

Z_NIFFING THE NET: HACKING vs HACKTIVISM

The following conversation between Claudia Giannetti and myself took place in February, 2001 during my research residency in MECAD, Barcelona, Spain.

Claudia.Giannetti : We all know that since the early 90's Hacktivism has become one of the most controversial activities in the information war and in the networked culture. How would you describe this quest in the wild wide web and what to your opinion is its social significance wider then breaking into computers?

Jenny Marketou : I think that our perception of hacktivism has been prejudiced ,in that only we tend to perceive it as an evil and mean act. Many times it has been identified with cyber terrorism and media has portrayed hackers as secretive,destructive intruders committing on line attacks in the name of social protest. I have come to think of " hacktivism " oth as an important phenomenon and as a metaphor for how we digitally manipulate and think through the electronic culture that engulfs us and how this demonstration of virtuosity can be addressed in the arena of theoretical, cultural politics and esthetics. There is nodoubt that "hacktivism" is a new breed of cultural activism, a syntax for resistance and critical discourse- wired and confrontational. It requires skills and constantly an update of tools ,a code race , escalating tactics in response to counter measures. But the importance of hacktivism has a wider social and historical significance which may help us to understand the full cultural implications of an increasingly networked world.

"Hacktivism" is a process involving a combination of information dissemination, direct action, and creative solutions. Hacktivism is a continually evolving and open process; its tactics and methodology are not static. In this sense no one owns hacktivism - it has no prophet, no gospel and no canonized literature. Hacktivism is a rhizomic, open-source phenomenon". <http://thehacktivist.com> " on line zine of April, 2001.

CG: What is the unifying feature between "hackers' and on line 'activists" ?

JM: But as there are many kinds of hackers there are many kinds of hacktivism. As Oxblood Ruffin -- whom some credit for coining the word "hacktivism" - pointed out that he now distinguishes between hacktivism and simple "[h]activism". "The former seeks to remedy the net of bad code, restriction, lack of access, etc.; the latter seeks to use the net as an agent for social justice on the ground through various protest actions, or as a publicity

medium." Thus hacktivism gives the possibility of political expression but is not itself confined to the concept of political motivation. Here is where most of the misapprehension lies: the use of the Internet and computer technology for political purposes is NOT necessarily hacktivism. It can be, but it is not arbitrarily so.

In my opinion there is "hacktivism" the process of ensuring through computer hacking methods that the internet remains a location in which people are entitled to freedom of speech, information and exchange of ideas. This freedom is expressed through the reconstruction of new systems on line such as "open source" and using the net as a platform for civil disobedience to protest a logical extension of the street-based protest.

But there is also "hacktivism" the process appropriated by many net artists of infiltrating hacking culture and strategies and which contributes to the formation of new configurations of characters, space, time and play on the net. Artists have always used their process as a strategy and means for subversion and resistance. I believe maintaining the internet as a medium on open-source standards, so that it facilitates the freedom of expression including political expression can be a unifying feature between hackers, activists and net artists.

On the other hand is the computer underground hackers, who usually after their arrest have been absorbed by the world's big business and venture capitalism. These computer underground hackers can be defined by their compulsive digital virtuosity, anonymity and technical skills, and who directly manipulate the code, breaking into the economy and system of the internet in order to access and manipulate certain information.

It is not paradoxical that art of hacking or net war has become very apparent on the internet especially since information is becoming more and more valuable in our e-economy. In which case the intention and ethics which drive both artists hackers and computer underground hackers are the same. The intention is to dismantle the present economic logic of the internet in order to take it forward into a state of free public space. The debate about Microsoft and Linux is another occasion to examine the meaning of operating systems as the foundation of the contemporary "information society". The event emphasizes the ways operating systems function, their relationships to social systems (politics, economics, culture, education, etc.) and the alternatives to MS operating systems. Naturally, the nineties of this century weren't the first ones to discover that information counts. Technology or science (if one may even separate these two fields after Heidegger) were involved in only one aspect: the encryption of one's own messages and the decryption of the enemy's. To use a more current metaphor the information war is like sports there are two teams, offense and defense. Any kind of hacktivism is always followed by countermeasures. Everytime a hacker will event something, the state state security adopts a strategy for defense.

