09 2003

A r/c tivism in Physical and Virtual Spaces

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Reclaiming the streets, producing an emancipatory public sphere – how does that work in a society that many call the information society, in which it seems that the spectacle has taken the place of political debate, in which urban space is progressively trimmed to neoliberal/economic imperatives.

What has thrust itself onto the stage of a globalized public sphere since the protests against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle[1], politically ambiguous[2] yet unmistakable in the potpourri of forms of expressions, represents a practice of dealing with these kinds of questions.

What happens behind the scenes of the colorful video images of protest, which, in fact, largely still adhere to thoroughly traditional patterns in terms of form, mode of production and discourse? What is going on in the virtual and physical workshop spaces of the globally networked movements?[3] How does the virtual space of the Internet relate to geographically definable, "real" locations? Can they still be clearly distinguished, how do they merge? How is the understanding of space and communication changing within the relatively small, relatively privileged[4] group of those active in

alternative media with the rapid appropriation of information technology?

Within the European noborder network[5] and Indymedia UK[6], I experience virtual and physical spaces almost as a single space of communication, in which the boundaries between "real" and "virtual" space increasingly blur. Because media activism no longer means just "making and editing images/texts" or clicking through video or audio clips with a mouse - it also means using the Internet as a work space, social center, project workshop; the technical and social appropriation of technologies such as WiFi, streaming, satellite connections on the desktop and in physical public space. This expansion of the communication space could perhaps even show possibilities of "where do we go from here" to practices of the production of self and the public sphere, of political organization and network formation. This incipient practice is to be described using the examples of the border camp in Strasbourg[7] and the protests at the G8 summit in Evian (June 2003). I took part in the former on site, in the latter from my desk.

Border Camp in Strasbourg

With an unerring sense for symbolically significant "real" places as a stage, Strasbourg was chosen for a border camp in 2002. The city relates in several ways to the themes of the European noborder network: the geographical location at a border demonstrating the arbitrariness of the demarcation of national borders, Strasbourg's role as European capital, but most of all the spatial proximity to the Schengen Information System (SIS)[8] brought together central discourses of the noborder network. Under the label dsec – Database System to Enforce Control – a small initiative addressed

conjunctions of the control of borders in physical and virtual space before the border camp started. Artists and techies were specifically invited to deal practically and theoretically with "free movement and free communication".[9]

With two to three thousand mostly European participants, Strasbourg was not only the largest border camp since 1998, but also the best equipped in terms of information technology.[10] The media center, called "Silicon Valley", developed right at the entrance to the area. Various Indymedia pages were updated here, audio and film material was edited and broadcast via web stream and pirate radio, people were scanning, printing, photocopying, programming and mailing. A powerful DSL dedicated line provided a connection to the Internet, people with laptops could log in via a wireless connection – often with borrowed network cards. The Dutch group Ascii had set up dozens of terminals in a dark yurt. A camp radio was produced in a confusion of cables, plugs, amplifiers, microphones, PCs and laptops in a rented party tent set up together. Various mobile media units settled in "Silicon Valley", such as the AK Kraak video bus and a radio bus from Germany.
Here at the start of the promenade leading through the entire grounds, the double-decker bus of the PublixTheatreCaravan from Vienna parked every evening too, a friendly snack bar for the evenings, stage, playground, meeting point, cinema, action workshop, gallery and sound system, but also a media center with four computers, on which texts were permanently being written, images uploaded, radio programs edited and broadcast.[11]

Despite the impressive array of information technology, by the third day of the camp it was already agreed: "communication is fucked", the internal flow of information wasn't working. The "infopoint" in the entrance area exploded just like the "action tent"

in a confusion of rolls of paper covered with felt pens, in a way that could hardly be coped with; the internal radio broadcast was either ignored or did not provide the right information. Countless groups with corresponding approaches, such as the people from deportation class, (s)iberia, or kanak attak, mib or yo mango, found themselves in the same grounds, but without the internal publicity that would have allowed them to make contact with one another.

