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issue 17

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Gnomads, Apple Trees, and The Affairs of Men

A Fairytale About Activism

James Morgan on Feb 10 2002

issue 17

Art is a reaction to power, cultural activism and an attempt to shake up established belief structures to prepare society for future structures. Or is it merely self-expression, an effort to lay bare some hidden truth about what we are or what we feel?

Once upon a time the gods gathered for a marriage made in "heaven." This is a bit of a liberal interpretation of the actual event since the guest list had several notable exceptions, and the philandering "king" of the gods pursued the bride until he learned about the prophecy. Those were the days when prophets saw the future and not philosophers or new media authors. Anyhow the prophecy said that our bride's son would be greater than his father.

Perhaps this struck too close to home since this "king" had found himself greater than his father, castrated and cast him out to take his place of leadership. That is however another story, and not the proper subject of discussion at a wedding.

The wedding was set to be an amazing elegant affair. However as I said certain of the gods were intentionally left out with the hope of making the gathering less difficult. This did not sit well with the offended party who decided to avenge herself upon the gathering.

Art is a reaction to power, cultural activism and an attempt to shake up established belief structures to prepare society for future structures. Or is it merely self-expression, an effort to lay bare some hidden truth about what we are or what we feel? Activism is the ongoing labor to reveal an essential truth, to right the wrongs perpetrated by an offending organism. Perhaps rebellion is too attractive though, and the act of opposition becomes its own end in some cases. Terrorism is an act of rebellion by an individual or small committed group that has lost other methods of political engagement and adopted fear and murder as tools to reach an end. However, terrorism degenerates into a cycle of revenge that denies the possibility of political or social solutions.

Corporate globalization or global corporatization involves the movement of capital and creation of wealth for its few drivers. Everything it touches becomes a tool to make money despite its other purposes. The corporation alters or discards anything that does not generate money. This is the approach of the corporation to the network: change the network to generate profits. Further complicating matters is the individuation of the corporate data body. Are these an intimation of struggle between organizational systems?

Our humble gatecrasher brought a simple yet loaded gift and stealthily inserted it among the crowd. This gift was nothing to the giver but the recipient was to be "the fairest" of those present. Who was the bomb wrapped in the shape of a golden delicious for? "It is obviously for me," claimed three of the crowd in vain and thus began a contest that even the wisest would not judge. The decision was left to a hapless young man . . . To choose fate or to choose your bribe. Power, Glory, or Love,

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Lev Manovich
Mark Napier/Liza Sabater
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an easy decision for a young horny man, and contestant "A" won. A fair fight waged and all went home.

Activism is an organized struggle against structured/established power, action in pursuit of a political or social end regardless of whether it looks like art or tastes like terror. Artists are people, individuals who occasionally have lives and "real world" concerns, when these interests adopt political cause an artist becomes an activist. Art is a form of cultural activism, which makes for an easy marriage.

In contemporary writings about activism and virtual activism the words netwar, info-war, hactivism buzz endlessly around linking methodology to that of networks and then further to networked structures. Hactivism, the new little brother of activism, depends less on a group working as coordinated units and more on a unit operating in the network. But still the discussion shifts from commitment, knowledge and skill of the activist to the structure and organization. The implication is that the adoption of a new method of organization is important in the discourse of activism. Is this then the struggle of one form of communication / organization attempting to overtake another, or an example of a more efficient network model outperforming the older hierarchical one? These explanations present a romantic and simplistic view of the situation. It is not true that a networked group of activists is superior to a hierarchical group, but one possible advantage gained from the network would be that there is no clear leader to target on the street. Generally activism has not adopted rhizomatic structures. Actually rhizomatic structures can be harmful to activism. For example in dealing with Human Rights the existing hierarchical structures are more efficient at applying pressure and utilizing previous experiences both specific and general to bargain when a government begins to give in to demands.

Which is winning, the trees or the roots? There is an assumption that networks and trees exist as a binary pair, in opposition but there are no clear examples of either. The internet fits beautifully into Deleuze and Guattari's definition of a rhizome until you examine its underlying physical structure and realize the hierarchy of domain names, the fact that IP addresses are strata, central servers unpack IP addresses from names and that most web surfing passes through a few search engines. Every node can connect to every other node but it is done strictly hierarchically.

Certain nodes handle routing; these form a subset of all possible nodes. Specific computers store tables of names and these machines connect to make redundant trees that take a step toward resembling a rhizome. Each step up in the hierarchy provides a greater level of interconnectedness but the number of nodes diminishes. This small subset has ephemeral functions used by all nodes but is almost entirely invisible to end-users.