CG: Can you give me some examples of artists and collective groups which work with the above methods?

JM: One of the most powerful weapons in the Zapatista's National Liberation Army was the group Electronic Disturbance Theater, which operates out of New York City. The collective group of four net activists and programmers through on-violent and direct action use the net to bring pressure on institutions engaged in unethical actions. Within the electronic environment EDT aims to disrupt the operation of information and capital flows of carefully selected target sites without causing serious damage. These four net activists, specialized in virtual sit-ins. Using a Javascript tool called FloodNet. (www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ZapTact.html) would organize thousands of on line protesters to access the website of Mexico's President Zedillo with up to 600.000 hits a minute.

The collective group of five UK activists called Electrohippies (www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/ehippies) is not a formal or organised group. The group is a collective of computer and IT specialist, and professional campaigners, who have been working together for over two years to develop 'online community activism'. The electrohippie collective group is known for the World Trade Organization Virtual Sit-In and a special action "Resistance is Fertile" initiated an e-mail campaign targeting 78 officials and US Department of Agriculture to build pressure against genetically modified foods. As part of the organisation of protests to mark the FTAA's conference in Quebec on April 19, 2001 the electrohippie collective group organised protests on line for the public to participate and communicate their dissatisfaction about the issues being decided against their will. This is a rehearsal for 'the main event' that takes place in November, 2001 - the next World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Qatar. Given the nature of the Qatar state, as detailed extensively by human Rights Watch, it is unlikely that any realistic protest action could take place around the next WTO conference.

In 1998 X-Pilot Group re-wrote text on the Mexican government's Website while the Hong Hong Blonde a group of hacktivists in Hong Kong with over 100 members were e-mailing Chinese Internet Users Web pages which have been banned by their government.

CG: Don't you think a lot of the "bad" image of hacking has to do with the media?

JM: All "hacking" / "activism" is surrounded by some kind of noise which is precisely makes its reception possible. All this noise is highlighted and stressed

by the media and by the hacktivists themselves and raises our expectations and our fears and fantasies of what it will come next or what it will happen.

The activity itself embodies the elements of both fear and fascination, and its aura of anonymity, sedentarily, repetitiveness makes hacking suitable for media hyperboles. I also think media and the computer security industry have helped in promoting this fear by the way information has always been controlled, yet any information we get about cases of hacking through media is sensationalized and reduced to computer-based activities diverting our attention away from its significant social implications. So it is very convenient to perpetuate this "evil image" of hacker. But the mainstream always creates this kind of alienation with anything marginal or any form of resistance until it is embraced and domesticated by it. Making hackers celebrities advances their disempowerment and consumerism absorbs the subversive impulse and this is the fear that like "terrorism" or "democracy" hacktivism can become an empty term.

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CG: Why do you think society needs this dark side of information technology?

JM: We have been always fascinated by the "black box" and the technical virtuosity of hackers who manipulate them, but at the same time we are fearful of their lack of transparency and the fact that our conventional concept of technological experts may be fatally undermined by largely anonymous, unaccountable and potentially subversive technological whiz-kids. As the perennial nature of techno-anxiety is illustrated by the historical range of cultural expressions that give it voice. It is present in the fate of such Greek mythological

figures as Prometheus and Icarus; it is vividly portrayed in Mary Shelley's gothic classic Frankenstein. The Zeitgeist that hackers personify has been vividly expressed in the fictional genre of cyberpunk novel Neuromancer and science fiction films such as Blade Runner , Terminator , Hackers and Matrix.

CG: How are Web art and hacktivism related?

JM: I believe the context is essential in defining within which the meaning of "hacktivism" resides. The web is the paradise of no-copyright, plagiarism, confusion and exchange. And many net artists believe that creativity is not creating something new but learning to use what it already exists. The "hacktivist net artist" instead of producing physical objects it organizes and deconstructs information , from the inside system in order to wake up the consciousness of the user.

