

NETWORKED DISRUPTION

*Rethinking Oppositions in Art,
Hactivism and the Business of
Social Networking*

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PhD Dissertation
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Cover image inspired by a scene in the film *Strike* (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein, described as *Holey Space* by Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari in their book: *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1986, pp. 413-414, also depicted in this book on p. 136). This remake of the original image features (from the left): Luther Blissett, Burning Man's wooden sculpture, the Mechanical Turk, J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, Trollface, Ray Johnson's Bunny, Anna Adamolo, the *Thimbl* logo by Telekommunisten, Neoist flaming steam iron by Pete Horobin, the *Anonymous* "suit without a head", Les Liens Invisibles' Captain Fake, and Facebook's default profile picture.

To Jonas and the prosperity of Bazzinkki

INDEX

Acknowledgements, 6

Introduction, 8

1 Disrupting Business in Networkscapes, 25

- 1.1 Networking Art and Business as Research Practice, 25
- 1.2 The Dilemma of the “Non-Political”, 30
- 1.3 Ethnography of Networks, 36
- 1.4 The Dialectical Paradox and The Paradox of Dialectics, 43
- 1.5 Montage as Method, 50
- 1.6 Disruption and Morphogenesis, 55

2 Social Networking Out of the Box, 67

- 2.1 Social Networks Before Social Networks, 67
- 2.2 The Gift-Exchange Grassroots Economy, 71
- 2.3 Collaborative Art Practices and Media Criticism, 74
- 2.4 Deconstructing Identities in Conspiracy Networks, 78
- 2.5 Mythologies of Demystification, 86
- 2.6 Disrupting the Bureaucracy, 101

3 When Art Goes Disruptive, 111

- 3.1 Towards a Critique of Hegemony in Participatory Networks, 111
- 3.2 The A/Moral Dis/Order of Recursive Publics, 116
- 3.3 The Anna Adamolo Multiple Singularity, 124
- 3.4 The Holey Spaces of Anonymous, 135

4 Common Participation and Networking Enterprises, 149

- 4.1 The Rhetoric of Web 2.0 & the Politics of Open Source, 149
- 4.2 The Business of Cybernetics, 157
- 4.3 The Art of Crowdsourcing, 167
- 4.4 Burning Man, A Social Network, 173
- 4.5 Hackers, Activists, Fetishists and Entrepreneurs, 184

5 The Art of Disruptive Business, 197

- 5.1 Rethinking Criticism, 197
- 5.2 The Hack of Performing Inactivity, 205
- 5.3 Activist Enterprises & Venture Communism, 218
- 5.4 Future Directions, 229

Appendix: Interviews, 236

Bibliography, 238

Webliography, 255

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INTRODUCTION

This research reflects on the status of activist, hacker and artistic practices in the new generation of social media (or so-called Web 2.0 technologies) analysing the interferences between networking participation and disruptive business innovation. The main objective is to rethink the meaning of critical practices in art, hacktivism and social networking, analysing them *through* business instead of *in opposition* to it. The increasing commercialisation of sharing and networking contexts and the key innovatory role of the open source community in the development of centrally controlled client-server web applications, have changed the scenario of participatory culture and brought hacktivist and artistic strategies into question within the framework of net culture. In the context of both underground artistic movements and that of digital culture, the concept of networking has been used to describe collective practices based on the principles of exchange and equal one-to-one collaboration. Participation, interaction and collaboration have been the conceptual starting points for much art of the 20th century, from Dadaism to Fluxus, from mail art to hacker art. However, since the emergence of Web 2.0, networking has become not only an everyday practice, but also a pervasive business strategy.

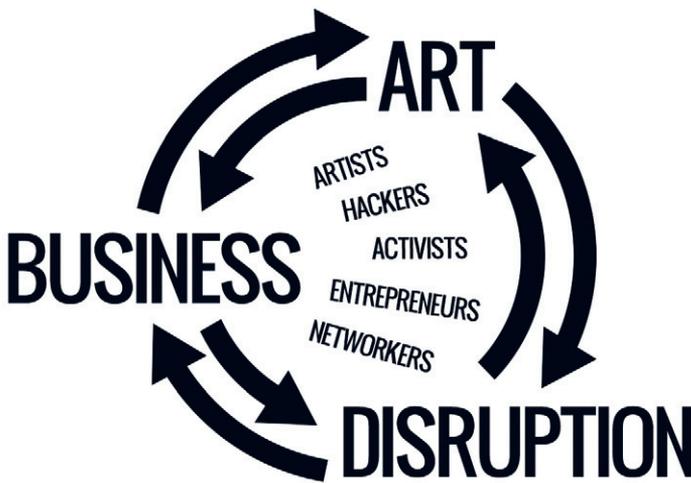
The current economical framework of the Internet bubble 2.0 is generating new contradictions and paradoxes, in which on the one hand we find the development of a critical vocabulary and practices highlighting the exploitation of networking and the cooptation of peer2peer culture from Web 2.0 companies; while on the other, we face incremental opportunities for sharing and for social contacts between a large number of Internet users, who are producing a huge mass of Internet content without necessarily being technology experts. Many Web 2.0 start-ups have adopted business strategies for generating revenues, formulating a rhetoric of flexibility, decentralisation, openness, sociability and do-it-yourself. Internet entrepreneurs have adopted in different contexts, and for other

purposes, similar values to those which characterised the emergence of hacker culture and net culture over the past decades. Alongside this phenomenon, many hackers and developers who contributed to the rise of the hacker culture and open source movement in the Eighties and Nineties have now been employed by communication technology corporations, especially in the US, and more particularly, in the Bay Area. The opposition to a communications monopoly and capitalist mindset expressed by many members of the underground digital culture over the past few years has now reached a state of paradox whereby those involved in opposition are also those being opposed. Such *coincidentia oppositorum* (or unity of oppositions) also mirrors the crisis of encompassing political ideologies and confrontational activist strategies in Western countries. Since, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated, “the road up and the road down are the same thing” (Hippolytus, Refutations 9.10.3), this begs the question as to whether the dualistic conflict between capitalism and anti-capitalism should be considered a path to provoke social change.

The departure point for this dissertation is the assumption that, on the one hand, networking grassroots communities of hackers and artists have served to accelerate capitalism since the emergence of digital culture and cyber-utopias; on the other hand, they have also served to strengthen antagonism against it, by generating critical artistic practices and hacktivist interventions based on technologies and methodologies of sharing and networking. Such mutual disruption and coexisting oppositions between art, business and networking, shows how hackers and artists have been both active agents of business innovation as well as those undermining it. By identifying the emerging contradictions within the current economical and political framework of informational capitalism, the hypothesis of this research is a reformulation of the concept of criticism in art, hacktivism, and in the business of social networking. The purpose of this investigation is to analyse hacker and artistic practices *through business*, therefore suggesting a coexistence of layers rather than a process of oppositional negations¹.

¹ Such an idea of “layering” rather than cooptation, was proposed by Fred Turner in the lecture “The Bohemian Factory: Burning Man, Google and the Countercultural Ethos of New Media Manufacturing”, University of California, Irvine, School of Humanities, April 23, 2009, while discussing his opinions on the social phenomenon of Burning Man

The aim is not to create an historical or philosophical analysis of social and artistic practices, but to reflect on different modalities of generating criticism, shedding light on contradictions and ambiguities *both* in capitalistic logic *and* in art and hacktivist strategies, while rethinking oppositional practices in the context of social networking. The notion of disruptive business becomes a means for describing immanent practices of hackers, artists, networkers and entrepreneurs, which will be analysed through specific case studies. Such case studies shed light on two different but related critical scenes: that of Californian tech culture and that of European net culture – with a specific focus on their multiple approaches towards business and political antagonism. Within the framework of this analysis “business” is not analysed from a business school perspective, but as a means towards working consciously on artistic, political and technological practices. The model of analysis as proposed here could be visualised as follows: hackers, activists and artists focus on social networking with a critical dimension, creating an intertwined feedback loop between art, business entrepreneurship and methodologies of disruption, as can be seen in the picture below:



Tatiana Bazzichelli, *Disruptive Loop Diagram*, 2011

and its contribution in sustaining new media industries. We will analyse Turner’s perspective in detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

The phenomenon whereby the development of business proceeds alongside a reformulation of radical practices is nothing new: the rise of cyberculture and hacker culture during the Sixties in California is a clear example of this, as has been described by Fred Turner in his research. Today a new coexistence of oppositions influencing each other is coming to the fore again within the framework of Web 2.0. Artists and hackers use disruptive techniques of networking in the framework of social media and web-based services to generate new modalities for using technology, which, in some cases, are unpredictable and critical; business enterprises apply disruption as a form of innovation to create new markets and network values, which are also often unpredictable. Disruption therefore becomes a two-way strategy in networking contexts: a practice for generating criticism *and* a methodology for creating business innovation. The history of cyberculture, and today the phenomenon of Web 2.0 demonstrate that opposites co-substantiate one another and often become a symbiotic necessity for each other's continued existence: in many cases, hackers, activists and business entrepreneurs are part of the same unity. Is it still meaningful to consider hacktivism as a radical criticism of a system, when hackers have contributed to its creation and its strengthening? And, if capitalism and what was once called "counterculture" now share similar rhetoric and strategies, is it possible to imagine alternatives to the current state of capitalism?

My intention is to propose an additional layer to this analysis: to investigate artistic and hacker interventions that create business disruption as an art practice. Since contradictions and dichotomies are nowadays inherent in business logic, the challenge lies in the exploration of symbolic dissolutions of power, where hackers and artists directly perform such contradictions and provoke unexpected consequences as an art form. *The Art of Disruptive Business* is a possible path towards investigating the deconstruction of power structures through experiencing them from within, exposing the contradictions of business logic and appropriating it both critically and ironically. Rather than trying to resolve the overall contradictions in the economical and political framework of the networked economy, the artists and hackers at the core of my analysis empathise with them, their field of experimentation being the mutual disruption between hacking, business and distributed methodologies of networking. The concept of disrupting business in social media sheds light on the

practices of artists, activists and hackers who are rethinking critical interventions in the field of art and technology, accepting that they must act inside the market scenario, while also deconstructing it. Challenging the market does not mean refusing it, but transforming it into a “playground”, both to appropriate it and expose its incongruities.

How is disruption in this perspective different from classical methodologies of conflict and antagonism? Starting from the assumption that to understand capitalism today is equivalent to being conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations (for example, hacktivism and business), the goal is not to frontally oppose the adversaries, but to trick them by “becoming them”, embodying disruptive and ironic camouflages. Bypassing the classic power/ contra-power strategy, which often results in aggressive interventions that replicate competitiveness and the violence of capitalism itself, to apply disruption as an art form means to imagine alternative routes based on the art of staging paradoxes and juxtapositions. Disruption becomes a means for a new form of criticism. Beyond the concept of coexistence of oppositions as dualistic tension between two forces, and the idea that one of the opposed conditions will prevail over the other, my analysis focuses on the mutual interference of multiple layers. Instead of dualistic tension, the challenge is to analyse holes in the system in which one-to-one oppositions are loosened up into distributed infiltrations. This does not mean that oppositions disappear completely, but that they become multiple, mutual, viral and distributed – as the many nodes of a network.

The departure point for this dissertation is the following question: what happens when the coexistence of oppositions, in art, hacktivism and the business of social networking, becomes a layer of mutual interferences? The analysis of the mutual feedback loop between hackers, artists and business in the nodes of social networks, implies rethinking cooptation as a process so as to understand social change as well. Analysing artistic practices in the framework of social media implies an acknowledgement of the fascinations of consumerist goods and the consequent strategies of being constructive and destructive at the same time, to innovate business by criticising it. To investigate the progressive commercialisation of sharing and networking platforms, it is necessary to understand business culture from within. Artists become viruses, working *empathically* with the subject of intervention. They disrupt the machine by performing it.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image, I propose to adopt a vision of dialectics in which the oppositions remain open, without generating encompassing synthesis, but are transformed into heterogeneous and distributed practices. The aim is to generate a polyphonic dialectic in which pluralities of approaches coexist. My hypothesis is that the concept of dialectics has to be reframed in the context of disruption, where disruption does not mean rupture, but acting in ways that the market does not expect, generating innovations from within the confines of business logic. The dialectical tension between business and opposition to it therefore shifts in a synergetic opposition where one is part of the other, and they mutually contribute in shaping each other. This does not mean dismissing dialectics altogether, but framing them in a perspective which instead of emphasising the symmetric tension "Either/Or", shows the contradictory paradoxes of "Both/And" (as Marshall Berman suggests in his 1982 book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*). Furthermore, adopting a perspective of "Both/And" means opening up to possible heterogeneous and distributed interventions, all of which together contribute to a shaping, or at least to an imagining of social change.

The dialectical perspective of Walter Benjamin, which he described as 'dialectics at a standstill' (*The Arcade Project*, p. 463, N3, 1) proposes a construction of history where the past and present interlock (as exemplified by Benjamin's figure of the *Angelus Novus*), and where the signs of modernity emerge from a crystallisation of progress which dissipates the illusion of continuity in history. This view of history as an interruption of time, where past, present and future coexist forming a dialectical image, calls for an understating of the present condition as a phase of crystallisation. The concept of dialectical image is used in the present research to imagine processes of de-crystallisation of singularities in a phase of crisis. As a metaphor for a phase of *impasse* in which the opposites coincide to create a frozen blockade, the de-crystallisation comes from inside, by performing the system's contradictions and understanding its logic.

In this stage of crystallisation, normalisation tends to embrace disruption and make it a form of stasis, as pointed out by Franco Berardi describing the present era of informational capitalism, where critical ideas are subsumed by repetition, automatism and hyper-velocity, and by Claudia Mongini, describing the precarious

crystallisation of critical and creative forces in contemporary society. As Claudia Mongini points out, trapped in a vortex of acceleration, the collective brain reaches a point of stasis, where the opposites of zero- and hypervelocity meet, preventing the creative formation of any critical idea. Inspired by the analysis of morphogenesis in the book *Run: forma, vita, ricombinazione* (2008) by Franco Berardi and Alessandro Sarti, where social morphogenesis is seen as a process of de-crystallisation of the financial state of the world, I propose the hypothesis of disruption as an immanent tension that emerges from within the crystallised systems. In my analysis, art intertwines with disruption beyond symmetric oppositions or radical ruptures, leading to a discovery of a subliminal and distributed strategy, which grows from within the capitalistic structure.

A possible path is to adopt business logic to “experience” them, by generating new forms of criticism. The challenge is to create disruption by creating innovation; to create paradoxes, pranks and tricks, and to discover decentralised holes in the system. Morphogenesis is born within the system and by recombining its rules, acting as chameleons which absorb the logic of the system and recombine them by finding the weaknesses within that logic. The suggestion of this thesis is to exit from the scheme of power/contra power, implying that one of the pairs of opposites is stronger or better than the other. Rather, a possible vision implies a process of contamination and interference, where business is performed from within. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s approach of *flânerie* – from his writings on Baudelaire – the direct experience of the fascination of goods becomes a method of understanding the consumerist culture from within, and thus of critically performing it.

My research develops through the analysis of different conceptual nodes of a network, connecting together disruptive practices of networked art and hacking in the framework of a network economy. These practices of artists, hackers and activists have been discovered through personal acts of networking; therefore my analysis contains both an internal perspective (since I myself have been part of the network of net and hacker culture since the end of the 1990s) and a meta-reflection on the research subject itself. This method, which in the first chapter I define as *ethnography of networks*, takes inspiration from a critique of ethnography, and aims to actualise – and to question – the notion of “fieldwork” itself. My methodology proposes to create

a montage of transnational practices, a *networkscape*, adopting the suffix “-scape”, which Arjun Appadurai used in 1996 to describe transnational technological, financial, media, social and political configurations. In the present research, case studies cross space and time, linked by the scope of investigating the mutual tensions between hacktivism, art and business in the context of social networking. Hackers, activists and artists in California (especially in the Bay Area) are intertwined with European ones, offering different perspectives on the subjects of hacktivism, business and social networking. The method is based on the reformulation of a research approach that works *within* the subject of research, rather than *on* the subject of research.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s montage method, the anthropologist Massimo Canevacci suggests a polyphonic and experimental mixed-media research approach, underlining that form and contents are strictly intertwined, and that there is a strict correlation between text and fieldwork. Similarly, in the context of this research, by describing the practices of hackers and artists who work *within* business, I propose to approach the research subject by working *within* it. While conducting research on distributed networks, I trace a network of actors who directly engage with hacktivism, art and social networking. Inspired by the reflections of Massimo Canevacci on the correspondence between Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno (dated November-December 1938), and in particular by the concept of *astonished facticity*, in the first chapter I reflect on the role of the researcher who abandons the use of theoretical “mediation” to approach the research subjects by engaging directly with them. The lack of theoretical “mediation”, and “the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts”, was the strong criticism made by Adorno to Benjamin after reading his essay on Baudelaire, which he planned to publish in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. However, as Massimo Canevacci points out, the “astonished dialectic”, and the concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*) with the commodities as proposed by Walter Benjamin, rather than the negative dialectic used by Adorno, constitute the basis for a deep methodological change. In the analysis of the modern metropolis – and today of the networked info-sphere – the focus shifts from alienation to empathy, and from production to consumption. The central role of the social factory and the mechanisms of production are substituted by the role of consumerist culture and its simulacra of

fascination. And in this context, the concept of “mediation” – and I would add, of cooptation – must be rethought.

In the first chapter I describe the idea of “montage as method”, derived from Benjamin’s writing style of *Denkbilder* (thought-images), and from its constellation of fragments and archival sources assembled in the *Arcades Project*. If a social and cultural critique has to be carried out both theoretically and practically, the analysis of cultural and social practices implies the involvement of the researcher in the practice of research itself. Therefore, the research method has to fill the gap between theory and practice. Drawing on the perspectives of the anthropologists James Clifford and George E. Marcus in *Writing Culture* (1986) and on much of the experimental ethnographic tradition, it becomes necessary to formulate a research methodology that reflects on techniques and methods of visualisation and narration. Therefore, as Canevacci argues, it is not only necessary to address decentralised and polyphonic viewpoints towards innovative areas of writing, but to extend the lines of research to the mixed-media of visual communication.

Following on from this suggestion, my research proposes a non-linear approach, both in its content and form. The process of investigation led me to link multiple perspectives and practices, crossing national boundaries and disciplines. At the same time, the convergence of business, art and hacktivism became key to unleashing a contradictory phenomenon such as that of social networking. The network of relations behind my research analysis was crucial for developing the research itself. Decentralised and plural viewpoints become both part of the theory and practice, connecting hackers, activists and business entrepreneurs involved in Californian digital culture (especially in the Bay Area) and hackers and artists active in the European network culture. The choice of case studies and the collection of interviews did not follow classical sociological methodologies, but was based on the development of a method, *the art of networking*, which I had already tested in my previous research on the hacktivist and underground art scene in Italy (which I published in the book: *Networking: The Net as Artwork*, written in 2006). Some of the people I approached had already collaborated with me in the course of the previous research, and other members involved in the hacker and net culture scene suggested to me new contacts according to my research objectives. During my visiting scholarship at Stanford University in 2009, I

collected a body of audio material by interviewing hackers, artists and free thinkers based around San Francisco and the Silicon Valley. The transcription of the interviews amounted to over a hundred pages. While deciding to quote selectively from the interview material, all of it has been crucial for gaining an understanding of the overall research subject². The result was to experiment with a methodological practice in which the theoretical point of view of the researcher was closely linked with the act of performing the research subject itself, involving the actors directly in the development of the analysis.

To sort out the different effects of networking art and hacking in the business of social media, I examined their development and influence on a cross-national scale, creating a constellation of case studies combining different attitudes and models of disruption between USA and Europe. In the first and in the fourth chapter, I emphasise the fact that in California, a libertarian attitude towards technology does not necessarily clash with business strategies, while the approach of European network culture is usually related to media criticism and political antagonism. However, such a dichotomy is a theoretical simplification. The presence of radical anarchic and libertarian traditions in the American counterculture deeply influenced some of the European underground media and off-media experimental subcultures. The critique of the idea of hegemony has proven a common ground for these practices, and this hypothesis also explains why counterculture and liberal economy in the US have often been intertwined. However, the fact that many Californian hackers and activists refute “the political” does not necessarily imply a lack of political awareness and criticism towards the establishment.

Many underground artistic and hacker communities and networks in California have worked towards the creation of independent contexts for sharing and exchange, both in the artistic and in the technological field of intervention: the role of The Community Memory Project, The Suicide Club, The Cacophony Society, The Church of the SubGenius and of the early Burning Man Festival are clear examples of this. In this respect, the concept of social networking is nothing new. Social networks have existed since the Sixties both in the US and in Europe, both as underground movements and as

² Even if not all hackers and activists I approached have been quoted in the manuscript, the perspectives of all of them have been very important for developing this research. I am planning to publish an edited version of the complete interviews in a further publication.

decentralised artistic practices, but also in the realm of cyberculture. However, many interesting contradictions arise as I will highlight in the fourth chapter. As Fred Turner points out in his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006), since the rise of cyberculture (and even before that, within the framework of cybernetics), the idea of creating decentralised systems of interaction and mutual feedback, plus the image of an ideal anti-authoritarian society, has been central in the development of information technology and computing in industrial and business laboratories. Today in California corporations like Google are among the main sources of employment for hackers and geeks; Google and Microsoft sponsor newborn hackerspaces, and the renowned Burning Man festival has become a strategic platform to feed new media industries and, nowadays, Web 2.0 media production.

Running in parallel to this, as I claim in the second chapter, the current meaning of *openness*, and the rhetoric of decentralisation, freedom and exchange in social media, cannot be fully understood without tracing back the practice of networking in the hacker and underground artistic contexts over the past decades. The second chapter proposes to analyse the roots of social networking based on both analogue and digital networked art, showing that the current artistic challenge of the Web 2.0 platforms lies in the invention of new courses of action, new content and new technologies developed by grassroots communities. The objective is to investigate how networking practices in grassroots communities are able to change the model of production for Internet content and artistic creations, connecting the development of hacker ethics with the creation of social media and Web 2.0. With a conscious use of technology, it is possible to activate an open process of creation, producing new models of technological and cultural intervention. The point of departure of the second chapter is to investigate the meaning of social networking over the past decades so as to be able to understand the phenomenon today. In my analysis, social networking is seen as a practice of community creation, towards the imagination of common spaces of intervention – and identity identification – where symbols, myths and memes are shared. To analyse social networking as a practice of collectively developing shared symbols and mythologies, I describe the genesis and the creation of a number of grassroots artistic networks between the Eighties and the Nineties, across both Europe and the US. A common thread connects the network of mail art,

Neoism, Luther Blissett, The Church of the SubGenius and more recently, in the era of Web 2.0, the Anna Adamolo experience and the Anonymous entity, which I analyse as case studies in chapters two and three.

Drawing on the concept of moral order in recursive publics formulated in the book *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (2008) by Christopher M. Kelty, I analyse the consequences of disruptive dynamics both in so-called underground artistic networks and in the business context of the digital economy. Inverting the notion proposed by Kelty of moral order in a grassroots community as a cohesive social imaginary, to that of a/moral dis/order, my intention is to highlight how the vulnerability and amorality of networking dynamics in collaborative networks becomes an opportunity for a critical understanding of contemporary info-capitalism. The challenge once again becomes to imagine possible routes for political and artistic intervention which are not based on radical clashes of opposite forces, but on the subliminal, ironic and multi-angled art of disruption. Artists and hackers adopt viral and flexible strategies, as does contemporary networking business, and by provoking contradictions, paradoxes and incongruities, business logic is *détourned*. Instead of the risk of being trapped in the classic dichotomy of two opposite fronts, which as I claim often feed off each other, artists and hackers generate tonal responses to the ubiquity of capitalism.

In the second, third and fifth chapters, I select specific case studies which work on the concept of disruption rather than opposition. In the anti-hierarchical one-to-one collaboration network of mail art, in the speculation and multiple-perspective of the Neoist network, in Luther Blissett's multiple use of a single name, in the "conspiracy religion" of The Church of the SubGenius, disruption becomes a challenge for the re-invention of symbolic and expressive codes. The "openness" of social networking in these cases means to share a practical underground philosophy, which works towards assembling multiple contradicting definitions of itself, operating collaborative pranks, paradoxes, plagiarism and fakes, questioning social and cultural categorisation and bureaucratic systems. I argue that such practices of disruption have been "social networks out of the box", therefore generating viral practices, strategies of networking and "radical play", both online and offline.

A similar disruptive attitude can be applied in the business of social networking or in the framework of Web 2.0. The case of the Anna Adamolo fictional identity demonstrates how to conceive of strategies of political and artistic criticism to apply during demonstrations and strikes that are able to represent a heterogeneous multitude of individuals, or better said, of singularities. The fictional identity, built up by a network of people with diverse backgrounds and competences, calls for a reflection on political methodology during conflicts, integrating online and offline practices. Personal and individual experiences are transferred into a collective path, reflecting on the evolution of a multiple-use name as a political practice to use in the context of strikes and demonstrations. Instead of being represented by an organisational structure, Anna Adamolo managed to become a self-representing Italian Minister of Education, University, and Research in the context of the students' and teachers' struggles operated by the "Onda Anomala" national movement. From the end of 2008 and during 2009, Anna Adamolo served as a collective name for an *unrepresentable* movement, which could be adopted in the squares and in the streets by anyone who chose to do so. The use of Facebook as a strategic medium for viral communication and networking was crucial, demonstrating that social media can be manipulated in unpredictable ways by a conscious analysis of their mechanisms and technological architecture. They can be reworked from within, making them functional to political and social criticism.

We find the same idea of the *un-representability* of unidentified individuals, even if in a different context and through different methods, in the Anonymous entity, which I describe as a strategy to generate disruption through the Internet in chapter three. Building on the analysis of non-hegemonic practices and the logic of affinity by Richard J. F. Day in the book *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (2005), I propose an analysis of projects that challenge the notion of power and hegemony, and the battle for dominance, generating distributed, decentralised and fluid networking practices. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "immanence"³ and the description of the metalsmiths,

³ Deleuze and Guattari use the image of the metalworkers, or the smiths, to link the concepts of "striated spaces", which are those controlled by society and organisation, and "smooth spaces", those of the monads without restrictions and directives. The smiths' lifestyle is somewhere between sedentary and nomad, as hybrid subjectivities.

Richard Day analyses libertarian and itinerant practices of activists and radical social movements which create *holey spaces of intervention*. To formulate such a concept, he refers to the scene of the silent film *Strike* (1925) by Sergei M. Eisenstein, previously used as a metaphor by Deleuze and Guattari, where people rise from holes in the ground. Similarly, in this context, I apply the concept of the holey spaces to describe art and hacker interventions, which act from within the economical system, discovering its bugs and holes. They emerge from inside the capitalistic machine, acting through its cracks and interstices.

The “smiths” of the contemporary networked society must therefore be discovered among a distributed network of actors who work towards emphasising the contradictions and paradoxes in the capitalistic economy. These contradictions are described in chapter four, which focuses on the libertarian tradition of American counterculture, and the analysis of the intersection between business and an anti-hegemonic critique of the establishment. This perspective calls for a reformulation of the idea of an encapsulation of radical values by business, highlighting the mutual disruption of the hacker principles of openness and collaboration and the business logic of social networking. Exploring the business strategy of creating a large network of engaged users to produce revenue, I draw on the analysis of the aesthetics of the masses realised by Siegfried Kracauer and of the art in the age of mechanical reproduction by Walter Benjamin. I argue that in the era of social media, we are facing a progressive aesthetisation of networking practices leading to a progressive commercialisation of web-based contexts of sharing and social relationships. Such a process is emphasised by an analysis of crowdsourcing as a networked strategy of revenue, and by the description of the Burning Man festival as a platform designed to legitimate and shape business strategies based on exchange and participation. Inspired by Fred Turner’s paper “Burning Man at Google” (2009), I propose to consider Burning Man as a metaphor of a social network in which all the participants contribute for free in the creation of a shared common, but in which the owner receives the final revenues.

Finally, in chapter five, which is conceptually linked to chapter three in the analysis of disruptive case studies, I propose the notion of the *Art of Disruptive Business*, suggesting possible strategies for artistic intervention, where incongruities and paradoxes can be experimented

with⁴. The challenge is to frame contradictions without resolving them through an encompassing synthesis, describing artistic and hacker projects in which disruption is expressed through the interference with business. It is possible to trace such networked disruption back to the Avant-gardes, in particular analysing the activities of the Surrealist-founded phenomenon of Mass Observation, a social research organisation founded in 1937 in Britain. Here Surrealism inspired the creation of a systematic database containing a wide range of everyday life practices, collected by a mass of observers, documenting human behaviour and social tendencies in Britain from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. Mass Observation exemplified the tension between wanting to disrupt the system from the inside, but at the same time, managing to serve the system by providing a huge quantity of personal and public data, as will be analysed in the final chapter.

Referring to the analysis of the Avant-gardes undertaken by Stephen Shukaitis in the book *Imaginal Machines* (2009), and by Franco Berardi in *After the Future* (2011), I claim that the rise of practices of radical thinking and social change in the experimental art context has been a source of innovation for capitalism, and at the same time, a way of disrupting it. According to Stephen Shukaitis, it is not possible to discuss subversion as an entity external from that of capital, and for Franco Berardi, the myth of energy (and action) during the past century has provoked a constant accumulation of goods and the acceleration of capitalism. Being aware of these conceptual tensions inherent in business logic, my suggestion is once again to play with this logic, to expose its contradictions and limits. Two case studies described in the last chapter follow this perspective: the Facebook interventions *Seppukoo* by Les Liens Invisibles (2009) and *Face to Facebook* by Paolo Cirio and Alessandro Ludovico (2011). Both these projects, even while adopting different strategies, are a reflection on the tension between the open and closed nature of social media, stressing the limits of Facebook's platform, and working on unpredictable consequences generated by a disruptive use of it. Simulating the functionality of the platform itself, and applying its logic to different contexts of networking and interaction, they demonstrate the vulnerability of Web 2.0 technologies – and the

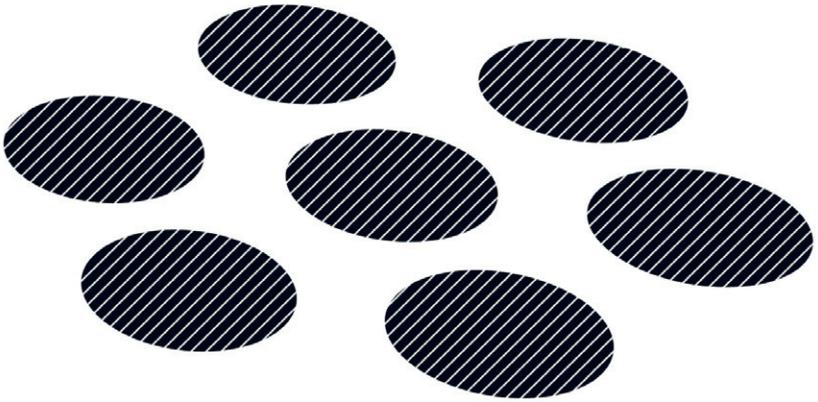
⁴ This concept is a result of research investigation I have been conducting since last year within a research group of the Digital Aesthetics Research Centre of Aarhus University.

consequent enclosure provided by their infrastructures, behind an apparent facade of inclusiveness.

In conclusion, what were once marginal practices of networking in underground hacker and artistic contexts have in recent years become a core business for many Web 2.0 companies. The increasing commercialisation of sharing and networking contexts is transforming the meaning of art and that of business. If business is adopting hacker and artistic strategies of disruption, what is the answer given by artists and hackers working on a critical dimension of networking? The proposal of an alternative to capitalism by working within capitalistic logic is suggested by the notion of Venture Communism developed by Dmytri Kleiner and the Telekommunisten collective. In the *Telekommunist Manifesto* (2010), Dmytri Kleiner envisions the creation of a network of enterprises where people produce for the sake of social values and share the results on an equal basis, and in which the collective formulation of a commons remains a goal. To achieve this, decentralised techniques of networking are developed through a process of self-organisation, based on peer production and the distribution of productive assets. This document, which is also an adaptation of the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels into a Manifesto for a networked society, transforms power-oriented modalities of conflict and political thinking into distributed, autonomous and decentralised networking strategies.

In 1984, at the first Hackers' Conference in Marin County, California, Stewart Brand said: "Information wants to be free. Information also wants to be expensive. Information wants to be free because it has become so cheap to distribute, copy, and recombine – too cheap to meter. It wants to be expensive because it can be immeasurably valuable to the recipient. That tension will not go away"⁵. This present research proposes *both* to expose *and* to dissipate this tension through a network of multiple, distributed, playful and disruptive practices. The challenge facing the art of disruptive business becomes to rethink oppositional hacktivist and artistic strategies within the framework of social networking.

⁵ This sentence was first printed in May 1985 in *Whole Earth Review*, and in 1987 in the book, *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT* (1987) by Stewart Brand.



1 DISRUPTING BUSINESS IN NETWORKSCAPES

1.1 Networking Art and Business as Research Practice

Since the mid-1990s, when I began researching into art, activism and hacker culture in the Italian underground scene, I reached the conclusion that informal relationships between members of grassroots communities – the whole framework of interactions, dialogues, discussion and knowledge-sharing which usually precedes and inspires the creation of works and projects – is an artwork in itself. In so doing, I made connections between experiences and projects from Dadaism to Fluxus, from mail art to hacker art, by defining art through the creation of connections and exchanges that are developed on the basis of networking, not just through networked production (Becker, 1982; Welch, 1995; Baroni, 1997; Saper, 2001). At the core of my investigation was the analysis of concepts of participation, collaboration and sharing through the art of the 20th century, linking these to the hacker and artistic practices in the underground Italian scene from the 1980s until the early years of the twenty first century. As I described previously in my book *Networking: The Net as Artwork* (2006), which traced the history of hacker ethics and *artivism* in Italy, the creation of contexts for sharing experiences and ideas, in which the network operators, or the *networkers*, assume a strategic role, is at the root of developing and maintaining networks. The practice of working together on the formation and sharing of ideas and projects lies at the heart of network analysis.

In the context of the 1990s, when artistic practices were melding with the development of digital technologies and online grassroots communities, the practice of “exchanging” spontaneous gifts was central, and seen – often very optimistically – as input for creating

free zones of political and social criticism. However, since the mid-2000s, the practice of networking cannot be deeply analysed without considering the shift from the early meaning given to it by hackers and artists in grassroots communities during the previous decades to the meaning it assumed with the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies. The whole idea of creating networks became strictly connected with developing new business models for sharing knowledge and user-generated content. We are therefore facing a radical change in the purposes, methodologies and strategies of networking, but this is not to say that the concept of social media – or social networking – is totally new.

Drawing on the reflections of Tim Berners-Lee, who argues that Web 2.0 does not represent a new version of the World Wide Web at all, but follows directly in the footsteps of the so-called Web 1.0 technologies, it is possible to trace a continuous thread connecting networked art and networking in the Web 2.0 economy. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr and YouTube have established themselves among large numbers of Internet users, and represent a successful business model for connecting people. If we consider the term *networking* as describing collective activities based on the principles of exchange and equal one-to-one collaboration, the practice of social networking in Western society has its roots in a series of experimental activities in the field of art and technology that started in the last half of the twentieth century. Within these contexts of experimentation, the concept of art as object has been transformed into that of art as a network of relationships, possibilities of collectively intervening in the creation of an artistic product. For example, the creation of multiple-use names harks directly back to the Luther Blissett Project and the Neoist network; the figure of the artist as a creator of platforms for sharing and exchanging ideas has long been part of a landscape of artistic and technological experimentation, from the early days of Fluxus and mail art to hacktivism and net.art.