As fate would have it love was the most beautiful and the most desirable. Of course a great king in a far off land had wed her. With the aid of his new patron our hero visited the king who showed him great hospitality. A wink, a nod, and a smile led to our hero running off with the great king's wife. One might expect the story to end here, as the gods had satisfied humanity, and humanity had satisfied the gods, but ours is perhaps more of a Grimm tale.

The brother of the king just could not let this pass, and raised a great army to rescue the queen. This army recruited every male of fighting age. Mothers tried to hide great warriors to spare their lives, but nonetheless the army found them to fight and especially to die.

Thus the army waged an epic campaign and laid siege to a great walled city. This protected and fortified city offered the assaulting army no progress toward a victory. Various interludes of rape and pillage in the countryside spiced up the generally monotonous nature of the war until finally the great personalities entered the picture.

Terrorism's goal is fear or terror. Ironically the mass media provides the greatest source of fear both for terrorist groups and in general. The media uses spin and editing as its most effective weapon saying anything to get eyeballs: "Do you feel safe?" It is easier to sell an ad on an inexpensively produced program with little investigation and national sound bytes and where we see the poor crying parents of a local murdered child. The goal here is to shock us. Disaster sells, as does fear of city life.

Examples of activism against the corporation, one is from the so called "Battle of Seattle" the WTO protest that took place in Seattle on November 30, 1999 and is an example of activism. Example number two is the Ingreslock 1524 compromise of playboy.com where Ingres claims to have maintained a presence on Playboy.com servers for nearly three years and culminates with an inflammatory E-mail on November 21, 2001 provides an example of hactivism.

Protestors in Seattle had several things that worked in their favor and made them

effective. Each protest group became part of a larger structure through consensus, and was also split into smaller groups through affinity associations. These very small clutches then kept in touch via cell phones, E-mail and central news sites, they used existing media like police scanners and traditional news sources to track the movements of police officials and to track efforts to contain them. The cops had their heads up their butts. The county cops hated the city cops, there were rumors that everything would be violent and the protests were to kill some officers. Police communications broke down more than once. What we have is a well-organized networked attack against a structured mob.

Then there was the smaller fringe group, the Black Blocs. They are anarchists with a message, and willing to use violence. They wore masks, broke windows and spray painted graffiti. Were these people the looters and the violent aspect the FBI expected to kill peace officers? This is simply not possible, the Black Blocs attacked Starbucks and the Gap and when faced with nosy media spray painted cameras. The Blocs avoided conflict and actually had a harder time dealing with the peaceful protesters than they did with the police. They were in Seattle for one day, monopolized the press, and then disappeared.

It is arguable but moot that this inspired the people of the city to follow suit and begin to break windows (and loot - how wonderfully capitalistic). Blame for most acts of violence rested on the greater demonstration by media accounts, not to the Blocs and not to the looters.

The protestors benefited from unexpected numbers and found success in a solid plan that involved no leaders. The attempt to arrest leaders failed, and eventually the police were forced to give up. In the end it is apparent that the police were responsible for more violence than the protestors, looters and even the Blocs. Overall the protestors succeeded, but not merely because of the way they organized themselves.

By working as separate groups the protestors were able to move quickly and absorb new members. By using an open, trusted communication network they were able to react quickly to opposition tactics. However they were unable to adapt to the extremists in their midst, and did not have the connections to outside media to impact the sensationalism of the national media. The structure may have aided them physically but cost dearly by lack of clear spokespersons.

A Martyn Luther Ping, and a group calling themselves Ingreslock 1524 claim to have maintained a presence on playboy.com's servers since 1998, they cite specific incidences of other attacks and the attempts by Playboy systems administrators to secure these servers afterwards.

Ingres sent E-mail to every person in the database telling customers their credit card numbers were in jeopardy and gave them the credit card number to prove access. Further they accuse the sys-admin of being sloppy in their security and list several major points. The final point however is to the consumer and that is "don't trust the internet with your important data."

Okay here is a dumb question, is a loss of confidence fear? If so then Ingreslock represents terrorism, is pointing out false confidence creating a loss of confidence? The point is that any yutz with a thousand dollars worth of equipment can set up an e-commerce site and ask for credit card numbers, further a search on google.com (perhaps corrected by now due to the publicity) will reveal credit card numbers as well. Why is it so easy? Because there are people who just look like security running the show, somewhat like the pretend security in airports, it is all there for peace of mind and in actuality does nothing but slow things down. Security without standards is not security, but that is another story.

