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makeworlds [paper1](#) | [paper2](#) | [paper3](#) | [paper4](#)

[Home](#) » [paper#2](#)

A Virtual World is Possible: From Tactical Media to Digital Multitudes

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I. We start with the current strategy debates of the so-called "anti-globalisation movement", the biggest emerging political force for decades. In Part II we will look into strategies for critical new media culture in the post-speculative phase after dotcommania. There are four phases of the global movement becoming visible, which all have their own distinctive political, artistic and aesthetic qualities.

1. The 90s and tactical media activism In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall the term 'tactical media' arose as a renaissance of media activism, blending old school political work and artists' engagement with new technologies. During the early nineties there was a growing awareness of gender issues, exponential growth of media industries and the increasing availability of cheap do-it-yourself equipment created a new sense of self-awareness amongst activists, programmers, theorists, curators and artists. Media were no longer seen as merely tools for the Struggle, but experienced as virtual environments whose parameters were permanently 'under construction'. This is the golden age of tactical media, open to issues of aesthetics, experimenting with alternative forms of story telling. However, these liberating techno practices did not immediately translate into visible social movements. Rather, they symbolized the celebration of media freedom, in itself a great political goal. The media used – from video, CD-ROM, cassettes, zines and flyers to music styles such as rap and techno - varied widely, as did the topics. Commonly shared was a feeling that politically motivated activities, be they art or research or advocacy work, were no longer part of a politically correct ghetto and could intervene in 'pop culture' without necessarily having to compromise with the 'system.' With everything up for negotiation, new coalitions could be formed. The current movements, worldwide, cannot be understood outside of the very personal and diverse cry for the digital freedom of expression.

2. 99-01: The period of big mobilizations By the end of the nineties the post-modern 'time without movements' had come to an end. The organized discontent against neo-liberalism, global warming policies, labour exploitation

 Search

paper#2

- ▣ **A Virtual World is Possible: From Tactical Media to Digital Multitudes**
- ▣ **Touching an elephant**
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- ▣ **Porto Alegre - Todays Bandung?**
- ▣ **Wandering between two worlds**
- ▣ **The European Social Forum: Sovereign and Multitude**
- ▣ **Fences of Enclosure, Windows of Possibility**
- ▣ **A brief history of the noborder network**
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- ▣ **Is it a Yes Men Satire? Yes, it is Yes Men, but it's not a satire**
- ▣ **Anti-Capitalism with a smiley face**
- ▣ **Sabotaging capital whilst having fun**
- ▣ **Virtuosity and Revolution**
- ▣ **Social entropy and recombination**
- ▣ **The Dark Side of the Multitude**

and numerous other issues converged. Equipped with networks and arguments, backed up by decades of research, a hybrid movement gained momentum, wrongly labelled by mainstream media as 'anti-globalisation.' It seemed one of the specific flags of that movement, that it hasn't been able and willing to answer the question, which constitutes any kind of movement on the rise, any generation on the move: what's to be done? There was and there is no answer, no alternative – either strategic or tactical – to the existing world order, to the dominant mode of globalisation.

And maybe this is the most important, and liberating, conclusion: there's no way back to the twentieth century, the protective nation state and the gruesome tragedies of the 'left.' It had been good to remember, but equally good to throw off, the past. The question 'what's to be done' should not be read as an attempt to re-introduce Leninist principles in whatever form. The issues of strategy, organization and democracy belong to all times. We neither want to bring back old policies through the backdoor, nor do we think that this urgent question can be dismissed with the (justified) argument of crimes committed under the banner of Lenin. When he looks in the mirror Slavoj Zizek may see Father Lenin, but that's not the case for everyone. It is possible to wake up from the nightmare of historical communism and (still) pose the question: what's to be done? Can a 'multitude' of interests and backgrounds ask that question, or is the agenda the one defined by the summit calendar of world leaders and the business elite?

Nevertheless, the movement has been growing rapidly. At first sight, by using a pretty boring and very traditional medium: the mass-mobilization of tens of thousands in the streets of Seattle, hundreds of thousands in the streets of Genoa. Tactical media networks played an important role in its coming into being. From now on pluriformity of issues and identities was a given reality. Difference is here to stay and no longer needs to legitimize itself against higher authorities such as the Party, the Union or the Media. This is the biggest gain compared to previous decades. The 'multitudes' are not a dream or some theoretical construct but a reality.