Loss of Friction

How could it be that specifically at a gathering of activists with above-average communication skills, the communication didn't work? After all, many of those present had managed again and again in recent years to set up gigantic, international interventions, despite language barriers and across broad geographical distances, despite the different modes of organization and political contexts, by intensively using e-mail, web sites and chats. Obvious reasons might be the lack of a pre-planned protest event in conjunction with a large-scale mobilization, consciously including conjunctions of the global protest movement, such as People's Global Action, for the first time, or even dealing with non-hierarchical, self-organized structures, the development of which takes longer than ten days. Could it be, though, that the internal communication chaos might also be due to the loss of friction with the merging of virtual and physical space?

Parc du Rhin as E-mail List

There are some indications that the communication mode of virtual space was involuntarily transferred to the material

surroundings of the Rhine Meadow, where the camp spread out. Each group planted its tent on the narrow, long strip of grass along the Rhine, just as one tosses an idea into a mailing list. From a technical perspective, an electronic mailing list works horizontally. Potentially everyone speaks to everyone else. Some listen, some just click away. Countless suggestions are made, only a few are pursued. Some lists exhaust themselves in endless circular discussions, which correlates to the experience of the daily barrio meetings at the camp every morning. Experienced e-mail users have their own strategies for solving the problem of overflowing mailboxes or the lack of attention. New project-oriented lists often break off - smaller plazas, so to speak, for a certain audience. In the physical space, however, there was no archive where one could find orientation, nor did any "agora" emerge, where people could gather, discuss and negotiate conflicts.

Like subscribing to a mailing list, the parallel presence at the camp seemed to provide enough of a framework for synergy: people would bring along their topics and forms of action, and those interested would eventually show up. This didn't work. The logic of material space is different from that of the virtual. Invitations could not be forwarded to everyone interested with a simple mouse-click - they had to be hung up in various places in the camp on handwritten notes or passed on orally either personally or via radio. Whereas the density of communication on the Internet is defined by bandwidth, server availability and web competence, at the border camp distances played a role again. The one kilometer from the entrance of the camp to the farthest end of the grounds was, in a sense, longer than the 3000 kilometers between Vienna and London, for example, in the Internet-supported preparation phase.

N/etiquette in Virtual and Physical Space

The use of verbal expressions from physical space to describe processes in virtual space is widely known: you "visit" a web site, "go" to a chatroom, "drop by" or "meet" there, people "keep in touch" through e-mail. Conversely, I sometimes find myself drawing keyboard smileys ;-) on postcards. The following communication situation during a d.sec workshop[12] initially irritated me:
Thirty people sitting in a circle on the floor of a tent hold a round of introductions. The mood is concentrated. A few guys from the media tent next door are hanging around the entrance. As the discussion leader, I ask one of them if he would like to introduce himself. The brief but friendly response is, "no". Later one of them interjects something into the discussion, after a short time he leaves the tent without ceremony.
In my view, it is courteous to take part in a round of introductions. The person in question, however, did not seem to be aware of transgressing this "rule of conduct"; on the contrary, I had the impression that he found my behavior somewhat inappropriate. Translated into chatspeak, the same communication situation would read something like this - and perhaps this other representation demonstrates why his behavior would be entirely correct in a chatroom, whereas mine would be a violation of "netiquette"[13]:
xy (~xy@67.110.168.11) has joined #workshop <=enters the room>
<ionnek> xy, would you like to introduce yourself?
<xy> no ;-)
(...)
xy (~xy@67.110.168.11) has left #workshop

"Lurking" is ok, and all online introductions to the topic of netiquette recommend maintaining a certain degree of anonymity

in chatrooms. Prying is frowned upon. Certain irritations in communicating with the providers from the media tent could perhaps be dispelled in a similar way. Anyone in need of help would do well to follow the recommendations of online Emily Posts such as smart-questions[14] - ask clear questions, do not engage in unfounded speculations about possible error sources or solutions, no small talk, think for yourself.