We would therefore assume that the main challenge of the Web 2.0 platforms, such as the creation of traffic and revenue through user-generated content, lies in the invention of new avenues of participation and new strategies for interaction, which have been the core activity of grassroots communities in the last two decades. The context for investigating social media should therefore be broadened, so as to consider the roots of artistic practices and social intervention based on

both analogue and digital networked art. However, the development of web-publishing techniques, the increased number of users, and most of all, the storages of users' data in centralised servers owned by commercial businesses has radically changed the scenario. The course taken by the neoliberal economy is central to understanding the present meaning of social media, as we will see in the following chapters. As Tim Berners-Lee has pointed out, the danger of social media is that they can grow too big and become a monopoly, and they do not allow users to migrate data from one site to another, blocking the free flow of information even though they claim to be open (Berners-Lee, 2010). On the other hand, there are alternative perspectives for analysing the issue. As the mail artist Vittore Baroni suggested during my interview with him:

“I think that first of all we have to accept the fact that there is a new generation of social networks sprouted from a constant evolution of technological tools and communication. By doing a research it is evident that there are not only the most popular social networks, but it is such a vast phenomenon that it is difficult to give an opinion on the value of them and consider them more or less positive compared to the more ‘traditional’ networking practices. Simplifying a bit, I believe that the presence of these tools is useful; what becomes decisive is to understand how to use them and for what purposes. Even Ray Johnson, known as the ‘father’ of mail art, in his networking activities did not use only mail channels, but also phone, or physical encounters of groups of people based on particular strategies. The networker is a person who does not retreat himself into his studio in order to make art; but instead his/her primary objective is to build networks and communicate with others. It is the act of communication that becomes a work of art” (Baroni in Bazzichelli, 2009a).

To analyse networking dynamics therefore requires reflection and consciousness in the use of technology and media. What is the role of artists and hackers in the new generation of social media? Is it still effective to adopt a critical position *against* business logic, or should we acknowledge that the anti-capitalistic battle has long since been

lost, while at the same time being open to the possibility that new territories of intervention and creation *within* business might be identified and imagined? Following the reflections of Vittore Baroni, when does an act of communication become a work of art in the context of social media?

The question is whether the cooptation of peer2peer culture from Web 2.0 companies might be the only approach for understanding present-day developments of networking and hacktivism. Two books respectively by Thomas Frank (*The Conquest of Cool*, 1997) and Fred Turner (*From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 2006) analyse how the endless cycles of rebellion and transgression are intertwined with the development of business culture in Western society – specifically in the USA. As Thomas Frank suggests:

“In the late 1950s and early 1960s, leaders of the advertising and menswear businesses developed a critique of their own industries, of over-organization and creative dullness, that had much in common with the critique of mass society which gave rise to the counterculture. The 1960s was the era of Vietnam, but it was also the high watermark of American prosperity and a time of fantastic ferment in managerial thought and corporate practice. But business history has been largely ignored in accounts of the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. This is unfortunate, because at the heart of every interpretation of the counterculture is a very particular – and very questionable – understanding of corporate ideology and of business practice” (Frank, 1997, p. 9).

According to Thomas Frank, it is evident that much of the business innovation in menswear and advertising as propagated by Madison Avenue was to prepare the way for the rise of the Sixties counterculture and its critique of mass society. The North American counterculture of the Sixties was very much based on promoting “a glorious cultural flowering, though it quickly became mainstream itself” (Frank, 1997) and in so doing, became attractive for corporations, from Coca Cola to Nike, but also for IBM and Apple. Similarly, Fred Turner explains how the rise of cyber utopias in the US is strongly connected with the development of the computer industry in Silicon Valley, as the result of a process of mutual interferences between counterculture and

business which started long before. Fred Turner demonstrates how the image of the counterculture of the Sixties, antithetical to technology, is actually the shadow of another version of history. This has its roots in the research laboratories of World War II where scientists and engineers began to imagine institutions as living organisms, social networks as webs of information. They embraced a new cybernetic rhetoric of information systems, creating a deep transformation in social relations and styles of work, as we will describe later. With the emergence of Web 2.0 enterprises today, we are facing the same phenomenon once more.

It should be of no surprise to find that Google managers are adopting the strategy of employing hackers – or promoting the bohemian ethos of Burning Man among their employees – since many hackers in California have contributed to the development of the computer business in Silicon Valley. By accepting that the digital utopias of the Eighties and Nineties were never completely extraneous to business practices, this might serve as an invitation for artists and hackers to reflect on what “counterculture” might mean today, and to start analysing how cyclical business trends work, and what they represent culturally. As I will explain in more detail in the following chapters, analysing how the hacker culture became a means of accelerating capitalism, a fate also befalling the youth movement of the Sixties, might change points of view and areas of criticism. The idea of cooptation could be reversed from the artists and hackers themselves. If hackers and activists cannot avoid indirectly serving corporate revolutions, they might work on absorbing business ideologies to their own advantage, which, in short, means transforming and hacking its models from within.

One possible tactic might be not simply to refute business, but to appropriate its philosophy instead, making it functional for social purposes beyond the realms of capitalistic logic. Even if it is common to recognise cooptation as a cyclical business strategy among hackers and activists, it takes more effort to accept that business has often been part of counterculture and cultural development. In this phase of ambiguity, it is important to look back and analyse the reasons for the shift of networking paradigms and hacker values, but it is also necessary to break some cultural taboos and avoid dualistic oppositions, as a political and artistic strategy. Possible artistic scenarios might lead to a stretching of the limits of business enterprises, and imagining different

strategies of participation, interaction and cultural innovation. Instead of refusing to compromise with commercial platforms, a possible model for artists and activists might be to develop an understanding of the medium from within, revealing power structures and hidden mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion. Once again adopting the hands-on strategy as practised by hackers, artists and activists would have to directly confront a market in which participation, interaction and collaboration are a core business. The objective therefore becomes to reflect on the intersections between art, hacker culture and the digital economy, focusing on disruptive art practices as tools for generating aesthetic, technological and socio-political criticism. I will return to this in the next chapters, in which I describe the projects and interventions of artists and hackers who use disruption as a methodology for artistic creation and social networking.

1.2 The Dilemma of the “Non-Political”

The concept of disrupting business in social media sheds light on the practices of artists, activists and hackers who are rethinking critical interventions in the field of art and technology, choosing to act inside the market scenario while at the same time deconstructing it. By focusing on the engagement of artists and hackers within business contexts, and the consequent tensions between their tactical practices and political awareness, it becomes a research challenge to conceptually frame the progressive commercialisation of networking contexts. A network analysis of artistic practices engaged with social media needs to be combined with a meta-reflection on the methods through which these practices can be described, therefore the activities of the researcher need to work in parallel with the subjects of the researcher’s investigation. In line with this, networking is not a research subject that can be effectively analysed from a distance: to understand it, it is necessary to experience and describe it from the inside, and to participate directly in the activity of creating networks. The relationships, connections, exchange and sharing of ideas between artists, activists and hackers make it possible to analyse the networks themselves. It is participatory research, which develops through an intimate dialogue with the subjects of the research, and it is a research

practice, which clearly implies the personal activity of networking, where the subjects being researched collaborate in the development of the analysis itself. Therefore, the theoretical point of view of the researcher is closely connected with the act of performing the research subject itself. Because the actors of this research – hackers, activists and artists in the context of social networking – are constantly in movement and in a state of transitional flux, lines of research multiply as well, addressing decentralizing and dialogical viewpoints and taking into consideration diverse subjectivities. Intersections between disciplines, the crossover of perspectives, mixed-media narrative techniques, all pose a challenge to a research topic which has disruptive and perturbing artistic strategies at its core.

This research develops through the analysis of different nodes of a cross-national network, combining disruptive practices of art and hacking in the framework of social media. It involves an analysis of mutual interferences between the hacker and art scene of California (with a specific focus on the Bay Area), with that of European (or European-derived) netculture. Many of these practices were discovered over the past ten years during my participation in the network art scene, organising conferences, exhibitions and events about art and hacking; others emerged from debates on online mailing lists such as Nettime, Faces, Spectre, NetBehaviour, the Institute for Distributed Creativity (iDC), and AHA/Activism-Hacking-Artivism. Furthermore, my visiting scholarship at Stanford University in 2009 enabled me to approach the art and tech scene of San Francisco and the Bay Area, conducting interviews with some active members of it.

The necessity of bringing together artistic and hacker practices from California and European netculture derives from the idea of analysing different viewpoints and subjectivities regarding the use and critique of social media. While many of the people involved in the Californian “cyberculture” (especially those active in the Bay Area) adopt a libertarian and anarchic attitude towards technology which does not necessarily clash with business strategies, the approach of European network culture is usually linked to media criticism, and adopts a more political approach towards technology. While this might be a generalisation, it is a widely recognised point of view within international netculture, especially in the context of the analysis of media criticism in the 1990s in the Nettime mailing list, which termed American hi-tech neo-liberalism as “Californian ideology”. As

Richard Barbrook pointed out in a post in a Nettime mailing list in 1997:

“From California, *Wired* magazine has achieved global notoriety through its claims that the Net will create the sort of free market capitalism until now only found in neo-classical economics textbooks. Everyone will be able to buy and sell in cyberspace without restrictions. States will no longer be able to control electronic commerce which can cross national borders without hindrance. The Net will allow the whole world to realise the American dream of material riches. Coming from California, this neo-liberal fantasy has even acquired a mystical dimension. By releasing the supposed laws of nature immanent in unregulated capitalism, the information technologies will allegedly lead to the birth of a new race of ‘post-humans’: cyborg capitalists freed of the restrictions of the flesh” (Barbrook, 1997 unpag.).

Richard Barbrook described the emergence of the Californian ideology as a new form of the American dream, whose constant technological innovation derives from the skills and enthusiasm of the workforce in the emerging digital economy. According to him, the optimistic promise of the digital economy was dependent on the creation of a new kind of worker, the *digital artisan*: “Whether producing inside the public, money-commodity or gift economies, digital artisans represent a future centred on skilled, creative and autonomous labour” (Barbrook, 1997, unpag.). As he already predicted in 1997, the contradictions in the previous Fordist economy were not going to be resolved by the digital economy, which was going to create instead a different kind of labour: precarious, pervasive, ubiquitous and, once again, exploited. This is actually what has happened in the past ten years, and what we see very clearly in the Web 2.0 phenomenon.

However, this critical approach is still very much trapped inside an oppositional perspective which highlights the clash between two different points of view: the Californian ideology (neo-liberal, individualistic, Darwinistic and techno-deterministic) and European netculture (anti-capitalistic, critical, politically and socially-oriented). While the critique of the Californian ideology is a valid means of

recognising the existence of different approaches and attitudes towards technology and media practices, as well as the result of a conscious theoretical and political debate related to media culture, it ignores the presence of radical anarchic and libertarian traditions in the American counterculture scene – which have deeply influenced some of those in the European underground media and off-media experimental subcultures. At the root of this misrepresentation, above all, lies the problem of relating to the meaning of “politics” within an American technological scenario. I would argue that the rejection of political engagement among American tech culture does not mean a rejection of being critical towards the establishment. Instead, it is very much connected with the anarchic tradition and the concept of “hegemony”. As the American computer engineer Lee Felsenstein pointed out during a personal interview:

“The US has an aversion to politics in the sense that the Europeans don’t. To use the word political, first it is more or less of a dirty word in the general culture. There’s been so much corrupt politics going on that if you call someone political, they will get angry at you. The establishment has done an extremely good job of preventing people thinking about politics, and discussing it. And this was really re-enforced by the anti-Communist campaign of the 1940s and 50s. So people would lower their voice if any discussion came close to any so-called small ‘p’ political, which doesn’t make any sense, since there isn’t any large ‘P’ political, but what I am saying is that any political thinking, any political discussion suddenly meant that you might become subject to repression, or at least investigation, or attempts at repression. So the habit of political thinking and discussion was driven out of general society in that way. What was left behind was people who knew they didn’t want to do as they were told, to live as they were given the ways to live, and certainly when it came to drug usage, we have the tradition of prohibition here. And that was defeated simply by criminal disobedience, and eventually was then removed, because it simply wasn’t working. Well, that really did not have a political component, but it was a good example for a lot of people who didn’t want to do things the way they

were given. So the underground here probably owes more to prohibition and what amounts to the gangster underground that developed around it than anything else” (Felsenstein in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

The battle against hegemonic thinking and authoritarian practices has deep roots in the American counterculture, fed by both anarchist and libertarian thinking, as I will analyse in the next chapters, referring specifically to the book *Gramsci is Dead* (2005) by Canadian political philosopher and sociologist Richard J. F. Day. Similarly, many North-European hackers and activists, from the Chaos Computer Club to Pirate Bay, overtly refer to this anarchic tradition when describing their activities as well as sharing the same diffidence towards politics. Even if in the Italian and Spanish hacker and activist tradition the battle against hegemony and control would be considered “political”, this is not the situation for many hackers in the US and North Europe. Besides, as Lee Felsenstein points out, “Anarchist theory allows for business, it just does not allow for hegemony. Or certainly it should not” (Felsenstein in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

This statement is crucial towards gaining an understanding of why the rise of counterculture in California was so closely connected with the emergence of cyberculture, as Fred Turner describes in his research in 2006. Furthermore, it goes a long way towards explaining why the philosophy behind Web 2.0 (openness, do-it-yourself, networking and sharing) evolved, adopting many of the values underpinning hacker culture and network communities, and once again bringing counterculture and business together. Such an interweaving of business and libertarian thinking (libertarian in the sense of anti-hegemonic) might sound like a paradox for many European politically oriented activists. But it does not represent a paradox in the American tradition, nor for the many artistic and hacker practitioners who adopt a similar attitude towards transforming society and everyday life through the simple act of doing (or better said, of *making*).

This anarchic background is crucial for a correct understanding of Web 2.0 and its business logic, and for the understanding of many artistic and media sub-cultural practices of the last thirty years, both in the US and in Europe. Unfortunately, this facet of history has mostly been ignored by many critics and exponents of politics and social movements who focus principally instead on the workers’

struggle, only recognising anarchistic tradition in a limited way. The anarchic background - from punk to hacking - is not considered an effective form of political methodology, certainly not one that is comparable with concepts such as the workers' struggle, or technical and political class composition. Many of the experiences of libertarian practitioners are usually seen as mirroring those of the neoliberal economy and their radical intentions are usually considered either to be a part of nihilism (i.e. punks and their idea of *no future*), or enthusiastic techno-determinism (hackers and geeks involved in the gift-economy).

Without laying claim to be exhaustive, this research tries to fill this gap, bringing together hacktivist and artistic practices from California and those from European netculture. Even while recognising the importance of a political and critical analysis of media practices, my intention is to propose a method of research based on the coexistence of oppositions, paradoxes and juxtapositions, bringing together different subjectivities in the fields of art and network culture. This methodology fosters the creation of connections, which highlight paradoxes rather than oppositions. However, in the present political and social situation it would be necessary to jettison the Euro-American master-narrative as well, and to create a broader analysis so as to include postcolonial countries. This is certainly a limitation of this research, which I hope will be supplemented in time by further studies. But I am of the opinion that it is still necessary to analyse the cultural and political dynamics of influences and the disjuncture between these two scenes, to understand the progressive commercialisation of network culture and the transformation of business strategies and the digital economy, and their influence on the more "underground" art and media culture landscape.

To address a multi-perspective research method, we need also to adopt the framework of another discipline: cultural ethnography, and its recent critical debate on the narration of subjectivities. In the framework of my research, the dialogue with other disciplines is crucial to enable the adoption of multiple points of view, and the innovative theoretical – and empirical – perspectives offered by experimental ethnography since the 1980s can be used to reflect not only on the role of the researcher as theorist, but moreover, on the researcher as participant. Furthermore, the objective is to formulate a methodology not focused only on the rhetoric of writing, but on

the intersections between practice and theory, art and research, direct involvement and meta-reflection.

1.3 Ethnography of Networks

This research aims to construct, through a comparative methodological approach, an artistic and cultural formation which I will define as the *ethnography of networks*. This manifests itself through the construction of network practices in the field of art and hacking and questions the meaning of the artistic and the political in the current economy of social media. Social networks are at the core of this analysis, and the activity of networking is the thread through which the fabric of the research is woven together. My research method takes inspiration from a critical debate on the techniques of narration and representation that was used to describe – and visualise – cultural processes in the framework of experimental ethnography. This approach follows the publication of *Writing Cultures: Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus in 1986, and the more recent critiques of it collected in the book *Beyond Ethnographic Writing* edited by Ana Maria Forero-Angel and Luca Simeone in 2010. The choice of referring directly to the field of cultural anthropology and experimental ethnography is motivated by the need to reflect not only on the role of situated subjectivities in a political and social context, but also on the techniques and methods of visualisation and narrations which these subjectivities adopt (in this research, networks and disruptive artworks produced by artists, hackers and activists).

In the experimental ethnographic tradition and in cultural anthropology the research approach is based on the in-depth investigation of practices that act in the cultural, aesthetic, and political fields of intervention. The reflection is not only theoretical, but aims critically to fill the gap between theory and practice. In my research, the artistic and hacktivist practices analysed are not based on the production of art objects, nor solely on digital or analogue technologies, but on the ongoing relationships between individuals within the social and artistic contexts of sharing. To sort out the various types of consequences of networking art practices in the era of Web 2.0, I examine their development and influence using a *montage*

method (Walter Benjamin, 1928) and a *mixed-media* approach (James Clifford, Clifford Geertz, 1988; Massimo Canevacci, 2002), thereby constructing a meta-reflection on the practice of research itself whereby the participatory involvement of the researcher plays a central role. The traditional rhetoric of ethnographic writing is substituted with polyphonic components of narrations and visualisation: “it is impossible to think of the ethnographic exercise without connecting art, politics, economics, and communication” (Forero-Angel & Simeone, 2010, p. 10). At the same time, it is necessary to recognise the importance of digital culture, media communication, body practices and art experimentation in the contemporary state so as to create an analysis which is not only theoretical, but also practice-based, and where the voices of the practitioners can be heard.

When *Writing Culture* was published, together with another important publication, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* by George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986), researchers in the field of ethnography, anthropology and communication started to reflect on the meaning of cultural representation, imagining alternative routes to the classic ethnography of fieldwork and traditional techniques of exhibiting native cultures in a museum; In the context of a critique of Western representations of Orientalism, the dichotomy “observer-observed” had to be challenged by the notion of *otherness*. Culture had to be thought of as a composition of “seriously contested codes and representations” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 2), questioning the concept of authority and imagining new experimental methods of writing. Such an ethnographic approach, which is rooted in the concept of ethnographic surrealism (Clifford, 1981), was used in anthropology to describe decentralised points of view in the study of cultural phenomena.

In 1981, writing about the concept of ethnographic surrealism, James Clifford referred to Comte de Lautréamont’s definition of beauty: “The chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (Ducasse, 1969, p. 234). James Clifford described the ethnographic attitude as a means of dismantling culture’s hierarchies and holistic truths. Cultural orders had to be substituted with unusual juxtapositions, the decomposition of reality, fragments and unexpected combinations, taking inspiration from the practices of the Avant-gardes of the 1920s and 30s. The goal of research was no longer seen as rendering the *unfamiliar comprehensible*

as the ethnographic tradition had required, but in making the *familiar strange* “by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism are two elements” (Clifford, 1981, p. 542)¹. This new practice of reflection placed value on fragments through a methodology of revealing multiple contradictions without actually solving them, but rather leaving them open to new interpretations as a form of cultural criticism and as a way to experience the field of research afresh. This method, which reveals our present time to be a collage of incongruities, and which does not simply resolve into a clash of oppositions, but rather leaves the incongruities open to interpretations made by multiple subjectivities, becomes a mode of thinking about future tactical strategies in the field of art and media.

With the emergence of digital culture, the challenge became to develop a *mixed-media* approach (Canevacci, 1995), thereby constructing a meta-reflection on the practice of research itself. The subjectivity of others, as well as the direct involvement of the researcher – following the thread initiated by the French surrealist writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris in *L’Afrique fantôme*, 1934 – plays a central role in the development of the research objective. In the essay *PIXER AIR Digital Auratic Reproducibility*, Massimo Canevacci proposes a critique of ethnographic research toward innovative compositions, “not focused only on the rhetoric of writing as much as extended to the mixed media of visual communication” (Canevacci, 2010, p. 9). As Canevacci points out, in *Writing Culture* the critical analysis of digitally-based cultural changes is ignored, and the challenge of renewing the discipline of ethnography is only seen through written language, creating a consequent reification of the written form in academic literature. In that context, the only openness toward artistic experimentation is found in the concept of ethnographic surrealism, articulated by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), but historically situated merely within the framework of the Avant-gardes.

¹ The concept of *defamiliarisation* was first coined in 1917 by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Technique” referring to the process of aesthetic perception as “estrangement”, in which art objects, while experienced, are made unfamiliar. To further investigate the matter of interpretation of cultures and describing the self in both its individual and collective projections, see the essay by Vincent Crapanzano: “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description” in Clifford J., & Marcus G. E., (1986) *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

The process of transforming bodies, identities and subjectivities via the emergence of digital culture was not taken into consideration, nor was a reflection on the relationships between metropolis and communication, or the analysis of the modern metropolis, which we can find instead in the work of Walter Benjamin, as I will describe later.

The focus of research that is critically communications-based should shift towards the analysis of multiple subjects with whom the researcher can interact, investigating the contemporary state of digital communication, thereby situating it politically and economically. Taking this road implies reflecting on the researcher's engagement in the topics of research – an engagement which is also a prerequisite for experimental researches *per se*. To face the progressive commercialization of contexts of sharing and networking shows that it would be possible to reach the end of this path only by bringing along previous and personal experiences collected in the field, with the intent of analysing them while deconstructing the subject of research itself. A possible path of investigation is to deconstruct power structures, hegemonic theories, irreducible dualisms and fixed narrative dimensions through the contamination of the writing practice with the language of different media, disciplines and experimental activities. Questioning the matter of authority and representation, the research subjects become multiple *aporias*, seemingly insoluble impasses, paradoxes where apparently incommensurable concepts coexist, “to penetrate into the material/immaterial processes of economic-political panoramas” (Canevacci, 2010, p. 13).

In the context of this research, which aims to construct an *ethnography of networks*, a comparative approach becomes of central importance, by creating a mosaic of practices in the field of art and hacking. A reflection on the meaning of the artistic and the political in the current economy of social media places stress on innovative compositions. Analysing artistic practices in the age of social media implies the acknowledgement of our fascination with consumer goods and the consequent strategies of being constructive and destructive at the same time. It implies the staging of *aporias* where criticism of neoliberalism encounters business culture. The theoretical approach of this research is based on the critical investigation that binds together hacktivist practices, business logic and methodologies of networking, assuming the form of a trans-local dialogue, where different disciplines

meet: from literature to contemporary art, from network theory to ethnography, from business culture to everyday life. To sort out the various consequences of networking art practices in the economic, cultural and political field of intervention, the experiences of artists, hackers and activists in California meet those of members of the European net culture, and their voices and perspectives intertwine, generating a coexistence of oppositions, thereby framing the whole argument of this research.

These practices of artists, hackers, activists and, more generally, cultural producers engaged with technology, are connected together in *networkscapes*, using the “scape” suffix to open out the concept of networks into a wider panorama, where multiple subjectivities and local minorities act inside as well as outside the technological framework. Investigating global and transnational distributions of correlated elements, in 1996 Arjun Appadurai used the suffix “-scape” to signify transnational arrangements of technological, financial, media, social and political resources, describing *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, *mediascapes*, and *ideoscapes*. This suffix indicates multiple relations between situated subjectivities, international disjuncture between cultural and economic levels that value the fragment and the minorities as well as the complex and overlapping forces of homogenisation. As Appadurai pointed out:

“I use terms with the common suffix *scape* to indicate first of all that these are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national grouping and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighbourhoods and families” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296).

These “imagined worlds”, which opened up a new field of research, the anthropology of globalisation, need of course to be situated within the theoretical context of the 1990s. They spread across the landscape of mobile groups and persons (*ethnoscapes*), the global configuration of technology (*technoscapes*), the rapid transaction of global capital

(*financescapes*), the distribution of electronic capability to disseminate information (*mediascapes*) and the ideologies of states as well as the counter-ideology of movements (*ideoscapes*). It is possible to analyse the global scenarios as mediations and concatenations of local subjectivities, creating a tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation. Appadurai's five *panoramic flows* replace the traditional Marxist structure, "questioning the dialectic structure-superstructure and therefore any possibility of synthesis" (Canevacci, 2010, p. 12). Appadurai points out a deeper change in the neo-Marxist models of development and production, which I believe is more and more in evidence today with the emergence of the network landscape of social media. As he writes:

"Here I begin with Marx's famous (and often-mined) view of the fetishism of the commodity, and suggest that this fetishism has been replaced in the world at large (now seeing the world as one, large, interactive system, composed of many complex sub-systems) by two mutually supportive descendants, the first of which I call product fetishism, and the second of which I call fetishism of the consumer. By production fetishism I mean an illusion created by contemporary transnational production loci, which masks translocal capital, transnational earning-flows, global management and often faraway workers (engaged in various kinds of high-tech putting out operations) in the idiom and spectacle of local (sometimes even worker) control, national productivity and territorial sovereignty. To the extent that various kinds of Free Trade Zone have become the models for production at large, especially of high-tech commodities, production has itself become a fetish, masking not social relations as such, but the relations of production, which are increasingly transnational [...]. As for the fetishism of the consumer, I mean to indicate here that the consumer has been transformed, through commodity flows (and the mediascapes, especially of advertising, that accompany them) into a sign, both in Baudrillard's sense of a simulacrum which only asymptotically approaches the form of a real social agent; and in the sense of a mask for the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the

producer and the many forces that constitute production”.
(Appadurai, 1990, pp. 306-307).

The whole system of production becomes a fetish, while the consumer has been transformed into a simulacrum, “consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where he or she is at best a chooser” (*ibidem*, p. 307). Such a concept of making a fetish of the consumer is central to the analysis of social media and social networking. It stresses the tension between fascination and consumption, embodiment (in which consumer’s identity is objectified into a “sign”), and alienation (the consumer is influenced by the production models). Similarly, the fetishism of the production process reveals the illusion of the local and the familiar, which we clearly see in the rhetoric of many social networks, which are seen as substitutes for contexts of friendships and relationships.

Applying these reflections to the investigation of hacker and art practices in social media, we could imagine a sixth “panoramic flow”: *networkscapes*. The concept of *networkscapes* stresses the pervasive character of networks, but at the same time, by virtue of its plural grammatical form, also aims to express the dimension of multiple subjectivities. In this context, *networkscapes* are the global configurations of networking in which the constant disjunction between personal relations and more global political and economic processes are experimented with. As Appadurai wrote in his analysis: “The critical point is that both sides of the coin of global cultural process today are products of the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 308). Following this thread through until the present day, *networkscapes* serve as mirror for the mutual tensions between open and closed approaches, which are anathema to one another, as for example we can see in the appearance of many corporate controlled social networks. At the same time, social networks also mirror a fascination with – and fetishism of – consumerist goods, as shown by the many active users who have made social media a part of their everyday lives.

A network analysis of artistic practices today needs to take into account the reciprocal tension produced by those who see social networking as a strategic resource which produces cultural innovation,

and those who see it as a new context for generating media criticism. With the emergence of social media and Web 2.0, networking is both a successful model for interaction, and a pervasive business strategy. This research focuses on the disjunction between these phenomena, the tectonic plates where business culture meet artistic disruption. In this context, the ethnography of networks is connected to a critical analysis of social media as well as the participation-based exploration of networking practices in the field of art and hacktivism, by reflecting on the concept of collective participation itself. Cross-national networks, in which various technological, cultural and political perspectives and subjectivities enter into the dialogue, become the framework of the present analysis.

1.4 The Dialectical Paradox and The Paradox of Dialectics

What is the challenge facing artists and activists working in the era of info-capitalism? To investigate the progressive commercialisation of sharing and networking platforms, it is necessary to understand business culture from within. Artists work *empathically* with the subject of research and practical experimentation. To achieve this objective, it is first necessary to imagine a dialectic concept as a process by which the oppositions remain open, without however generating an encompassing synthesis. Drawing on the dialectical model of Both/And, supplanting that of Either/Or (Marshall Berman, 1983), the aim becomes to generate a dialectic opposition beyond that of confrontation, one in which a plurality of different approaches coexist. To investigate the creative involvement of the artists and hacktivists in the experience of Web 2.0 and the current network economy, where commodities become emotional fetishes, my analysis builds on Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, and his research into nineteenth century Paris. The *passages* and the *flâneur* become symbols of an illusionary world of commodity fetishism, but also a pathway for political awareness. This analysis can be harnessed to formulate possible routes for artistic and political intervention in the field of social media: possible strategies are seen in the creation of networked

practices, which are derived from intimate experience rather than power conflicts. They act from “inside” instead of “outside” business contexts. To reach such an objective, it is first necessary to analyse the marketplace from within, adopting a “hacker perspective”, trying to understand how the market works after deconstructing its strategies, its commodities and its mechanisms of production.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, a popular motto among activists and hackers was: “Don’t hate the media, become the media” (coined by Indymedia in 2000, quoting Jello Biafra). Today this approach should also be applied to business strategies, in the tactical response to the progressive commercialisation of contexts which involve the concepts of sharing and networking. Instead of shunning the market, it is necessary to understand its hidden rules and strategies, to *experience* it, to open it up to disruptive practices of art. The motto might be: “Don’t hate the business, become the business” (Bazzichelli & Cox, 2011). Therefore, both Walter Benjamin’s approach of *flânerie* – as a method of understanding the consumerist culture from within, or, as he states “dialectics at a standstill” (*Arcades Project*, p. 463, N3, 1) – a dialectics beyond historical progress – become important for the formulation of a critical approach towards social networking.

To analyse his contemporary society and the modern capitalist culture, Benjamin began taking notes in 1927, which he continued until his death in 1940, collecting his impressions of the everyday life of Paris, which developed into the creation of his incomplete masterpiece, *Paris – Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, otherwise known as *Das Passagenwerk* or, in English, *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940). As Benjamin pointed out while referring to Baudelaire’s description of *flânerie*, artists walk across the shiny passages of consumer culture, acting as shoppers who don’t buy goods, but rather who *experience* them through empathy and intimate understanding. Passing from *Erfahrung* into *Einfühlung*, the *flâneur* experiences what Benjamin describes as the crisis of the modern (*die Moderne*), or, according to his point of view, the crisis of the capitalist society. The *flâneur* strolls among the crowd through the arcades, and empathetically connects with the commodities of the metropolis, the shiny simulacra of the market, through his “casual eye” and his meditative trance. “In the *flâneur*, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace” (Benjamin, 1999c, p. 10).

Benjamin's philosophical approach shows how the crisis of the modern can be resolved through the experience of the past (that of 19th century Paris), adopting a utopian, messianic and emancipatory perspective through history. According to Benjamin's construction of history, clearly visible in the figure of the *Angelus Novus*, "the present is defined as a time of crisis and transition, and philosophical experience (truth) is associated with the glimpse within the present, via the past, of a utopian political future that would bring history to an end" (Osborne & Charles, 2011, unpag.). Such a vision, which opens out into something beyond the realms of time where past and present interlock, reflects a messianic structure, what Benjamin referred to as 'dialectics at a standstill' (*Arcades Project*, p. 463, N3, 1). Here, historically concrete facts become images, distinctive objects and emotional fetishism. What Marx called commodity fetishism, becomes in Walter Benjamin phantasmagoria. As Rolf Tiedemann points out:

"Phantasmagoria: a *Blendwerk*, a deceptive image designed to dazzle, is already the commodity itself, in which the exchange value or value-form hides the use value. Phantasmagoria is the whole capitalist production process, which constitutes itself as a natural force against the people who carry it out. For Benjamin, cultural phantasmagoria expresses 'the ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and the products of his epoch' [Exposé of 1935, section V]"(Tiedemann, 1999, p. 938).

Adopting a critical mode of thinking, Benjamin's analysis develops through the close study of advertising, architecture, fashion, photography and other techniques of art reproduction, department store shopping, a framework of everyday life associated with self-reflection. *Wunschbilder* (wish images) serve as simulacra of collective desire experienced in the modern metropolis. Benjamin *transfigures* Marxist theory and the fetishist character of commodities into both society and a collective subconscious, "divesting them of their commodity character" (*ibidem*, 939). Arcades, fashion and bourgeois interiors become the *experience* of the society, where the dialectic manifests itself as the *feeling* of the objects, and the crystallized icons through which society represents itself. Capitalism speaks through

the empathy felt for the commodities, beyond the logic of social mediation. Benjamin extends the practice of *flânerie* to the emotional discovery of urban assets. It is a theoretical approach that Theodor W. Adorno defines as “the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts” (Adorno, 1999, p. 283), or in German, “staunende Darstellung der Faktizität”, a perspective lacking in theoretical mediation, as Adorno writes in the letter to Benjamin dated November 1938. Adorno compares such *astonished representation of factuality*² to the petrifying glance of the Medusa, which entraps victims in history. In a suggestive and poetic, but also categorical, comment on Walter Benjamin’s dialectic at standstill, Adorno argues:

“The [Benjamin] essay as form consists in the ability to regard historical moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, ‘culture’ as though they were natural. Benjamin could do this as no one else. The totality of this thought is characterized by what may be called ‘natural history’. He was drawn to the petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization, to everything in it devoid of domestic vitality [...]. The French word for still-life, nature morte, could be written above the portals of his philosophical dungeons. The Hegelian concept of ‘second nature’, as the reification of estranged human relations, and also the Marxian category of ‘commodity fetishism’ occupy key positions in Benjamin’s work. He is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects – as in allegory – but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as ancient, ‘ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance. Philosophy appropriates the fetishism of commodities for itself: everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things. Benjamin’s thought is so saturated with culture as its natural object that it swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly

² I find the literal translation from German into English – *astonished representation of factuality* – much more poetic and responsive to the original concept than the English translation “the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts”, as adopted by the book *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*. Eds. Lonitz, Henri and Nicholas Walker. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1999.

rejecting it [...] the glance of his philosophy is Medusan” (Adorno, 1967, p. 233, in Helmling, 2003, unpag.).

On the contrary, as the anthropologist Massimo Canevacci points out, the critique of *astonished facticity* (*staunende Faktizität*) proposed by Theodor W. Adorno, becomes fundamental to understanding the development of capitalist society through a participatory perspective, and helps to recognise the lucidity of Walter Benjamin’s thinking. Referring to the correspondence between Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno (1938), Massimo Canevacci argues: “Benjamin realises that already in the 19th century the passages – along with the Great Exhibitions – logically replace the centrality of the social factory, spreading consumption and not productive work. Spreading empathic identification and not alienation” (Canevacci, 2003, p. 36)³. Walter Benjamin’s answer to Theodor W. Adorno expresses this point clearly:

“You write in your Kierkegaard that ‘astonishment’ reveals ‘the profoundest insight into the relationship between dialectics, myth and image’. [...] I think one should say that astonishment is an outstanding *object* of such an insight. The appearance of closed facticity which attaches to philological investigation and places the investigator under its spell, dissolves precisely to the degree in which the object is constructed from a historical perspective. The base lines of this construction converge in our own historical experience. In this way the object constitutes itself as a monad. And in the monad everything that formerly lay mythically petrified within the given text comes alive” (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 292).

Through this answer, Benjamin does what Perseus did to the Medusa and her power to petrify through her gaze. As he is about to come face-to-face with her, he holds up a mirror, thereby petrifying her. He severs her head and uses it as a weapon in subsequent adventures⁴.

³ Translated from Italian into English by the author.