If there is a strategy, it's not contradiction, but complementary existence. Despite theoretical deliberations, there is no contradiction between the street and cyberspace. The one fuels the other. Protests against WTO, neo-liberal EU policies, and party conventions are all staged in front of the gathered world press. Indymedia crops up as a parasite of the mainstream media. Instead of having to beg for attention, protests place under the eyes of the world media during summits of politicians and business leaders, seeking direct confrontation. Alternatively, symbolic sites are chosen such as border regions (East-West Europe, USA-Mexico) or refugee detention centres (Frankfurt airport, the centralized Eurocop database in Strasbourg, the Woomera detention centre in the Australian desert). The global entitlement of the movement adds a new layer of globalisation from below to the ruling mode of globalisation, rather than just objecting to it.

3. Confusion and resignation after 9-11 At first glance, the future of the movement is a confusing and irritating one. Old-leftist grand vistas, explaining US imperialism and its aggressive unilateralist foreign policy, provided by Chomsky, Pilger and other baby boomers are consumed with interest but no longer give the bigger picture. In a polycentric world conspiracy theories only provide temporary comfort for the confused. No moralist condemnation of capitalism is necessary. Facts and events speak for themselves. It is the situation that drives people to the street, not an analysis (neither ours nor the one from Hardt & Negri). The few remaining leftists can no longer provide the movement with an ideology, as it works perfectly without one. "We don't need your revolution." Even the 70s and 80s social movements, locked up in their NGO structures, have a hard time keeping up. New social formations are taking possession of the streets and media spaces, without feeling the need of representation by some higher authority, not even the heterogenous committees gathering in Porto Alegre.

So far this movement has been bound in clearly defined time/space coordinates. It still takes months to mobilize multitudes and organize the logistics, from buses and planes, camping grounds and hostels, to independent media centres. This movement is anything but spontaneous (and does not even claim to be so). People travel hundreds or thousands of miles to attend protest

- ▣ [What is to be Thought? What is to be Done?](#)
- ▣ [A Visit to the Sarai New Media Initiative Delhi](#)
- ▣ [Homo Politicus Pim Fortuyn: A Case study](#)
- ▣ [noborder Camp 02](#)
- ▣ [The dark side of Camping](#)
- ▣ [A Visit to the Sarai New Media Initiative Delhi](#)
- ▣ [Dark Fiber](#)
- ▣ [noborder Camp 02](#)
- ▣ [The dark side of Camping](#)
- ▣ [Borders: Walking Across, as opposed to Flying Above](#)
- ▣ [Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?](#)
- ▣ [The clash in the western mind](#)
- ▣ [The Transformation of Security](#)

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- ▣ [recent posts](#)
- ▶ [news aggregator](#)

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rallies, driven by real concerns, not by some romantic notion of socialism. The question: "reform or revolution?" sounds more like a worn-out blackmail to give the politically correct answer.

The contradiction between selfishness and altruism is also a false one. State-sponsored corporate globalisation affects everyone. International bodies such as the WTO, the Kyoto Agreement on global warming, or the privatisation of the energy sector are no longer abstract news items, dealt with by bureaucrats and (NGO) lobbyists. That insight has been the major political quantum leap of recent times. Is this the Last International? No. There is no way back to the nation state, to traditional concepts of liberation, the logic of transgression and transcendence, exclusion and inclusion. Struggles are no longer projected on a distant Other that begs for our moral support and money. We have finally arrived in the post-solidarity age. As a consequence, national liberation movements have been replaced by a power analysis, which is simultaneously incredibly abstract, symbolic and virtual, while terribly concrete, detailed and intimate.

4. Present challenge: liquidate the regressive third period of marginal moral protest. Luckily September 11 has had no immediate impact on the movement. The choice between Bush and Bin Laden was irrelevant. Both agendas were rejected as devastating fundamentalisms. The all too obvious question: "whose terror is worse?" was carefully avoided as it leads away from the pressing emergencies of everyday life: the struggle for a living wage, decent public transport, health care, water, etc. Both social democracy and the real existing socialism depended heavily on the nation state. A return to the 20th century sounds as disastrous as all the catastrophes it produced. The concept of a digital multitude is fundamentally different and entirely based on openness. Over the last few years the struggles of the multitudes have created outputs on many different layers: the dialectics of open sources, open borders, open knowledge. The deep penetration of the concepts of openness and freedom into the principle of struggle is by no means a compromise to the cynical and greedy neo-liberal class. Progressive movements have always dealt with a radical democratisation of the rules of access, decision-making and the sharing of gained capacities. Usually it started from an illegal or illegitimate common ground. Within the bounds of the analogue world it led to all sorts of cooperatives and self-organized enterprises, whose specific notions of justice were based on efforts to circumvent the brutal regime of the market and on different ways of dealing with the scarcity of material resources.