Media Action

At the action level, presuppositions about media and tech activism, "real" and "virtual" space were also questioned. A plausibly equipped research team was able to start a rumor about a successful hack of the most secure database in the world with a small theater performance in front of the fence around the Schengen Information System.[15] The impact of the action was not based on technical hacker knowledge, but rather on brazenly playing with the myths about this knowledge and transposing them to physical space: hackers can do anything, all they need are a laptop, commands and maybe a few cables. The playful translation of abstract data streams into tangible images (digging up the data cable) was happily believed. At the concluding press conference of the border camp, the action was repeated with participation on the part of journalists and an "expert" from the Bureau d'Etudes, which contributed to turning the press conference into a kind of mini-demonstration on SIS. Although all the communication guerrilla possibilities were far from exhausted, the story was picked up and spread by Le Monde[16] and several web publications.

Media Work

During the Strasbourg border camp, there were many who missed debates on contents. The daily schedule was filled with demo activities and the organization of daily life - latrine duty, garbage duty, guard duty not only all had to be done, they first had to be discussed, and finding a consensus on the mode of self-organization and decision-making processes was a tedious procedure. Similar to Lazzarato's model of a corporealization of "new possibilities of living" during the event of Seattle, Shuddhabrata Sengupta experienced these processes as a "microcosmic model of a 'functioning anarchy'", which he interpreted as an "instance of how the actions and energies of the 'multitudes' might translate into concrete realities on a day to day basis in a possible future away from Capitalism"[17]. Despite this positive turn, it remains to be noted that it was not only in Strasbourg that the "movement of movements" devoted so much time to processes owing to apparent practical constraints that thinking and discussing political controversies was pushed to the edge. Perhaps this is a subconscious strategy for holding together the "diversity" of the movement that is repeatedly celebrated internally and depicted in a colorful whirlwind of video sequences. For Hito Steyerl, this diversity presents itself as a non-reflected addition of contradictory, even opposing political approaches.[18] Avoiding political conflicts, however, may be part of a process of recombining, in which cooperations/overlaps are formed more on the basis of *how* something is done than *why* it is done. Perhaps there is sometimes a contradictoriness in the linguistic and political diversity that could also be a reason for the popularity of video clips as a form of communication that can function without words.
In the "rediscovery of content", information technology also plays a role for me as a form, but not as finished products such as web sites or videos, but rather in terms of a more unintentional function of the production process: the most intensive, most

concentrated discussions did not take place at the major discussion events - where speaking and, as I fear, often thinking are left up to the experts on the panel. Once again, it was the alternative media work that created a space in the form of countless minidisc users, who were constantly interviewing others or one another - for one of the radio programs at the camp or at home, for Indymedia newswires, or simply as a documentation buried in private archives. Thinking was conducted in these interview discussions, a search for clarity and mutual comprehension. The "minidisc" device appeared to be generally accepted as a sign that this communication situation must not be disturbed. A similar function of media was staged in Peter Watkin's film project "La Commune", in which individual scenes were not linked by a uniform plot, but rather through anachronistically integrated television teams and their broadcasts.[19] However, whereas the boundary between journalists and actors was maintained in the film, it was largely dissolved at the border camp - just as it has been postulated not only in various Indymedia Mission Statements.

"Near-ly" - G8 Protests in Evian

* You were in Evian, weren't you?
* Yes, I mean no - I wasn't in Switzerland, but I was in the chatroom.