⁴ For a reconstruction of the Medusa myth in relation to the Benjamin’s dialectical image and the Adorno’s constellation, see Helmling, S. (2003) “Constellation and Critique:

Benjamin inverts the movement of the negative dialectic into a still-image, where history emerges from the ruins of the past, beyond evolutionary progress. But at the same time, he presents the ruins as something new, finding new life in the frozen past. Where Adorno sees crystallisation, Benjamin sees life. In the above mentioned letter to Adorno, when referring both to his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) and to Adorno's negative dialectic, Benjamin writes: "In my own essay, I attempted to articulate the positive moments as clearly as you have articulated the negative ones" (*ibidem*, p. 295).

As Canevacci observes, Walter Benjamin already shows in the 1930s that the contemporary communicational metropolis is characterised by forms of visual fetishism: "the sex-appeal of the inorganic" (Benjamin, 1935). Fetishes which derive from culture, consumption and communication, when overcoming their productive values, become phantasmagoria. The distance produced by social mediation disappears. "Benjamin inverts Adorno's critics claiming the facticities (i.e. the fragmented and mobile constellation of objects-things-commodities) as the centre of his immanent critics observed and melted through his astonished glance. Benjamin assumes his method beyond any mediation of synthetic dialectics: his interpretation is at the same time the destruction of reification" (Canevacci, 2007, unpag.)⁵. *The Arcades*, ostensibly a project about the 19th century, is *de facto* a work about the 20th, where "fetishised" visual objects and communicational goods take centre stage in an analysis of the contemporary metropolis. What Adorno defines as the Medusan glance should be thought of as Benjamin's fascination with the forms of metropolitan experience, which led him to value the emancipatory power of commodities, rather than focusing merely on their production value. This approach, instead of producing paralysis, generates new imagination when coming to understand modern society.

The "dialectics at a standstill", a spatial and atemporal dialectical image, is a paradox *per se*, as Steven Helmling points out in his analysis of Adorno's constellation and Benjamin's dialectic (2003). It is a dialectic in which the opposites coexist rather than simply

Adorno's Constellation, Benjamin's Dialectical Image". *Postmodern Culture*, Volume 14 (September 1, 2003).

⁵ From the text: *An Astonished Facticity: Ethnography on visual fetishisms*, by Massimo Canevacci Ribeiro: www.simon-yotsuya.net/profil/fatticita.htm (retrieved March 1, 2011).

oppose each other, and therefore a dialectic which transforms into an insoluble paradox. This makes the work of Benjamin a key source for interpreting our present as well: if the fetishism is not merely a consequence of production (and historical progress) but is a simulacrum of the communicational metropolis, then the concept of fetishism expands not only to commodities, but also to cities, people, bodies, and networks, which become expanded objects of desire⁶. If the dialectic becomes an *aporia*, a philosophical puzzle, a seemingly insoluble impasse, which incorporates paradoxical concepts and practices, rather than petrifying the action, it shows multiple angles and enables new possibilities of intervention. The dialectic at a standstill, instead of a petrified deadlock, shows the configuration of the present, in which it is possible to reconstruct history though the past – following Walter Benjamin’s approach to history. It is the paradox of the past/present/future brought together beyond historical progress. The paradox lives inside the fetish, and can be *experienced* to create new paradoxes, new *aporias* which emerge from the petrifying Medusa, and proceed by turning her gaze into multiple visions and subjectivities.

As Antonio Caronia writes in the epilogue to the book: *Žižek presenta Trockij. Terrorismo e comunismo* (*Žižek presents Trotsky. Terrorism and Communism*, 2011), referring to Benjamin’s image of Angelus Novus⁷:

⁶ In the book by Massimo Canevacci Ribeiro (2007): *Una stupita fatticità. Feticismi visuali tra corpi e metropolis*, Milan: Costa & Nolan, the concept of astonished facticity and visual fetishism is transformed along the flux of contemporary communication, and it is applied to art, advertising, design, music, architecture, fashion, web and performance. For the English abstract of the book, see the note above.

⁷ From Walter Benjamin 1940 work, “On the Concept of History,” *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 691-704. Suhrkamp Verlag. Frankfurt am Main, 1974: “There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees on single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm”. Translation: Harry Zohn, from *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938-1940 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392-93.

“This powerful and perceptive representation of Benjamin, linked perhaps to an unsustainable philological reading of Klee is one of the most radical criticisms of the idea of ‘progress’ that has ever been made. A revolution undertaken in the name of progress, based on the analysis of the ‘contradictions’ that claims to identify a direction of history, instead of working on the conditions of developing and creating subjectivities, is designed almost fatally to sacrifice on the altar of the future and of the ‘trends of history’ the concrete present of the historical agents, individuals and social classes which purports to interpret the hidden and profound needs. [...] It is this ‘case’, the emergence of events, the creation of opportunities that we need to develop, not the loyalty to a dubious and often dangerous ‘design of history’. It is the ambiguity and unpredictability of the general intellect that we must encourage, not a scary ‘alternative rationality’, which will prove no less oppressive than what it wanted to oppose” (Caronia, 2011, pp. 250-251, my translation).

The “ambiguity to encourage” and which will be developed in the context of this research, is the concept of producing business by disrupting it, as a challenge for critically reflecting on the practices of art and hacking in the networked economy – and beyond it – through the unpredictable action of multiple subjectivities. The challenge is to highlight the coexistence of oppositions which generate paradoxes through the analysis of the mutual interferences between art, hacking, business and social networking.

1.5 Montage as Method

The *Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin is a journey through the experience of the capitalist metropolis, and at the same a journey into a conscious “working model for a new, philosophically oriented, materialist historiography with political intent” (Osborne & Charles, 2011, unpag.). In the above-mentioned overcoming of the theoretical mediation, we can see the formulation of a research approach that

functions *within* the subject of research, rather than *on* the subject of research. The wide-open eye, the astonished gaze of Benjamin, is that of the researcher who chooses to transform his/her subject of research from within. “[Benjamin] already perceived that the construction of writing itself is method. That there is a strict correlation between text and fieldwork” (Canevacci, 2003, p. 36, my translation). Benjamin’s research methodology is self-consciously organised into a fragment, a puzzled object, expressed through a constellation of archival sources, metropolitan ruins, “as a paradigm of a form of constitutive incompleteness that is characteristic of all systematically oriented knowledge under the conditions of modernity” (Osborne & Charles, *ibidem*). The emergence of the modern expanded city and its transitory nature is therefore expressed through a fragmented style, representing objects, topics and elements of the everyday life of 19th century Paris.

In the methodological chapter of the *Arcades Project*, which is titled “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress” (*Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*, pre-1935), Walter Benjamin describes his conceptual framework for *The Arcades* and his methodology as *literary montage*. Not only in that work, but also in *One-Way-Street* (*Einbahnstraße*, 1928) and in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1928), Benjamin shows an awareness of the idea that a contemporary critique of culture and society has to be undertaken both theoretically and practically, through the adoption of a conscious writing style. Therefore, the practice of montage must not automatically be seen as stylistic artifice, but rather as a *method* to create a deep understanding of the subject of research, “an objective embodiment of subjective experience”, as Adorno explicitly theorises in 1955 when referring to Benjamin’s writing style.

Hannah Arendt defines Benjamin’s methodology by using a *pearl diving* metaphor, explaining “a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface” (Arendt, 1969, p. 51). Many theoreticians have connected the fragmented style of Walter Benjamin with surrealist writing (Ernst Bloch, 1935; Josef Fürnkäs, 1988, Mauro Ponzi, 1992). Such an association seems clear when taking as an example the work *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) by the French

surrealist Louis Aragon, in particular the chapter “Le passage de l’Opéra”, a detailed description of a Parisian arcade. However, even if there are many connections between the work on Paris by Aragon and *The Arcades* by Benjamin, especially in the compositional technique of writing and in the art of combining heterogeneous materials – the *montage* – many differences between the two authors nevertheless persist. Benjamin himself maintains his distance from Surrealism through his refusal to accept the “dream state” as a means of describing the labyrinths of contemporary culture, thus displaying simulacra and fragmentary images of the modern metropolis through the use of montage, thereby reaching a critical awareness. As Benjamin points out in *The Arcades Project*: “Whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely the ‘mythology’ [...], here it is a question of the dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history. That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet conscious knowledge of what has been” (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 458).

The writing style of Benjamin, his aesthetics of expressing the fragmentation of modernity, cannot be separated from his conceptual thoughts. Benjamin’s methodology responds to the aim of connecting form and content in the conscious understanding of contemporary society. In 1955 Theodor W. Adorno suggested considering Benjamin’s *kleine Form*, defined as such by Benjamin in a letter to Gershom Scholem in 1926 as *Denkbilder* (thought-images, or images of reflection). Therefore, in the writing style of Walter Benjamin, the dialectical images become thought-images (Helmling, 2003, unpag.). *Denkbilder* was also used in Dutch (*denkbeeld*); a term introduced into German by the poet Stefan George, author of the poem *Der siebente Ring* (1907). But as Gerard Richter points out, the notion of *Denkbild* was known before this, descending from the baroque emblem whose structure inspired Benjamin as well, who was aware of the subject from his study of German baroque drama (*Trauerspiel*, 1928). The baroque emblem, structured through a motto or *inscriptio*, icon or *pictura*, and epigram or *subscriptio*, corresponds quite closely to the structure used by Walter Benjamin in *One-Way-Street*: the title, the image of the object described and the interpretative commentary (Richter, 2007, p. 11). Walter Benjamin was deeply inspired by the baroque emblem books by Giovanni Piero Valeriano Bolzani, Diego

de Saavedra Fajardo, and Julius Wilhelm Zingref and by the theories of the emblem, as pointed out by Karoline Kirst in 1994 (in Richter, 2007, *ibidem*).

The thought-image is a literary form requiring an investigation into the aesthetics of writing and into the status of writing itself, which was particularly used in the nineteenth century not only by Walter Benjamin, but also by other members of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and, less directly, by Ernst Bloch (Richter, 2007, p. 1). This form gave voice to the contemporary culture of the time, as the work *One-Way-Street* by Walter Benjamin exemplifies, through the description of philosophical miniatures and everyday life fragments. They can be understood “as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production” (Richter, 2007, p. 2). As Theodor W. Adorno writes about the *Denkbilder* of Benjamin’s *One-Way-Street*:

“The pieces in *One-Way-Street*, however, are not images like the myths of the cave of the chariot. Rather, they are scribbled picture-puzzles, parabolic evocations of something that cannot be said in words (*des in Worten Unsagbaren*). They do not want to stop conceptual thought so much as to shock through their enigmatic form and thereby get thought moving, because thought in its traditional conceptual form seems rigid, conventional and out-moded. What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling – that is to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire” (Adorno, 1955, p. 374).

The challenge is once again to make the familiar strange, as was outlined earlier in the chapter when describing the approach of ethnographic surrealism. The meta-structure of Walter Benjamin’s writing is evident both in the literary work *One-Way-Street* and the *Arcades*, which, according to Gerard Richter, are siblings: the first showing the literary representation of the modern city and the second showing its philosophical expression. Both are based on the

technique of *montage*, and the political and philosophical reflections are inseparable from the form in the poetic texts. Theory and practice coexist in a semiotic approach, which gives value to the symbols and icons of metropolitan Paris; while a fragmented style of writing might represent the cityscape which dissolves macro-categories of thought (or “grand-theories”). This *intertextuality* (as defined by Julia Kristeva in 1966) of *One-Way-Street* and the *Arcades* also serves as a mirror for how research subjects might assume multiple meanings, and it constitutes a challenge for interpreting contemporary culture, adopting a critical perspective in which thoughts and aesthetics are consciously intertwined. The technique of *montage* not only becomes necessary for describing a subject-in-flow without thereby avoiding an engagement with the aesthetics, but it also emphasizes Benjamin’s concern for “awareness” while dealing with social and political matters, thus creating a continuous interplay between theory and *praxis*. As Gerard Richter points out, the *Denkbilder* collected in *One-Way-Street* “define the city and its life as a semiotically charged text to be read” (Richter, 2007, p. 45).

This close connection between form and content brings us back to the discourse between the involvement of the researcher in the practice of research itself, and the absence of “mediation”. The research therefore becomes the result of a constant renegotiation between the researcher, the subject of the research and the techniques of narration, writing and visualisation of the research analysis. The subjectivity of the researcher is part and parcel of the analysis process, but taking inspiration from the activity of the networker, the researcher might assume the role of a facilitator of contexts in which diverse people can both speak and can be heard. It therefore becomes necessary to focus not only on the results of the research, but on the processes of investigation, collecting voices and making other subjectivities express themselves. The network of relations underlying the research analysis becomes a central aspect of the research itself. The research method becomes the *experience* of the encounter with the actions, thoughts and practices of other people. Subjectivities remain in constant transformation; they generate a puzzle of cross-national and interdisciplinary networks⁸.

⁸ The interviews collected in the course of this research in Europe and the US, which are the secondary sources of my analysis, have been carried out following this methodological perspective.

1.6 *Disruption and Morphogenesis*

Describing the experience of the self in this age of precarious subjectivities and technological hyper-velocity, in the essay *The Art of Critique in the Age of Precarious Sensibility* (2011) Claudia Mongini refers to a novel by James Ballard, *The Crystal World* (1966). Here, living conditions have frozen into a mysterious phenomenon of crystallization, which have taken over an entire jungle. The crystals keep objects and human beings connected through a *patina of blockade*, in a suspended state of existence which stops time and life. There is no escape. To describe this process of crystallisation, Mongini uses the example of measuring brain activity with electro-encephalography, where both absolute calm (a frozen scenario), and ongoing repeated hyperactivity are registered as a flat pattern of white noise. Such a crystallisation spreading out in every direction can be compared with contemporary forms of hyper-velocity that pervade our time and make the formation of any critical idea, subsumed by technological automatism, increasingly difficult. Different subjectivities freeze into a blocking patina of acceleration of stimuli and an overdose of information, where past, present and future are crystallised by a competitive pressure.

Similar to the consequences of the frozen process in the forest described by James Ballard, it is difficult to imagine a way out. This psychological *impasse*, due to informational acceleration, is what Franco Berardi describes as the result of info-capitalism and the progressive abstraction of labour in the digitised age. Labour becomes precarious (info-labour), and crystallises into what he defines as the “skizo-economy”, through an all-encompassing process of psychotic subjectivation:

“The process of digital production is taking a biological form which can be likened to an organism: the nervous system of an organisation is analogous with the human nervous system. Every industrial enterprise has ‘autonomic’ systems, operational processes that must function for its survival. What was lacking from organisations in the past were the links between pieces of information that resemble the interconnected neurons in the brain. The networked

digital business functions is an excellent artificial nervous system. Information flows within it quickly and naturally, like thought in a human being, and we are able to use technology to govern and co-ordinate groups of people, with the same rapidity with which we can concentrate on a problem. According to Bill Gates (1999) the conditions are created for the realization of a new form of economic system, centred on what can be defined as ‘Business at the speed of thought’” (Berardi, 2009, p. 35).

Franco Berardi sees technical automatisms taking control of the social psyche, creating a situation of progressive colonisation of time, where techno-communicative systems and social minds are interwoven. The result is a constantly-at-work human being, where the separation between private and public life collapses – a phenomenon clearly evident in contemporary social media, which capitalise on friendships and intimate relations. This hyper-acceleration of intimate rhythms, and its progressive control over social relations and private life, is described by Berardi as the crystallisation of the economy (Berardi, 2011a). In the current financial scenario, where banks are increasingly substituting ideologies and charismatic leaders, it is becoming more and more difficult for the parts to understand the whole. In *Swarm & Disruption* (2011) Franco Berardi points out:

“Notwithstanding the current critical fortune of the notion of multitude in neo-Spinozian *milieux*, I don’t think that this word is explaining much of the present social subjectivity. If we want to understand something more on this problem, network and swarm are words that can help us better. Network is a plurality of (organic and artificial) beings, of humans and machines who perform common actions thanks to procedures that make possible their interconnection and interoperation. If you do not adapt to these procedures, if you don’t follow the technical rules of the game, you are not playing the game. [...] Swarm is a plurality of living beings whose behaviour follows (or seems to follow) rules embedded in their neural system. Biologists call swarm a multitude of animals of similar size and body orientation, moving together in the same direction, performing actions

in a coordinated way, like bees building a hive or moving towards a plant where they can find what they need in order to make honey” (Berardi, 2011b, p. 4).

In the book *Networks, Swarms, Multitudes* (2004) the biologist Eugene Thacker focuses on the analogies and differences between collectivity and connectivity. Swarms are different from networks, because the latter are usually organised through common procedures in which a coordination of tasks and shared performances is implied. Swarms are not an example of organised collectivity, neither are random conglomerations, because they usually follow a specific pattern. In the act of following such a pattern, swarms rarely engage in criticism, because they lack awareness. In a hyper-complex environment we see the human equivalent of swarms forming where people follow simplified paths and use complexity-reduced interfaces. The challenge becomes to imagine how swarms might mutate into conscious collectivity, into unpredictable singularities. How does it become possible to imagine processes of de-crystallisation of singularities in a period of crisis, and where might this occur?

Describing a new form of performative critique, Claudia Mongini employs the above-mentioned frozen blockade described by James Ballard as a metaphor:

“The attempt to dissolve the patina of blockade goes along with a process of beginning to feel the bodily holes which the parasitic crystals have produced. Becoming aware of breaches in the inner organs, sensing multiple scars on the skin. When the world impinges again onto the nude complexion, an aching and fearful estrangement permeates the body. Conglomerations of void fill visceral and soul cavities. And while the body experiences disintegration, it craves for another form of shelter, less hard and aggressive than the former impermeable patina. The desire for a soft membrane allowing for transpiration, for a tender exchange, starts to penetrate in the capillaries of the soul. Novel reconnections emerge in a germinal state” (Mongini, 2011, unpag.).

The loose molecules, which emerge through the cold *stiffness* that attracted the human bodies and minds, are “material fragments in search of new patterns of aggregation” (*ibidem*). They are new aggregations, which escape the frozen status and develop through “collective feeling” and a “different perception of otherness” (*ibidem*). The way out is found *within* the frozen order; it is the result of an intimate understanding of the openness among crystallised patterns, which generates new forces able to de-crystallise and to exist beyond the trapped organism or organisms. It is the escape from the frozen status.

Franco Berardi imagines a way out of the crystallisation through social morphogenesis, the process of de-crystallisation of the financial state of the world. The de-crystallisation is possible through the return of flesh and desire, through the development of concrete and authentic relationships between human beings. Such results are no longer possible through revolutions. He writes: “The concept of Revolution is deceiving, because it was based on the illusion of a total control of social reality by rational will and by the linear project of transformation” (Berardi, 2011b, p. 7). According to Berardi, neo-liberalism has been the last effective revolution of history, bringing with it a very complex financial system, the fragmentation and destabilising of labour as well as unpredictable fluxes of social change. In the book *Run: Forma, vita, ricombinazione* (Berardi & Sarti, 2008), which traces the process of “becoming-other” as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the authors demonstrate that even artificial morphogenesis (the generation of forms from simulated algorithms and biogenetic generation of artificial lives) is not strictly predictable.

The deterministic thought is only an illusion: morphogenesis cannot be reduced to the level of linear development. That is why revolution as opposition is no longer an effective practice in neoliberal society. Berardi and Sarti, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, propose overcoming the *concanetazione-cristallo* (crystal-stratum) of forms with the *concatenazione-onda* (wave-stratum), which is unpredictable and un-programmable. The wave-stratum is a form in which the dynamic of becoming is not deterministic and not reducible to a predictable code. Assuming a hetero-genetic and rhizomatic perspective, the creation of forms becomes independent via automatisms. As Franco Berardi and Alessandro Sarti write:

“Politics tends to be replaced by recombinant bio-morphogenesis. This may take the form of the biopolitics of power, after which we will be faced with trying to encapsulate discipline and dependence in the brain and body of the human organism. But recombinant bio-morphogenesis cannot be an exact science, nor a predictable technology. It will have rather similar characteristics to politics, namely an absolutely random exercise whose outcome is unpredictable, governed by the etherogenesis of purposes, by the interdependence of infinite parables of will and action. It will be rather similar to poetry, a destructive exercise that renders language ambiguous by laying unexpected paths of meaning” (Berardi & Sarti, 2008, p. 74, my translation).

It is possible to apply the concept of morphogenesis into politics and society if we think about the creation of forms through a recombinant process, consisting of bifurcations, assembly and disassembly, overlap and misunderstanding, fluxes where imagination plays a central role and where it is able to change the rules of the game. According to Franco Berardi and Alessandro Sarti, the creative response to capitalism is the emergence of conscious (and sensitive) subjectivities, replacing the techno-economical *swarms*, which symbolise the control society (referring to the book *Out of Control* by Kevin Kelly, 1990). To achieve this goal, subjectivities have to regain their capacity for empathy, the perception of the other’s body, finding time for experiential enrichment and desire, which have been subsumed by the ever more pervasive informational economy, with its rapid developmental rhythms. The fragmentation of social existence has to be replaced by unpredictable waves of subtraction, imagining new forms for a social system. The transformation of contemporary society needs to begin by reconstructing empathy, which needs to grow directly from the skin of scientists, researchers and programmers, as is pointed out by Berardi and Sarti.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define society not in terms of its lines of contradictions (in the Marxist sense), but in terms of its lines of flight, and its *untechnocratizable* consequences. Minorities supersede classes; computer viruses replace strikes and transform the concept of “sabotage”. The nature of knowledge and its infinite number of permutations are presented

through a rhizomatic equation. Similarly, Franco Berardi writes: “the more a system grows complex, the more it gets inclined to disruption. [...] Nowadays the collapse takes the form of disruption, but it is no longer giving way to Revolution, rather it is giving way to consolidation. Morphostasis follows disruption, so that we don’t know anymore how to open the way to morphogenesis” (Berardi, 2011b, p. 8). According to Franco Berardi, consolidation is therefore a side effect of disruption. This is very evident today in the phenomenon of the financial crisis: it works at disrupting an old system by provoking its collapse, but it is also functional in generating a new order, which is still embedded in the neoliberal financial paradigm. Disruption drives a fake change, subsuming any radical opposition, while also generating crystallisation.

Referring to the previous section, I compare the process of de-crystallisation leading towards the creation of a new shape of society with Walter Benjamin’s hacking off of Medusa’s head, with its petrifying glance, by *experiencing* the impasse of modern capitalism from within and *feeling* its paradoxes and incongruities. We could link the concept of crystallisation as described by Franco Berardi to that of “dialectics at a standstill”, with the problematic nature of petrification as addressed by Theodor W. Adorno when considering the work of Walter Benjamin. Embedded in the dialectics at a standstill is the concept of crystallisation, because the historical movement freezes into a steady-state cycle. However, as described earlier, this kind of dialectic also shows a “positive” perspective where incongruities coexist and where such a Medusa’s head can be hacked off. Even when frozen, it can give birth to movement. Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image reveals that it is through the encounter of recent events and those further in the past that it is possible to reconstruct history, and to imagine possible ways out of the *impasse*. If we imagine a dialectic that overcomes dualistic oppositions, and becomes a dialectical image, we can start dissolving the patina of blockade from within. Dialectics at a standstill, which is a paradox *per se*, might dissolve the stasis generating other paradoxes. It is when disruption emerges from the inside of crystallised social forms – and not from outside them – that we can discover morphogenesis.

Disruption is a very ambiguous – and inspiring – concept. In the business culture, disruption not only means rupture, but innovation and the re-design of behavioural tendencies. The concept of disruptive

business, which is at the core of my analysis, is a paradox because it shows a process that interferes with business, whilst at the same time generating new forms of business. Disruptive innovation, an art term coined in 1997 by Clayton Christensen, Professor at the Harvard Business School, “is used in business and technology literature to describe innovations that improve a product or service in ways that the market does not expect”⁹. The Wikipedia Encyclopaedia shows the example of ‘new-market disruption’ caused by the GNU/Linux Operating System, which “when introduced, was inferior in performance to other server operating systems like Unix and Windows NT, but by being less expensive after years of improvements, Linux is now installed in 87.8% of the worlds 500 fastest supercomputers” (Wikipedia, April 2010).

According to Alexander Manu, a professor and writer on strategic foresight and innovation, disruptive innovation is not merely a breakthrough in technology; rather it is an innovative outcome, which directly concerns human behaviour and desires. As he writes in his book *Disruptive Business* (2010):

“Innovation is an outcome, a new behaviour, a new way of doing things. Disruption is a behaviour – an outcome involving media and a user – changed by invention. Invention is a moment of discovery or creation of something new. Disruptive Business means the sum of new behaviours and their support models. Innovation is a moment of use, a manifest behaviour that engages *an innovation object* into new uses, and modifies the habitual conditions of the present. [...] Innovation is rooted in Desire, not need. Desire is the motivation for behaviour. Desire leads to goals, and goals lead to motivation, the internal condition that gives rise to what we want to do, based on our goals, what *can we* do – based on the norms of behaviour – and what *we will do* – the actions that we voluntarily decide to undertake. Motivation is the ethos of goal-oriented behaviour, and a company’s ability to understand motivation directly contributes to the success of their products and services in the marketplace” (Manu, 2010, p. 3).

⁹ From *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, retrieved on April 2010: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disruptive_technology.

Apart from the motivational business rhetoric of this description, the analysis of Alexander Manu is useful for pointing out that innovation is an outcome linked to desire. Despite coming from two very different backgrounds, Alexander Manu and Franco Berardi show that human desire is the key to creating morphogenesis: for Alexander Manu desire is a driving force of innovation; for Franco Berardi desire is an opportunity to be unchained from capitalist logic as well as being a channel to fight automatisms. Combining these perspectives might appear to be a paradox, but doing so might also help us envision new perspectives and get rid of the “patina of blockade”. Would it be possible to imagine a form of art which disrupts business by recreating business, while at the same time going beyond business logic?

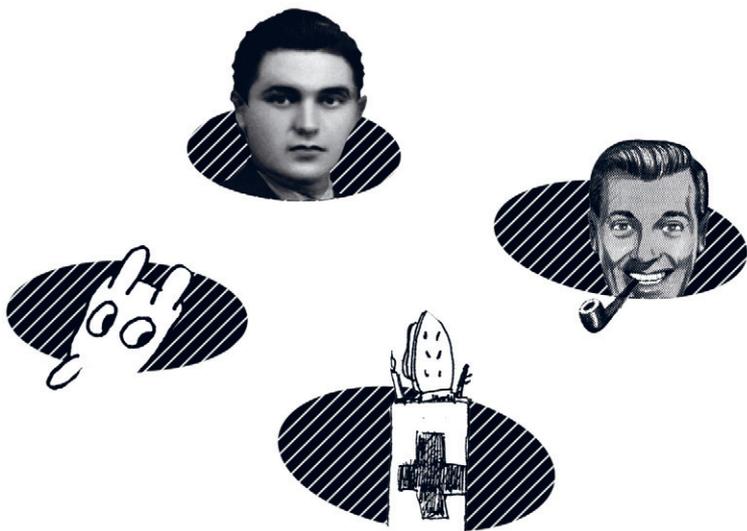
In answer to this question, I propose the concept of the *art of disruptive business* as a form of artistic intervention within the business field of Web 2.0. In this context, artists and hackers, conscious of the pervasive presence of consumer culture in our daily life, react strategically and playfully to create a change that comes from within the flow of business, in all its complexity. Adopting this concept as an art practice offers an opportunity to imagine new possible strategies for art as well as creating innovations in the economic framework, which are only possible by getting directly involved in the business process. Taking inspiration from Benjamin’s description of the *flâneur* and the notion of *Einfühlung*, to perform the art of disruptive business, artists and activists form an intimate relationship with their subject of criticism, *experiencing* it emphatically, so as to be able to become aware of it, while at the same time transforming it into something different. While disrupting the machine, and engaging in criticism, it might be possible to accomplish a new critical perspective by forming an attitude which could be considered as “a participant’s observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarized cultural reality”, to quote the anthropologist James Clifford (*On Ethnographic Surrealism*, 1981, p. 542). The challenge once again becomes to make the familiar seem strange, as was earlier outlined when describing the approach of ethnographic surrealism. But the challenge is also to transform the strange in a creative manner, by becoming a direct agent in the subject of the investigation.

Since the Avant-gardes, artists have concentrated on the effect of producing the unpredictable, while generating new forms. But in

the neoliberal era, business logic deals with the unpredictable as well, generating disruption and adopting the same language and strategies as counterculture. Artists and hackers can respond by appropriating the concept of disruption in the business framework. Today the paradox lives in the encounter between business culture and artistic disruption. The concept of *disrupting business* described in this research is seen as a methodology of transformations and interventions in the network economy by the adoption of disruptive business strategies as a form of art, in which the paradox, and the recombination of orders play a central role. This perspective applies to the business concept of *disruptive innovation* as artistic strategy, whilst at the same time opens a critical perspective towards business (and towards the concept of “disruption” itself). In a scenario where business is intertwined with the values of hacker ethics and networking, and where the forms of criticism tend to freeze as soon as they emerge, the way to morphogenesis might be found within business itself. Business innovation becomes art intervention.

My intention is to investigate projects and interventions of artists and hackers who do not work on a radical interruption (or rupture) of a chain or a flow, but provoke disruptive innovation in the business field of social media. Such paradigms emerge from a frozen blockade of consumption, through a discovery of its holes and voids. This morphogenesis derives from disruption, but rather than deriving from clash or rupture, it emerges from within the business system. It is an act of hacking which demonstrates how to seize on business logic so as to appropriate this logic. Rather than re-creating the blockade, it generates innovation, because it crosses new paths by finding bugs in the system, “bodily holes” (quoting Claudia Mongini). Disruption becomes constructive and destructive at one and the same time, emerging from a dialectical image. It is a dialectic of paradoxes, an inversion of clashing schemes, through the direct experience of multiple and diverse subjectivities. This movement comes from within the business culture, precisely the culture that artists and hackers aim to disrupt. We need to ask ourselves whether it makes sense today to talk of “counterculture”, when cooperation, sharing and networking have become the watchwords of the Web 2.0 business. The act of responding to this via a radical clash no longer appears to serve as an effective practice. The challenge becomes to be aware of the logic and mechanisms of business.

The aim of my analysis is to show how endless cycles of rebellion and transgression coexist with the development of business culture in western society, both in Europe and the USA. In the following chapters I will describe the process of mutual interference between networking culture and business. I will show how the rhetoric of openness, decentralisation and exchange evolve alongside the development of the business logic of Web 2.0, and have become part and parcel of it within the context of social networking and community enterprises. This will lead us to a deeper analysis of the concept of *the art of disruptive business* as a form of artistic intervention within the business world. I will describe how, since the Avant-gardes, critical art and business have shown clear signs of interconnection. Extrapolating from this, I will analyse how in Web 2.0, artists and activists, conscious of the pervasive presence of consumer culture in our daily life, react strategically and playfully from within the system. They subvert business logic, but rather than merely opposing it, they create business disruption. They make possible an acknowledgement of how business works, introducing unexpected incongruities in the capitalist structure and provoking unusual feedback while remaining part of the machine. They do not refute business; they generate new ideas within it, beyond the logic of clashes, creating new flows of fascination by adopting disruptive business logic.



2 SOCIAL NETWORKING OUT OF THE BOX

2.1 Social Networks Before Social Networks

The aim of this chapter is to investigate network dynamics as they existed before the emergence of Web 2.0, focusing on the issues of participation and collaboration, but also on those of disruption and criticism, which have been central to artistic practices in the 20th century, from Dadaism to Fluxus, from mail art to hacker art. My intention is not to reconstruct a history of networking, as I did in my previous book *Networking - The Net as Artwork* (2006), but to focus on the meaning of social networking as a disruptive art practice. On the one hand the practice of networking as a modality of sharing knowledge has been central to the creation of aesthetic situations among a small group of participants in the fields of experimental art and poetry in the last half of the twentieth century (Saper, 2001); on the other hand, with the emergence of social media and Web 2.0, enabling communities has become a pervasive business strategy (Lovink & Rossiter, 2006; Galloway & Thacker 2007; Cox, 2008). The meaning of participation, collaboration and networking is itself changing and, since the mid 2000s, social networking has become a mainstream concept. However, if we recognise that networking today is opening an ever broader channel of communication among people who are not necessarily involved in the alternative art and technology scene, it is possible to imagine Web 2.0 as a new context for artistic practices, as pointed out by Juan Martin Prada in 2007 in his paper presented at the New Art Dynamics in Web 2 Mode conference.

On the one hand, with the emergence of Web 2.0, we are facing *a process of continuity*: networking, which was previously a narrow artistic practice among the Avant-garde, or in the underground creative scene during the 1980s and 1990s, has found a much wider

audience today and is becoming a common mode of interaction. On the other hand, we are facing a *deep change*, or as many hacktivists and critical theoreticians argue, an involution in the modalities of creating networks, which are becoming ever more centralised and informed by the logic of business. This dual approach looks more like a split, if analysed from a critical political perspective. A theoretical vocabulary has developed in recent years stressing the risks of social exploitation, technical automatism and social control, especially in the framework of analysing the post-Fordist economy. This approach is largely related to a political critique developed by Autonomist Marxism since the 1960s and 1970s in Italy – reflecting on technical and political class composition, the mass worker, the refusal of work – and later extended to the analysis of concepts such as immaterial labour, cognitive capitalism and biopolitics, to name but a few. In this context, social networking and the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms of interactions and exchange can be seen as a new form of social exploitation, where the tension between production and consumption is affecting everyday life and intimate social relations.

However, as described in the previous chapter, such a transformation of networking practices is not necessarily negative and might open new contexts of interventions for artists and hackers. The Californian computer engineer Lee Felsenstein stresses the point that today the term social media implies a form of expanded participation – at least, formally – and this might be considered a victory for some hacker principles such as *access for all*, and *computer power to the people* (Felsenstein in Bazzichelli, 2009b). Similarly, the Italian mail artist Vittore Baroni argues that we must recognise the potential of social networks as widespread platforms for sharing and exchanging; therefore it is important to engage with them, while nevertheless maintaining a critical approach (Baroni, 2009). I will return to this debate in the next chapter, describing forms of network participation that attempt to go beyond exploitation, instead entering critically the sphere of political production, while rethinking practices and strategies of media criticism. But before that, it is important to reflect on the meaning of networking as a collective art practice, addressing the concept of *disruption*, as a challenge to acting within production processes (recalling the *hands-on imperative* of the hackers). This becomes an opportunity to reflect on concepts such as openness, authority, and identity, which are constantly challenged and renegotiated by artists

and activists, who work within the realms of social and cultural disruption. How does it become possible to develop new artistic strategies in an increasingly commercialised networking context? And consequently, how is disruptive art materialised in social media?

At first glance it may seem evident that business enterprises of social networking and Web 2.0 built their corporate image by re-appropriating the language and the values of the first phase of hacker culture – a language once very representative of certain networked art practices as well, from mail art to net.art. Tim O’Reilly, one of the main promoters of the Web 2.0 philosophy, and organiser of the first Web 2.0 conference in 2004 (in San Francisco), wrote in the fall of 2006: “Web 2.0 is much more than just pasting a new user interface onto an old application. It’s a way of thinking, a new perspective on the entire business of software” (Musser & O’Reilly, 2006, p. 3). Both what has been called Web 2.0 since 2004 (when Dale Dougherty came up with the term during a brainstorming session) as well as the whole idea of *folksonomy*, which props up social networking, blogging, and tagging, might be considered a mirror to the economic cooptation of the values of sharing, openness, participation and networking which inspired the early formation of hacker culture and peer2peer technology (Kleiner & Wyrick, 2007). The whole idea of the gift-exchange community as an alternative social and economical system was the driving purpose behind many networked art practices after the 1950s, which were based on networks of participants and collective works (e.g. Fluxus, visual poetry, mail art, etc.). Such networked art practices, and the interactive processes of postal collaboration anticipated and predicted contemporary “social networks”.