We're not simply seeking proper equality on a digital level. We're in the midst of a process which constitutes the totality of a revolutionary being, as global as it is digital. We have to develop ways of reading the raw data of the movements and struggles and to make their experimental knowledge legible. To encode and decode the algorithms of its singularity, nonconformity and non-foundability. To invent, refresh and update the narratives and images of a truly global connectivity. To open the source code of all the circulating knowledge and install a virtual world.

Bringing these efforts down to the level of production challenges new forms of subjectivity, which almost necessarily leads to the essential conclusion that everyone is an expert. There's a superflux of human resources and a brilliance of everyday experience, which get dramatically lost in the 'academification' of radical left theory. The new ethical-aesthetic paradigm lives on in the pragmatic consciousness of affective labour, in the nerdish attitude of a digital working class, in the omnipresence of migrant struggles as well as many other border-crossing experiences, in deep notions of friendship within networked environments as well as the 'real' world.

II. Let's now look at strategies for Internet art & activism. Critical new media culture faces a tough climate of budget cuts in the cultural sector and a growing hostility and indifference towards new media. But hasn't power shifted to cyberspace, as Critical Art Ensemble once claimed? Not so if we look at the countless street marches around the world.

The Seattle movement against corporate globalisation appears to have gained momentum – both on the street and online. But can we really speak of a synergy between street protests and online 'hacktivism'? No, but what they have in common is their (temporal) conceptual stage. Both real and virtual

protests risk getting stuck at the level of a global 'demo design,' no longer grounded in actual topics and local situations. This means the movement never gets out of beta. At first glance, reconciling the virtual and the real seems to be an attractive rhetorical act. Radical pragmatists have often emphasized the embodiment of online networks in real-life society, dispensing with the real/virtual contradiction. Net activism, like the Internet itself, is always hybrid, a blend of old and new, haunted by geography, gender, race and other political instances. There is no pure disembodied zone of global communication, as the 90s cyber-mythology claimed.

Equations such as street plus cyberspace, art meets science, and 'techno-culture'—all interesting interdisciplinary approaches—are proving to have little effect beyond the symbolic level of dialogue and discourse. The fact is that established disciplines are in a defensive mode. The 'new' movements and media are not yet mature enough to question and challenge the powers that be. In a conservative climate, the claim to 'embody the future' becomes a weak and empty gesture.

On the other hand, the call of many artists and activists to return to "real life" does not provide us with a solution to how alternative new media models can be lifted to the level of mass (pop) culture. Yes, street demonstrations raise solidarity levels and lift us up from the daily solitude of one-way media interfaces. Despite September 11 and its right-wing political fallout, social movements worldwide are gaining importance and visibility. We should, however, ask the question "what comes after the demo version" of both new media and the movements?

This isn't the heady 60s. The negative, pure and modernist level of the "conceptual" has hit the hard wall of demo design as Peter Lunenfeld described it in his book 'Snap to Grid'. The question then becomes How to jump beyond the prototype? What comes after the siege of yet another summit of CEOs and their politicians? How long can a movement grow and stay 'virtual'? Or in IT terms, what comes after demo design, after the countless PowerPoint presentations, broadband trials and Flash animations? Will Linux ever break out of the geek ghetto? The feel-good factor of the open, ever growing crowd (Elias Canetti) will wear out; demo fatigue will set in. Does your Utopia version have a use-by date?

Rather than making up yet another concept it is time to ask the question of how software, interfaces and alternative standards can be installed in society. Ideas may take the shape of a virus, but society may hit back with even more successful immunization programs: appropriation, repression and neglect. What we face is a scalability crisis. Most movements and initiatives find themselves in a trap. The strategy of becoming "minor" (Guattari) is no longer a positive choice but the default option. Designing a successful cultural virus and getting millions of hits on your weblog will not bring you beyond the level of short-lived 'spectacle'. Culture jammers are no longer outlaws but should be seen as experts in guerrilla communication. Today's movements are in danger of getting stuck in self-satisfying protest mode. With access to the political process effectively blocked, further mediation seems the only available option. However, gaining more and more "brand value" in terms of global awareness may turn out to be like overvalued stocks: it might pay off, it might be worthless. The pride of "We have always told you so" is boosting the moral of minority multitudes, but at the same time it delegates legitimate fights to the level of official "Truth and Reconciliation Commissions" (often parliamentary or Congressional), after the damage is done.

Instead of arguing for "reconciliation" between the real and virtual we call here for a rigorous synthesis of social movements technology. Instead of taking the cyberpunk-derived "the future is now" position, a lot could be gained from a radical re-assessment of the techno revolutions of the last 10-15 years. For instance, if artists and activists can learn anything from the dot-com rise and subsequent fall it might be the importance of marketing. The attention economy of the dotcom eyeballs proved worthless.