I spent the seven days of protest against the G8 summit in Evian on the "other" side of the communication space: not on the streets, blockades or in activist villages, but rather in chatrooms, streams, web sites, electronic mailing lists, Twikis. Physically, I was completely detached from the outside world, as though glued to the computer. Mentally/emotionally or even just based on the

amount of adrenaline produced, I was in the midst of it, nearly. Mind and heart were working full blast, always focused on what was happening "there", but nearly also nearby, here in the communication space that my screen represented, which I shared with people all over the world, into which information streamed through every possible channel. Dozens of IMCistas produced a continuous, overwhelming density of information and thus an almost real workspace and meeting point on the Internet. I could nearly simultaneously be in the chatroom with colleagues from Spain, Germany and the UK, additionally in the complex system of the jointly and multilingually used "dispatch" rooms, in which information was exchanged, checked, processed and publicized.
In this situation, being a media activist, for me, did not mean "reporting about", but rather "protesting" - specifically not only at the moment when the people in the media center in Geneva reported live on the storming of their "real space" and concretely requested help.
The Internet was no longer a tool that I used as one would use a telephone, but instead became a place due to the intensity of the communication, one that implacably demanded presence like a physical meeting place - when I am in the chatroom, I can't be carrying on a conversation at the kitchen table or go to the cinema at the same time.

"It was exciting, but at times, it was too much, even though we were more people than ever before. The fastness, the urge to do 10 things at a time, a lack of pre-structuring and priority setting pushed us to the limits - no teargas for the webheads, but exhaustion after days on end at the computer, completely forgetting about basic physical needs. It was matrix. One person stayed online for 36 hours. Direct media. The dynamics of 'being there' spread from the streets to the virtual world." [20]

Modes of communication and interaction from "meatspace" are reinvented for text-based web communication. One learns not only to understand, but even to feel icons and tags like <lol> and <brb> as smiles, winks or annoyance. In chat practice, the symbolic force of words can become so charged that even "spaces" and times for eating and drinking together can be created. In conjunction with these kinds of social interactions, intensive discussions conducted in parallel in workspaces and chatroom private rooms as the almost equivalent of corridors or coffee bars, also produce an emotional closeness that is nearly indistinguishable from face-to-face encounters in its intensity.[21]

Cyberpunk? I don't think so. Many media activists (the same as private persons, business people, professionals, gamers) are quite unspectacularly already right in the midst of the matrix, which William Gibson described as a darkly alien threat. Actually existing cyberspace today does not (yet?) consist of bio-technological apparatuses that connect the human body to electronic networks via electrodes. It emerges through the use of information technology tools of communication. In spring 2003, Indymedia alone was affiliated with 600 to 700 electronic mailing lists, over 600 users gather around the 2723 pages of the collective content management tool Twiki, not to mention the rarely less than 60 IRC chatrooms. Innumerable media groups are becoming more self-confident in dealing with radio and video streams, the RSS syndication of web sites, satellite dishes, wireless connections and, not least of all, the use of the non-commercial open source operating system Linux. This practice is not a virtual reality as it was imagined in the eighties as a graphical simulation of reality. It takes place at the keyboard just as much as in the technicians' workshops, on the streets and in the temporary media centers, in tents, in socio-cultural centers and squatted houses.

At least at the level of information transfer, the results are impressive. Evian and Strasbourg are only two examples of many: for Evian innumerable individual reports in at least six European languages were conjoined on a single web site[22] via RSS and prepared in several summarizing reports.[23] Those on the streets could get messagesfrom friends via SMS about what was happening where. The permanent presence of portable, mobile, transportable media equipment on the street, whether in the form of buses or public access terminals, satellite dishes or camera and minidisc recording devices, affects more than reporting – it changes the form of political articulation, can become part of interventions, contribute to the permanent production of the public sphere, a public sphere no longer has to distinguish between "real" and "virtual". It is thus only logical when parts of the global protest movement increasingly demand not only "free movement", but also "free communication" while skillfully connecting virtual and physical space: during the G8 protests in Evian, a demonstration procession visited the WTO, the International Organisation for Migration[24], and the World Intellectual Property Organisation, and we may look forward to actions around the UN summit "World Summit of the Information Society" in December 2003 with great anticipation.

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[1]The genealogy of this global protest movement has not (yet) been fixed. For some, the first Zapatista revolt in 1994 was the initial spark, others refer to older movements in their respective countries, yet others posit one of the action days synchronized around the world at the beginning.