Rather than pointing out the commercial limits of networking in Web 2.0, in this chapter I aim to investigate which constructive forces remain imaginable within social media, tracing a path of continuity from the early experiments of networking art and underground culture to the recent techniques of networked art as developed in Web 2.0. Considering that the values of networking, sharing and user-generated content became the driving force behind the social media market, it is necessary to find a way out of the dichotomy of ‘acritical acceptance of business’ vs. ‘refusal of compromising with business’. Once again, the concept of business disruption appears central. A possible path is to imagine artistic practices within social media which imply strategies of subversion, play, hacking and disruption. The objective is to provoke

a conscious understanding of the technology, as well as generating disorder within it, by aiming to produce networking interventions which question the practice of opposition as a political and artistic strategy, and indirectly, the meaning of cooptation in a network economy. Considering that many social media projects are built up involving and employing hackers and networkers, the question is not so much whether such people are exploited anymore (many social media developers and users would simply answer that they are not), but rather how hacking, sharing and openness are still possible inside Web 2.0. Networking is indeed becoming a mainstream practice, but what is the meaning of participation and sharing *within* the framework of this cultural development?

First of all, I aim to go beyond earlier studies carried out on social networking, refuting the widely accepted idea that social networking is principally a digitally- and web-oriented phenomenon. Social networking is not new. To understand where the notion of social networking derives from, it is necessary to investigate the roots of collaborative art practices. Such investigations centre on the figure of the networker, a creator of shared networks which expanded virally through collective interventions. Such collaborative networking projects reached a peak of participation between the 1970s-1990s, both in Europe and the USA, as exemplified by the mail art network, The Church of the SubGenius, the Neoist network, the Luther Blissett Project (LBP). These offer clear examples of how networking strategies, multiple identities and viral communication techniques might be used to generate artistic disruption. In the next chapter, following this line of investigation, while referring to the contemporary social media scene, I will portray the Anonymous entity as today's equivalent of Luther Blissett and Monty Cantsin (the Neoist "open pop star"). And last but not least, I will investigate the Italian example of Anna Adamolo (2008-2009) as offering a possible case for the adoption of a critical political approach towards social media, generating viral networking practices both online and on the streets. In the process of describing cross-national networks, I will imagine possible theoretical connections, interweaving experiences through a constellation of artistic and hacker interventions beyond space and time, following a "montage methodology", as I described above.

2.2 *The Gift-Exchange Grassroots Economy*

The contemporary Internet-based social networking platforms have their roots in a series of experimental activities in the field of art and technology started in the last half of the twentieth century which have transformed the conception of art as object into an expanded network of relationships. These narrow practices have shown that networked art is not mainly technologically determined, but is based on the creation of sharing platforms and of contexts which permit exchange between individuals and groups. Such a perspective made it possible to define the concept of networking in three ways: as the practice of creating nets of relations; as a cultural strategy aimed at sharing knowledge, and as a map of connections in progress. Networked culture, developed during the last half of the twentieth century, was often connected with the concept of the gift-exchange economy, where grassroots communities promoted alternative social configurations and a model of sustainable economy based on the sharing of free goods (Welch, 1995; Baroni, 1997; Saper, 2001). This model of relationships allowed for the “exchange” of spontaneous gifts, a practice based on peer technologies and peer networks. Since the 1980s, networking platforms such as the postal art communities, but also the BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) networks have been designed to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience, as well as to create collective works. The concepts of openness and Do It Yourself, today mentioned with ever greater frequency in the rhetoric of social networks and Web 2.0, hark back to the development of the sharing models of grassroots communities in the alternative art scene of the previous half of century.

Openness refers to a decision-making process managed by a collective of individuals organised into a community, which was imagined into being rather than orchestrated into existence by a centralised authority – it is a definition used frequently today in Web 2.0, but remains an absolute paradox in the centralised Internet-based social networking platforms. *Do It Yourself* (or DIY) expresses an “attitude” to build up, to assemble, to make and to create independently, which has often been compared with the “hands-on imperative” as articulated by Steven Levy in 1984. DIY as a genuine underground practice could be said to have begun with the punk movement of the 1970s. In those years, copy-machines became widespread and their

use increasingly harnessed within the milieu of “dissent”, giving birth to underground zines, art-zines, punkzines, etc, as was pointed out by Stephen Duncombe in 1997. Punk culture questioned the notion of *high art* in order to open up creative possibilities for musicians who were not necessarily professional, thereby opposing the business model of large music labels. The motto was “anyone can play”, and several bands began to apply this DIY logic, fusing it with a set of anarchistic attitudes to produce music and manufacture albums and merchandise as well as organise low-cost concert tours. Obviously, the punk movement was soon co-opted by the music business, which was hungry to discover new markets, but there is no doubt that between the 1970s and the 1980s punk was a driving force for grassroots participation, and it inspired many young people eager to change the *status quo*.

Within this timeframe, the DIY network dynamic was affirmed on a broader level through the use of computers and the Internet, becoming a practical philosophy within the hacker scene. The history of Italian hacktivism and net culture from the early 1980s until today is a clear example of this process. A path which began in mail art, in the Neoist and Luther Blissett projects, but also in the BBS networks, evolved yet further into the creation of Italian hackmeetings, the Telestreet networks and into many other networking and art projects managed by different Italian artists and activists. Within that scene, the concept of “hacktivism” referred to an acknowledgment of the net as a political space, with the aim of generating decentralised, autonomous and grassroots participation, as I previously described in 2006. Within this framework, networking became the practice of creating nets of relations by sharing experiences and ideas. In the Italian hacker communities of the 1990s networking platforms were perceived as open spaces in which the ideas of sharing, openness, decentralisation and free access to computers applied. Similarly, the concept of networking was considered an art practice in itself, providing a critical perspective on political imagination among people who were harking back to the tradition of the avant-gardes as a subversive art practice. Networking art resulted in the practice of acting inside social interstices and cultural fractures, which seemed to be at the margin of daily life, but in fact constituted a fertile territory for the re-invention and re-writing of symbolic and expressive codes. In the Italian underground culture, where hacker communities were

(and still are) very much linked to activism, the art of networking developed through the figure of the artist as a creator of platforms for sharing and of contexts for connecting and exchanging.

Among the BBS culture between the 1980s and the 1990s, a networker was anyone who managed to generate areas of discussion and sharing; in the mail art network, a networker was anyone who in turn created contexts of exchanging self-made artworks, but networkers were also those who accepted the invitation for the networking project and created their DIY products in answer to this call. The idea of establishing a gift exchange economy was crucial, even if many practices were more correctly imagined as an alternative to the financial economy and therefore a utopian concept of sharing and collaboration, often refuting – or playing with – business logic. The objective of the network operators was to make art less elitist and more inclusive, and in so doing attempting to question the very meaning of art itself. Networking as a direct modality of sharing and communicating was the symbol for the shared ethics in the international underground scene of that time. It resulted in the creation of networks of artistic and media experimentalists, which took the form of a broad aesthetic movement. It was an aesthetic where relations among networkers became the real artwork, clearly disrupting the capitalistic logic of producing goods to generate revenues.

In this context, the Italian hacker scene is functional for our discourse because it developed as a very widespread experimental “playground” for applying the logic of openness, DIY and sharing knowledge. Inspired by the hacker scene of California, and by libertarian, anarchic and cyberpunk literature, the development of hacker culture in Italy constituted a very fascinating zone where politics, art and technology met. Probably due to the prevalence of a language gap (not so many people spoke English fluently enough to be able to participate in international mailing-lists and debates), this attitude towards technology lasted longer in Italy than in many other countries. It enabled the development of a kind of utopian autonomous zone (in the sense described by Hakim Bey in the book *T.A.Z.* published in 1991), which still survives today in the more politicised and radical areas of the movement, showing a strong rebuttal of capitalist logic. As we will see from the various artistic projects for which network strategies are inherent, the art of networking in Italy still constitutes

a fertile area of experimentation and subversion, even if today it implies a criticism of networking practices themselves, following the emergence of Web 2.0. We will come back to this when outlining the case of Anna Adamolo (2008-2009) and its viral development both in the field of social media and in the streets.

2.3 Collaborative Art Practices and Media Criticism

In the aforementioned examples which pre-date the notion of social networking engendered by the Web 2.0 platforms, and which gave rise to a lively utopian attitude towards technology, networking was a collective art practice not merely based on the production of objects, nor solely on the use of digital or analogical technologies, but on ongoing relationships between individuals. The practice of networking was imagined as a process that grew from contact to contact and expanded through intertwined actions of people who developed viral communication strategies. This common ground of networking constituted the basis for many artistic practices in the 1990s working within the realms of media and art, both in Europe and in US.

As Derrick de Kerckhove points out when describing the evolution of the networking phenomenon and recognising the practice of mail art as one of its predecessors long before the evolution of the Internet, quoting the famous phrase by Marshall McLuhan *the medium is the message* “today one may say that the network is the message of the medium Internet” (Kerckhove, 2006, p. 11). Assuming therefore that the network of relationships is the main message, an analysis of social networking today cannot be undertaken without shedding light on its roots, which date back more than thirty years and frequently took shape beyond the confines of the Internet. The network of mail art, The Church of the SubGenius, the Neoist network and the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) are clear examples of distributed modalities of networking, which raise the question of the meaning of participation itself. Even if they differ in origin, context, and goals, what they share in common is the development of a grassroots networking structure,

the redefinition of the concept of art through disruptive intervention, the critique of a rigid identity, a reflection on the meaning of authority, an attack on high culture, the creation of a multi-use (and in the case of Luther Blissett, anonymous) philosophy of sharing. Reflecting on such topics as the deconstruction of identity, the creation of urban myth and the production of fake information, they questioned the institutional media system of the time and often plunged it into crisis, exposing its bugs and highlighting its vulnerability. Pranks and cultural jamming interventions focused on *continual poetic renewal* (Vale & Juno, 1987), using the elements of surprise, irony and social criticism.

To analyse networking practices which harnessed the concept of disruption, I have selected five main concepts: *generating openness through media criticism; challenging the dogma of truth; questioning the meaning of authority; creating a collective myth; disrupting the bureaucracy*. My choice in selecting these concepts to analyse disruptive practices in the early phase of social networking has been made so as to avoid a linear historical perspective. The underground conspiracy networks examined here worked on renegotiating the meaning of history and truth, by experimenting with networking strategies and deconstructing identity. They worked with collective symbols while reinventing the meaning of participation and self-representation, therefore constructing networking by building a phantasmagoria of fictitious myths. Therefore, the important aspect when analysing them is not to figure out what really happened or who did what – even if I will try to give some practical examples of their artistic practices – but which driving forces lay behind the idea of creating unstable networks. My intention is therefore not to write a historical reconstruction of their activity – not least because it is impossible to understand if sources are reliable – but to lay stress on the meaning of speculative and conspiratorial methodologies of constructing (social) networks by exposing multiple contradictions. In this context therefore, the practice of disruption also becomes a multiple phenomenon, meaning something different each time.

Movements such as mail art, The Church of the SubGenius, Neoism and Luther Blissett presented quite different strategies, and were made up of different participants, even if, for example, some mail artists were involved in Neoism, while some Neoists were involved in Luther Blissett and some Luthers were involved in mail art, not to

mention the fact that Neoism and The Church of the SubGenius had various influences in common. However, it is through analysing their roots that we can find some important answers to be able to correctly frame the concept of social networking today. Starting from the first concept, *generating openness through media criticism*, it is useful to quote – and combine – different narratives on the genesis of such disruptive networks. During a personal interview with Vittore Baroni (March 2009), he describes the genesis of mail art, linking it to the rise of the counterculture in the Sixties and the development of new possibilities of spreading independent information. As he recalls:

“There were decades of counterculture and political battles, during which the most common means of communication used was the simple instrument called ‘mimeograph’. The flyer given to people on the street during the 1968 movement (which in Italy actually took place in 1969), the fanzines or punkzines from the punk era, created an efficient and disruptive action in certain circles. [...] The creation of mail art coincided with the diffusion of postage as a means of communication in different circles, like that of the New York Correspondence School founded by Ray Johnson, but also those of visual poets in South America, or artists behind the Iron Curtain. The genesis coincided with a practical need: the idea of connecting people in the most simple and functional way possible. George Maciunas understood that there was a network of people who shared artistic and creative objectives but they were located in Europe, America or Japan. It was no surprise that Fluxus came about through a festival in Germany, spinning a web across the postal and telephone services between different people who had common interests. There was an intense epistolary correspondence underpinning Fluxus. Ray Johnson found post and telephone the most efficient and economical way to create his artistic network, but if he was still alive today he would probably use the Internet too” (Baroni in Bazzichelli, 2009a, unpag.).

The central tenet of mail art was not which channel to select in order to create networks (either postal communication, artzines or telephone),

or which artefact to produce (visual art, music, sound art, poetry, etc.), but the idea of connecting people located in different countries, so as to develop a worldwide cultural movement. The focus was not to harness this or that specific medium, but to communicate, to have fun; to generate a loose international community involving people from the most varied backgrounds. As Vittore Baroni recalled during our interview, at the time of the genesis of mail art, in the early 1960s, it was easier to create alternative content using simple communication tools, because the channels of information were still rather slow and circumscribed. One challenge facing the movement was to strategically remix and recombine information and communication symbols by generating one-to-one collaboration on an equal basis. The need to communicate among a network of people sharing similar interests was directly connected with a critical reflection on the use of media, and the result of this mail art activity was the development of innovative strategies to make information open and accessible to all.

The mail art phenomenon aimed to demonstrate that postal communication could replace galleries and museums, becoming the main context for artistic and cultural production, thereby disrupting the art establishment through network strategies. The mail art network, “The Eternal Network” (as described by Robert Filliou), was a very fertile channel of communication between many sub-cultural movements emerging in the 1970s and 1980s. As Vittore Baroni writes in *Real Correspondence - Six*, “Mail art is not just another art trend. Mail art affects firstly the *structure* of cultural work, the way art and information is produced and circulated” (Baroni, 1981). The hand-made production of postcards, rubber stamps, artzines, postal stamps, audiocassettes, and the creation of a worldwide network of free exchanges often based on xerography (photocopying), became a common technique of networking used by many artists and all sorts of creative people during those decades. The ethics of distributing art-gifts, of showing in collective initiatives everything submitted to the network by its members without previous selection, often implying the production of all-inclusive catalogues, was a radical statement, which deeply influenced the output of alternative culture. The collages and drawings of Ray Johnson, not to mention the New York Correspondence School he created in the 1960s, showed that puzzling, remixing, assembling, juxtaposing, fragmenting, reconstructing and constantly renegotiating the meaning of communication became

an art practice in itself. From Dadaism to Futurism, from Fluxus to punk, from Neoism to the Luther Blissett Project, the network of mail art played a central role in connecting people and establishing the exchange of postal gifts as a channel of communication.

2.4 Deconstructing Identities in Conspiracy Networks

It is no surprise that Neoists used mail art to share information, and that mail art was one of the most popular forms of exchange within Neoism. As reported in the few existing Neoist publications¹, the Neoist experience started in connection with the practice of mail art, at the end of 1970s in the city of Portland, even if mail art was not a substantial part of Neoism at the time. As the mail artist David “Oz” Zack recalls in a letter written to Graf Haufen, a Berlin-based member of Neoism:

“One thing I definitely did invent is ‘Monty Cantsin’, the open pop star. I did not do this alone, I did it in Portland, Oregon, with the very first Monty Cantsin, an artist named Maris Kundzins. We’d been working with a Xerox 3107 that makes big copies and reductions. We were making giant folios; monster folios and dinosaur folios we called them. And one night Maris started fooling around with the tape recorder, singing songs in Latvian about toilets and traffic. Well, we decided to make a pop star out of Maris, but it had to be an open pop star, that is, anyone who wanted could assume the personality of the pop star. [...] We were mouthing Maris Kundzins’ name, and it came out Monty Cantsins. Then we got to say can’t sin and can’t sing and quite a few other things to give the impression that this pop star could be a thief as well as a saint. Maris and I sent a card

¹ Such as the website *The Seven by Nine Squares* and the books: “Neoism Now!” (1987), an independent publication assembled by Monty Cantsin, and *A Neoist Research Project* (2010) by N.O. Cantsin.

to Kantor in Montreal; you are Monty Cantsin, the open pop star” (Zack in N.O.Cantsin, 2010, unpag.).

The genesis of Monty Cantsin (the original name was Monty Cantsins, with an additional “s” at the end) was embedded in the underground art, punk culture and industrial music scene of Portland². Monty Cantsin made its first appearance written as a name on a simple postcard, following the mail art ethics that “people can share their art power”, as David Zack writes. Zack launched the Monty Cantsin idea in 1977 as a reaction against individualism in art and musical culture, and as a challenge to achieve fame by adopting the name of an open pop star. The “legend” says that the recipient of the Monty Cantsin postcard, the Hungarian-Canadian performance artist Istvan Kantor, followed David Zack’s suggestion by starting to act as an open pop star. Kantor was the first to rally to the call when he arrived in Portland in 1978, and continued using the name actively for many years. Kantor initially used the name Monty Cantsin within the context of the “first major Neoist activities” which they named Portland Convenience Store Mysteries. These consisted of periodical bouts of shoplifting in supermarkets carried out by Kantor and Zack, the former simulating a heart attack so as to distract the employees while the second stole cases of beer. In these initial attempts to bring Monty Cantsin to life, it can be seen how two of the five concepts I mentioned earlier, namely *challenging the dogma of truth* and *questioning the meaning of authority* are explored with irony and cynicism.

The first of these two components, *challenging the notions of truth*, is central for an assessment of the birth of Monty Cantsin, and its subsequent development into Neoism. As Stewart Home writes on *Neoism as Negation & The Negation of Neoism* (1993), during the late 1970s, David Zack, Al Ackerman and Maris Kundzin invented the concept of No Ism, “an open, inclusive and anti-ideological grouping of individuals who saw themselves as artists opposed to the gallery

² Together with David Zack and Maris Kundzins, the scene involved Rhoda Mappo, Tom Cassidy, Eerie Billy Haddock, Patty Blaster, Dr. Blaster Al Ackerman, Musicmaster, Jerry Sims, Alan Lloyd, Tim Harvey, John Shirley, the Neoboys, Steve Minor and also, temporarily, Cees Francke, Anna Banana, Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti, to mention just a few.

system”³. According to Home, No Ism gave life to Neoism. But, in the book *The Assault on Culture*, Home writes: “What can be ascertained with certainty is that Kantor had spent some time at the Portland Academy in 1978 and returned to Montreal with the concepts of Monty Cantsin and ISM which Zack, Ackerman and their group had been developing” (Home, 1988, p. 87). The fact that even the same author generates a contradiction through his two explanations of the roots of Neoism (which could be a development of ISM but also of No Ism), is actually a clear indication that Neoism could be considered a constant paradox. Indeed, according to tENTATIVELY a cONVENIENCE (pseudonym of Michael Tolson), who joined Neoism in the early Eighties, “Neoism is, above all, a prefix and a suffix without anything in between”, pointing out the potential openness of the movement, which is perhaps the negation of a movement itself. It is almost impossible to reconstruct a history of Neoism (and, furthermore, is beyond the scope of this chapter), because its members were encouraged to spread fake stories and contradictory definitions of the movement, refusing any attempt to achieve any degree of historical certainty about their activities.

However, according to the most accepted narrative today, arrived at through a synthesis of websites, interviews and rare Neoist publications, Neoism took on concrete form in 1979 when Kantor moved back to Montréal in Canada and entered into contact with a group of young French Canadian artists, offering up Monty Cantsin as a pseudonym which anyone could borrow⁴. The connection with the young artists around the Vehicule Art group, led to the mail art show *The Brain in the Mail*, organised by Kantor and opened at Vehicule Art on February 14, 1979, a date considered by Istvan Kantor to be the beginning of Neoism⁵. Since that time, Kantor and the rest of

³ From: www.stewarthomesociety.org/neoism/neoneg.htm, retrieved on April 21, 2011. Written by Stewart Home in April 1993 for the *Negation: The Last Book* edited by Jack Sergeant (where it never appeared - the text was subsequently included in the book *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis* by Stewart Home, AK Press, 1995).

⁴ Among the group of young Canadian artists were: Kiki Bonbon (pseudonym of Jean-Luc Bonspeil), Lion Lazer, Niels Lomholt, Napoleon Moffatt, Reinhart Underwood Sevol and Alain Snyers.

⁵ As Istvan Kantor says during an interview with Daniel Baird, published in *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2004 (www.brooklynrail.org/2004/06/art/istvan-kantor): “The opening of the *Brain In the Mail* show took place on February 14, 1979 and mostly it is considered to be

the young crowd of artists started to organize radical anti-art events in art galleries, collective situations where groups of people gathered. Some events were flaming iron rituals or flaming-actions in art spaces – being the flaming steam iron part of the Neoist iconography – as a reaction to the immobility of the art system. Most popular of all were the Blood Campaigns, a series of events in which Kantor used his blood in performances such as Red Supper, and Halloween and Supper (1979) – lifting the food motif from the Fluxfeasts, as Stewart Home points out. Another “origin myth” of the movement suggests that The Neoist Chair was the first “official” Neoist event, held on May 22 1979 in downtown Montreal. As Istvan Kantor recalls, it was Election Day and he decided to bring Neoism onto the street. He asked people to sit on a Neoist chair, just a regular folding chair with a Neoism sign attached to it, and basically that was it. The people were curious and they thought it was part of a political campaign. But Kantor gave no clear definitions. As he says, “I felt there was a need for something else to extend the Monty Cantsin concept. Therefore I proposed Neoism. I came up with this name because it didn’t really mean anything. [...] Neoism was only a name. I didn’t have any manifesto – I did write a one-sentence manifesto that said ‘Neoism has no manifesto’” (Kantor in D. Baird, 2004).

The *challenge of truth* is crucial for understanding what lies behind Monty Cantsin, which in essence is a multiple name that challenges every linear and orthodox way of thinking, raising contradictions, ambiguities and *aporias*. As can be read in the website *The Seven by Nine Squares*, “Multiple names are connected to radical theories of play. The idea is to create an ‘open situation’ for which no one in particular is responsible. Some proponents of the concept also claim that it is a way to practically examine, and break down, western philosophic notions of identity, individuality, value and truth”⁶.

the beginning of Neoism. Even though I came up with the name only a couple of months later and typed the word Neoism for the first time on a Smith-Corona typewriter on May 1, 1979, in Apt. 215, at 1100 McGregor Street, to be really exact”.

⁶ “Multiple Names” by Stewart Home, in: *The Festival of Plagiarism*, London 1988. Retrieved from *The Seven by Nine Squares* April 21, 2011: www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/multiple_names.html. To understand the importance of challenging the truth within Neoism, mention should be made of the homonymous section “Truth” in *The Seven by Nine Squares*, which contains large amounts of links and texts, not always coherent with one another, creating an interesting diffuse and un-linear narrative on the subject.

Neoism started as an idea without a clear definition, an empty concept to be appropriated: later it developed into an international subcultural network that collectively used the Monty Cantsin pseudonym, spreading from U.S.A and Canada to Europe (in particular, England, Germany and Italy).

In the book *The House of Nine Square* (1997), a collection of letters about Neoism, Psychogeography & Epistemological Trepidation (sic), edited by Stewart Home and Florian Cramer, the paradoxical aspects of Neoism, and the *challenge of the truth* come to the fore. The two authors, even while collaborating, have two contradictory notions about Neoism – Stewart Home placing Neoism in the context of the twentieth-century Avant-gardes, while Florian Cramer presents Neoism as an epistemological experiment in speculation. What emerges through reading the letters in *The House of Nine Square* is that, to quote Stewart Home, *every narrative constructed around Neoism is inaccurate and manipulative*, and that Monty Cantsin and Neoism, according to Florian Cramer, “rather than simply being arbitrary, they are self-contained signs and that everything done with them affects what they represent”⁷.

Therefore, Neoism might be considered a movement which proclaims itself to be an anti-movement, and also, a *self-written legend* and thus has become very appealing for other artistic subcultures, artists and political groups since the late 1980s, who are either inspired by Neoism or oppose it⁸. From the end of the 1970s Neoism became a conspiracy network (The Neoist Network-Web), expressed mostly by the Neoist Apartment Festivals (APTs), weeklong events taking place in the apartments of Neoists, including various activities such as conferences and performances. They were the *fêtes mobiles* of the Neoist Network Web, with the chief objective of gatherings, drills, and habitation *manoeuvres*, but also of connecting people together through informal situations. The Neoist Apartment Festivals (14 in total, peaking between 1980-1986, plus a European Training Camp in 1982) are probably the best exemplification of Neoism in terms of (social) networking strategy. As Kantor recalls:

⁷ Retrieved from: www.stewarthomesociety.org/neoism/ninesq.htm, April 21, 2011.

⁸ As we read in the Wikipedia definition of Neoism, retrieved April 21, 2011: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoism>.

“For a while we pulled out all Neoist activities from institutional places and only performed in our own apartments. Once you joined Neoism you didn’t just sell your soul to Neoism, but your living space, your ‘Lebensraum’ became part of the network as well. Later the apartment concept was extended to the entire city so activities could take place anywhere, in the streets, in clubs, on the beach, up on the roofs. We also introduced the training camp concept that was somewhat the same idea of living together but more focused on the philosophical aspects of doing things, like cooking, eating, having discussions, working in the garden, exercising, having sex, invading public places, dancing with flaming irons, making Neoist altars, and so on” (Kantor in D. Baird, 2004)

The International Apartment Festivals – the first occurred in September 1980 at *No-Galero* in Montréal – helped to expand the Neoist network, bringing other subcultures into the fold as well. For example, at the second APT in 1981, several members of the Krononautic Society assisted the event. Among them, tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE, who was also involved in The Church of the SubGenius⁹ and whose attempt at making of Neoism a participatory network is well documented from his involvement in the APT Festivals – he personally promoted the APT 7 in Baltimore, 1983. In *A Few Simple Statements about Neoism* (1994), a section of *The Seven by Nine Squares* written by tENTATIVELY, we read a short and clear definition of Neoism: “Neoism is a mind game. The purpose of the

⁹ tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE, who defines himself a Mad Scientist / d-composer / Sound Thinker / Thought Collector, comes from Baltimore and has been active with the Krononautic Organism (a time travellers’ society), Nuclear Brain Physics Surgery School, The Church of the SubGenius – in which he’s a saint – and became popular for his performance “Pee Dog/Poop Dog Copyright Violation Ritual”, which he acted out during the SubGenius 1983 Congress in Baltimore. tENTATIVELY, naked and covered in white greasepaint, was arrested while beating a dead dog in an abandoned railway tunnel. Currently tENTATIVELY is writing a book, whose structure can be followed online and which he defines: “A Mere Outline for One Aspect of a Book on Mystery Catalysts, Guerrilla Playfare, neoism, booted music, Mad Scientist Didactions, Acts of As-Beenism, So-Called Whatever, Psychopathfinding, Uncerts, Air Dressing, Practicing Promotextuality, Imp Activism, CircumSubstantial Playing, etc.” (Retrieved on April 22, 2011: www.fyi.net/~anon/MereOutlineIndex.html).

game is to provide stimulus for the players. Playing the game comes naturally to the players. People who aren't sure that they're Neoists aren't Neoists. No-one is a Neoist all the time. Not all mind games are Neoism"¹⁰.

The above-mentioned text written by tENTATIVELY, followed by a list of "Neoist-Mind Game Players", is quite peculiar because of its presentation of Neoism as a distributed network of people. When analysing the movement through the interwoven actions and interventions of various individuals, it is also worth mentioning the magazine *Smile*, launched by Stewart Home in February 1984, which soon became the zine of Neoism. It was created in order to question authorship and promote anonymity by propagating plagiarism and, for example, the contents included plagiarism of mail art works and plagiarism of previous *Smile* issues¹¹. But even if Neoism was about sharing and cooperation between people, the members did not always manage to put their egos and temperaments to one side (as David Zack underlines in N.O. Cantsin, 2010, unpag.) and in this respect the notion of *questioning the meaning of authority* takes on a peculiar meaning. The Neoist members, indeed, tried to challenge authority by claiming to be Monty Cantsin, or using different pseudonyms, but because Monty Cantsin was connected to physical individuals, who didn't often manage to go beyond their singular identities, it was not completely protected from over-identification and personal competition.

In his PhD dissertation *Improper Names: The Minor Politics of Collective Pseudonyms and Multiple-Use Names* (NYU, 2010), Marco Deseriis describes the concept of *improper names* pointing out that they are *explicitly constructed to obfuscate both the identity and number of its referents* (Deseriis, 2010, p. 2). He also argues: "One of the main functions of an improper name is to *empower a subaltern social group by providing anonymity and a medium for mutual recognition to its users*" (*ibidem*, p. 3). However, in the case of Neoism, the name Monty Cantsin was not always able to guarantee this openness and to completely obfuscate the identity of its "users", as Deseriis points out (Deseriis, 2010, p. 48). No doubt in part because perhaps this was not

¹⁰ From: www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/tent_neoism.html, retrieved on April 22, 2011.

¹¹ The association goes directly to the zine *Vile* created by the Canadian mail artist Anna Banana, which was a parody of the magazine *File* launched by "General Idea" in 1972.

the central aim of some of the members, who wanted to act as open pop stars; however, the problem of over-identification caused many tensions, and even while Neoism was trying to challenge the notion of authority, some members of the movement somehow got trapped into it. This occurred to the point that, as Deseriis underlines, the harsh polemics over the “proper use” of Monty Cantsin (e.g. the one between Home and Kantor), and the issue of *who has the authority to speak on behalf of the multiple name* made the group lose strength as well as denting enthusiasm among its members (Deseriis, 2010, p. 225). Furthermore, “by letting individuals appropriate Cantsin as a self-promotional banner, they unleashed unspoken jealousies and rivalries that undermined the collaborative spirit of networking” (*ibidem*, 247). This is a contributory factor as to why Stewart Home left the group in 1986, and tried instead to push more politically driven alternatives such as the open concept Karen Eliot, a collective signature for artworks, the Festival of Plagiarisms (1988-1989) and the Art Strikes (1990-1993).

However, such over-identifications were unavoidable in a context where art practices and personal lives were so intertwined, and, moreover, they demonstrated the contradictory aspects of Neoism that were deeply rooted in the movement. If Neoism takes shape through speculations and paradoxes, it symbolises at one and the same time both the construction of a network and its deconstruction¹². It is a network and an anti-network; it is Neoism and Anti-Neoism, being therefore a sort of dialectical image where the opposites coexist – thereby alluding to my reflections on Walter Benjamin’s dialectical approach described in the previous chapter. It is likely that such a constant renegotiation of meanings made it difficult for Neoism to spread in any pervasive way, but it managed to influence future generations of artists and activists anyway. In a viral form, it suddenly transformed into something else, but this doesn’t necessary demonstrate its failure. Monty Cantsin reached an audience, even if a minor one, especially in respect to his/her speculative being, thereby becoming a source of inspiration for many subsequent members of underground networks

¹² The use of “speculation” in this context is related to the idea of deconstructing and negotiating the meaning of truth and identity in unstable artistic networks in the underground framework of the Eighties and Nineties. It is not directly related to the exploration of speculative realism and post-continental philosophy developed recently in the *Journal of Speculative Realism* (www.publicpraxis.com/speculations).

whose activities still contribute to the *perpetuation of a collective myth* today.

Some artistic and political practices can still be found – I will describe one of them later, Anna Adamolo – for which Neoism serves as a predecessor, and many Monty Cantsins are still alive and well within social media such as Facebook, even if they do not seem to be applying any practices of disruption in that context¹³. The practice of constricting networks through multiple-use names or shared identities becomes central towards gaining an understanding of new forms of disruption and play which intertwine in the creation of contemporary Internet actions, as will be analysed in the next chapter in context of the Anonymous entity. Deconstruction of identity, the negotiation of truth, and networking as disruption of consumer capitalism become possible strategies for performing criticism beyond opposition, and for generating disorder from within the technological and economic systems.

2.5 *Mythologies of Demystification*

The topic of *creating a collective myth*, the fourth factor connecting sub-cultural movements which use the network strategy as a central modality for development, brings us back to the experience of the Luther Blissett Project (LBP), and before it, to that of The Church of the SubGenius. In the case of the Luther Blissett Project (the network sharing the “Luther Blissett” identity), which worked deeply with language, communication and techniques of cultural and symbolic representation, the mythological component acquired a subversive

¹³ As far as I can judge, many social media users simply use the pseudonym Monty Cantsin as a profile name and as a vehicle for propaganda, without really reflecting on the nature of the platform itself. This is not the case however for Stewart Home, who since the emergence of Web 2.0 is using disruptive techniques of networking and communication to create paradoxes and fakes in blogs and social media. In the essay: *CLICK THIS? MySpace & the Pornography of Corporately Controlled Virtual Life* (2009, London: Diffusion generator, No profit publication), Stewart Home describes his explorations of social networking as the fake identity Mister Trippy started on MySpace in the spring of 2006. Online at: www.stewarthomesociety.org/praxis/myspace.htm (Retrieved August 9, 2011).

aim, to the point that we could define Blissett's methodology as being both the *construction of a mythology* and *its demystification* (or *demythification*). Quoting Ronald Barthes in *The Rustle of Language* (1989):

“With regard to myth, and though this is still a task which remains to be accomplished, the new semiology – or the new mythology – can no longer (or will no longer be able to) separate so easily the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the phraseological. Not that this distinction is false or ineffectual, but it has become mythic itself [...]; in other words a new mythological *endoxa* had been created: demystification (or demythification) has itself become a discourse, a corpus of phrases, a catechistic statement” (Barthes, 1989, p. 66).

Even if Barthes describes mythology as a conservative practice used to establish power and control upon society (which is why we need a process of de-mystification), connecting the idea of myth with its demythification offers an interesting angle towards explaining the methodologies of the underground subcultures we will be analysing. Luther Blissett dismantled common rules by creating an alternative set of shared parameters, thereby linking myth and de-mythification together, reconnecting us to the analysis of *aporias* and paradoxes as disruptive art practices already described in the previous chapter. The strength of the practitioners of such techniques was in being disruptive and constructive at one and the same time, first breaking the rules, and - after having exposed their limits - creating a new perspective by which to see critical engagement. We can understand this meaning of myth as a shared phantasmagoria only if we try to break free from a vision of history as *continuum*, showing that history is a constant construction of a plot, an assemblage of fragments, which goes beyond a linear, absolute and progressive way of thinking. History becomes a fictional construct, a shared myth of origin and a strategy of building unstable networks. Following this vision of history as constant renegotiation, Walter Benjamin is once again a significant source of inspiration – as it was for Luther Blissett too, as we read in the book *Totò, Peppino e la guerra psichica* (*Totò, Peppino and the Psychic War*), written by Luther Blissett in 1996, where Walter

Benjamin's 14th thesis on history is quoted: "History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [Jetztzeit]"¹⁴. Walter Benjamin's notion of history, intertwining the present and the past in a frozen configuration, allows us to reflect on the meaning of disruption as an artistic practice, and as an emerging context of criticism beyond opposition. As Benjamin writes in *On The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress*:

"It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within various 'fields' of any epoch, such that on one side lies 'the productive' 'forward-looking', 'lively', 'positive' part of an epoch, and on the other side the abortive, the retrograde, and obsolescent. The very contours of the positive elements will appear distinctly only insofar as this element is set off against the negative. On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of the lively; the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of an angle of vision (but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too – something different from the previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocastasis" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 459).