Conceptual artists have always been cultural hackers like sampling rap MC, in their effort to manipulate existing techno-semiotics structures towards different end, to get inside internet systems and feel free to make them do things they never intended to do. This kind of ability to use the system as a mechanism of protest among artists and artists collectives has a long history, going back to Dada, or to Duchamp who took the female identity of Rose Selavy or snatched Mona Lisa and put the urinal in the white cube of the gallery and to the derive of the "Situationists" Their practice not only he reconstructed a new system of meanings and representation but also shocked because it was expressed inside the boundaries of a bourgeois world.

Game patching or cracking the code of popular games is also another paradigm of "hacks" which also implies and includes the act of tearing open a finished program to get at the underlying code and explore what new coinages are invented when the process is an open -ended system , yet invites the user/browser to create their own work. The artists group Mongrel created the "National Heritage" Photoshop plug-in to address issues of racism, identity and neo-eugenics online. The artists group @RTMark project The Simcopter Hack channeled \$5000 as a reward to a Silicon valley programmer for substituting naked kissing boys for buxom babes, tuba players and other computer game staples. The collective group @RTMark moved on to other forms of online activism, creating a doppelganger to the official Website for GATT and championing European art group eToy in their fight with toy retailer eToys.

The group from Bologna known as [http:// www.0100101110101101](http://www.0100101110101101) the name of their internet site whose creative hacktivism has become very controversial. The group came into the limelight for having hacked on May 1999 hell.com the most popular elitist Net art museum. The mirror site was published in an anti-copyright version without password protection and month later the

activists downloaded and modified Art.Teleportacia, the first art gallery to appear on the Web. The gallery's exhibition, "Miniatures of the Heroic Period," was renamed "Hybrids of the Heroic Period" and the works on display are radically altered. Darko Maver, the Serbian artist who set Venice Biennial and Europe buzzing in 1999 for the glumness, the radicalism, but also the weirdness of his artistic actions, is an inexistent person, he is a figment of the lively imagination of 0100101110101101.ORG. This year the same group in collaboration with epidemic.com they set again the Venice Biennial, 2001 on fire by creating the spy.net virus as an art project which was free to the public to download.

The Knowbotic Research is another collective based in Zurich whose internet project XXXXConnective Force Attack <http://h---h.de> was presented this fall 2001 as part of the exhibition AUSSENDIEST in Hamburg's public domain.

Connective Force Attack allows the public to carry out "brute force attacks" on the internet server of the city of Hamburg. The goal of participants is to penetrate the information medium and deposit their own content in a password protected internet domain. The software is distributed on CD ROMs free-of-charge in Hamburg's tube stations. Participants in the connective force attack-open way to public which can organize themselves in a chat environment in order to subdivide the area being searched for the password. By doing so, they heighten the efficiency of the attack. (social connective efficiencies). At the same time, the progress of the attacks is presented on infomonitors in the city's tube trains. Some 1,100 datascreens (monitors) installed in tube trains run by the Hamburg Transport Authority will offer a further project window presenting the project 'offline' to a wide audience.

What I would like to point out is that what all of the above net artists have been trying to explore is that art in the web can really become "participatory", "connective" and "open sourced". From this directory they feel free on one hand to explore tactics of "hacktivism" and the complexities of computer systems and on the other hand to attack the mechanisms and the myth of the art system itself by questioning not only the originality or authorship as a collective process but by structuring their own models in their process.

Finally I should refer here to the essay "Avant-garde as Software" by the new media theorist Lev Manovich in which he argues that the concerns of the new media avant-garde have shifted from fixed representation to new ways of accessing and manipulating information. Perhaps it is time to abandon the traditional, stable and enduring finished works of the artworld we know and we should rethink and reconsider the models of our creativity towards a more open-ended and unfixed process which accepts mutations and collective process.

CG: Do you think that the phenomenon of hacktivism and provocation has become very fashionable and many net artists have adopted those tactics?

JM: I will not call it fashion because "fashion" is can be a transparent pleasure and we know that any kind of meditation by passes sheer pleasure ,on the contrary "hacktivism" is a subversion of the means which requires the awareness of the viewer.