[2]This ambiguousness is discussed, for instance, by Boris Buden: Forever young. Negris Multitude as Post- Emancipatory Concept of Emancipation. In: www.eipcp.net/transversal, Space of Empire, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0603/buden/en; and Maurizio Lazzarato: Struggle, Event, Media. In: www.eipcp.net/transversal, representations, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1003/fr/en. Buden states that "we have no feeling of political belonging within the multitude and can develop no sense of binding solidarity with the other 'members'." Lazzarato concentrates on the transition from a political-emancipatory grand narrative to a mode of possibilities that became evident in the event of Seattle.

[3]Examples of virtual workspaces would be, for instance, irc.indymedia.org or the directory of nearly 700 Indymedia email lists; the Polymedia Lab planned for the WSIS or the Indymedia Center in Genoa could be named among the countless temporary "convergence centers" and media centers.

[4]Access to the communication spaces of the tech/media activists is limited by new and classical mechanisms of exclusion - on the topic "Gender and Indymedia", see for instance the short-term study by Blue: Leftist Techies and patriarchy, 17.01.2002 19:10. online on the Internet http://de.indymedia.org/2002/01/13720.shtml [24 Sept 2003]

[5] http://www.noborder.org

[6] Currently: http://www.indymedia.org.uk. More on the history of this collective: Annie und Sam: From Indymedia Uk to the United Kollektives. Scheduled for publication in Media Development 2 (2003). Online on the Internet http://ionnek.strg.at/bin/view/Main/ImcUkMd

[7]Call: http://noborder.org/strasbourg/display/item_fresh.php?id=1&lang=en

[8]A database that stores data on migrants, activists and others and thus refers to the new border regime supported by information technology. Online introduction: http://noborder.org/strasbourg/topics/back/display.php?id=33&lang=en

[9]See http://www.dsec.info

[10]Cf. Geert Lovink's post to nettime, 2 July 2002 online: http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0207/msg00147.html

[11]More on the role and concept of the publiXtheatre bus in the article by Jürgen Schmidt: another war is possible // volXtheater. In: www.eipcp.net/transversal, real public spaces, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1203/schmidt/en. Reports online: http://zone.noborder.or, Link: diary and http://no-racism.net/noborderlab, Link: project archive Strasbourg.

[12]Online report on the workshop: http://de.indymedia.org/2002/07/26955.shtml

[13]Cf. Valentina Djordjevic: Von "emily postnews" zu "help manners". Netiquette im Internet. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin 1996: http://duplox.wz-berlin.de/texte/vali/index.html

[14] Online: http://www.catb.org/~esr/faqs/smart-questions.html

[15]Cf. the description by Jürgen Schmidt: another war is possible // volXtheater. In: www.eipcp.net/transversal, real public spaces, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1203/schmidt/en, pictures: http://zone.noborder.org/pics/research_sis

[16] LeMonde Interactif 27 July 2002

[17]Shuddhabrata Sengupta: No Border Camp Strasbourg : A Report, 29 Jul 2002: http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2002-July/001673.html

[18]Cf. Hito Steyerl: Die Artikulation des Protestes. In: Gerald Raunig, TRANSVERSAL. Kunst und Globalisierungskritik. Vienna 2003, 19-28, and ibid., The Articulation of Protest: http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0303/steyerl/en

[19]For more on this project, see Michaela Pöschl: "... beyond the limitations of the rectangular frame". In: www.eipcp.net/transversal, representations, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1003/poeschl/en

[20]From a reflection on reporting on Evian: http://ionnek.strg.at/bin/view/Main/EvianExperience. This also includes further details on the IT tools used.

[21]Cf. Bernhard Debatin: Analyse einer öffentlichen Gruppenkonversation im Chat-Room. Lecture held at the annual conference of the section Computer Mediated Communication of the DGPuK in Munich 1997. Online: http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~debatin/German/Chat.htm

[22] http://www.indymedia.org/g8

[23]E.g. the online summary from IMC UK http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/12/282510.html

[24] One of the institutions for "global governance", cf.: http://www.noborder.org/iom/index.php