This provided a direct assault on the corporate data body and a challenge to the profit model of the "internet" business. It calls into question all assumptions about security and privacy and for good reason too. The end result questions our confidence, who do we trust.

What is the point of these examples? Both examples show how an work of activism, or an act of vandalism may be recast as terrorism. This is a bit of a stretch in both cases especially since so lives were in danger, but this distinction is unimportant to some.

The story became about the battle. Love turns to war. This has always been a popular topic for a story, or perhaps the script for a made for TV movie. With a wounded ego the greatest warrior withdrew from the battle almost costing his army the battle. Eventually a friend borrowed his infamous armor. Even this does not keep the friend alive. This angered the warrior so much that he rejoined the battle, slew the antagonist who had killed his friend and dragged the body around the funeral pyre. The gods then reenter the picture to see a decent burial for the slain antagonist.

The global corporation's activity in its need for profit is an obvious target for activism. The involvement of corporatization in global trade agreements and the exclusion of factions with closed meetings makes the people feel disenfranchised, and for good reason. Further this globalization has an interest in restructuring the Internet, to recreate familiar models that support profit. This may be a structure-based conflict.

Activism by its nature finds difficulty in operating entirely as a top down organization, especially when it comes to grass roots support. However it is possible for members of a small group to act on a subset of goals from a larger group through consensus.

Swarming, the act of very small groups coming together in a time of need, is very effective on the streets where hostility is measurable, but how effective has it been on-line? With the nature of computers being intermittent, the act of slowing down a web site or preventing access to a server would not seem significant. Especially when compared to the physical act of blocking doors to prevent employees from getting to work. Or is undermining confidence in the network stronger? Is it confidence in the corporation or the network?

Seattle's strategy was successful for more than one reason, the swarm tactics prevented the organization from being beheaded like successive demonstrations, but is that all that happened? The strategy of the protesters was solid and communication was good. The rhizome describes their method of communication more accurately than the groups participating.

The little nomadic assault groups of the '70s and '80s in Italy had proven ineffective. Upon reflection they saw themselves holding up the government they hated. The solution or the path to solution involved meeting in a more open approach of engagement instead of use of fear. This is an emphasis of collaboration over nomadism. Good ideas and communication bring freedom and equality, if one represses what people find liberating then communication works against you. The more knowledge a person takes in the better that they are to make a decision, and the more they can contribute to the 'cause' right?

Unable to overcome the defenses and after 10 years of battle the attackers make a giant sculpture for the patron (who failed at this point) and everyone went home. "It's a trick, it's a trick" cautioned the wise but those eager for a clean victory wanted to show their greatness and display the feat of defeat.

Ingres provides an example of a nomad, and the Bloc's are part of a network. The Italians found collaboration more useful than nomadism. This fusion of ideas comes forth in indymedia.org. Indymedia was founded out of Seattle when the activists realized just how important open source media was. This provides the broadest bandwidth, and it meets Deleuze & Guattari's model of a rhizome as any good network of all points to all points would, but unlike the internet all nodes contain indexes, yes the information is redundant but that is what makes it difficult to shut down. In this case, is the editor a head for the organization? Maybe, but the source is available in a raw form and also an edited form for those of us unwilling to put the time into culling rants for news. Any node to any node, removing a node leaves the network in tact and rebuildable. Then the hierarchical nature of the Internet lies over top of this network with the search engine, so it is a rhizome in an arbolic structure.

After dark, warriors break free from the sculpture revealing the treachery and the armies return with the defenses flung wide open. Men are killed women carried off into slavery, and beauty returned to her original husband who upon seeing her forgives her, for her beauty.

The moral is clear as mud, in abandoning nomadic assault groups the Italian dissidents were able to challenge the government and engage in discourse about issues of importance, to make change occur from the grass roots level. The single act of Ingres was dramatic and fed the worry of the consumer and corporation, which will further limit legitimate protest online in the future. The model adopted by anti-WTO was effective while un-counteracted but collaboration created a stronger rhizomatic news structure and a solid platform for future protest, and support of protest. The nomadic assault group seems to have the reverse effect but moving toward a more collaborative structure strengthens even a networked approach.

So if you can't be the prettiest, and you have got great competition for the fairest, you should at least make sure you invite everyone to the party. If not then some smart ass is going to see through to what you are doing and expose your vices and weaknesses to the rest of the world. And it just may end up involving sculpture or some other form of art too.

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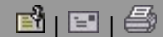
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