This reflection, which brings the positive and the negative together in the configuration of an historical dialectical image, can be applied to Blissett's methodology if we consider that mythology for Luther Blissett was a tool for disruption and liberation at one and the same time. Luther Blissett was a multi-use name, a collective alias, a shared identity adopted by hundreds of artists and activists all over Europe from the summer of 1994, spreading from Italy to the rest of Europe,

¹⁴ Italian translation in *Totò, Peppino e la guerra psichica*: "La storia è oggetto di una costruzione il cui luogo non è il tempo omogeneo e vuoto, ma quello pieno di 'attualità' [Jetztzeit]". The English translation quoted above is by Dennis Redmond and it is the closest version I found to the Italian one published in the Blissett's book (see: www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.PDF, retrieved august 19, 2011).

to the United States and South America. Here we can see associations, but also disjunctions with Neoism. The LBP was rooted in Neoism, not only due to its use of a multiple name, but also because many Luthers themselves were also Neoists. By the way, as we have seen, the multi-use name Monty Cantsin was to a large degree related to specific individuals, being more often a pseudonym than a multiple identity. Contrary to Neoism, the LBP – at least in its early phase – managed to solve the problem of over-identification by the network’s members with the multi-use name, combining the idea of anonymity with the negation of a singular identity in favour of a shared philosophy. The LBP can therefore be seen as an example of a fertile networking strategy, which could be defined as *the applied myth of a common cause*. With the aim of disrupting the cultural industry, Luther Blissett was able to create a common phantasmagoria and became a popular phenomenon throughout the 1990s. Vittore Baroni, who was part of the Luther Blissett project from the outset, describes the genesis of the phenomenon as being connected to today’s practice of networking in social media. Here, Baroni analyses how the construction of a shared mythology might lead to a rethinking of strategies of artistic interventions, while reflecting on some connections and, at the same time, disjunctions, with the practice of social networking:

“We realised that a certain mythology of practices and ways of thinking were missing; it was missing what [the Italian singer] Franco Battiato described as ‘a centre of permanent gravity’. Once upon a time you would go to see a concert like Woodstock and on the stage you would see ‘mythological’ people, so much attractors as lightning conductors and energy diffusers. Today in the network dynamics we see an explosion of artificial democracy and equality, which creates a total opacity; the subject of individual responsibilities tends to crumble in an undifferentiated mass of fragmented data. Once upon a time people like John Lennon were able to create a song that had meaning because he was the one creating it, but also because it was perceived by an audience that contributed to spread it through people’s imagination. If a song like *Give Peace a Chance* was sung by millions of people in a square during a protest, a virtuoso circuit would be created that contained the artist and the public together.

In the frenzy of equality of Web 2.0 the most satisfied are those who have the power, because the problems are still the same, but people have the illusion that there is full freedom and the possibility for everyone to have their fifteen minutes of fame. I think that current social networks are reality shows for everyone. Now we just have to transform the reality show into a cultural programme (which is a difficult task!)” (Baroni in Bazzichelli, 2009a, unpag.).

According to Baroni, behind the multiple-use of the Luther Blissett name was a need for a new mythology, which heralded the creation of a “folk hero”, an open identity that could be adapted to everyone, or at least, to all those wanting to subvert the cultural industry and the hierarchical mechanisms of power (media power, political power, sexual power, etc.). A kind of “Robin Hood of the information age”, as described in their website by the Wu Ming group of novelists (considered to be among the “veterans” of the LBP), trying to combat the *status quo* by finding tricks and subliminal tactics to exploit conformist ways of thinking. Luther Blissett managed to be so inspiring to so many because he became a cultural symbol that could be freely appropriated and personalised. Being the face of nobody, he was the face of everyone. This multiple-use name was the perfect “tool” that could be used strategically by a generation of activists and students growing up immersed in the informational society – a society whose media system was becoming increasingly monopolised, if we consider the Italian political situation prevalent at the time. But it would be a mistake to consider Luther Blissett as a radical left political project, because it also implied a deep criticism of the very concept of politics, with its questioning of authority, leadership, and the mechanism of political representation. Even if many Luthers worked to disrupt capitalism (for example, fighting for “*reddito garantito*”, guaranteed income to all), they also tried to appropriate pop culture for their own ironic purposes, turning their actions into long-lasting collective performances. Between 1994 and 1999 – the year of Blissett’s Seppuku, a symbolic suicide orchestrated by some of the early “conspirators” involved in the LBP – Luther Blissett became an icon for students and activists involved in the underground scene.

In Italy, the network was mostly connected with the Social Centre (*centri sociali*) scene, and was predominantly active in the cities

of Bologna, Rome and Viterbo¹⁵. This period saw the spread of cyberpunk culture (and in the unique manner by which this happened in Italy, it was therefore linked to a political agenda¹⁶), as well as the diffusion of network communication among cultural activists who were using independent BBSes (Bulletin Board Systems) for networking and propaganda purposes. The practices of the opposition in the 1980s, which intertwined punk culture, hacker culture, anarchism and street art (Tozzi, 1991) now found themselves in an unusual confluence with pop culture, fusing subversive practices with mainstream media. A generation of young people, who had grown up influenced by political antagonism, punk and rock music, electronic experimentations, advertising jingles, songs from popular TV series and Japanese anime cartoons (the latter performed by the *Toretta Style* music event at the Forte Prenestino Social Centre in Rome) was ready to embrace this newborn folk hero¹⁷. Here is where the practice of *demythification* (or *de-mythification*) arises as a form enabling a symbolic “re-appropriation” of culture and language.

¹⁵ The Luther Blissett scene in Viterbo was very important for the development of the movement, but was also the less documented. Through a collection of inedited interviews, it is deeply explored by Marco Deseriis in his PhD dissertation (2010), in Chapter 4: “Luther Blissett, The Mythmaker”, section 8: Media Homeopathy (p. 321-329)

¹⁶ For a deeper analysis of the early politicization of cyberculture in Italy, see Chapter 2 (Towards the Cyber Utopias) of my book *Networking: The Net as Artwork* (Costa & Nolan, 2006 / DARC, 2008). Online version at: <http://networkingart.eu/the-book>

¹⁷ I was part of this young crowd, when studying Sociology at the “La Sapienza” University in Rome between 1993 and 1999. I was not actively part of the Luther Blissett Project at that time, but it definitively influenced me, getting to know some colleagues who were very active in the network, such as Daniele Vasquez and Fabrizio Carli. One episode that got into my mind like a shot was a Luther Blissett “ritual” when I was studying Cultural Anthropology in 1994. Sometimes the course programme, run by Massimo Canevacci, presented *ex-chatedra* activities, and one of them was dedicated to Luther Blissett. A group of students entered the room carrying a Luther Blissett altar, a huge picture of Luther flanked by two candles. Then they introduced the character (Luther Blissett), providing deep insights into the practice of psychogeography in the city of Rome, which was commonly practiced in the Roman Luther Blissett Project. I also recall hearing for the first time the “voice” of Luther Blissett, the students having a tape recorder, emitting a very fascinating synthesised collage of words. Some years later, during my involvement in the AvANa hacker collective at the Forte Prenestino social centre, I got to know some of the Roman Luthers better (among them, Andrea Natella, Luca Nobile and Andrea Tiddi), immersing myself deeper into this common phantasmagoria.

This phenomenon came about through the generation of social and political disruption by the collective staging of stunts, pranks and media hoaxes. Indeed, Luther Blissett was not only an attempt to rethink politics beyond the traditional concepts of opposition and clashes, but also an attempt to work creatively with media, communication, urbanity and, most of all, identity. The LBP was one of the first underground subcultures, together with Neoism, that was able to transform the concept of identity into a mind game, creating the concept of a *multiple-self*, which worked both as a political statement and a critique of politics. The criticism against radical politics resulted in the rethinking of political antagonism beyond hierarchies and leadership, making linguistic tricks and self-irony part of the political strategy. There is a specific narrative that has been constructed to augment the Luther Blissett “urban legend”, even if such knowledge was not decisive in the adoption of the name, nor for an understanding of the phenomenon’s broader meaning. As with many myths, its genesis is simple, almost irrelevant. Its strength resides in the power that the symbol catalyses after its creation, when it becomes a familiar icon to many people. The background anecdotes about its genesis only acquire importance once the “legend” is historically reconstructed, to reveal something of it *a posteriori*. However, even if such anecdotes were not central to the creation of the Blissett mythology, they were still important for the members of the movement to feel a part of it, to share in a sense of belonging.

To mention just some of the diverse genesis myths for the Luther Blissett character: “Luther Blissett’s face was created by Andrea Alberti and Edi Bianco in 1994 by morphing old 1930’s and 1940’s portraits of Wu Ming 1’s great-uncles” (as we read in the Wu Ming website); the name of Luther Blissett derived from the name of the former Jamaican footballer who played for Watford and also – with less success – for Milan in the 1980s; sources of inspiration for the Luther Blissett multiple-use name was a networking project of an English mail artist who had diffused compositions and collages of football players including the Jamaican player Luther Blissett. According to the Wu Ming group of Italian novelists, *the creation of a myth* was central to the genesis of the Luther Blissett folk hero (even if probably not all the Luthers would agree with this). The “folk hero” was formed by activists, students and artists who could identify with propagating such a myth, which implied the belief in radical practices, antagonism

and subversion, while disrupting pop culture and reflecting on the impact of media tactics (therefore, the *demystification* component was also central).

Situationism, and especially the concept of *dérive*, as the spontaneous exploration of urban landscapes, was a great source of inspiration – even if the Luther Blissett Project never claimed to be an avant-garde movement. Additionally, by nature of its very loose structure, it was quite different from that of the Situationist International. As we read on the Wu Ming website, the objective of the Luthers was *to play elaborate media pranks as a form of art, always claiming responsibility and explaining what bugs they had exploited to plant a fake story*¹⁸. Luther Blissett was therefore creating a self-mythology while at the same time embedding the art of disruption. It was a myth that was also an expression of a communitarian political act, as Wu Ming 5 describes:

“The creation of myths – of stories, legends, exemplary events, foundational episodes and moments – is at the base of every human community. And so it has been from the dawn of time. [...]. Thinking more in detail, any family group or small kinship clan recognizes itself through the stories of the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, through the anecdotes that are repeated at every family reunion, a ritual without which those people would be almost unknown to each other. But if from an analytical point of view all myths have the same value, it’s not at all the case from a political point of view. Because myths live in the midst of human events, they change, they’re shaped, they take on different meanings; often they’re emptied of sense and remain mere rhetorical simulacra until someone comes along to reinterpret them. The activity of the storyteller, as Wu Ming intends it, has to do with this way of seeing myths and stories. That is, as something living, something collective, something with which it’s possible to interact. To tell a story is a political activity in the primary sense of the word. Because to tell a story is to share, that is, to make a community. To make a community is never

¹⁸ From: www.wumingfoundation.com/english/biography.html#1. Retrieved August 9, 2011.

a neutral activity, and neither, therefore, is choosing which story to tell or the way to tell it. We often refer to the need to act narratively, to find significant symbolic stories, which will help us see the present from a new angle. [...] What interests us more is presenting multiple communities and characters” (Wu Ming 5 in R. P. Baird, 2006, pp. 258-259).

Luther Blissett became so widespread among the underground culture of the 1990s because it reflected a multiple and open art of storytelling, as generated by a network of individuals, or better still, *co-dividuals*. The actions of the Luther Blissett Project were planned collectively, and often orchestrated through the use of network technology (many of the Italian Luther Blissetts were using Bulletin Board Systems to coordinate their activities, such as the network of BBSes Cybernet). In Italy, the nodes of Bologna, Rome and Viterbo were the most active, but Luther Blissett was potentially open to appropriation by anyone, and that is why it spread so well in other countries too. It became an “open reputation”, as we can read on the LBP website, which the members were constantly renegotiating through their activities and writings. Of course, among the Luthers, some people had more authority than others, because they managed to create a “reputation” (not only for the open character, but for themselves, too). What Wu Ming 5 states about the non-neutrality of making a community and choosing which story to tell is truly central for Luther Blissett as we have also seen for Neoism. Some Luther Blissett stories became more popular than others, bringing us back to the issue examined by Marco Deseriis in his PhD dissertation (2010), namely: who is actually allowed to use a collective name and for what purpose.

It would be uncritical to say that embodying a multi-user identity or becoming an open pop star would solve the problem of representation or leadership in grassroots networks in its entirety, but in the case of Luther Blissett we can state with some certainty that its main strategy was to question the meaning of the networking structure itself, developing a methodology based on the principles of inclusiveness. There were of course Luthers who became more popular, as for example, the members of the Wu Ming group, who signed the book *Q* as Luther Blissett and who orchestrated the Luther Blissett Seppuku, the death of the project in 1999. However, there were also many Luthers who decided to remain anonymous until

the end, contributing to the creation of a shared imaginary – which, incidentally, despite the Seppuku is still alive today and is still inspiring generations of younger artists and writers.

In the above-mentioned book *Totò, Peppino e la guerra psichica* (1996), we can read about *The Networks of Events*, a principal networking challenge facing the Luther Blissett Project. The main idea was to start building up a planetary network of active participants (as Luther Blissett calls it) of autonomous groups and individuals able to coordinate their activities through every means of communication: from real-life relations to computer networks, radio, telephone or postal exchange. The challenge was to *produce events*, real or fake, to practice them, to advertise them and to transform and modify them through a constant flow of action and information. As Luther Blissett states, every method was permitted, from cultural sabotage to media hoaxes, plagiarism and subversions, rave-parties, theatre happenings and public demonstrations. “It had to be the first step toward putting into circulation ideas, people, legends and all those things that break the continuum of the official history. It was the prophecy of the heretic Blissett” (Blissett, 1996, p. 30, my translation). And it was achieved through an international network, a collective performance which was also a critique of the political: “without centres of power, political committees, or majorities, but simply by applying to the various nodes of the network specific actions to which it is possible to join for free and freely. [...] This is the greatest advantage of the network, the individual links which will always be independent of each other, while at the same time keeping in constant contact with each other and interacting at any time” (Blissett, 1996, p. 31, my translation).

Following our analysis of disruptive networks based on the creation of a common phantasmagoria, before Luther Blissett and Monty Cantsin, another networking myth was created: its origins go back to the early 1950s in the USA, where it was given the name of The Church of the SubGenius which, as legend has it, was founded by J. R. “Bob” Dobbs, the “world’s greatest salesman”. J. R. “Bob” Dobbs is represented graphically as an iconic image of a man smoking a pipe; but only the man’s face is visible, and in fact he is not a real man at all, but a 1950s-style comic figure. Demystifying the mythical story, it is known that The Church of the SubGenius was founded originally in Dallas, Texas, by Reverend Ivan Stang (born Douglass St. Clair Smith) and Dr. Philo Drummond in 1979, though Stang himself

denies this and claims J. R. “Bob” Dobbs founded the organization in 1953. However, as Hal Robins (a.k.a. Dr. Hal, or Dr. Howland Owl), another member of the Church of the SubGenius – and a renowned underground comic artist and illustrator – recalls during an interview in San Francisco (December 2009) the icon of “Bob” came from a clip art phone directory for a local phone company. He describes the genesis of the SubGenius as such:

“In Texas, and in the American south and southwest, the radio is full of screaming fanatical fundamentalist preachers shouting about hellfire and damnation. And these two young men [Ivan Stang and Dr. Philo Drummond] grew up hearing this stuff all the time. What goes into your life becomes part of your art. That is one current, but there are also SubGenius thinkers. One of these was the Polish genius Stanislaw Szukalski. [...] He was a big artist in Poland before the Second World War, creating sculptures, drawings, publishing books. There used to be a museum devoted to his work, which was destroyed in the war. His books are extremely peculiar; one of them is called *Behold, the Proton*. He developed many theories, and one of them was that in the past, certain apes or ape-like beings intermarried with humans to create a lineage which includes all the evil dictators and oppressors of humanity and some of his books demonstrate with pictures of politicians, how their anatomies correspond to this yeti, ape-like forbear. But, although we in the Church of the SubGenius accept this teaching, we believe that instead of producing evil politicians and oppressors of humanity, the yeti admixture was to the good and its descendants are SubGenii. Szukalski himself would never have believed this and would have reacted to it with horror. Then, there are many literary influences and philosophical ones. Our friend who recently died – Robert Anton Wilson – was important to us. The horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, and many others created out of his work, the crazy religious background of the American south and southwest, some writings of Szukalski, produced the unified tenets of The Church of the SubGenius and its philosophy. And there is a coherent philosophy within it,

although there are many offshoots and sidetracks” (Robins in Bazzichelli, 2009b)

As can be seen, this myth holds significance for the SubGenii as well, which even if it is not devoid of contradictions and paradoxes, constitutes a common basis for the development of a movement. The central philosophy and belief of the Church of the SubGenius and its members is the pursuit of *total slack*, which means the acquisition of a sense of satisfaction, freedom, liberation, pleasure and independence from authority and the limits experienced by conformist behaviour within society. The aim of the Church is linked to the idea of libertarian satisfaction, anarchic thoughts of rebellion and freedom, stating that humanity is born with Original Slack, but the slack has been stolen from us by an antagonist conspiracy. This is the conspiracy of normalized people – or so-called “pinks” – that the SubGenii – blasphemers, rebels, outcasts, hackers and free thinkers – must oppose. The opposition, however, doesn’t imply the pursuit of radical political action or intervention – reflecting the way many people in the US interpret the concept of “politics” – but it comes through *slack*, or just “doing nothing and getting what you want anyway”.

The belief of the Church of the SubGenius is intertwined with ironical, cynical and subliminal practices applied to media and communication, creating satires that mock organised religions (such as Scientology, for example), but also reflects a critical reflection on art and visual experimentation. Among the techniques used by the SubGenii for their propaganda are *détournement*, plagiarism, modification and alteration of pre-existent film and video material, such as American and Japanese science fiction movies of the 1950s, “found-footage” clips, TV news and cable show clips, old civil defence films, clips from the various SubGenius events, self-created footage, and fan clips. The result is an extremely visionary communication style, which combines various media, illustrations, voices and texts – among the SubGenii are many visual artists, underground cartoonists and filmmakers, such as Paul Mavrides, Robert Crumb and the above-mentioned Harry S. Robins. The Church of the SubGenius is *ludic religion*, where instead of victimisation, refusal and privation, there exists a combination of anti-authoritarian behaviour, irony and cynicism. It is a celebration of an *effort-free and pleasurable life*, a life

where *you don't want to spend your time working for somebody else*, as Dr. Hal points out:

“We do reject the system of values, the Conspiracy, which represents anti-values. Our chief value is *slack*. Slack is the opposite of tension, and it also represents leisure. Slack time is the time that is your own time, not the time that is dictated to you by the Conspiracy. Leisure is the basis of culture. Only in leisure can cultural creation and innovation come about. The first invention of prehistoric people came in their leisure time, when they were not engaged in the work of survival and that sort of thing, so slack is of considerable importance. You don't want to spend your time in meaningless toil, for a meaningless result. This is what we want to divert people from doing. Slack means to restore meaning and value to the individual and to take it away from an unquestioned attachment to the undefined yet very real external group that we've given the name of Conspiracy” (Robins in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

Comedy and parody are part of the structure of the Church and its rituals, and it has been defined as a *cynisacreigion*. It made use of (and still makes use of) iconic and graphic symbolism, creating disruptive interventions in the media and a meta-reflection on media culture as well. The Church of the SubGenius used Scientology double-talk as a parody in the mid-80s for its groundbreaking “Arise!” video and other Sub-genius productions¹⁹, as well as producing visionary radio shows, pamphlets, information, books and promotional material to spread the cult, which deeply influenced later visionary underground pop culture movements. The pipe of “Bob” symbolizes the mythology of the church: it is more than a pipe, or better said, by quoting the words painted by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte below a pipe, *it is not a pipe* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, 1928-1929). The pipe is not a pipe, because it is the image of a pipe, and the abstraction of this image means it can be used for different purposes, in ways it is not normally supposed to be used. It encourages a symbolic appropriation, a *détournement* of meanings: it is an act of disruption. The symbol

¹⁹ Retrieved in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, “Church of the SubGenius” article, on April 29 2011: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_SubGenius.

becomes an icon, travelling across generations, as we can see from the recent symbol the SubGenii have created to brand the church, which is an abstract representation of Bob's face. The pipe and the face (like the face of Luther Blissett) therefore become a symbol of a common belief, and a common practice as well. However, the aim of the Church is not to produce opposition, but to pursue slack and leisure. Dr. Hal describes the purpose of the Church and its difference with the experience of culture jamming and adbusting as follows:

“We are not that pro-active as aggressors and attackers, we tend to try to alter the meaning of symbols with our parodies and our questioning of them, taking their power from them. Their main power comes from not being questioned. From simply being accepted. We treat them in a different fashion, which is not of acceptance, not of opposition, but as objects of contemplation. Symbols are the basis of art for us, not of commerce. We are aiming to provide slack, not to generate profits. [...] We create slack where they are creating tension. We are creating slack by dissipating this tension, and showing how to appropriate the symbols rather than the things. The slack is in the symbol more than in the thing. People can have it without the grief that comes from giving away their own time. The result of our activity is to give people their time back. We provide leisure on the basis of culture” (Robins in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

Another central aspect of our analysis is that The Church of the SubGenius was a widespread network, applying both strategies for networking and the ability to reflect on these strategies as well. It was a social network before what is called social networking today, gaining prominence in the 1980s and 1990s but going on to maintain an active presence on the Internet as well (the total membership in 2003 was close to 10.000). Besides the fact that the SubGenii have been meeting every year since 1996 in New York State for the annual SubGenius meeting called “X Day”, in the mid-1990s dozens of DIY websites of the church spread through the Internet, connected to the official SubGenius home page, which is maintained by Ivan Stang; in the 1990s, the network of the SubGenius gave birth to two Usenet newsgroups, *alt.slack* and *alt.binaries.slack*, and a third

one, *alt.binaries.multimedia.slack*, was created in 2005. Today, a weekly radio programme, the *Hour of Slack*, hosted by Stang, his wife Princess Wei R. Doe, and voice comic Dave DeLuca (a.k.a. Lonesome Cowboy Dave) is still being broadcast, while in the Bay Area, Dr. Philo Drummond, Hal Robins and Doug Wellman (a.k.a. Puzzling Evidence) broadcast the show *Puzzling Evidence* that started back in 1982²⁰. Even if the Church of the SubGenius has been in existence for thirty years, it remains a creative symbol across the US and Europe for many people, and by destructuring normativity, it represents the *aversion of the logic of hegemony* as can be found in the US counterculture of the 1970s-1980s, as mentioned earlier when discussing with Lee Felsenstein the hacker ethics in California.

As we will see in the next chapters, describing the analysis of Richard J. F. Day in the book *Gramsci is Dead* (2005), what binds together such networks based on self-organisation and the self-development of alternative practices is more a logic of affinity rather than hegemony. “Hegemony” is not seen as a form of oppression, but following the perspective of Antonio Gramsci, it is interpreted as a process, a consensual aim of struggle, a common tension to acquire power, a striving to dominate antagonistic groups (Day, 2005, pp. 6-7). Richard Day criticises such logic, which very often characterises both revolutionary and reformist viewpoints as an attempt to create a consensual order in society, and which he defines as the *hegemony of hegemony* (Day, 2005, p. 8). According to Day, the “newest social movements” (those post-1980s) directly question a dominance-driven structure of political antagonism, transferring their actions from the logic of hegemony to decentralized networks and toward a more network-based logic of “affinity”. The creation of direct affinities, going beyond the old-fashioned idea of mass revolution, sheds light on minorities, autonomous and post-colonialist groups which work through systems of situated subjectivities. Such a perspective, reflecting on the assets of dominance, control and power, sheds light on critical practices perpetuated by networks of minorities. As Day points out, the focus has shifted towards “those struggles that seek to change the

²⁰ Hal Robins, together with Chicken John runs the show “Ask Dr. Hal”, in San Francisco, an *interactive salon* in which the audience can consult the oracular Dr. Hal Robins by asking him whatever question they wish. The show, hosted by Chicken John, also presents audio and visual collages by KROB, as well as the visual puns of Yo-Yo King David Capurro. The official website is: www.askdrhal.com.

root, that want to address not just the *content* of currents modes of domination and exploitation, but also the *forms* that give rise to them” (Day, 2005, p. 4). The following examples suggest how to imagine alternative forms, which work by understanding and consequently disrupting the systems of control and bureaucracy. Contents and practices are interlinked, giving rise to community-based networking practices, which value a logic of affinity rather than the politics of representation, recognition and, often, dominance.

2.6 Disrupting the Bureaucracy

This section sheds light on the concept of *disrupting the bureaucracy*, the fifth factor which I argue linked underground network practices in the course of 1980s and 1990s, and which I will adopt as a comparative standpoint to analyse both hacker and art practices in the contemporary social media. As I demonstrated earlier, the artistic and hacktivist practices analysed here are not merely based on the production of art objects, but develop through relationships between individuals within social and artistic contexts of networking. In 2001, Craig J. Saper, a professor at the University of Central Florida, proposed the concept of *intimate bureaucracy* to describe practices of mail art, networked art and experimental visual poetry spanning the last half of the twentieth century. Through his idea of intimate bureaucracy, Saper defines creative appropriation and subversive interventions in the standardized bureaucracy of contemporary society. For example, mail artists used various methods to appropriate the bureaucracy of postal correspondence to create and disseminate their works of networking, such as by self-producing postage stamps, rubber stamps, stickers, envelopes and postcards. These activities are pre-dated by the mail art projects of other networking pioneers, such as Giacomo Balla and Francesco Cangiullo, or the “blue stamp” of Yves Klein in the 1950s, and the creative experimentation with stamps and postcards by some Fluxus artists, such as Ben Vautier, Robert Watts and Mieko Shiomi.

The list of artists who have endeavoured to transform bureaucracy into a work of art must certainly include the Italian mail artist Cavellini and the American artist J. S. G. Boggs (Steve Litzner), the former for

his encyclopaedic and systematic activities of self-historicization, and the latter for his series of self-produced Dollar banknotes, also known as “Boggs bills”. The Boggs bills, in circulation since 1984 and actually used by the artist as real banknotes until the American government forced him to suspend their production, constitutes a clear example of the intimate appropriation of the market bureaucracy. William Boggs worked critically on the issues of reproducibility and market disruption, transforming bureaucracy into a networking practice and an intimate exchange between individuals. As Craig J. Saper points out: “An intimate bureaucracy makes poetic use of the trappings of large bureaucratic systems and producers (e.g., logos, stamps) to create intimate aesthetic situations, including the pleasures of sharing a special knowledge or a new language among a small network of participants” (Saper, 2001, p. xii). As a consequence, bureaucracy is seen as a parody of itself and, at the same time, a challenge for creating unexpected connections.

At the same time, the idea of disrupting the bureaucracy is strongly connected with the above-mentioned concept of business disruption. Often such artist’s activities contribute to create a rupture in the *status quo*, but they also develop innovative modalities of production, by proposing alternative paths in the economy and everyday life. For example, Boggs banknotes constitute a performance in and of themselves: the real artwork is not the fake banknote created by the artist, but the network of transactions involved in trying to spend the bill as real money. As Saper points out, “Boggs’s work demonstrates the general phenomena found in a group of artworks concerned with transactions that create intimate relationships using the trappings of bureaucratic systems (stamps, cancelling stamps, corporate names, logos, events, instructions, and, in Boggs’s case, money) These artworks invent a gift-exchange community involved in a more intimate sense of transactions that we usually consider impersonal” (Saper, 2001, p. x). To describe the transaction involved in Boggs’s disruption of bureaucracy, a \$100 bill can be exchanged for \$100 worth of goods; the artworks are not solely the bills created by the artist, but the receipts, the change he got, and, sometimes, the goods he purchased. A collector who wants to get hold of the art bills, the “objects” produced by the artist, has to track them down himself through the network of transactions, which becomes the real artwork. The cooperative network formed by the artist, the collectors, the

suppliers and the consumers is therefore what produces the work of art: a distribution system created by the artist himself, who integrates himself directly into the society's economy, by disrupting it. It is a good example of what Howard S. Becker defined in 1982 as "art worlds", patterns of collective activity and human cooperation which "affect both the production and consumption of art works" (Becker, 1982, p. 1).

Another project in the context of networked art, which worked to create unexpected interferences between art and daily life by *disrupting the bureaucracy*, was *F.U.N. (Funtastic United Nations)*, created in 2001 by the mail artists Vittore Baroni and Piermario Ciani. The main purpose of this collective concept which dealt with fictitious worlds was to reflect on the strategies of networking itself; even if mail art and networked art had the scope to create "horizontal networks", the idea of horizontality might often be no more than a utopia. As Vittore Baroni points out, the purpose of networking over the course of the past decades has been to destabilise the art market and the art-star system through interpersonal collaboration, but it wasn't flawless. China, African countries, India and many other Asian countries were not involved in the "Eternal Network", whose popularity spread only in the Western countries; furthermore, the postal network involved mostly a "white, male, middle class, literate class of people" and was not exempt from ego conflicts, as has been described above.

The project F.U.N. was therefore created to imagine a utopian network of countries "preserving the biodiversity of cultures and encouraging an eco-friendly, free and open participation in the creative experience" (Baroni, 2003 unpag.). The concept was to dream up imaginary lands, and an independent and supranational organisation that was devoted to collaboration among all kinds of imaginary countries and worlds, "virtual countries, multi-ethnic and transgender, where the passports, postage stamps and banknotes are real, but not the wars" (Baroni, 2003 *ibidem*)²¹. F.U.N. was a network which produced several collaborative publications, and other creative

²¹ The F.U.N concept followed in the footsteps of other similar projects which imagined "free zones" and utopian lands, such as George Maciunas' Fluxus Island, Anna Banana's Queendom of Banana, Harley's Terra Candella, Dogfish's Tui-Tui Islands, Surrealville by buZ blurr (Russell L. Butler), the promised land of Akademorod by the Neoist network, the NSK State by Neue Slowenische Kunst, but also the "cartographies of the soul", common in the late Baroque period and in some (pre-mail art) postcards from the beginning

works created by the Funtastic United Networkers, such as thematic artistamps, rubberstamps, postcards (collected in the *Mail 4 FUN* survival kit, AAA Edizioni, 2002), the travelling artistamps show Philatelic FUN, the Funtastic United Nations meetings (the second, held in 2005, is described in the *SUN of FUN, Second Universal Nexus of Funtastic United Nations* catalogue), and a limited edition portfolio of art banknotes of the Funtastic Nations, created by twenty international artists, for the *Bank of F.U.N* project. Here also, the *Bank of F.U.N* constitutes the artwork, and the banknote is already an artwork in itself, having value only if traded or used in the Funtastic United Nations. The creative currencies from the Bank of FUN, as the Funtastic United Nations, follow a long tradition of artist's money, from the series of *1 Dollar Bills* produced in 1962 by the Fluxus artist Robert Watts; the *Dollar Bills* collages by Ray Johnson that came to light in Chicago in 1970; and many exhibition projects of mail art have been focused on artists' (fake) money, between 1984 and 1988 (Baroni & Ciani, 2003, p. 9).

A similar methodology of disruption of bureaucratic systems, to *hold back the depersonalisation of money transactions*, was practiced in the Neoist network. In 1979, for example, David Zack conceived together with Niels Lomholt (Denmark) and Horacio Zabala (Italy) a "10% Prison share" bill, issued through Lomholt Formular Press. David Zack, who was conducting a nomadic lifestyle in a van with his family, was often forced to escape from creditors, as Istvan Kantor recalls, so that at the end of the 1970s he invented the Unpaid Bills Collage Festival, "which was basically a party to get drunk and glue unpaid gas and electricity bills to large pieces of cardboard" (Kantor in D. Baird, 2004). With a similar attitude, in October 1981, tENTATIVELY a cONVENIENCE, staged the Neoist Parking Meter Action, at the APT 4 in Montréal, describing the action as follows:

"Wearing sandwich boards that said in English & French: 'Neoist Parking Meter Action - Pay Me to Go Away' & wearing a parking meter hood over my face, I stood at empty parking places & waited for cars to park there. Then I followed the drivers when they left their cars with an impassive face & my hand out-stretched mechanically.

of the twentieth century, as Vittore Baroni and Piermario Ciani pointed out (*Mail 4 Fun*, 2002)

The drivers all avoided me by walking somewhere where I wasn't - after which I left a Neoist Parking Ticket under their windshield wiper. Finally disgusted by what I thought was a mediocre response to my imaginative begging, I started to walk back to the LOW theatre. En route, two guys stopped me & asked me what I was doing. When I explained, they thought it was so funny that they pretended to get out of a car & gave me money" (tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE in N.O.Cantsin, 2010, unpag.).

However, in the Neoist and mail art network the most impressive project of "intimate bureaucracy" and "disrupting bureaucracy" was realised by the Scottish artist Pete Horobin. It took the name DATA, which stands for Daily Action Time Archive. DATA carried on for 10 years on a daily basis, from 1st January 1980 to 31st December 1989; based at 37 Union Street in Dundee, the headquarters of Horobin's studio, known as "The Attic". He documented every day of his life using various media, combining films, audio recordings, journals, graphics, drawings, correspondence, collaborations, mail art projects, small three-dimensional objects and photography. After this project, from 1990 to 2005, the artist documented two other phases of his life, only this time no longer as Pete Horobin, but as Marshall Anderson and Peter Haining (the whole project is today known as *The Attic Archive*). *The Attic Archive* covers in total a period of more than thirty years, the artist having had three lives and three different names: Pete Horobin, Marshall Anderson and Peter Haining. Pete Horobin was involved in the mail art network and in Neoism, organising several Neoist Apartment Festivals (1984: APT 8, the eighth Neoist Apartment Festival in London; 1985: APT 9, the ninth Neoist Apartment Festival in Ponte Nossa, Italy); Marshall Anderson, who lived from 01.01.1990 to 31.12.1999 was a mixed media artist and freelance art journalist who worked with arts and crafts in Scotland, whose life is documented through Scottish landscape drawings and an assemblage of film material; the activity of Peter Haining, which started in 2000 with the "Haining's Irish Biketour in Eire and Round N Ireland (Arts)" – HIBERNIA project – ended five years later, and it is also documented through drawings and films. Such work of self-historification, which resulted in an extraordinary collection of material, filed daily and archived for

thirty years, is a clear demonstration of “intimate bureaucracy” as a combination of art and life. The concept of disrupting the bureaucracy by turning it into self-representative performance and an intimate art practice acts as a common ground for the early “social networks” described in this chapter. It constitutes a tentative transformation of institutionalised and formalised automatisms from everyday life into an art performance, and it works poetically by building up a personal mythology through the art of storytelling²².