This is a terrain of true taboo knowledge. Dot-coms invested their entire venture capital in (old media) advertisement. Their belief that media-generated attention would automatically draw users in and turn them into customers was unfounded. The same could be said of activist sites. Information "forms" us. But

new consciousness results less and less in measurable action. Activists are only starting to understand the impact of this paradigm. What if information merely circles around in its own parallel world? What's to be done if the street demonstration becomes part of the Spectacle?

Increasing tensions and polarizations as described here force us to question the limits of new media discourse. In the age of realtime global events Ezra Pound's definition of art as the antenna of the human race shows its passive, responsive nature. Art no longer initiates. One can be happy if it responds to contemporary conflicts at all and the new media arts sector is no exception here. New media arts must be reconciled with its condition as a special effect of the hard and software developed years ago.

Critical new media practices have been slow to respond to both the rise and fall of dotcommania. In the speculative heydays of new media culture (the early-mid 90s, before the rise of the World Wide Web), theorists and artists jumped eagerly on the not yet existing and inaccessible technologies such as virtual reality. Cyberspace generated a rich collection of mythologies; issues of embodiment and identity were fiercely debated. Only five years later, while Internet stocks were going through the roof, not much was left of the initial excitement in intellectual and artistic circles. Experimental techno culture missed out on the funny money. Recently there has been a steady stagnation of new media cultures, both in terms of concepts and funding. With millions of new users flocking onto the Net, the arts can no longer keep up and withdraws into its own little world of festivals, mailing lists and workshops.

Whereas new media arts institutions, begging for goodwill, still portray artists as working at the forefront of technological developments, the reality is a different one. Multi-disciplinary goodwill is at an all time low. At best, the artist's new media products are 'demo design' as described by Lunenfeld. Often it does not even reach that level. New media arts, as defined by its few institutions rarely reach audiences outside of its own electronic arts subculture. The heroic fight for the establishment of a self-referential 'new media arts system' through a frantic differentiation of works, concepts and traditions, might be called a dead-end street. The acceptance of new media by leading museums and collectors will simply not happen. Why wait a few decades anyway? Why exhibit net art in white cubes? The majority of the new media organizations such as ZKM, the Ars Electronica Centre, ISEA, ICC or ACMI are hopeless in their techno innocence, being neither critical nor radically utopian in their approach. Hence, the new media arts sector, despite its steady growth, is getting increasingly isolated, incapable of addressing the issues of today's globalised world, dominated by (the war against) terror. Let's face it, technology is no longer 'new,' the markets are down and out and no one wants know about it anymore. It's little wonder the contemporary (visual) arts world is continuing its decade-old boycott of (interactive) new media works in galleries, biennales and shows like Documenta XI.

A critical reassessment of the role of arts and culture within today's network society seems necessary. Let's go beyond the 'tactical' intentions of the players involved. The artist-engineer, tinkering on alternative human-machine interfaces, social software or digital aesthetics has effectively been operating in a self-imposed vacuum. Science and business have successfully ignored the creative community. Even worse, artists have actively been sidelined in the name of 'usability', pushed by a backlash movement against web design, led by the IT-guru Jakob Nielsen. The revolt against usability is about to happen. Lawrence Lessig argues that Internet innovation is in danger. The younger generation is turning its back the new media arts questions and operates as anti-corporate activists, if at all involved. After the dotcom crash the Internet has rapidly lost its imaginative attraction. File swapping and cell phones can only temporarily fill up the vacuum; the once so glamorous gadgets are becoming part of everyday life. This long-term tendency, now accelerating, seriously undermines future claims of new media.

Another issue is generationalism. With video and expensive interactive installations being the domain of the '68 baby boomers, the generation of '89 has embraced the free Internet. But the Net turned out to be a trap for them. Whereas assets, positions and power remain in the hands of the ageing baby boomers, the gamble on the rise of new media did not pay off. After venture capital has melted away, there is still no sustainable revenue system in place

for the Internet. The slow working educational bureaucracies have not yet grasped the new media malaise. Universities are still in the process of establishing new media departments. But that will come to a halt at some point. The fifty-something tenured chairs and vice-chancellors must feel good about their persistent sabotage. What's so new about new media anyway? Technology was hype after all, promoted by the criminals of Enron and WorldCom. It is sufficient for students to do a bit of email and web surfing, safeguarded within a filtered, controlled intranet. In the face of this rising techno-cynicism we urgently need to analyse the ideology of the greedy 90s and its techno-libertarianism. If we don't disassociate new media quickly from the previous decade, the isolation of the new media sector will sooner or later result in its death. Let's transform the new media buzz into something more interesting altogether - before others do it for us.

(Edited by David Teh)

[previous](#)
paper#2

[up](#)

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