it let them be heard, so that they could denounce and hear what is generally buried and hidden within institutional discourses.

Actions like this are a form of parasitism, characterised by the appropriation and replication of the very language and commercial/institutional structures that are being challenged. This is achieved by ironically inhabiting those structures, making use of the same means and linguistic ploys that they use, but with the aim of bringing them down. It all consists of creating extensions and added functionalities that distort, obstruct or reveal the underlying interests of the given organisation's operating dynamics, and these artivists therefore employ strategies for diversion, distortion and misrepresentation, similar to those proposed decades ago by the situationist *détournement*.

6. Social media art and dissent

A significant amount of today's Internet art (now fundamentally "social media art") still presents itself as a way of thinking critically about the logics and dynamics of digital connectivity, based on an association of the technological regime and a certain form of discrepancy with it.

It is the same difficulty from which Internet art emerged, and from which it would justify itself as more than a fleeting practice, proving that its time is none other than the endless time of non-conformity and dissension. It is a materialisation, therefore, of a social thought, in the form of an artistic intervention in the networked space, where the main practices of production and globalised living take place today. The critique would be principally aimed at many of the strategies for the production of meaning and value that operate on the Internet, at its policies, its forms of business, its built-in contradictions that, even so, are reconciled, somewhat vaguely, by means of their continued operation.

The main capacity for critical action of these artistic manifestations, those that use social media as their field of operation, does not come from research into the meanings projected by the network, but rather on the study of the very conditions that allow for its construction. Hence, the best Internet art today can be defined, precisely, as a poetic analysis of the process of understanding those conditions.

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[17] Collective comprised of Clemente Pestelli and Gionatan Quintini.

In the current phase of the connected society, in which terms such as participation, contribution, cooperation and social network are omnipresent, discovering what is authentically "social", what is truly emancipatory in all of this, is a challenge that should be prioritised.

But it does not seem possible to clarify anything, in this regard, without first acknowledging the implementation of a great many strategies adopted by the power of the large corporations in recent years. These strategies would be fundamentally linked to the fact that economic relations have become increasingly autonomous regarding the control exerted by government and state policies. Today, the new form of sovereignty produced and disseminated through the networks is global, transnational; there are no borders to hold it back, it does not come from from one single territorial point, it is decentralised, deterritorialised. Nor is there anything that transcends these forces of global interaction, whose model is both oligopolistic and democratic. There is no doubt, however, that such globalisation has arrived hand-in-hand with a process of economic polarisation, in an increasingly impoverished and violent world.

With this process, whereby individuals are involved and included in the systems of economic production and subjectivity that are characteristic of the network system, today's new forms of power try to manage every single aspect of life, ensuring an all-encompassing action of its exertion. As such, power is merged with life, it becomes abstract, it is no longer exerted upon individuals, but rather, as Foucault already diagnosed, it *circulates* through them (all of us, consciously or otherwise, make it circulate).

Today, the most effective devices for exerting power are based on participatory logic, on the fluxes of social activity. And the most effective strategy for biopolitical control is an apparently paradoxical action: we are all subjected to the same forces, but in different ways. The big Internet corporations are clear about one thing: the connected crowd cannot be regimented; normalisation can no longer be effective.

Therefore, as opposed to the attempts at homogenising procedures, at treating everybody in the same way, the economic logic of the network-system is based on differentiating and singling out all procedures, or on allowing everybody to single them out in their own way, resulting in a copious supply of free choice, of free decision-making. The system seeks to correspond to the multiplicity of singularities that make up the connected multitude, and suppress them, by means of their unwitting self-conversion into transmitters of the new forms of power. Dominance is no longer a unilateral relationship, but rather it operates through shifting, unstable power games, based on seductive and diffuse strategies for the circulation and transmission of communicative and affective pleasures.

So the most politically engaged social media art cannot be rightly understood as just something that is accessed via the Internet, or presented on the Internet, or mere online content – instead, it is something that actually seeks to encompass the Internet, which studies, indicates and presents it. Its key strategy would be, in this sense, one of "invagination": to flip an established situation, to contain the network space instead of being contained by it, to appropriate that space instead of just being presented inside it[18].

It is not just about creating a "spectacle" or a work that thematises the social

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18   See Martín Prada, J., «Hacia una teoría del social media art», in *Revista de Occidente*, 465, (2020), pp. 5-25.

conditions of what is happening and what is controlled in the field of the network, but rather it is about presenting the network as a ''spectacle'' in itself, seeking to intervene in the real articulation of their systems of production and the circulation of meanings and their processes, revealing how the new forms of power take hold there.

Moreover, the ideal critical function of works of Internet art would not be so much the critical experiencing of a new medium but, rather, to experience ourselves in it. This would point to a critical awareness of the medium itself and, as such, its true political potentialities would be situated.

It is a process of turning the medium itself into the central working theme, by helping us momentarily break the ties that bind us to it, making us think poetically about something that is much more than a means of transmission, through, precisely, establishing it as an activity.

It is true that, in defining the social and communicative evolution of the Internet through the principles brought about by the Web 2.0 model (social networking, sharing, dialogue, commentary, peer networks etc.), the ideological neutrality of its technologies is always assumed to be a fundamental value of life in the most technologically developed societies. Perhaps this is why it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between validity or scope of meaning and mere economics. This would support the view that, from within the field of artistic production, the ultimate purpose of current social media art should in fact be to reveal this distinction.

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