A similar strategy can be found in the Luther Blissett Project, if we consider the idea of “reddito di cittadinanza”, a shared political claim meaning *guaranteed basic income for all the citizens*. In the “Taxes Declaration” written by Luther Blissett in the “Rivista Mondiale di Guerra Psichica” (*World Magazine of Psychic War*, n.3, winter 1995-1996), Luther Blissett claims that the entertainment industry owes him money. It is considered a refund for all the times that Luther Blissett, and therefore every citizen, has appeared on television, in film or on the radio, without his/her knowledge, whether casually or in the background; it was also considered recompense for every time

²² Another more recent artistic work of self-historification, dealing with the idea of disruption through the intertwining of public bureaucracy and intimate everyday life is realised by Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša. They are three Slovenian artists – who all changed their names to Janez Janša, which was the name of the former Prime Minister of Slovenia. – in the summer of 2007. Their practice is focused on the acts of changing one’s personal name as a critical artistic methodology, which creates a constant tension between what is public and what is private, and the meaning of “mediation” in the art. As Janša, Janša and Janša demonstrate through their work, they disrupt the relational scheme between art and life, brining art into life instead of life into art. The first public artistic project of one of the three Janez Janša (born as Davide Grassi), related directly with money and was titled: “I Need Money to Be an Artist”, an urban installation presented first in Ljubljana, Slovenia (1996) and then in Venice, Italy (www.aksioma.org/i_need_money). It was an ironical attempt of reflecting on material exchange and on the boundaries between production and consumption in the everyday life of contemporary artists – by placing several yellow mail boxes, upon which the artist wrote the statement “I Need Money to Be an Artist”, at specific locations in Ljubljana (and later, in Venice). As the artist points out, it was an urban action to strike back against the common old fashion idea of the artist as Bohemian. Lately, the artist presented the goods collected in the mail boxes at the Kapelica gallery in Ljubljana, where the mail boxes were open to the public – not containing only money, but also messages, letters, postcards (directed to the artist but also other people, being the yellow boxes mistaken for real white postal boxes), and other random objects. In this case, like for the examples of Boggs banknotes and the archive of Pete Horobin, what is central are not the collected objects *per se*, but the network around them.

industries have used personal citizen's data as part of their statistical calculations, or when defining marketing strategies, or to increase the productivity of firms, or by the daily wearing of t-shirts, backpacks, socks, jackets, suits, towels with brands and advertising slogans, as Luther Blissett points out. If Luthers' bodies are unconsciously used as billboards, then the industries have to pay for this; the result is to get "a lot of money because I am many"; money for Luther Blissett and therefore for all citizens, because Luther Blissett, is "the multiple and the varied", and his identity belongs to everyone. The *basic income for all the citizens* was a crucial political issue in Italy during the 1990s, and as usual, the initiatives and interventions of Luther Blissett became an occasion to reflect on social and political dynamics²³.

The argument of the basic income guarantee was a proposed system of social security, providing each citizen with a sum of money, which became a huge debate in Italy involving various political parties and activist groups. In the book *Reddito di cittadinanza: Verso una società del non lavoro (Basic Income Guarantee. Towards a society without work)*, Agostino Mantegna and Andrea Tiddi describe the divergent political perspectives surrounding the definition and formulation of such a hypothesis. It reflects on such issues as the crisis in capitalism, the crisis in the Welfare State, immaterial labour and the increasing precariousness of working conditions, and combined different political approaches by analysing the changes in politics and society from the mid 1970s until the early years of the new century. Clearly embracing political reflection, which began in Italy at the end of the Seventies (and the Italian Autonomia was a direct exemplification of this), Andrea Tiddi and Agostino Mantegna point out:

"The factory can no longer be regarded as the central place of spatial and temporal work production. The entire cycle of work production has largely bypassed the walls of the factory for all to society as a whole. Now the whole of society

²³ In another article, named "Lettera aperta di Luther Blissett a tutti i centri sociali (e non solo a loro)", ("Open Letter From Luther Blissett To All Social Centres (And Not Only Them)", published in January 1996 and later in the book *Totò, Peppino e la guerra psichica* (AAA Editions, 1996), Luther Blissett proposes to substitute the Italian banknotes (liras) with banknotes of Luther Blissett, to be used as normal currency for transactions inside Social Centres. The letter is also published online in the official Luther Blissett website: www.lutherblissett.net/archive/139_it.html.

is to be, so to say, governed by the factory's regulations, in other words by the specific rules of capitalistic production. Production is increasingly detached from physical performance and basically takes the form of manipulation of relational, intellectual, techno-scientific and affective commodities. Work production changes from a linear scheme into a complex process relating to the ever more developing social networks of cooperation" (Mantegna & Tiddi, 2000, p. 14, my translation).

Luther Blissett, together with the other disruptive art projects presented here, are clear examples of the changing focus of intervention from the production factory to that of everyday life. It is a mirror of a deep social and political transformation, resulting in a shift of critical reflections among artists and activists as well. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Massimo Canevacci, describing the analysis of Walter Benjamin on the *passages*, points out that *they logically replace the centrality of the social factory, spreading consumption and not productive work; spreading empathic identification and not alienation*. If we apply this concept to the contemporary practices of activists, hackers and artists, it is evident that their creative methodology becomes a disruption from within, where symbols and languages are mixed up and recombined through a constant assemblage of codes. The crystallisation of the social factory, of automatic bureaucracy and of encompassing political schemes is shaken by a flow of mobile interventions that reflect on the meaning of network cooperation, and, more generally, on social and political dynamics, as will be described through the analysis of three case studies in the next chapter. In these contexts the practice of networking becomes a distributed strategy for collectively developing political and social criticism. With the network of cooperation being an increasingly sensitive territory for the rewriting of symbolic codes and a central setting of political and economic fluctuations, it becomes the perfect stage for producing artistic and activist interventions, where clashing political antagonisms are translated into more subliminal actions, fluid interferences in the everyday stream of events in life.



3 WHEN ART GOES DISRUPTIVE

3.1 Towards a Critique of Hegemony in Participatory Networks

This chapter presents a selection of three case studies relating to the topic of disruptive art in networks, bearing a direct relationship to the concepts described in the previous chapters. These case studies combine multiple identity projects and hacker practices with distributed networking strategies to generate political and social criticism within the framework of art and social networking. These hacker interventions foster a critical understanding of contemporary informational power and enable possible avenues for political and artistic actions via the construction of decentralised networks. Such interventions must be considered within the broader question of subjective participation and identity construction in unstable networks, so as to enable a methodology of political action that leads directly to a critique of oppositional hegemonic practices. As I wrote in the previous chapter, this notion of “hegemony” is prompted by the reflections of Richard J. F. Day in his book *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (2005). Day considers the logic of hegemony described by Antonio Gramsci as an attempt to ‘lead’ kindred and allied groups (Gramsci, 1971), proposing on the contrary a practice-based *logic of affinity* to interpret contemporary network-based social and political movements. Such analysis, drawing together post-anarchism (Gustav Landauer) and post-structuralism (Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), questions a political strategy involving radical clashes of forces which struggle for change by dominating their opponent, proposing instead projects and situations that operate “*non-hegemonically* rather than *counter-hegemonically*” (Day, 2005, p. 8).

Day observes that even in politically Leftist groups, a commonly prevalent attitude is to establish a counter-hegemony which works

from 'below' in favour of the 'oppressed'. But such an attitude commonly results in remaining trapped within the oppositional logic of power against power, leading to what Day defines as the *hegemony of hegemony* (Day, 2005, p. 8). The challenge instead is to devise *non-branded strategies and tactics*, using "non-universalizing, non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships based on mutual aid and shared ethical commitments" (Day, 2005, p. 8) to achieve social change. The case studies presented here follow on from the reflections on the multiple-identity and multiple-use name practices as described in previous chapters, but more specifically, they all play with and challenge the notion of power and hegemony among radical groups. They contest the hegemony of a specific entity (be it individual or collective) and the battle for dominance of a specific position (both in the art and in politics). Once again quoting Richard Day, "Power is seen as disseminated through many relationships, every day and every night, personal and political, discursive and material. In such a context political revolution makes no sense, as there is no building one could seize, no leader one could assassinate, in order to eliminate power effects and achieve a transparent society. [...] [P]ower does not emanate from a single point, but flows through all points" (Day, 2005, pp. 133-134).

The aim of my analysis is to conceive of and describe more flexible viral actions as relevant responses to the ubiquity of capitalism. The case studies here described operate not only as a political and social critique of specific phenomena (from the art system to education policy and the structure of corporate media), but also generate a meta-critique of themselves, of their objectives, structures and aims. By addressing the fluidity of networking dynamics, they generate socio-political criticism, while the act of creating disruption becomes an art practice in its own right. The strategy of disruptive innovation as a model for artistic creation is therefore described as a challenge to the re-invention and rewriting of symbolic and expressive codes, rethinking the meaning of oppositional practices in art, hacktivism and social networking.

The first case study, a Neoist intervention at the rebel:art festival in Berlin in Germany (April 2004), shows how the concept of disruption can be applied through artistic practices which generate confusion, disorder, and disturbance. As I wrote previously, the challenge becomes to provoke a dialectic of paradoxes, inversion of radical

schemes of oppositional conflicts, through the direct involvement of multiple subjectivities that act playfully from within. This case study also explores networking dynamics and the way groups perceive themselves, focusing on the meaning of participation in decentralised artistic networks. Focusing on disruptive actions in collaborative networks, my analysis sheds light on the vulnerability of networking dynamics in *recursive publics*. A recursive public, a concept proposed by Christopher M. Kelty in the book *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (2008), describes geek communities as groups sharing a moral order, common social norms of openness and freedom. However, adopting the concept of disruptive art to investigate hacker and activist practices, and therefore inverting the parameters of moral order into amoral disorder, a different perspective in understanding contemporary networking dynamics emerges. Artists can question the concept of “moral order” by constantly renegotiating the meaning of being part of a community, and the meaning of the community itself.

Such inversion of parameters, from moral order to amoral disorder, also mirrors a shift of business strategies in the Web 2.0 market, where enterprises work by generating disruptive innovations in order to stimulate higher levels of participation – and consumption. As a challenge to contemporary info-capitalism, artists and activists appropriate business strategies, applying subliminal and speculative tactics of disruption. However, they do not reach this objective by trying to dominate business contexts, they do not propose a model of counter-hegemony, or “hegemony of hegemony”. They act virally from within the systems. They create what Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* define as *the holey space of the itinerant smiths* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 413) oriented towards circumventing hegemony, a mode of action which also inspired the reflections of Richard Day. Such a reflection on disruptive strategies of criticism is central to providing the context for the second and third case studies to be explored in this chapter: the Italian fictional identity of Anna Adamolo and the international Anonymous “entity”. Both of these phenomena, even if their contexts and objectives differ, demonstrate how disruption can be created by staging unpredictable interventions, through the strategic use of networking techniques. Rather than simply refusing to use commercial platforms, from blogs to social media (as some members of certain hacker and activist communities would do), these networks produce critical changes from within, by

understanding how to play strategically with such platforms. The Anna Adamolo network uses Facebook to operate a political critique of authority and to give voice to a plurality of individuals, combining viral interventions both online and offline. The Anonymous “entity” deconstructs proprietary logic by disrupting corporate contexts and branding strategies, and generating new dynamics of networking and collaborative actions, most of the time challenging the notion of morality as well.

Another important aspect linking such case studies is their *participation* in networking contexts, which is once again linked to the idea of power and the issue of inclusion/exclusion within communities. The concept of participation is central for highlighting how the concept of “networking” has evolved and transformed in antagonistic contexts. For some years, a critical vocabulary has developed over the issue of social participation and capitalist exploitation in the post-Fordist economy. This is closely related to an analysis of new models of social and political struggle through an emerging plurality of individuals, and by bringing into play different subjectivities working against neo-liberalism. Theorists such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, described an emerging entity called the *multitude*, a term first used by Machiavelli and Spinoza, and more recently analysed by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in the book *Empire* (2000), and in *Multitude* (2004) and by Paolo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). Although the aforementioned theorists themselves tend to focus on the topics of subjectivity, nomadism and overcoming a negative dialectical approach, when translated into practice, their ideas are often interpreted by activists as generating “oppositional clashes”. Such a vision of the *multitude* can operate at a theoretical level to describe decentralised and distributed practices of political criticism, but it is difficult to apply such a concept on a pragmatic activist level without recreating dynamics of power conflict. Antonio Negri himself, in his article *Così comincio a cadere l'impero* (2001), describes the movements of Seattle, Göteborg, Quebec City and Genoa as “hegemonic”¹.

¹ Here, Antonio Negri writes: “Così la ricomposizione delle lotte si fa nel segno della moltitudine e quando si parla (come Genova ci impone di farlo) di un nuovo ‘ciclo di lotte’, questo è egemonizzato dalla moltitudine”. My translation: “Thus the struggles’ reconstruction is carried out on behalf of the multitude, and when we talk about a new ‘cycle of struggles’ (such as Genoa requires us to do), this is hegemonised by the multi-

Whilst it is not my intention to dismiss oppositional practices of conflict, which might offer the only possible solution in certain cases, I nevertheless consider it essential to rethink the notion of hegemony as a strategic answer to more and more pervasive forms of control, which are evident in the current era of info-capitalism. This would avoid falling into the trap of legitimising the existence of the “oppressors” by giving them the opportunity to fight using the same strategies as their opponents. The challenge is to disrupt the dichotomy of oppressors vs. opponents by trying to imagine new forms of participation that go beyond the creation of a compact force seeking holistic hegemony, even if presented in the plural form. As Paolo Virno suggests, language and communication, by acting on the spheres of production and politics, become crucial territories of intervention. To avoid the risk of falling into the trap of the *hegemony of hegemony*, it is also necessary to rethink activist practices and strategies by engaging in a meta-reflection on their meaning, as well as on the meaning of “oppositions”. The D-I-Y tradition that ranges from underground art networks to hacker culture, and the notion of viral interventions, might serve as a form of inspiration, even if such a background is also open to criticism since the emergence of Web 2.0 and the collapse of many utopias related to the notions of freedom of knowledge and peer exchange. It can be gleaned from such experiences that it is possible to act within the systems (applying what hackers call the “hands-on imperative”) and to work through fluid strategies of disruption in the cultural industry, as we will see in the following three case studies.

tude”. In the article, Negri clearly describes the emerging international political movement at the beginning of 2000s as “hegemonic”: “Questo movimento è egemone: lo trovi, senza contraddizione, nel centro dell’Europa e nel mezzo delle foreste del Chiapas; negli States e nei deserti e nelle megalopoli africane; nelle rivolte degli studenti indonesiani e nel crescere di una resistenza indignata dell’intellettualità russa...La sinistra italiana ha una sola possibilità: mettersi al servizio di questo movimento egemone” (My translation: “This movement is hegemonic: you find it, without contradiction, in the heart of Europe and in the middle of the forests of Chiapas, in the US and African deserts and in the metropolis; in the riots of the Indonesian students and in the growing resistance of the outraged Russian intelligentsia...The Italian left has only one option: to serve this hegemonic movement”). From: *Così comincio a cadere l'impero*, published in *Multitudes: revue politique, artistique, philosophique*, on December 7, 2001. Retrieved on: <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Così-comincio-a-cadere-l-impero>, August 10, 2011.

3.2 *The A/Moral Dis/Order of Recursive Publics*

The concept of a/moral dis/order is analysed in this context as a dialectical tension between disruptive strategies in so-called underground artistic networks and in the business context of social media. The juxtaposition of concepts such as amoral and moral (which becomes a/moral) and that of disorder and order (which becomes dis/order) sheds light on the ambiguities inherent in the contemporary business of social networking, and the contradictions which emerge from clashes between two opposing powers. What generates order and what creates disorder in the contemporary framework of the digital economy and political antagonism? And is the business of social networking “moral” or “amoral”? Perhaps contemporary networking business and the political methodology surrounding the concept of radical clashes are *both* generating order *and* disorder, they are *both* moral *and* amoral, as will be further analysed. The strategy of disruption as a model for artistic creation loosens dualistic tensions, proposing disruptive viral actions instead as responses to the pervasiveness of capitalism. By drawing on Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image, the “dialectics at a standstill”, adopted here as a model for political criticism which encourages the coexistence of oppositions instead of provoking oppositional clashes, becomes a challenge for envisioning disruptive practices in the field of art and technology, and in the business of social networking.

In his investigation into geek communities and what binds them together, Christopher M. Kelty proposes the notion of modal and technical order:

“Geeks share an idea of moral and technical order when it comes to the Internet; not only this, but they share a commitment to maintaining that order because it is what allows them to associate as a recursive public in the first place. They discover, or rediscover, through their association, the power and possibility of occupying the position of independent public – one not controlled by states, corporations, or other organizations, but open (they claim) through and through – and develop a desire to defend it from encroachment, destruction, or refeudalization (to

use Habermas's term for the fragmentation of the public sphere)" (Kelty, 2008, p. 50).

According to Kelty, what brings geeks together is *a shared imagining of order*: geeks share a moral imagination of the Internet, which lives through hardware, software, networks and protocols, and which shapes practices in their everyday lives. The geek community is a recursive public since it works on developing, creating and maintaining networks, and at the same time *the geek community is the network* and the social infrastructure which geeks maintain. As Kelty points out, geeks share ideas, but they also build up the technology that allows the expression of certain ideas. "The idea of order shared by geeks is shared because they are geeks" (Kelty, 2008, p. 43). Geeks speak and argue about topics which they directly create and bring into existence: therefore, they are their own public, the developers of their own social imaginary. In other words, what Kelty defines as moral and technical order could easily refer to hacker ethics, which is a common social imaginary about technology and the Internet, even if Kelty prefers to use the term "geek" to that of "hacker" (Kelty, 2008, p. 35).

While discussing a public sphere that refers to a specific moral and social order, Kelty draws upon the analysis of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, as well as previous investigations by Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner. But even if Kelty's concept of recursive publics adds a new layer to the analysis of social imaginary in the so-called modern society – since it is not only interpreted as a shared background but as a tool of creation and autonomous development – the concept of "social imaginary" still has to be questioned. In 1936 the psychoanalytical analysis of Jacques Lacan indicated that the notion of imaginary, when seen as a coherent unity of a body's image, is just a fascination and an illusion of control and totality (the "Mirror Phase")². George E. Marcus's ethnographical exploration of the relationship between contemporary science and technology in his book *Technoscientific Imaginaries* (1995) questioned the notion of imaginary, beyond authoritative and comprehensive conceptual schemes, suggesting unexpected connections through the dialogue of various subjects.

² The idea of the mirror phase was first proposed at the 1936 Marienbad International Congress of Psycho-Analysts.

To return to the common ethics shared by geeks, Kelty cites the example of Napster's collapse and its battle against the musical industry. This was a battle strongly supported by hackers and geeks worldwide, who found a common goal in the fight for the freedom of information and exchange, and the right to use decentralised technologies in opposition to monopoly. This is one possible way of analysing the matter; but if we were to adopt another perspective, we might discover a different meaning. A business enterprise like Napster managed to attract the will and the energy of many activists to support a cause with a deep commercial purpose at its core. Analysing this apparent contradiction, Kelty points out:

“Napster was not, however, a recursive public or a Free Software project, but a dot-com-inspired business plan in which proprietary software was given away for free in the hopes that revenue would flow from the stock market, from advertising or from enhanced versions of the software. Therefore geeks did not defend Napster as much as they experienced its legal restriction as a wake-up call: the Internet enables Napster and will enable many other things, but laws, corporations, lobbyists, money, and government can destroy all of it” (Kelty, 2008, p. 61).

I would argue that Napster was able to garner so many followers because it managed to absorb their values and channel them into its business model. It was a business which decided not to follow the moral order shared by its peers, as represented by the music industry monopoly. Napster opened a (new) cycle of appropriation of values and ethics, transferring them from the so-called underground culture to the field of business, just like many of the new generation of social media and Web 2.0 companies have been doing since the mid-2000s. It demonstrated that the idea of social imaginary as a cohesive moral order could be disrupted, and the change could be achieved by being strategically amoral – thus adopting values that were apparently contrary to its own set of aims and practices. Therefore, in the case of Napster, the challenge of generating revenues was addressed by not encouraging corporate monopoly and protect copyright, but the exact opposite, championing the sharing and freedom of information, a

philosophy already familiar to the communities of geeks and hackers, who were among Napster's main users.

This also explains why today it might be overly reductive to describe network dynamics from only a singular point of view, and that, in the fields of both business and technology, not only the notion of moral order, but also that of amoral disorder might be a valid perspective from which to analyse business logic. If we start adopting such a perspective, which proposes disruptive practices as the engine of cultural innovation beyond the idea of incommensurable moral orders, what conclusions might we reach? I propose shedding light on disruptive practices which contribute towards exposing paradoxes and juxtapositions in the field of art and hacktivism, so as to be able to correctly frame the mutual interference between hacking, networking and business within the context of Web 2.0. Through referring to a constellation of various interventions undertaken in the present and in the past in the field of art and technology, my aim is to present a different modality of criticism, one which is not merely based on oppositions, but on distributed techniques of disruption. To back this up, I have selected three case studies: a Neoist prank at the rebel:art Festival in Berlin in 2004; the fictional identity of Anna Adamolo in Italy (2008-2009) and the contemporary Anonymous network.

The Neoist prank staged by a Berlin-based Monty Cantsin, which followed an intervention by the radical activists Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz at the Club der polnischen Versager in Berlin in April 2004³, is presented here as an example of a creative form of disruption which served to deconstruct the political strategy inherent in a clash of opposite forces which was aimed at creating social criticism. Furthermore, due to its highly speculative nature, the intervention shows that the notion of shared moral orders is not always effective for an interpretation of collective dynamics, when referring to underground communities who stage paradoxes and who work towards the creation of multiple contradictory definitions of themselves. Even if the idea of sharing moral orders and social imaginary might prove effective for explaining the activities of some independent groups (as Kely demonstrated), it is rendered questionable when referring to those groups practicing disruption of their very own values as a form of art. When the act of disruption

³ In the context of the Rebel:art festival: www.rebelart.net/f001-02.html.

becomes art, it reveals the weakness of a mono-dimensional approach and, at the same time, might open the path for viral interventions in the field of art and politics, transforming flexibility into tactical advantage, as we will see in the following examples.

The rebel:art festival in Berlin brought together various underground activists and artists, working on culture jamming, hacktivism, media art and urban interventions. Among them were Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz, who gave the lecture “Texte Gegen Die Kunst”, under the heading “Demolish Serious Culture!!!”, which was also the title of one of their books, published in 2000. Alexander Brener, originally from Kazakhstan, but internationally known as a Russian performance artist, gained popularity in the art field for his act of defecating in front of a painting by Vincent Van Gogh at the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow and for drawing a green dollar sign on Kazimir Malevich’s painting *Suprematisme* at the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam, for which he was jailed in 1997. His radical writings and actions, often created in collaboration with Austrian activist and researcher Barbara Schurz, have inspired many subcultures, from Neoism to NSK (especially through the above-mentioned book *Demolish Serious Culture!!!*). For example, Istvan Kantor’s *Blood Campaigns*, the series of performances in which he took his own blood and splashed it onto walls, canvases or into the audience, are directly reminiscent of Alexander Brener’s radical interventions in art museums and galleries. Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz, who had originally proposed the concept of technologies of resistance, reformulated their approach into anti-technologies of resistance in 2000, claiming a radical critique of the art world and of capitalism through “familiar and traditional methods of political struggle and cultural resistance, as well as individual ‘transgressive’ techniques”. As they wrote:

“On the one hand we tried to analyze critically technologies such as demonstrations, sit-ins, hunger strikes; on the other hand we discussed the effectiveness of showing your ass in front of your enemy, throwing eggs and spitting on your opponent’s dress. Resistance must take into consideration concrete circumstances of place and time and must act from very precise strategies and tactics of local struggle, if it wants to be effective. Borrowing from Foucault, who

spoke about the ‘specific intellectual’ we suggested the term ‘local and specific resistor.’ Such a resistor doesn’t act from universal concepts or out of the doctrines of parties or groups, but struggles against these very doctrines and keeps moving endlessly, not knowing what he or she will do tomorrow. In combating the current art-system, local scandals, interventions, leaflets, graffiti etc. may be effective at a certain moment but useless in another context. Soft subversion, a heritage inherited from the 1980s, is no longer adequate, and the hidden undermining of the political context of the enemy is obsolete and has finally degenerated either into cynicism or into conformism and strategies of success and survival within the system” (Brener & Schurz, 2000, unpag.).

Such techniques of resistance are what they proposed at the Club der polnischen Versager in Berlin when performing their poem “Texte Gegen Die Kunst”, beating their fists on the table while reading aloud from their paper and denouncing the compromise made by the rebel:art festival with the art system. They began asking for the director of the festival, while holding a basketful of eggs. Actually, the rebel art festival was a small underground event, managed by only a few people. It had been arranged by Alain Bieber and the rebelart.net collective, with the support of those (myself included) who had contributed to the development of the programme. The organisers made up the bulk of the public during the festival. Quoting Christopher M. Kelty, we were a “geek recursive public”, apparently sharing the same “moral order”; that of activists, hackers and independent artists in the underground media scene in Berlin, which in our minds at the time also included Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz. In their view however, we were just part of the art system. While Alain Bieber beat a swift retreat after receiving threats from Brener, a member of the audience suddenly stood up, claiming to be the director of the festival. Brener and Schurz’s response was to throw an egg in his face, met in turn by screams from the audience and demands for them to leave. Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz stood there visibly surprised and embarrassed, slowly realizing that they had been fooled by an imposter, who later explained his action

to Barbara Schurz by stating simply: “Because I am Monty Cantsin and I love you”.

It is not the case that such an artistic act of disruption came from one of the many Monty Cantsins, the open-pop star of the Neoist network, a subculture, as we described in the previous chapter, which constantly negated itself and whose definitions have often been disputed, both from inside and outside the network. This constant disputation has been a central aspect of Neoist art practice, and its speculative nature also becomes clear from this action in Berlin⁴. “The best product of Neoism is anti-Neoism” is the favoured aphorism of the Neoists, a *détournement* of a famous saying by Amadeo Bordiga, as Wu Ming 1 recalls (WuMing1, 1999, unpag.). This self-negation and amoral disruption of orders (and disorders) is also a mirror of a multi-dimensional approach that might be considered an inspiration for reflecting on contemporary forms of socio-political criticism. The strategy of answering power with contra-power might just contribute to the enlargement and development of spiralling and encompassing

⁴ A group of Berlin-based Neoists, including Mario Mentrup, Stiletto, Florian Cramer, Georg Ladanyi (and tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE in teleconference) was involved in the programme of the rebel:art festival, proposing the event: “Neoism Now And Then!”, scheduled after the reading by Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz. The intervention of the person acting as Monty Cantsin is not to be attributed to all the Neoists present that night. The above-described reaction to the reading of Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz was an individual initiative. However, as Florian Cramer pointed out after reading my reflections on that night (previously presented in a paper at the “Public Interfaces” Conference, Aarhus, January 2011) someone like Istvan Cantor would probably not agree with my interpretation, by exposing the differences between Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz’s resistance theory and the Neoist practices. The idea of the technology of resistance could be conceptually connected with Cantor’s “Blood campaigns”. I agree with this objection, it being my intention to demonstrate the anti-holistic, individualistic and speculative character of Neoism. Neoism is a practice that makes sense if individualised; Neoism has no manifesto, no instructions for use, and each member – each Monty Cantsin – can perform it and decide what Neoism is, even if these interpretations contradict each other. I do not therefore view as highly problematic the emergence of individualistic behaviour within Neoism, which have often been criticised and considered a limitation for the movement. Instead, I consider them as inherent to its meaning and practice, as I pointed out in the previous chapter. However, I decided not to reveal the real identity of the specific Monty Cantsin who disrupted the reading of Brener and Schurz, because I believe that at such a moment, this person decided to perform under the Cantsin pseudonym, and was acting *as* Monty Cantsin. The performance was never laid claim to publicly, commented on or further mentioned by its instigator; therefore there is no need to break with the anonymity of the action.

oppositions, and, paradoxically, to legitimising the power under question. The concept of resistance as proposed by Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz at the rebel:art festival demonstrates its inefficiency when disrupted by viral strategies which work by staging pranks filled with ambiguity.

If we reflect on the increasing commercialization of the concepts of sharing and networking, and the appropriation of many cultural instances of 1990s hacker culture by proprietary platforms (from the concept of *openness* to *do-it-yourself*), the ability of business to adopt and invade “moral orders”, which were once the purview of their opponents, clearly emerges. The case of Napster, which received huge support from many people in the underground technology scene when it was shut down by court order, constitutes one of the first examples of this phenomenon. Napster, initially founded by Shawn Fanning and his uncle John as a pioneering peer-to-peer file sharing Internet service, managed to become a real business by offering free online music. Actually, as we read in Wikipedia, “it was not fully peer-to-peer since it used central servers to maintain lists of connected systems and the files they provided, while actual transactions were conducted directly between machines”⁵. But it managed to create a revolution in the music industry by proposing a different way of providing songs, resulting in the support of many people, even in hacker circles.

Napster clearly demonstrates the ambiguity inherent in many social networks today, which function by claiming a sharing and open attitude while still maintaining centralised data in accordance with corporate business logic. However, what is important to point out is the ability of Web 2.0 business to adopt a philosophy of sharing and networking, therefore interfering with communities and networks, which function by applying such philosophy at a practical ethical level. Is this logic generating disorder (by creating disruptive innovation) or a new form of economic order? And is this ability to fluctuate between “moral orders”, to be considered “amoral”? For many hackers, there is nothing wrong in doing business in such a way, so long as it doesn't interfere with the freedom of action and speech. As Fred Turner wrote in his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006), business has always worked by encouraging innovative practices and visions created in what was formerly called “counterculture”. Using Napster

⁵ Retrieved from *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* on May 10, 2011: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Napster>.

as an example, together with the subsequent history of Web 2.0, the idea of “resistance” as a clash of opposite forces appears anachronistic and destined to fail. And it can easily fail as an art practice as well, as we have seen at the rebel:art festival in Berlin. A reaction to the notion of oppositional clashes as a whole, showing the crisis of encompassing political intents and strategies, becomes an interesting territory for art experimentation. Monty Cantsin’s disruption of the intervention by Brener and Schurz, which corrupts the mechanism of oppositions from within, is one example of this. In the case of Neoism, and of many hacker communities, the actions of their members can be in open contradiction with each other.

A/moral dis/order, as the art of revealing paradoxes and contradictions, looks to be a more effective framework for such art practices – and for many practices of hackers as well, as we will see later. By disrupting the concept of “moral orders” (but also that of “amoral disorder”) as a coherent set of values which communities share, Monty Cantsin demonstrated that the challenge resides in the encounter with the symbolic dissolutions of power, whether they be authoritarian or anti-authoritarian in nature. Similarly, analysing artistic practices in the time of social media implies an acknowledgement of the strategy of innovation and disruption at one and the same time. Innovation becomes possible through disruption and disruption becomes critical when it is transformed into an art form. To reach this objective, it is necessary to analyse the marketplace from within, adopting a “hacker perspective” by trying to understand how the market works after de-assembling its strategies and mechanisms of production. In short: not clashing with it, but developing within it, while challenging it critically – and ironically – from within.

3.3 The Anna Adamolo Multiple Singularity

This section describes the birth of a fictional identity, Anna Adamolo, created on the occasion of the student’s and teacher’s strikes and school occupations in the autumn of 2008 in Italy. The project was a collective endeavour and was directly inspired by networking techniques and collaborative projects previously developed in the context of Italian hacktivism and activism. But it also aimed at reaching

a broader range of individuals and groups beyond the framework of political antagonism. More specifically, the Anna Adamolo experience presented a direct link with the symbolic strategies developed in the Luther Blissett Project (the genesis of a fictional identity able to represent a diverse mass of individuals), in mail art circles (such as the creative use of bureaucracy), and in other Italian collective projects working playfully with pseudonyms and fakes (such as the fictional characters of San Precario, and Serpica Naro). Furthermore, Anna Adamolo was a creative consequence of the call by Italian students, researchers and teachers to protest against national educational cuts; therefore, this case study needs to be contextualised by such political circumstances. The networking project Anna Adamolo started in October 2008. It managed to bring about an open process of creation both online and offline, creating a new impetus in the Italian activism and activism scene. It worked both on the symbolic level and on the pragmatic level, developing concrete political strategies that could be applied during demonstrations and strikes. This collective project was the result of a conscious reflection on the dynamics of collective representation in a time of political struggle, finding a tactical means of spreading communicative icons and imaginative symbols to the student movement. By taking apart and disrupting institutionalised circuits, it showed how they could be effectively appropriated. Furthermore, Anna Adamolo demonstrated that social media could be used as a platform for political and artistic intervention, through an understanding of what lies beyond their user-friendly interface and by consciously playing with it.

It would be impossible to understand the causes and the objectives of the Anna Adamolo project without describing the political and social situation in Italy at that time. Anna Adamolo is the acronym for “Onda Anomala”, or, in English, Anomalous Wave, a concept developed in Italy in the autumn of 2008 to define a national movement of Italian students, teachers and researchers. To describe its nomadic strategies and polyphonic components the Anomalous Wave movement used to evoke the metaphor of being *unrepresentable and unstoppable*. From the outset it rejected the idea of being represented politically by parties and leaders, very conscious as its creators were of the recent defeat of the institutionalised Left in Italy. Its political tactics were to use networking strategies, which resulted not only in demonstrations and sit-ins, but also in nomadic interventions such as blockades of

train stations and streets, actions which were coordinated between the demonstrators on a national scale. Furthermore, the movement proposed self-organisation and self-education (“auto-formazione”) as models for knowledge dissemination, organising open-air lectures and classes during strikes and school occupations carried out by teachers, professors, researchers and students. The Anomalous Wave included many individuals and groups, who refused to be described as one movement following the same flag, but whose common objective was to contest and abolish the “Gelmini Education Reform Bill”. The Gelmini Bill, still under consideration today, was the third attempt in ten years to reform the education system in Italy, following Minister Berlinguer’s reforms in 1997, and the Moratti Bill of 2003. It bears the name of the Italian Minister of Education, Universities and Research, Mariastella Gelmini, who has been serving in the Berlusconi Cabinet since May 2008. The Gelmini Bill covers every level of education, from elementary school to university. The Bill requires, among other measures, educational funding cuts and fixed-term contracts for researchers, thereby reducing the overall budget for public education. Provisional Law 133, approved on December 22, 2010, signified the first attempt by the government to make cut backs on public education funding⁶.

Since 2008, through large-scale protests and demonstrations, the Anomalous Wave movement has grown into a network of students and researchers, workers and teachers. It is the largest student movement focussed on educational matters in Italy since the Pantera (Panther) movement, which was responsible for the occupation of

⁶ In particular in the university context, the most critical – and contested – articles by researchers and students were the 16th and the 66th ones. The first one, “Authorization of the university to transform itself into a foundation”, clearly intended to please the Confederation of Italian Industry (see: www.treelle.org) by providing a direct interference of private companies in the study programme, gaining them the right of a seat in the study board. The second article included measures of “rationalization”, by cutting or reducing the employees, making an obvious disadvantage for precarious contracts – and giving more power to full professors. It stated that “For the three years 2009-2011, the employment of personnel, and the stabilization of precarious contracts, must not exceed 20% of the contracts that are discontinued the previous year. For the year 2012 the limit is 50%. In practice: for every 5 retiring employees, it will be possible to hire only one new employee”. Furthermore, the article proposed the reduction of the Ordinary University Funding (FFO) by 1441.5 millions of euros in the course of five years. Information retrieved from the blog “Anomalous Wave”, retrieved May 11, 2011: <http://anomalia.blogspot.com/2008/11/08/law-133-what-does-it-say>.

several schools and universities in 1989-1990. At the beginning of the Wave movement, the students used to borrow the iconography from the Pantera movement for their own propaganda. During their occupation of schools and universities, they claimed that the Pantera was back, and was “*in movimento*” (moving) again. But later, Pantera’s iconography was abandoned for the more fluid definition of the Wave, specifically rooted within Italy’s precarious social and political situation of the last decade. The abolishment of Law 133, and, more generally, keeping Italy’s educational system public and accessible to all, regardless of individual income, were central to the Wave’s objectives. *Uniriot, il network delle facoltà ribelli*, which translates as ‘the network of rebel schools’, played a central role in coordinating the students’ activities in schools and universities⁷.

