

Locality, locality, locality

[Anti-]Globalica: Conceptual and Artistic Tensions in the New Global Disorder, Wrocław, Poland, 1 May 2003.

Organized by Geoff Cox and Joasia Krysa from the Institute of Digital Art and Technology at the University of Plymouth, this symposium was part of 'Globalica', WRO3, 10th International Media Art Biennale. It undertook to 'investigate the local tensions around the ways in which artists and commentators respond to global processes ... against a backdrop of Poland's impending entry into the European Union (and neo-liberal capitalism)'. For the organizers, Hardt and Negri's fluid-form *Empire* and Žižek's 'Real' of neoliberal capitalism set the theoretical tone. Participants were invited to respond to questions such as: 'How does contemporary artistic practice respond to these tensions, especially when using or reflecting the use of network technologies? Do artists simply respond using the same fashionable rhetoric as the system they seek to question? What chance does networked resistance have of being resistant in such a scenario? How can digital technologies that inherently serve to support the process of globalization be used to promote and maintain what is locally specific, culturally and socially heterogeneous?'

The questions posed from the outset did not necessarily find responses in the diverse presentations that took place on the day. Adam Chmielewski's 'Globalism and Particularism: On the Particularity of Global Forces and Globality of Particularisms' opened gloomily with a general rumination on the death of difference, the end of class struggle, the loss of a definable enemy, and how the fight against globalization is doomed to failure. My own 'Two Worlds of Fortune: Culture and Dying in the Global Zone', which reflected on advertising slogans as consciousness-wrecking tools, struck a sombre Adornian note in analysing the current scene. But, more combatively, I proposed a cultural activism that subverts existing capitalist materials, by setting Benjamin's notion of 'positive barbarism' against Hardt and Negri's lifestyle-based drop-out barbarism. Benjamin's technology-based 'positive barbarism' was aligned with the cultural tactics of Billboard Liberation Front and other 'culture jammers', their mimetic and parodic techniques purloined from the post-Dada embracing of technology in art for democratizing ends.

Andreas Broeckmann, from the Berlin techno-arts festival Transmediale, went for heterodoxy, in his paper 'On the Heuristics of Artistic Action'. He rejected culture as too feeble a weapon in the struggle for global justice, and suggested that globalization is a myth, which could be proven by the fact that McDonald's burger bars are different the world over. He threw in some pious homilies from Rabindranath Tagore, who, speaking in the USA in 1916, delivered a call for co-operation rather than competition, reconciliation rather than fighting, as man strives towards a 'higher nature'. Broeckmann then proposed a ragbag of strategies for artists: Becoming the Media; Techno-cultural Interference; Translocal Wandering and Story-telling; Carnavalesque Performance. To what ends these strategies should be deployed was unclear, given the initial scepticism about culture's impact and the lack of an identifiable adversary.

Monica Narula from Raqs Media Collective in Delhi presented a punchier vision of the worldwide impact of globalization in a paper titled 'Stubborn Structures and Insistent Seepage: Art in a Networked World'. Above her head was projected a clockface whose numbers and

hands were substituted by place names and emotions. When there is panic in New York, indifference is on the dial in Baghdad. This was a vision of the network, an attempt to show that interconnections exist, even if they are structured on difference. Invoking those places that 'fall off the map', she presented typical existences that 'interfere' with capitalist covenants: the illegal immigrant, the terrorist and the electronic pirate. Art too should interfere, 'assailing certainties with quiet insistence'. This amounted in the end to a familiar plea. Artists inasmuch as they operate politically (or rather ethically, as presented here) should ask questions and pose 'the possibility of alterities, without itself taking on a transcendental position "outside" the network'.

James Stevens from Internet laboratory Deckspace in London's Greenwich followed with pragmatic suggestions for local IT action. Stevens introduced his project 'Consume', an effort to construct user-owned and -operated free local networks that evade the telecom monopoly. These rely on a transmitter that uses the only free part of the radiowave spectrum – microwave – to 'trip the local loop' and allow 'free exchange at the network's edge'. This is DIY 'hactivism', technologically astute and utterly persuaded of the wrongs of commodified corporatized technologies. This theme was continued with 'From Software to Hardware: From an Artistic Act to Social Activism' by Zoran Pantelic, a media activist from kuda-org in Novi Sad. Pantelic introduced the idea of a second wave of 'new media centres', and emphasized practical questions concerning access to the Net, media literacy, and the use and misuse of e-technologies, in relation to 'digital ecology in an age of image saturation'. Most importantly, he championed the ways in which the network can allow media activists across the world to exchange information and organize. In Pantelic's narrative this global connection was framed in some sense as a defeat, and as a loss of local significance. Lack of promotion of Internet technologies in Serbia had meant that media activists had more communication with those abroad who worked in a similar high-tech field than with those at home, despite the fact that much of their work was directed specifically towards countering Serbian nationalism through the 1990s.

The symposium ended with a contribution titled 'Politicians Are Redundant', from Polish artist Piotr Wyrzykowski, aka Peter Style. Style is part of the group CUKT (Technical Culture Central Office), which fielded a virtual candidate for the post of President of the Polish Republic recently. As the campaign put it: 'A group of people united in CUKT/Central Office for Technical Culture have conceived the idea that the best candidate for the President of Poland will not be a politician since we all know what they are like, but a virtual person who will have the chance not only to get electorate votes but to transform Poland into a Technical Culture Tiger.' The candidate – a sort of young Queen Elizabeth II-cum-Lara Croft lookalike who existed only virtually – took her policies from proposals sent in by the public to the website. This meant, of course, that her views were disparate and contradictory, progressive and repressive. The project garnered a fair amount of fascinated media coverage. Peter Style presented it as a project in electronic democracy, but what came across was rather a cynicism about politics as a whole, and the experiment's failure (candidate Viktoria Cukt received only a few votes) was blamed on the Polish people who are 'not ready for this type of opportunity'. But Style struck a chord with at least some of the Polish section of this audience. To enthusiastic applause he voiced ideas that the crowd had clearly been biting their tongues on all day: What's wrong with globalization? Only Westerners could have the luxury of criticizing it. Don't we want more globalization here? Don't we want good telecommunications and advanced technologies? Don't we want corporations to come into Poland? Don't we want more not less capitalism? Hip hip hooray. And so the symposium ended, more divided than it began. Locality persists indeed in a globalized age.

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