The hacktivism mailing list (hacktivism.tao.ca) -- an e-mail discussion list started last summer to grapple with this combination of hacking and activism -- has carried debate about whether such attacks are nothing more than glorified censorship, with activists simply hampering the opposing side's right to speak. It is very apparent that the net allows a artists to bypass traditional systems for advertising and promoting their work. The net artists literally have taken media's role because they are able to play the media. I do not need to tell you the art-world is extremely competitive and a very steeply-sided pyramid. So artists do things they think will gain them attention or notoriety, Of course. But why does this have anything more to do with hacktivism than any other 'strategy', than anything else?

CG: And what about women "hacktivist?"

JM: Hacktivism is associated with computer skills and virtuosity which reflects an all male cyberculture an underground society which often has the misogynistic stink of a high school boys locker room. Paul Taylor a British sociologists and author of Hackers : Crime in the Digital Sublime" argues in his book that it has been very difficult to find women hackers. The same author and the MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle have spun Freudian theories from (crackers have a masculine desire to penetrate into an unwilling system) to the sociological (men seek hard mastery over abstract systems while women seek soft mastery over social situations.)

My current thought is much broader than the above dualities of either/or alternatives .I am looking from the post feminist point of view into a more pluralistic conception of culture, of gender and therefore of hacktivism is not reduced to a mere sexual desire but it can be questioned by the fact that hacktivism has also an ideological as well as cultural component so it can be read in relation to what it presents. While I was researching ABC news I found that women are more common in hacktivism, hacking with an ethical or political end, than in other parts of the illegal hacking community. So female hacktivists do exist.

Don't you remember that the Philippine police thought the Love Bug computer virus was written by Onelus sister, Irene de Guzman. A woman, Carmin Karasic

(her real name), a software engineer, one of the members of The Electronic Disturbance Theater group wrote FloodNet.. She is also a well known artist - engineer who has exhibited internationally and her work is currently on line UK based PROCESS Art-in -Progress virtual gallery. Blueberry, a 32-year-old hacker from Brisbane, Australia, teamed up with law enforcement to oppose child pornography with her volunteer group condemned.org. A woman who goes by the name Natasha Grigori started out in the early 1990s running a bulletin-board system for software pirates. Now, at age 40-plus, she is the founder of antichildporn.org, a group of hackers who use their skills to track kiddie-porn distributors.

Cornelia Sollfrank an artist based in Hamburg and active member of the Cyberfeminist group ,has been researching on women hackers ,in her video"Notes from the Electronic Underground" talks with Clara G.Sopht, the reflective and unpredictable hacker at the Berlin Convention 1999.

Finally talking about hacking conventions female hacktivists were present this last year in Berlin during the HAL 2000 conference (www.haecksen.org) and they will be present again. Rena Teigen

CG: At this point, Jenny, I would be interested in learning more about your work.

JM: I became interested in hacking and code cracking a few years ago as I was researching ways to create the virtual persona of Chris.053 an artificial intelligence a bot, for my web based project SMELL.BYTES.

Since then I have been creating artificially intelligent agents/ bots, with hacking and tracking behaviors, which vary from IP snatching and reappropriating codes to getting personal information from privately networked environments such as CU SEEME chat rooms. My goal is to develop website controlled, electronically based installations and participatory environments/lounges that use transformational imagery to explore the fluidity of subjectivity and neo-eugenics by linking digital odors, (science) algorithms, software and telepresence on net .What kind of new coinage can be created through the open source agency of information hacking, and data base processing. What has always interested me is the body, embodied or disembodied, its relation to space and time as well as the potentiality and meanings of embodiment within an environment built around and within communication technologies, with a special regard to the relationship between technology, body, and subjectivity, space and time.

And now I am in Barcelona with a grant from MECAD to do further research on hacking, pranking and open sourcing and the role these strategies have played in the construct of a sociopolitical imaginary in our networked culture. I am

particularly interested a how the above tactics have been dynamically appropriated and how the computer underground hacktivism has been infiltrated and interpreted in the work of many internet artists and collective groups working on the net and especially women.

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<http://www.mecad.org/e-journal/numero6/marco.htm>

<http://smellbytes.banff.org>

<http://www.taystes.net>

<http://www.netartcommons.net>