Such a network provides the backdrop for the creators of Anna Adamolo, some of whom were members involved in the process of self-education which evolved during the school occupations. However, the Anna Adamolo network had a wider appeal, involving not only students and teachers, but also researchers, artists and activists, who connected with each other in several Italian cities and in other towns abroad (e.g. the city of Rotterdam), and on the internet (through Italian art and activist mailing lists and various social media). To give voice to the Wave movement, this loose network decided to work at the level of social imagination, creating a collective fictional identity named Anna Adamolo. A member of AutArt, a collective of students and activists based in Milan, and who was directly engaged in the self-education programme at the Brera Fine Art Academy, defines the genesis of Anna Adamolo as follows:

“The main idea was to create an interesting and playful intervention working on communication strategies and

⁷ The *Uniriot* network followed the path of the *Globalproject* platform, a network previously created as part of the “disobedience” antagonist movement spread in Italy during the beginning of 2000s. Two networks emerged from *Globalproject*: *Uniriot*, the network of the students fighting against the educational cuts (which is today called *Unicommon*), and *Uninomade*, the more intellectual networks of researchers, scholars and professors – today, named *Uninomade 2.0*. Conceptually connected with *Uninomade* is the more international platform *Edu-Factory*, a transnational collective engaged in the transformations of the global university and conflicts in knowledge production, which produces texts, essays and publications on the topic.

*pratiche di piazza*⁸. Anna Adamolo was an occasion to collectively reflect on the practices of fake and *détournement*, which we were discussing at that moment with some other students, but also to question the reasons for adopting collective names as a form of artistic intervention. We started to think that the use of collective names (such as Luther Blissett) could become a concrete strategy (*pratica di piazza*) to use on the street during strikes and demonstrations. The idea of creating a collective name to apply during protests created the genesis of a fictional character to individually appropriate and personalise. Anna Adamolo worked on two levels. She embodied the practice of fakery by being interpreted as the new Minister for Public Education; furthermore, she was the mask, which each individual could wear on the streets during protests. She was the voice through which various singularities could speak on their own, and politically represent themselves without intermediaries” (a member of AutArt, 2011, unpag., my translation)⁹.

Anna Adamolo was conceived as a catalyst to encourage reflection about political strategies during strikes and demonstrations, as well as a methodology to apply viral networking techniques (as we can read on Anna Adamolo’s blog: <http://annaadamolo.noblogs.org>). She was regarded as a collective name through which an *unrepresentable*

⁸ The concept of *pratiche di piazza*, is a specific Italian construct to describe strategies of political interventions during strikes and demonstration. For example, *pratiche di piazza* are expressed by the specific behaviour adopted by different groups and collectives on the street during protests, which could result from ludic interventions to violent clashes. Usually, each group of collective has a specific plan to express its presence in the public sphere, and *pratiche di piazza* are often negotiated among participants of a demonstration – and they are also the most frequent reasons of fights, disputes, schisms or splits among collectives. It is interesting how the word “piazza” (square) is used in this context; “piazza” literally refers to a convivial way of being in the public space, and in Italy, *piazze* have traditionally been the most important place for meetings and chats, and in general, for the expression of the public life.

⁹ Extract from an interview with a member of the AutArt collective, carried out by the author on May 15, 2011. The person here interviewed chose to remain anonymous in order to preserve the collective configuration of the Anna Adamolo network. For the same reason, the author decided not to mention the “real” identities of the various people and groups that were part of the AA network. The above-written extract has been translated from Italian into English by the author.

movement could be represented, but also as a means for expressing a personal political experience, because “il personale è politico” (The Personal Is Political), as one of the members of AutArt points out, quoting a famous slogan used during the feminist movement at the end of the Seventies in Italy. The significance of this character was very rooted in the collective understanding of political strategies during street interventions, but also in the debate about bio-politics, a concept initially developed by Michel Foucault, as the application and impact of political power on all aspects of human life, and later discussed by many other intellectuals, such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Judith Revel¹⁰.

Judith Revel, in *Identity, Nature, Life: The Biopolitical Deconstruction* (2009) reflects on Michael Foucault’s approach to the terms of “identity”, “nature” and “life”, proposing a new path for political actions based on the recognition of the subjectivities to face *dispositifs* of power. She argues that, instead of aiming for a “creative force”, which would entail a return to a certain postmodern vitalism, “we should attend to the forms of subjectivation yet to come”. The analysis of a common “we” becomes part of the political investigation, “and it is precisely this ‘we’ which is part of the problematisation of our present, as the slow invention of a commonality yet to come as the constantly reworked space for resistant subjectivation and ways of life” (Revel, November 2009, p. 10).

The network of students, teachers, researchers, artists and activists who created Anna Adamolo seek to play with cultural and political codes through the *détournement* of symbols, to express the will of a collective of people, but also the will of specific singularities. Minister Gelmini was playfully transformed into someone else: the Wave Minister, who first took shape as a woman’s portrait and then as a stylized graphic female face. The portrait of Anna Adamolo was graphically represented by a woman’s face created by morphing a female photo – the creators of Luther Blissett used a similar technique years before. The graphic character of Anna Adamolo, which later started to circulate as the “logo” for the project, also showed the face

¹⁰ Another source of inspiration for the creators of Anna Adamolo was a podcast on the Uniriot network platform, where Judith Revel reflected on the topics of “Biopowers and resistances”, published at: <www.uniriot.org/index.php?option=com_vfm&Itemid=109&do=view&file=Biopoteri+e+Resistenze+-+Judith+Revel+%28+Coll+autof+Padova+%29|judith.mp3> (Langugae: Italian; undated), retrieved May 21, 2011.

of a woman, but it was drawn without a mouth because she was representing all the voices of the diverse people who were fighting at that time. Having no mouth, she was the mouth, and the voice, of everyone. She was the “face” of an enlarged network, and a multiple voice expressing the general motto of the Anomalous Wave: “*noi la crisi non la paghiamo*” (We Will Not Pay For This Crisis), which started to circulate among the demonstrators at the beginning of October 2008. Anna Adamolo’s graphic character resembles Minister Gelmini to the extent that she wears squared glasses, but she is also directly linked to the Wave movement by featuring a wavy hairstyle. Her glasses and logo are purple, the principal colour adopted for Anna Adamolo’s propaganda. The choice of adopting the colour purple was suggested by a definition of the term “purple” published in October 2008 on it.wikipedia.org (my translation): “The purple colour appears frequently in children’s drawings. It represents the urgent need to express themselves: its appearance is often related to an environment in which the child cannot express itself freely in all areas, due to imposed rules or standards of behaviour. Such a conflicting situation arises within the family and at school and can influence the child linguistically, behaviourally and in terms of free expression”¹¹.

The portrait of Anna Adamolo started circulating on Facebook at the beginning of November 2008, when the AA network created several Facebook groups in support of Anna Adamolo. However, when the AA groups started to appear on Facebook, it was still not clear who Anna Adamolo was. Her identity, that of the Wave Minister, was revealed only on November 14, 2008, on the occasion of the national students’ and teachers’ strike in Rome, as a final step in two simultaneous interventions orchestrated by the Anna Adamolo network: the creation of “The Fake Ministry Site” and “The Facebook Operation”. The “Fake Ministry Site” was created by hijacking and cloning the official Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and

¹¹ Original Italian text, retrieved from Wikipedia, and posted on the Anna Adamolo mailing-list by a member of the Anna Adamolo network, on November, 6, 2008: “Il colore viola è uno dei colori che emerge frequentemente nei disegni dei bambini. Rappresenta l’urgenza di esprimersi: il suo apparire frequente è in relazione a quella situazione ambientale che non consente al bambino di muoversi liberamente in tutti i settori per le regole o le norme di comportamento che gli vengono imposte. Tale situazione conflittuale insorge sia in famiglia che nella scuola e può investire nel bambino: la sfera del linguaggio; la sfera del comportamento; la sfera della libera espressione” <[http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viola_\(colore\)](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viola_(colore))>.

Research website (which, however, was never directly affected by this operation). On the Fake Ministry Site the multiple voice of Anna Adamolo made her first public appearance, embodying the identity of the Wave Minister.

The clone website made by the AA network (with the domain name of www.ministeroistruzione.net) was apparently very similar, if not identical, to the official one (www.miur.it). But for those accessing the site, within a few seconds an unexpected video would pop up on the homepage (www.vimeo.com/2431622). The video, entitled “Sono Anna Adamolo” (I am Anna Adamolo), showed mixed images of a calm sea (the wave) and street demonstrations (the Anomalous Wave), while the voice of Anna Adamolo declared herself to be the new “Wave Minister”, representing all the students, mothers, teachers, workers who were embodying her. At the end of the video, the visitor was redirected to another website, the “official” Anna Adamolo Ministry website, which had a similar look and layout as the “real” one. Here, the biography of AA was presented; together with all texts written by the people who had previously recorded their protest messages by calling a telephone number shown on the home page. The visitors could record their experiences and thoughts about the education protest, turning the AA Ministry website into a mirror for public and collective dissent, where all the individuals in this movement could emerge and have a voice. In January 2009, nine of these stories, collaboratively written by twenty-two people, were published in the book: *Sono Anna Adamolo: Voci e Racconti dall’Onda Anomala* (“I am Anna Adamolo: Voices and Stories from the Wave”, Nda Editions, 2009).

Some weeks after the launch of the website, the AA network orchestrated a Google-bombing campaign, until the Wave Ministry website rose to third position for anyone searching for “Ministero dell’istruzione” (Ministry of Education). But the most disruptive action managed by the AA network took place on Facebook. Being aware that the “real” Minister of Education, Mariastella Gelmini, had no Facebook profile as yet, the AA network decided to create one for her, obviously without informing the real Minister. The Gelmini Facebook profile was created at the end of October, during the first wave of occupations by the movement. It soon reached two thousand “friends” – both supporters and antagonists of the Gelmini Reform, but mainly supporters – who expressed their solidarity or

their anger on the Minister's Facebook wall. On the same date as the Fake Ministry website launch, on November 14, 2008, the profile of Mariastella Gelmini turned into that of Anna Adamolo. The Facebook's friends of Gelmini thought that hackers had hijacked the Minister's profile and started expressing their anger on the Wall: but there was no real Minister profile, only that created by the same people who had changed it into "Anna Adamolo". In the meantime, intense networking activity had already made of Anna Adamolo a symbol for many activists and members of the Anomalous Wave movement to rally around. They now started to interact on the Facebook wall of Anna Adamolo too.

"The Facebook Operation" generated a chain of support for the Anomalous Wave protest, and immediately after this operation, the virtual heroine became one of the most popular Facebook icons in the Italian activist network. On Facebook, many members of such networks changed their names or their profile's images into those of Anna Adamolo. Simultaneously, the character of AA started to "infiltrate" strikes and demonstrations and it became a real tool used by protestors on the streets or to promote initiatives: an Anna Adamolo DIY-kit was spread on the Internet, including the shape of the purple glasses to cut and paste (or to wear during strikes) and stencils to draw and glue onto walls with the face of AA; some "official" stamps of the Wave Ministry, as well as the "official" signature of the Wave Minister and other bureaucratic merchandise could be downloaded from the AA blog. Some students created Anna Adamolo t-shirts, others staged a theatre play where some extracts of Anna Adamolo's book were read aloud and performed. The fictional identity of Anna Adamolo started to be used as a *pratica di piazza*, thereby ensuring that the AA network reached the initial objective of its imaginative project: to bring a multiple identity into the streets to represent a movement made up of multiple subjectivities.

However, this was not the first time that an Italian movement of precarious subjectivities (workers, students, activists, etc.) had acted radically through iconic, symbolic and playful strategies. As I previously described in my book *Networking: The Net as Artwork* (2006), in 2004 the Italian activist network created San Precario, the patron saint of precarious workers (www.sanprecario.info), and, in 2005, Serpica Naro, the fictional fake designer, whose name is the anagram of San Precario (www.serpicanaro.com). The fictional identities of San

Precario and Serpica Naro, together with the previous experiences of Luther Blissett, constituted a source of inspiration for the creators of Anna Adamolo. The networking component was central to Anna Adamolo, and by working on collective symbols and media icons the AA network placed on centre stage similar communication techniques as those applied by previous multiple identity projects.

Anna Adamolo interpreted Luther Blissett by playing with media communication and creating an identity open to many, transforming the Government bureaucracy into a realm allowing possibilities for intervention, and expressions of life stories. The fictional character managed to generate a network of collaboration between activists, students and young researchers, precarious workers and teachers, creatively re-interpreting the formal bureaucracy and power structures of everyday life. The symbols of the institution were reversed, from the official stamps and signatures of the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research to the Ministry's official website, becoming a platform for sharing. Signs and labels of the bureaucracy were used to reflect on a different model of education and to fight for a better future. However, contrary to Luther Blissett and San Precario, AA tried to give voice to a community of students, teachers, researchers and activists who were directly linked with a national political movement such as the Anomalous Wave; a comprehensive group of people, and a mix of various subjectivities, who were protesting against the official politics both offline and online.

Anna Adamolo was regarded as an identity that everyone could embody: she was the mirror of specific stories of life, which were very personal and real, even if narrated by people who decided to stay anonymous by wearing the mask of the fictional character. The personal and intimate component, which is also evident in Serpica Naro, more than in Luther Blissett, was central to the AA project. The possibility of calling an open telephone number to narrate a personal life story and the editing of such stories into the AA collective book, plus the idea of using the AA DIY-kits during strikes and demonstrations, made of Anna Adamolo both a collective and an individual project. She was a public/intimate tool that could be used by the movement to create community, without following specific directions or action plans. She answered to the *impasse* of the political economy and education policy, bringing together different individuals into a network, and resulted from those involved reflecting on identity, authority, and

conscious political participation. She worked within the Anomalous Wave movement, being directly rooted in its political and social struggle, in order to for those taking part to become politically active agents and to reflect on their own social responsibility; but she also went beyond the more “traditional” political struggles, spreading viral techniques both offline and online and allowing people to appropriate them according to their own needs.

Anna Adamolo managed to transfer strategies and techniques of hacking and activism to a broader movement, which had not necessarily applied them before, to develop strikes and demonstrations. Inspired by previous Italian hacker and activist experiences (i.e. the Hackmeeting or the AHA/Activism-Hacking-Artivism community), the network beyond Anna Adamolo managed to achieve pervasive disruption within the parameters of social media. The Anna Adamolo project demonstrated that understanding and knowing different models of networking might constitute a tactical response and a challenge to stress the limits of social media themselves. Once again, networks became a tool for artistic creation and socio-political criticism. Anna Adamolo aimed to deconstruct the hierarchical logic of communication which influences the meaning of collective and social participation, by critically redefining the notion of social networking through direct action. It is evident that contemporary platforms of social networking define as “social” something that often is not, by not including an open, uncensored and unfiltered exchange, and by accelerating the level of communication so much to make difficult the creation of a deep conversational context.

While much of the contemporary social media provides access for a broad public and high quality technologies for sharing, they substantially differ from peer2peer technologies. The rhetoric of openness and self-production appears to be the same, but many of the contemporary social media platforms store data in proprietary servers and do not allow a flow of information and sharing beyond the limits decided by the companies which own the infrastructures. These companies generate consumption by collecting high revenues through the sharing of users, which are not equally redistributed among them. However, this does not mean that a collective intelligence cannot intrude and hack social media circuits from within, as has been demonstrated by projects such as Anna Adamolo’s “Facebook Operation”.

To create The Facebook Operation the AA network had to be able to understand the weakness of such systems before applying techniques of viral communication. Paradoxically, the Facebook technological infrastructure facilitated the spreading of the AA icon – and meme – because the activists and students understood how to use it strategically. Anna Adamolo managed to reach not only its own limited network, but also people in the streets during strikes and demonstrations. By turning the networking and propaganda features of social media to their own advantage, the AA network managed to challenge the limits of collaborative participation on such platforms. Their political intervention became a means of expressing both personal and collective experiences, giving voice to a multiple, plural, and anonymous, “we”.

3.4 The Holey Spaces of Anonymous

In his analysis of counter-hegemonic practices and the logic of affinity, Richard J. F. Day refers to the description of *the smith* as a mode of critical subjectivity, derived from Deleuze and Guattari’s “Treatise on Nomadology”, published in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The smiths, the metalworkers, inhabit a space somewhere between being citizens and nomads. They are itinerant, and “they follow the matter-flow of the subsoil” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 412), so that “their space is neither the striated space of the sedentary, nor the smooth space of the nomad” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 413). To describe the smiths’ activity, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the text by Élie Faure on the metallurgy of India and his description of itinerant people who bore holes in the ground, thereby creating “the fantastic forms corresponding to these breakthroughs, the vital forms of nonorganic life” (*ibidem*). They live in the shadow of granite, they excavate mountains and, after centuries, their mining successors emerge from them, showing up miles away from where their predecessors entered. Their activity is described as such: “they transpierce the mountains instead of scaling them, excavate the land instead of striating it, bore holes in space instead of keeping it smooth, turn the earth into swiss cheese” (*ibidem*). By shaping the hard metal while it is hot and soft, *they create holey spaces.*

In order to visualise the metaphor of the smiths creating holey spaces in a concrete fashion, Deleuze and Guattari cite as an example one scene from the silent film *Strike* (1925) by Sergei M. Eisenstein, where “a disturbing group of people are rising, each emerging from his or her hole as if from a field mined in all directions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 413-414).



Holey Space, from the film *Strike* (1925) by Sergei M. Eisenstein.

This very emblematic picture, symbolising a strike in 1903 undertaken by the workers of a factory in pre-revolutionary Russia, is used by Deleuze and Guattari as a description of hybrid subjectivities. By pointing out that the smiths exist in a zone between being sedentary and nomad, they argue:

“The [machinic] phylum simultaneously has two different modes of liaison: it is always *connected* to nomad space, whereas it *conjugates* with sedentary space. On the side of the nomadic assemblages and war machines, it is a kind of rhizome, with its gaps, detours, subterranean passages, stems, openings, traits, holes, etc. On the other side, the sedentary assemblages and State apparatuses effect a capture

of the phylum, put the traits of expression into a form or a code, make the holes resonate together, plug the lines of flight, subordinate the technological operation to the work mode, impose upon the connections a whole regime of arborescent conjunctions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 415).

The smiths are therefore a rhizome-like entity, fluid and fragmented, *and* a result of the State apparatus, a demonstration of its functionality. However, as Richard Day points out, reflecting on the concept of the “smiths” as presented by Deleuze and Guattari, “the activities of smiths show us that no matter how totalizing a system might be, it will never achieve its ambition of totality – it is impossible to create a system with no outside, even a system that appears to cover an entire planet. For there will always be holes, even when there are no longer any margins. And out of these holes will spring all manner of subjects” (Day, 2005, p. 175). Day sees the figure of the smiths as a metaphor for a further exploration of social spaces where *communitarian nomads* live; subjectivities that work in the interstices and margins of the institutional “sedentary” society. Even if they do not acritically accept its rules they coexist with it. They are the ones “who practise an ethic of care of the self, but are also open to sharing values, resources and spaces with others, to building communities of resistance and reconstruction that are wider and more open, yet remain non-integrative in their relation to others” (*ibidem*, pp. 176-177). Included by Day in the notion of the smiths are anarchist, queer, feminist, hacker, and hybrid subjectivities. Like the smiths, they do not tend “to *dominate* by imposing all-encompassing norms” but seek “to *innovate* by tracking and exploiting opportunities in and around existing structures” (*ibidem*, p. 174). Drawing on Day’s perspective, we could argue that such hybrid subjectivities are *both agents of disruption, and agents of innovation*. By working from inside the system, discovering its bugs and holes, they challenge it and transform it. As we previously pointed out, in this tension, a dialectical model of Both/And supplants that of Either/Or (Marshall Berman, 1982). A coexistence of opposition therefore lies at the core of social and political change. Hybrid subjectivities act *inside* its interstices, holes and fractures of the systems, rather than acting *against* them from the outside.

Researching hybrid subjectivities which generate holey spaces, by modelling new forms of conviviality and by operating the art of disruption, I came across a rhizome-like collective of people who have often been cited in recent years both in the mainstream and independent media. They have no name, or better said, their name is Anonymous. Approaching this entity as a researcher is not an easy task. The image that comes to my mind when attempting to describe it is one of a field of dandelions. A dandelion seed head enables wind-aided dispersal over long distances. When the wind blows, the seeds leave their original location and drift off; they dissolve into the air and re-emerge somewhere else. They are both nomadic and sedentary. The seeds are produced without pollination, resulting in offspring that are genetically identical to the parent plant. Basically, they are an agglomerate of lightweight particles, which travel on air currents. They all look identical from the outside, but they are very diverse when compared with each other close up. The Anonymous entity is a difficult research subject because it is constantly changing and in movement. The scant information about Anonymous is contradictory, not only because generating pranks and jokes is part of their practice, and the art of creating paradoxes is one of their better skills, but also because each member can act independently and does not necessarily share the same views as the others. Who exactly is behind the label “Anonymous” and who is doing what become uninteresting – as has already been argued when describing Neoism and the Luther Blissett Project. The point is to concentrate on the meaning of different strategies and actions which are the real purpose of the entity, together with that of having fun. We should imagine a digitalised holey space, where anonymous individuals pop up in pursuit of the most diverse of causes, or not following any of them, just for fun, or for the *lulz* (a derivation of *lol*, laugh out loud) – as those in Anonymous usually say.

To embark on the task of collecting together some of the pieces of such a rhizome-like puzzle of interventions, it is not only necessary to read newspaper articles, comments, forums, blogs, wikis and essays about them, it is important to participate and directly enter into the Anonymous world. Everyone is invited to become an active agent, and to perform in the art of participation. This is what Gabriella Coleman, Assistant Professor at the New York University, has done. In the article “Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action” (April 6, 2011), she describes the political birth, the multifaceted attributes

of the Anonymous entity, the forms of authority and power hidden or openly manifested in the Anonymous IRC channels. To introduce some of their most popular interventions, she writes: “Anonymous resists straightforward definition as it is a name currently called into being to coordinate a range of disconnected actions, from trolling to political protests” (Coleman, 2011, unpag.). Anonymous is an entity, not a movement, or a group. It is a loose collectivity of people that decides to act or to perform anonymously, both in the real and in the digital word. Referring to the difficulty of analysing Anonymous as an encompassing phenomenon, Gabriella Coleman points out:

“[...] Commentators struggled to describe its ethics, sociology, and history using traditional analytical categories. This difficulty follows from the fact that Anonymous is, like its name suggests, shrouded in some degree of deliberate mystery. It purports to have no leaders, no hierarchical structure, nor any geographical epicenter. While there are forms of organization and cultural logics that undeniably shape its multiple expressions, it is a name that any individual or group can take on as their own” (Coleman, 2011, unpag.).

The tradition of being anonymous is nothing new in the so-called digital culture. For many years, communities of hackers and activists have been shown how to protect personal data on the Internet, and how to stay safe during unrest and protests - both online and offline¹². Therefore, using the label “Anonymous” basically has little meaning for people already familiar with political practices, and many hackers have often acted in a conscious and safe way while being online. From the outset, it has been a very open definition, which can embrace everyone – and no one, if taken literally. However, especially in the US, since 2008 the term Anonymous has been directly linked to a specific phenomenon, and today it is directly connected with a collective of people who act as part of a very loose community.

In this context, the term “Anonymous” derives from the fact that it was used to post anonymously on imageboards like 4chan (www.4chan.org), launched in 2003 following the popularity of Japanese manga

¹² The Anonymous’ Introductory Guide to Safety during Social Instability is a good example: <http://pastebin.com/LVrXDNCm>. Retrieved June 1, 2011.

and anime chans. Here, the name assigned to someone posting an image without entering any text in the name field, by default becomes that of “Anonymous”. This is done to preserve the anonymity of the users, who often expose themselves or other people (mostly humiliating them), creating jokes, pranks and parody (as the chain <http://vortexchan.org> demonstrates), but also distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks. Sometimes, they act just for fun, spreading Internet memes such as “Lolcats”, or “Pedobears”, or refer to popular Internet phenomena like the “Chocolate Rain” viral video, “Never Gonna Give You Up” Rickrolling, and others¹³. Such an in-joke culture is also connected with the development of wikis and forums like Encyclopædia Dramatica (<http://encyclopediadramatica.ch>), a platform “to provide comprehensive, reference-style parody, to poke fun at everyone and everything on the internet, as well as an archive for online communities to document and reference deviant users”¹⁴.

Since 2008, Anonymous has become a multiple use name for signing actions and interventions, so that at the end of the Anonymous

¹³ Internet “memes” are ideas, icons or behaviours that are virally transmitted from person to person, often spread through social media or Internet platforms. For most memes, the exact history is a mystery. *Lolcats* are pictures combining a photograph of a cat with text – often grammatically incorrect – to generate humour; Pedobear, the paedophilic bear, is the picture of a bear which is often used in imageboards to signify the idea that behind something cute and nice, like the bear’s character, there could be a much darker side, therefore referring to the controversy surrounding his love of little girls; “Chocolate Rain” viral video is a song and music video performed by American Internet personality Tay Zonday, which became very popular for the deep voice of its singer and his mannerisms while singing, after being spread on YouTube in 2007; Rickrolling is another meme which is usually used when in forums or imageboards a person provides a hyperlink seemingly relevant to the topic discussed by the members, but actually leads to the the 1987 Rick Astley song “Never Gonna Give You Up”. Other recent popular mems are the Nyan Cat, also known as Pop Tart Cat, an 8-bit animation depicting a cat with the body of a cherry pop tart flying through outer space, leaving behind a rainbow trail; the Trollface meme, a creepy image of a smiling face, which is mostly associated with activity of trolling, and which was initially spread in deviantART, later in 4chan and currently appearing in many other websites or Internet platforms when designating trolling. A good source for analysing the trolling phenomenon – and the Anonymous entity – though a research perspective is the thread initiated on Feb 6, 2011, on the Air-L mailing list (the mailing list is provided by the Association of Internet Researchers <http://aoir.org>), with the subject: Academic work on the website 4chan? (<http://listserv.aoir.org/pipermail/air-l-aoir.org/2011-February/022965.html>).

¹⁴ From Encyclopædia Dramatica: www.encyclopediadramatica.ch/Encyclopedi_a_Dramatica>About, retrieved June 8, 2011.

announcements, which often introduce their operations or attacks, we read: “We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us”. Before Anonymous started to act as a “Legion”, in 2007 the “Operation Media-Defender-Defender” anticipated strategies, styles and objectives of the Anonymous interventions by leaking internal e-mails of the MediaDefender company specializing in the battle against peer2peer and file-sharing¹⁵. However, “Project Chanology” (or “Operation Chanology”) is commonly considered the first Operation realised by Anonymous as an entity¹⁶. It started in January 2008 with the aim of exposing the controversial Church of Scientology’s religious and money-oriented philosophy: for the members of Anonymous, Scientology – or \$cientology as they like to write it – became a target. The Operation started by leaking on YouTube internal information about the Church, such as a video featuring Tom Cruise speaking enthusiastically and uncritically about the Church’s salvation practices. After the video was removed from YouTube at the request of the Church, the Operation developed into viral trolling actions, such as applying a DDoS to the Scientology’s website and Gigaloader attacks¹⁷. “Many Scientology call centres were treated to the music of Rick Astley and a great number of pizzas and taxis were mistakenly ordered for Scientology buildings around the world” (Encyclopædia Dramatica, 2011).

¹⁵ See the article: “Leaked Media Defender e-mails reveal secret government project” by Ryan Paul, 2008, at: <http://arstechnica.com/software/news/2007/09/leaked-media-defender-e-mails-reveal-secret-government-project.ars> and the message on Full Disclosure List “Media Defender owned big time” published on Mon Sep 17 2007: <http://archives.neohapsis.com/archives/fulldisclosure/2007-09/0317.html>. Thanks to “Vecna” for pointing out these references.

¹⁶ A good source for information about Project Chanology can be found on Encyclopædia Dramatica: http://encycopediadramatica.ch/Project_Chanology. Retrieved May 13, 2011. Another detailed description of the Operation is at: https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Project_Chanology.

¹⁷ DDoS is a distributed denial-of-service attack (DDoS attack), oriented at saturating the server of the target of the protest with massive external communications requests, usually forcing the targeted computers to reset such that they respond too slowly or they become effectively unavailable. It is a common strategy of civil disobedience used by many activists and hackers since long time (for example, in Italy, a similar practice took the name of Netstrike starting as a phenomenon in 1995). A Gigaloader DoS attack is an easy way to do a DoS attack (denial-of-service attack) stressing the target server using a site called “Gigaloader”.

Consequently, a new video was published by Anon on YouTube, an anonymous message to Scientology presented as “The Formal Declaration of War”, which assumed a much more political language, focusing on the battle against misinformation and suppression of dissent, to promote freedom of knowledge¹⁸. Scientology’s answer was to start a legal battle and through bandwidth attacks on the insurgency wiki (<http://vortexchan.org>), Encyclopædia Dramatica, and other sites hosting the plans for the raid, such as Partyvan.info, which was used to coordinate the action (<http://partyvan.info>). Later, another video appeared, featuring Mark Bunker, a renowned critic of the Church, who invited Anonymous to use more critical strategies and legal procedures to oppose Scientology, beyond just trolling and devising pranks¹⁹. On February 10th, 2008, Anonymous gathered at approximately two hundred Scientology Organisations and Missions, and the protest started to bind together online and offline strategies: “Anonymous showed that they can troll effectively IRL [In Real Life] as well as online” (Encyclopædia Dramatica, 2011). Since then, many protests occurred worldwide, and a new phase started, where the fun of trolling networked with fights for freedom of speech and information. Many interventions have been organised, aimed at fighting for the freedom of speech, information and global power. Among them, Operation Payback to support The Pirate Bay after the DDoS of its server instigated by an Indian software company hired by the MPAA; the attack on Bank of America, on Mastercard and Paypal after they stopped their service to Wikileaks; and, recently, the distributed denial of service (DDoS) against the government sites of Tunisia and Zimbabwe, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Iran to support local protests, spread safety activist guides to use during riots, and fight against restrictions on free speech²⁰.

¹⁸ Message to Scientology, Uploaded on YouTube by en0nym0us0 on Feb 14, 2008: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lw1l_LGuDaI&feature=player_embedded, retrieved May 31, 2011.

¹⁹ Scientology: “XENU TV Speaks to Anonymous”, uploaded by xenutv1 on Jan 27, 2008: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zW466xcM0Yk&feature=player_embedded, retrieved June 8, 2011.

²⁰ A list of the most influential Anonymous’ protests and actions since 2008: *Operation Payback* to support The Pirate Bay (<https://encrypted.google.com/search?q=anonymous+wikileaks+news&hl=en&lr=all>); the hack of the Westboro Baptist Church (www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZJwSjor4hM&feature=youtu.be); the hack of Stephen Col-

Today, Anonymous consists of countless members belonging to an Internet subculture, a concept which is difficult for outsiders to grasp, but which is very welcoming towards new people²¹. It is necessary to be constantly updated in order to follow the phenomenon, because many of the actions are planned on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) network channels (#AnonOps is the most active and has the most participants), and even if it is possible to find updates about Anonymous on blogs and websites, even on Facebook and Twitter²², the Anonymous entity is very fluid, and often disrupted by its own members, so that URLs and IRC channels are constantly moving²³. Describing the loose structure of Anonymous, Gabriella Coleman points out:

bert's The Colbert Report (www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/375739/february-28-2011/anonymous-hacks-the-colbert-report), the attack on Bank of America (www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/14/bank-of-america-anonymous-leak-mortgage_n_835220.html), on Mastercard and Paypal to support the Wikileaks cause (www.observer.com/2010/daily-transom/4chans-anonymous-army-takes-down-master-card-visa-paypal-lieberman); the lawsuit against GeoHotz from Sony (<http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2011/04/anonymous-attacks-sony-to-protest-ps3-hacker-lawsuit.ars>); the hijack of the website of Washington DC-based HBGary Federal (www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=wEV2CMfhCeo); the DDoS attacks against Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Iran, to support those countries' local revolutions and fight against oppressive political systems (<http://www.thehackernews.com/2011/02/operation-iran-press-release-by.html>); A99 Operation Empire State Rebellion to fight global financial power and the banking system (www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Qf17WaXrHTA and <http://ampedstatus.org/network/groups/a99/>).

²¹ As we can see on the *#OpNewblood Guide for IRC Chat Setup & Anonymous Internetting*: <http://pastehtml.com/view/1dzt3z4.html>. Retrieved June 7, 2011.

²² Some useful addresses are: AnonOps Communications (<http://anonops.blogspot.com/>); AnonNews - Everything Anonymous (<http://anonnews.org/?p=home>); Encyclopædia Dramatica (<http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Anonymous/>); WyWeProtest (www.whyweprotest.net/); AnonOps community on Facebook (www.facebook.com/Anonymous#!/anonops); AnonOps on Twitter (<http://twitter.com/#!/anonops>).

²³ Recently, Anonymous IRC networks - irc.anonops.net & irc.anonops.ru have been hacked. As the Anonymous announcement states, "a former IRC-operator and fellow helper named 'Ryan' decided that he didn't like the leaderless command structure that AnonOps Network Admins use. So he organised a coup d'etat, with his "friends" at skids.us. Using the networks service bot 'Zalgo' he scavenged the IP's and passwords of all the network servers (including the hub) and then systematically aimed denial of service attacks at them (which is why the network has been unstable for the past week). Unfortunately he has control of the domain names AnonOps.ru (and possibly AnonOps.net, we don't know at this stage) so we are unable to continue using them. We however still have control over AnonOps.in, and will continue to publish news there". From [143](http://mes-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

“What we can note about Anonymous is that since the winter of 2008 it has become a political gateway for geeks (and others) to take action. Among other opportunities, Anonymous provides discrete micro-protest possibilities that aren’t otherwise present in a way that allows individuals to be part of something greater. You don’t have to fill out a form with your personal information, you aren’t being asked to send money, you don’t even have to give your name but you do feel like you are actually part of something larger. The decision to engage in political action has to happen somehow, via a concrete path of action, a set of events, or influences; Anonymous is precisely that path for many” (Coleman, 2011, unpag.).

A video named “Who Is Anonymous?”²⁴, shows a person wearing a mask, the mask used by the Anonymous members during their offline protests (which is the same Guy Fawkes mask used by the character “V” in the movie *V for Vendetta*, 2006). The author, who signs himself “Anonymous Thoughts”, describes the birth of the entity, and its double-sided approach of coming up with pranks for the *lulz*, beyond moral conformism and political correctness, as well as fighting for freedom and social rights, against corporations, oppression and corruption. The fun of trolling *and* political activism are bound together. However, the anarchic structure of Anonymous has made those aspects coexist easily; there is no overall committee deciding what Anonymous must be or is, and people who have shown leadership tendencies have been banned from the IRC channels. “Anonymous Thoughts” describes Anonymous as such:

sage.anonops.in, now not available at: The Hacker News, posted on May 8, 2011 (www.thehackernews.com/2011/05/anonymous-irc-networks-ircanonopsnet.html).

²⁴ Uploaded by “AnonymousThought” on YouTube on Mar 20, 2008 at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0WCLKzDFpI, retrieved June 1, 2011. The author says that when he originally planned this video it was supposed to be a joke. In my view, it shows a poetic and interesting personal interpretation of Anonymous. Since Anonymous is a constellation of different individualities, I decided to quote it here; of course it is not representative of the whole Anonymous entity, it is just an individual contribution to it.

“Is Anonymous a hated cyberterrorist or an activist for freedom and truth? No / Yes. Anonymous beginnings make it difficult to understand the entity. Anonymous is simply ideas without order, may be a phrase, a fad, a proverb. The concept of anonymous has always existed [...]. With anonymous there is no authorship. The claim is not more valid than the individual claim to existence. They are simply a spark but not the fire. Anonymous has grown out of the imageboards, out of the Internet, into the world we know, the world in which we live. [...] There is no control, no leadership, only influence. The influence of thoughts” (AnonymousThought, 2008, video).

The networking strategies of Anonymous in organising their actions are diverse. The most important platforms of coordination are the IRC channels #AnonOps and #AnoNet, where it is possible to join different “operations” entering in specific channels. To start interacting is technically quite simple (also because in #AnonOps and #AnoNet it is possible to use webchats), even if privacy safety measures are always recommended to avoid unpleasant surprises. Even if the Anonymous entity has no leaders, people with technical skills are much more influential than others, and IRC operators able to run IRC channels or skilled geeks able to make a denial of service attack (DoS attack) or distributed denial of service attack (DDoS attack) attain more respectability. For example, on the *#OpNewblood Guide for IRC Chat Setup & Anonymous Interneting*, it is stated that “users on the IRC channel with a @, &, %, or - in front of their names have elevated privileges, so RESPECT THEM”. As in many hacker collectives, there are theoretically no hierarchies, but being technically skilled operators (or “ops”) gives you more power in the community and it burnishes your reputation.

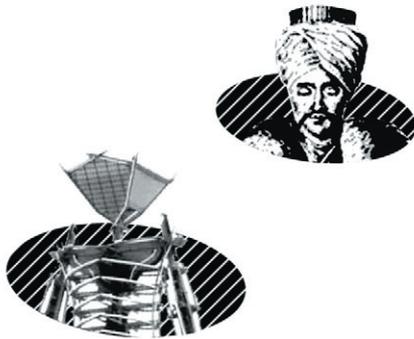
In the above-mentioned article “From the Lulz to Collective Action” Gabriella Coleman points out that within Anonymous, authority and power are not irrelevant subjects, and even if anyone can potentially coordinate or run a micro-protest, only a limited number of people have a pivotal role among the IRC networks, and are able to ban other participants if necessary. Some members create announcements, manifestos and videos, used to broadcast Anonymous messages. Others publish messages and announcements on Twitter, Blogspot

and Facebook under the name Anonymous. Even if anyone can potentially join, and it is not difficult to get involved, it is not clear who decides the political strategies and behavioural norms that are to be followed. Are we really sure that Anonymous messages are created by members of Anonymous instead of being spread by opponents of Anonymous to disrupt the image of the entity? It appears that Anonymous blogs and forums are flourishing more and more, but it is difficult to establish whether they are “authentic” or not, and the advice would be always to maintain your Anonymity and don’t trust anyone too much. This also demonstrates the fact that the Anonymous entity is the disruption of authenticity in and of itself, and that the more open groups are, the more easily they are polluted. However, this would seem unavoidable in order to keep the whole structure open and without evident leadership, thereby making the project viral and very alive.

The various actions of Anonymous, from the global protest against the Church of Scientology, to Operation Payback, to the recent “OpTunisia” in support of the revolts in Tunisia, show that the strength of Anonymous is to spread as a meme involving a large number of diverse people. As happened with the practice of Netstrike in Italy in the 1990s, the possibility of influencing public opinion, and of making people discuss the social and political meaning of various campaigns, video messages and hacks perpetuated by the members of Anonymous are what is of real interest. It is not important to win the battle or to crash servers, but to make people speak about crucial topics, to expose bugs in the system, to produce evidence of corruption, to spread a meme, to create a viral idea, to propose new paths of thoughts. The spread of a meme, either for the *lulz* or for social justice, is what really matters. This is also what “V” says in *V for Vendetta*: “Beneath this mask there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr. Creedy, and ideas are bullet-proof” (V, 2006).

Returning to the previous analysis by Richard Day on the “smiths” of contemporary social movements, I would argue that they consist of those who understand that the machine can be disrupted from the inside; those who build up networks of ideas which are able to spread like memes; those who follow fluid trajectories, who believe in fragmented social structures by playing with them. Like the smiths described by Deleuze and Guattari, they pop up from the holes within the system (both digital and real) and they occupy a specific space

between the nomadic and sedentary lifestyle. They are a network of singularities who do not like leadership, but like to act collectively. In Encyclopædia Dramatica we read: “Anonymous must work as one. Anonymous is everyone and no-one. You are. I am. Everyone is”. The three case studies described in this chapter: the Neoist intervention at the rebel:art festival, the Anna Adamolo fictional character and the Anonymous entity, are examples of networking strategies that have been used to disrupt encompassing systems: art systems, political systems or systems of ideas. The challenge becomes that of being aware of the logic and mechanisms of such systems, and to envision artistic actions that become disruption. These case studies show that technology, pop culture, even the philosophy of lolcats and Rickrolling can be turned into something different, an idea to believe in, to follow in connection with other people and according to our own needs. The Internet technology industry can become a path to find holey spaces of rebellion and *lulz*, while mechanisms of consumption, if inverted and appropriated, can become an incentive for the creation of artistic and political interventions.



4 COMMON PARTICIPATION AND NETWORKING ENTERPRISES

4.1 *The Rhetoric of Web 2.0 & the Politics of Open Source*

After the analysis of some artistic and hacktivist practices that work by imagining and applying pervasive methodologies of disruption within networks, this chapter focuses on the development of collaborative artistic and hacker practices in the Web 2.0 era, by highlighting mutual interferences between networked art, hacktivism and the business of social networking. It traces the shift in the meaning of “openness”, and how a certain vocabulary of freedom and peer collaboration has been adopted by the rhetoric of Web 2.0 and social networking. As I already described in Chapter Two, Do-It-Yourself, sharing knowledge, hackability, and similar concepts first witnessed in the underground interventionist realm of hacker culture and networked art are today the core business for many enterprises of Web 2.0. Many hackers and activists have pointed out that the rhetoric behind Web 2.0 has been via a progressive appropriation – and often, disambiguation – of hacker and cyber utopias of the 1980s-1990s. However, the analysis of Fred Turner (2006), of Brian Holmes (2001), and the documentary “The Net” on the Unabomber by Lutz Dammbeck (2006) have largely shown that the cultural upheaval of US hacker culture and counterculture in the Sixties has been deeply intertwined with the history of cybernetics and the IT business. The same discourse holds true for the history of branding and advertising – for example, the cultural output of Madison Avenue – which opened the way for the subversive values of counterculture in the Sixties, and later co-opted what the counterculture produced, in an endless cycle of cooptation-rebellion-cooptation, as analysed in the book *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) by Thomas Frank.

The cooptation of radical values by business needs will be analysed by focusing on its ambiguity, shedding light on the constant paradox of being functional to the system while trying to disrupt it. In both this and the following chapter, I propose the hypothesis that it is possible to take advantage of business logic and flexible mechanisms of revenues by generating both disruptive and innovative artistic visions which are able to challenge – and compromise – systems of economic production. My analysis goes back to the radical anarchic and libertarian tradition of American counterculture, reflecting on how it has been able to bind together business production *and* an anti-hegemonic critique of the establishment, using as examples various contributions of hackers, activists, artists, cultural producers and practitioners whom I interviewed during my stay in San Francisco, Stanford and Silicon Valley in the autumn of 2009.

Their points of view show that the difference in (political and social) approach between the US and Europe towards technology and media practices does not necessarily imply a lack of consciousness in strategies of media criticism. As we have seen in the example of 4chan and Anonymous, the refusal to become politically organised or have a leadership does not imply a refusal to be critical towards the establishment. The perceived lack of criticism in the US cyberculture and hacker culture is often a Eurocentric misunderstanding, which tends to stigmatise the US libertarian attitude as an uncritical acceptance of capitalism and neoliberalism (see, for example, the position of Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in *The Californian Ideology*, 1995). As we have seen in the previous chapters, such a libertarian attitude emphasises the values of freedom of knowledge and speech, but it does not imply a lack of reflection on crucial issues such as hegemony, pervasive control and surveillance by corporations and centralised systems, nor does it eschew an analysis of proprietary business logic and its possible subversion. However, the ambiguity of the US networked managerial class during the rise of cyberculture, which resulted both in the absorption of countercultural values and in the production of them, by generating an economic system of “flexible accumulation” (Holmes, 2001) is quite an emblematic process that can be drawn upon to analyse the meaning of the cooption of grassroots networking practices by Web 2.0 businesses.

Starting with the analysis of hacker culture in the era of social media, we can say that openness, freedom of culture, the sharing of knowledge

and many other values that had previously been commonly associated with hacker ethics, have become the core business of entrepreneurial companies. As described by Steven Levy in his book *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984), hacker culture expressed a new way of life, with a philosophy, an ethics and a dream. The roots of such a philosophy go back to the Sixties with the hackers of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and to the Seventies, with the rise of the cybernetic computer culture in California and in Silicon Valley. In the 1980s and 1990s the hacker principles of sharing, openness, decentralisation, free access to computers, world improvement and the *hands-on imperative* (Levy, 1984) proved to be a common ground for both American and European hackers, who started to connect through BBSes (Bulleting Board Systems) and to use networks and computers to create digital communities. Creating networks of collaborations is therefore a practice which has roots in the rise of “digital utopianism”, as Fred Turner points out in his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006), which will be described in due course.

Today, the principal success of a Web 2.0 company or a social media enterprise derives from the ability of enabling communities, providing shared communication tools and *folksonomy*. The software developer and venture communist Dmytri Kleiner described Web 2.0 business logic and its paradoxes in a panel discussion at the Chaos Communication Congress in Berlin in 2007¹: “the whole point of Web 2.0 is to achieve some of the promises of peer2peer technology but in a centralized way; using web servers and centralized technologies to create user content and folksonomy, but without actually letting the users control the technology itself” (Kleiner, 2007, video). Even if the Web 2.0 business enterprises do not hide their function as being data aggregators, they make openness, user-generated content and networking collaboration their core strategies. User contribution becomes a key factor in market dominance. One of the first companies to base its business on the process of involving users in giving productive feedback was Google, which applied the strategy of releasing beta versions of its applications to be tested by

¹ 24th Chaos Communication Congress, Panel ‘Hacking Ideologies, part 2: Open Source, a capitalist movement’, with Dmytri Kleiner, Marcell Mars, Toni Prug, Tomislav Medak, 23 November, 2007, Berlin. Video: http://chaosradio.ccc.de/24c3_m4v_2311.html.

users without their being formally part of the production process (this is what occurred with the development of the Gmail email service and the Chrome browser).

If we want to discover the roots of such an idea of *perpetual beta* (Musser & O'Reilly, 2006) we should go back to a sharing knowledge model which inspired both business entrepreneurs and geeks in the course of the 1990s: the Bazaar method. Eric S. Raymond conceptualised it in his paper *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (1997) presented at the O'Reilly Perl Conference in September 1997. The paper analysed the ability to create software and other products of intelligence and creativity through collaboration among a community of individuals acting to open up communications channels. Raymond, whose essay led to the formation of the Open Source Initiative (OSI), is clearly in favour of collaborative practices, but also an apologist for greater involvement of free culture in the marketplace. This is hardly surprising considering that Raymond is the co-founder of OSI – together with Bruce Perens – the organisation which coined the term “Open Source” in 1998 in Palo Alto, California, and which included various individuals connected with the O'Reilly community: the developer Todd Anderson, Chris Peterson (Foresight Institute), John “maddog” Hall and Larry Augustin (Linux International), Sam Ockman (Silicon Valley Linux User's Group), Michael Tiemann (Red Hat), and Eric Raymond.

Raymond's essay focuses on sharing practices in the hacker community and on the idea of generating a “distributed peer review” as a method of collaborative production (www.opensource.org/history). It juxtaposes the methodology of open source and its de-territorialisation of production (*the Bazaar method*) with that of project development in laboratories or closed groups of programmers and software engineers (*the Cathedral*). This text, considered controversial by many hackers for being heavily negative towards the work of Richard Stallman and the Free Software Foundation (clearly representing the metaphor for the Cathedral), created a paradigm shift from the idea of open source as signifying user rights of free infrastructures, established first by the Free Software Guidelines and later by the Open Source Definition, to a model of networked collaboration for cultural production. As Florian Cramer points out:

“The main advantage of the term ‘Open Source’ over ‘Free Software’ is that it doesn’t merely refer to computer programs, but evokes broader cultural connotations [...]. ‘Open Source’ sparked an all the richer imagination as Raymond didn’t simply pitch it as an alternative to proprietary ‘intellectual property’ regimes, but as a ‘Bazaar’ model of open, networked collaboration. Yet this is not at all what the Open Source Initiative’s own ‘Open Source Definition’ says or is about. Derived from Debian’s ‘Free Software Guidelines’, it simply lists criteria licenses have to meet in order to be considered free, respectively open source. The fact that a work is available under such a license might enable collaborative work on it, but it doesn’t have to by definition. Much free software – the GNU utilities and the free BSDs for example – is developed by rather closed groups and committees of programmers in what Raymond calls a ‘Cathedral’ methodology. Conversely, proprietary software companies such as Microsoft may develop their code in distributed ‘Bazaar’ style” (Cramer, 2006, unpag).

Therefore, the main difference between free software and open source in Raymond’s view is cultural, while, according to Richard Stallman, it is political (Stallman, 2007, unpag.). As the hackers and activists of the Ippolita Italian collective point out in the book *Open non è free* (*Open Is Not Free*, 2005), by shifting the target from users to producers, the open source production model focuses more on business opportunities than on an ethical idea of (free) software distribution towards the creation of a shared commons. It doesn’t emphasise the concept of freedom and rights to users as stressed by the free software movement, making open source seem instead to be more of a branding label than a philosophy. A predictable consequence of this production-oriented collaborative vision emerges when Tim O’Reilly – involved from the outset in the Open Source Initiative – refers to what he calls the “open source paradigm shift” (O’Reilly, 2004, unpag). Focused on the business advantages of building applications on top of open source software, this techno-methodological shift implies the idea of building modular architecture to allow compatible programmes, encourage Internet-enabled collaborative development and create viral distribution and marketing by engaging users as co-

contributors. The idea of applying collaborative software development and open source models in Web 2.0 companies becomes a strategic business advantage, where little emphasis is laid on the rights of users. This makes life easier for producers, with its inherent reductions in production and development costs. Many companies have adopted such a “Bazaar method” and open source built-in communities model, from IBM, Google, Apple, Facebook, to Creative Commons and Wikipedia. Indeed, the same cultural vision, which involves a sharing model which is beneficial to business, is used by the Creative Commons initiative. As Anna Nimus (aka Joanne Richardson and Dmytri Kleiner) points out in the essay “Copyright, Copyleft and the Creative Anti-Commons” (2006):

“The public domain, anticopyright and copyleft are all attempts to create a commons, a shared space of non-ownership that is free for everyone to use. The conditions of use may differ, according to various interpretations of rights and responsibilities, but these rights are common rights and the resources are shared alike by the whole community – their use is not decided arbitrarily, on a case by case basis, according to the whims of individual members. By contrast, Creative Commons is an attempt to use a regime of property ownership (copyright law) to create a non-owned, culturally shared resource. Its mixed bag of cultural goods are not held in common since it is the choice of individual authors to permit their use or to deny it. Creative Commons is really an anti-commons that peddles a capitalist logic of privatization under a deliberately misleading name. Its purpose is to help the owners of intellectual property catch up with the fast pace of information exchange, not by freeing information, but by providing more sophisticated definitions for various shades of ownership and producer-control” (Nimus, 2006, unpag.)

We can therefore see that the idea of using an open license does not always encourage peer and equally distributed practices, but it might cover a business strategy which promotes a free market logic of production, thereby leading to a softening of monopolistic models. To fight against closed models of intellectual property (such

as the Microsoft policy), and hierarchical organisational structures, consumers are encouraged to be more involved in the production process, thereby making people more likely to work for free. Thus, the role of producers and consumers begins to blur and merge, leaving space for a new form of wealth-generating labour, making the consumer become a producer, or *prosumer*, as defined by Alvin Toffler in 1980². Reflecting on the problem of intellectual property and the producer-consumer dichotomy in the Web 2.0 era, Anna Nimus states: “What began as a movement for the abolition of intellectual property has become a movement of customizing owners’ licenses. Almost without notice, what was once a very threatening movement of radicals, hackers and pirates is now the domain of reformists, revisionists, and apologists for capitalism. When capital is threatened, it co-opts its opposition” (Nimus, 2006, unpag.)

However, the shift of the hacker principles of openness and collaboration into commercial purposes mirrors a broader phenomenon, this being one of the consequences of a production process which started much earlier, as we will see in the next section. With the emergence of Web 2.0 we are facing a progressive commercialisation of contexts for software development and sharing, the aim of which is to appear open and progressive (very emblematic is the claim “Don’t be evil” by Google), but which are indeed transforming the meaning of communities and networking. Many of the social networking platforms try to present an image of themselves as “a force for good” (Fry, Stone, & Hoffman, 2009), as does Google, emphasising its role in providing free services for enabling communities, but shadowing their centralised logic of business production. At the same time, the free software community has not been left out of this progressive corporate takeover of the hacker counterculture. Google organises the Summer of Code festival every year to get the best hackers and developers to work for the company (<http://code.google.com/soc>); it encourages open source development, supporting the Mozilla Foundation for the development of Firefox, and paying Canonical/Ubuntu for the development of Chrome. Similarly, Ubuntu One, an online backup and synchronization utility, uses Amazon S3 as its storage and transfer facility – while the Free Software Foundation

² In the book *The Third Wave* (Bantam Books, USA, 1980). The concept of *prosumers* was already envisioned by Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt in their 1972 book *Take Today: The Executive as Drop-out* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 4).

bases its GNewSense free software GNU/Linux distribution, on Ubuntu³. Furthermore, Google funds hackerspaces – i.e. the Hacker Dojo in Mountain View – and tends to promote incipient tech groups and initiatives, especially in California, but also internationally through Google companies worldwide. Business and hacker values are therefore clearly interconnected in the development of Web 2.0 and the new generation of software.

This ambiguity of values and practices mirrors what Carlo Formenti defines as the *apology of the amateur* function to establish “an anarcho-capitalist project, which on the one hand aims to accelerate the end of the dinosaurs of the old cultural industry and replace them by the 2.0 corporations, and on the other hand, uses the cyber-populism of *smart mobs* against media professionals to crush their resistance - branded as corporative – to personnel and salary cuts” (Formenti, 2011, p. 60, my translation). Similarly, Paolo Virno defines general intellectual labour-power, as *intellettualità di massa* (intellectuality of the masses). Such mass intellectuality goes beyond the boundaries of labour structures and extends into a more comprehensive system of production of intangible property, which affects both public and private life, as well as a wide-range of relational dynamics and linguistic practices:

“The characteristic aspects of the intellectuality of the masses, its identity, so to speak, cannot be found in relation to labour, but, above all, on the level of life forms, of cultural consumption, of linguistic practices. Nevertheless, and this is the other side of the coin, just when production is no longer in any way the specific locus of the formation of identity, *exactly at that point* does it project itself into every aspect of experience, subsuming linguistic competencies, ethical propensities, and the nuances of subjectivity.

The intellectuality of the masses lies at the heart of this dialectic. Because it is difficult to describe in economic-productive terms, for this reason exactly (and not in spite of this reason), it is a fundamental component of today’s capitalistic accumulation, The intellectuality of the masses

³ As Florian Cramer argued during an email exchange on how hacker culture and Web 2.0 philosophy and practices are more and more intertwined. Personal email correspondence, January 24, 2010.

(another name for the multitude) is at the centre of the post-Ford economy precisely because its mode of being completely avoids the concepts of the political economy” (Virno, 2004, p. 109).

Such ambiguities of business perspectives and non-material production, where networking values and corporate missions are deeply intertwined, allow us to critically rethink the meaning of the digital utopias of the last decades. As Matteo Pasquinelli points out, while analysing the contemporary exploitation of the rhetoric of free culture, and the collapse of the “digitalism” ideology, “a parasite is haunting the hacker haunting the world” (Pasquinelli, 2008, p. 90).

4.2 The Business of Cybernetics

In the first chapter I emphasised the divergences from the libertarian attitude towards technology adopted by many of those involved in Californian “cyberculture” in contrast to the politically oriented perspective of many members of the European net culture. American hackers and practitioners often relate more closely to business practices than those involved in European network culture, who tend to adopt a more critical and radical perspective towards both digital culture and the political process. However, this perspective of mutual opposition between pro-business US entrepreneurs and anti-business European activists runs the risk of simplifying and stigmatising a much more complex process. As has already been pointed out in the first chapter, the avoidance of the overtly “political” among those involved in the American tech culture does not imply an uncritical stance towards the establishment. If we consider that the rise of digital culture in the US deeply influenced many European underground experiences in the course of the Eighties and Nineties, such as working on creating networks of collaborations, then the critical attitude of many European media activists cannot be completely separated from a cultural and social process that had started in the US long before.

This complex phenomenon weaves together the rise of the US counterculture in the Sixties with that of cyberculture in the Seventies and Eighties, which later led to the development of the

New Economy in Western society. Many values that inspired the development of hacker ethics and cyberculture, such as the sharing of knowledge, collaborative production, decentralisation of networked systems, freedom of knowledge and the battle for cyber-rights, have deep roots in the rise of cyberculture in the US since the end of the Sixties. Similarly, what happened in many European contexts in the Eighties, when the first punk and hacker collectives started to act against “normalisation” of behaviour and authoritarian systems, has been the result of a complex combination of mutual influences that responded politically and creatively to the development of industrial and pop culture during the Cold War. Even if some publications, such as the anthology of essays *Radical Thought in Italy* (1996), edited by Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, have described the social context of the Eighties as a source of opportunism, commercialisation of values and, in short, a “poisonous culture” (Hardt & Virno, 1996, p. 7), during those years many hackers, artists and activists instead created networked critical activities especially in the artistic and technological underground subcultures⁴. As has already been demonstrated in my descriptions of experiences such as Neoism, Luther Blissett, mail art and the Church of the SubGenius, many artistic experiences have been able to infiltrate pop culture and the symbols of mass consumerism by applying viral strategies of networked collaborations.

Such grassroots networks and projects emerged from the ruins of radical political movements in the Seventies, which, especially in Italy, were crushed by the State and the police. However, those hackers and activists have since been able to transform the previous experiences of revolutionary politics into a model for decentralised forms of critical thinking. Even if many of these groups and networks have often considered themselves to be more anarchic-libertarian than “political”, expressing values of anti-hegemonic thinking beyond institutionalised political parties, we could argue that the concept of “political” could be extended into such practices as well, emphasising their effort in imagining new models of criticism. Those collective experiences fuelled their anti-conformist attitudes, by the application of distributed networking practices, by the refusal to succumb to hierarchical authority and centralised leadership, by engaging in the

⁴ As Tommaso Tozzi described in his book *Opposizioni '80: Alcune delle realtà che hanno scosso il villaggio globale* (Milan, Amen, 1990); and as I analysed in my book *Networking: The Net as Artwork* (Costa & Nolan, 2006/ DARC, 2008).

battle for freedom of speech and openness of information. Even if the subsequent intrusion of IT business has been in evidence during the development of such distributed networks of interventions, it does not necessarily mean that such experiences have been poorly socially or politically engaged. Therefore, to return to the statement of Michael Hardt describing the Eighties as a “poisonous culture”, we could turn this phrase around by saying that these distributed networks of artists, hackers and activists learned to poison their targets of criticism (instead of being poisoned by them), causing disturbances to centralised systems and understanding how to play with viral contamination strategies.

However, the critical-mindedness of many hackers and activists during the Eighties was clearly inspired by a deep change in society and cultural structures during the Cold War, and by a deep transformation in business and the commercial sector as well. If we want to analyse social and cultural phenomena according to a dialectical approach, the rise of cyberculture that led to the New Economy shows that historical development usually follows a non-linear structure, and that facts and events are often intertwined. The analysis of “counterculture” through business therefore generates a dialectic that exposes paradoxes and coexistent layers of events, more than oppositional negations. It results in a flow of practices and facts that are based on ambiguity and juxtapositions, emphasising paradoxes beyond a linear historical approach. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s concept of dialectical image, the methodology of highlighting coexistences and contradictions becomes central to understanding the connections between business culture, hacker culture and radical politics. Similarly, it makes it easier to understand how networking and business today are more and more connected to and dependent on each other. Linking what happened in the US during the rise of cyberculture during the Seventies to what is happening today with the emergence of Web 2.0 and the consequent absorption of hacker values into business, it becomes a metaphor for a “dialectical image”, where the present and the past are frozen together by keeping cultural ambiguities and paradoxes alive.

In the book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006) Fred Turner analyses the root of American digital utopianism, tracing the history of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968-1972) and network, as well as the activity of Stewart Brand and the community of entrepreneurs

connected with it. This network gave birth to the virtual community named the WELL (The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), to the magazine *Wired* and contributed to the development of the emerging technological hub now known as Silicon Valley in California. Emblematic of the rise of cyberculture, as well as being a powerful social and rhetorical resource for entrepreneurship, the Whole Earth group brought together scientific researchers, business entrepreneurs, back-to-the-land proponents, interlinking hippy and psychedelic culture with mainstream consumer culture. This network managed to carry into the future the revolutionary torch lit by the youth in the Sixties and to champion values focussed on the empowerment of people, but it also became a productive platform for the communitarian rhetoric surrounding the introduction of the Internet – and of what Fred Turner defines as *digital utopianism*. Highlighting new frontiers of consciousness opened by technology and synthetic drugs, the Whole Earth network provided utopian answers to the fears of the Cold War, of atomic bombs, and of potential nuclear attacks, which were commonly seen as social spectres in the US during the Seventies. In the opening text of the first *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968), Stewart Brand writes:

“We are as gods and might as well get used to it. So far, remotely done power and glory – as via government, big business, formal education, church – has succeeded to the point where gross defects obscure actual gains. In response to this dilemma and to these gains a realm of intimate, personal power is developing – power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the WHOLE EARTH CATALOG” (Brand, 1968, p. 3).

The DIY approach towards technology and culture, which became very common in the hacker and activist scene of the Eighties and Nineties, have deep roots in a utopian vision of society which emerged during the Cold War, and as Fred Turner demonstrates, in the military-industrial-academic laboratories of cybernetic research during World War II (such as the MIT Radiation Laboratory, founded late in 1940

by the National Defense Research Committee). This vision, which combined great trust placed in the possibilities offered by technology and in the ability of humanity to control nature through machines and to establish collaborative systems through mathematical algorithms, was at the centre of the cybernetic rhetoric. Such rhetoric, first developed in the military industry in the US during World War II, instead of expressing a centralised way of thinking, rigid conformism and bureaucratic methodologies, as many activists from the New Left thought during the Sixties, created the basis for systemic and distributed network theories as well as a non-hierarchical management style. Many scientists and theorists contributing to the development of cybernetic and of interdisciplinary networks of people oriented towards technology and the transformation of consciousness gave rise to a highly entrepreneurial, flexible and freewheeling work ethic. As Fred Turner points out regarding the structure of laboratories during World War II:

“Among these various professionals, and particularly among the engineers and designers, entrepreneurship and collaboration were the norm, and independence of mind was strongly encouraged [...]. Scientists and engineers have to become entrepreneurs, assembling networks of technologists, funders and administrators, to see their projects through. Neither scientists nor administrators could stay walled off from one another in their offices and laboratories; throughout the Rad Lab, and even after hours, in the restaurants and living rooms of Cambridge, the pressures to produce new technologies to fight the war drove formerly specialised scientists and engineers to cross professional boundaries, to routinely mix work with pleasure, and to form new, interdisciplinary networks within which to work and live” (Turner, 2006, p. 19).

Such interdisciplinary collaboration, which brought together military research projects and a variety of academic disciplines from management theory to clinical psychology and political science, was exemplified after the war by the Macy Conferences (1946-1953), sponsored by the Macy Foundation. Here, the military research projects were extended into society in general, connecting system theory and cybernetics

to cognitive science and everyday life⁵. Additionally, following on from the questioning of authority already initiated by the Frankfurt School when conducting its research on the authoritarian personality (*Studie über Autorität und Familie*, 1936), some of the researchers participating in the conferences later contributed to government-funded analysis on the psychological effects of LSD, and its potential as a tool for interrogation and psychological manipulation (Holmes, 2002; Dambeck, 2006).

The Macy conferences contributed to the development of cybernetic concepts, such as the relationship between a system and its observer, the nature of feedback, geographically distributed methodologies of analysis, information management and control through computer systems, which later would become the basis of Internet research (Turner, 2006, pp. 21-22). From the end of the Sixties and into the Seventies in the US, Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth network embraced the cybernetic theories of information, and the interdisciplinary and flexible structure of the military-industrial-academic complex to develop a new cultural and social model of information technology. In such a vision of society and culture, a heterogeneous set of people worked towards establishing networks of collaboration where flexible and interdisciplinary relationships contributed to the establishment of a new form of economic life. This was a life in which the development of computers and technology linked countercultural values of freedom and liberation with the rhetoric of information and system theory as previously developed within the military-industrial-academic context.

As Fred Turner points out, Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth network helped legitimise the lifestyle of the government-funded military-industrial research by “embracing the cybernetics theories of information, the universal rhetorical techniques, and the flexible social practices born out of the interdisciplinary collaboration of

⁵ Among the participants, we find psychiatrist and a pioneer in cybernetics William Ross Ashby; social scientist Lawrence K. Frank; psychiatrist, neurophysiologist and cybernetician Warren McCulloch; anthropologist Gregory Bateson; pioneering computer engineer Julian Bigelow; biophysicist Heinz von Foerster; neurophysiologist Ralph W. Gerard; psychologist Kurt Lewin; cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead; mathematicians John von Neumann; researcher, physician, physiologist and a pioneer of cybernetics Arturo Rosenbluth; mathematician and statistician Leonard J. Savage; mathematician and founder of cybernetics Norbert Wiener and many others (see: www.asc-cybernetics.org/foundations/history/MacyPeople.htm).

World War II” (Turner, 2006, pp. 238-239). The foundation of the first virtual communities and of the collaborative network forums and publications that Brand and his peers helped to establish is the consequence of a process whereby military and academic life worked together to transform social and cultural values into networking models. Since the Nineties, such models have become more and more connected with a restructuring of economic paradigms, whereby precariousness, flexibility and networked forms of sociability are becoming pervasive business norms. However, the history of the Whole Earth network and the activities of the “New Communalists” (as defined by Fred Turner, p. 33), and before them, the systemic models of cybernetic research, demonstrate that the phenomenon of co-opting anti-hegemonic counterculture by business, is actually a process of consensual cooperation. This interlinked collaboration brought together back-to-the-land proponents, cyber-enthusiasts, computer experts, writers like Kevin Kelly and Peter Schwartz and the team of *Wired* magazine, managers of business corporations and entrepreneurs of the Global Business Network. Networking became both a means of accumulating cultural value and a model of production.

Brian Holmes, in the essay *The Flexible Personality* (2002), refers to the book by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (written in 1999), analysing how capitalism works at “recuperating” the critique of the previous era, to make the system become tolerable once again. For example, the critique first levelled against capitalism by the worker’s movement, and at the end of the 1960s by social movements - namely, that it thrived on exploitation and alienation - led to a decentralised reorganisation of work production towards the *networked* model, which became a “magical answer” for aspirant managerial groups. Brian Holmes is clear about the reason for the entrepreneurial interest in networked organisation and production models:

“First, the pressure of a rigid, authoritarian hierarchy is eased by eliminating the complex middle-management ladder of the Fordist enterprises and opening up shifting, one-to-one connections between network members. Second, spontaneous communication, creativity and relational fluidity can be encouraged in a network as factors

of productivity and motivation, thus overcoming the alienation of impersonal, rationalized procedures. Third, extended mobility can be tolerated or even demanded, to the extent that tool-kits become increasingly miniaturized or even purely mental, allowing work to be relayed through telecommunications channels. Fourth, the standardization of products that was the visible mark of the individual's alienation under the mass-production regime can be attenuated, by the configuration of small-scale or even micro-production networks to produce limited series of custom objects or personalized services. Fifth, desire can be stimulated and new, rapidly obsolescent products can be created by working directly within the cultural realm as coded by multimedia in particular, thus at once addressing the demand for meaning on the part of employees and consumers, and resolving part of the problem of falling demand for the kinds of long-lasting consumer durables produced by Fordist factories" (Holmes, 2002, unpag).

The growing flexibility of networked managerial systems is therefore a consequence of the recovery by capitalism from the setbacks of the Sixties and the Seventies, imposing delocalised contracts and more volatile modes of consumption. This social and economical process generates new forms of mobility, both physical and relational, which Holmes describes as a "flexible personality". If we apply such a term to the user-generated content model of cultural production and interaction in social networks, the confluences between hacker culture and business logic in Web 2.0 appear clear. Once again, anti-hegemonic ways of thinking and systemic models of cooperation are turned into a business model. However, as the analysis of the roots of cyberculture previously demonstrated, such a process of "contamination" is nothing new. Instead, it is a contemporary expression of a phenomenon started long before, which reveals how in the development of cyberculture, libertarian and anti-hegemonic thoughts have often been connected with business logic. This is not only a North American phenomenon: it is the obvious manifestation of the cyclical process of integrating and recuperating "deviations" and criticisms by organised systems, which is proper to every capitalist society. On the other hand, the interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that organised institutional

systems can also become agents of cultural change and can be critical of the *status quo*, as the development of networking methodologies and interdisciplinary collaboration models within the military-industrial-academic laboratories demonstrated.

This ambivalence of perspectives became more and more evident to me while getting to know as well as interviewing activists, hackers, and independent thinkers in California during my scholarship at Stanford University in the autumn of 2009. As will be seen in the final section of this chapter, in California, and more precisely in the Bay Area, the entrepreneurial attitude of many hackers, geeks and cultural producers working for commercial companies or in connection with them, does not preclude them from generating highly experimental projects which even have the potential to make a critical impact on society and culture and in the marketplace. Instead of using their time working for companies during the day and creating radical projects critical of the mainstream during the night, which would be a sort of schizophrenic “Penelope’s activity”, many people I met demonstrated how to turn this tension to their own positive advantage. Collaborative meeting platforms such as the San Francisco Dorkbot, hackerspaces such as NoiseBridge in San Francisco, publishing houses such as Re/Search, web hosting services such as Laughing Squid, pornography companies such as Kink.com, demonstrate how it is possible to avoid falling into the trap of accepting mainstream business models by turning entrepreneurial attitudes into a source for disruptive, and often critical, production.

Instead of avoiding conflict with business, such experiences benefit by confronting the ambiguities involved, leading to projects and networks whose goal might be to transform the status quo and create cultural and technological alternatives. One interesting aspect of such an attitude is that it might also tackle the above-mentioned “Penelope’s syndrome”, which has come to characterise the majority of labour production in the immaterial economy in recent times. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Penelope weaves a burial shroud during the day, telling her many suitors that she will choose one of their number when she has finished it; however, since she is waiting for the return of Odysseus, in the night she unpicks part of the shroud. Similarly, it might happen that an individual works for a commercial company during the day, and disrupts such activity by creating radical political projects at night, trapped in a constant dichotomy between innovation and

exploitation, production and consumption. On the contrary, using what has been learned at a commercial company can sometimes lead to the creation of a self-sustaining activity, which might for many people be a means of getting beyond the problem of exploitation or, at least, turning it into something positive.

However, this certainly does not get to the root of the problem, and the tension between production and consumption never completely vanishes. This friction becomes evident in the business logic which the innovation analyst Katherine Warman Kern defines as *disrupting ambiguity*. As she writes in her blog: “This week’s reading and thinking inspires a theory that the path to innovation is not just disruption (i.e., destroying the status quo) but ‘Disrupting Ambiguity’. Disrupting Ambiguity is not about destroying the other side in a conflict – it is about resolving the conflict by moving to a whole new level that makes the differences of the two sides’ moot, irrelevant” (Kern, 2010, unpag). To explain the notion of disrupting ambiguity she mentions Stewart Brand’s statement delivered at a hacker conference in 1984: “Information wants to be free. Information also wants to be expensive” (because it can be so valuable). This statement demonstrates also the ambiguity of the concept of “free” – which expresses both a value of freedom *and* part of business logic – and that it is a crucial step towards framing the current development of networking technologies. Furthermore, Katherine Warman Kern points out the ambiguity of making money with the strategy of creating a very large network of engaged users, who are not just “simple users”, but become “producers”, stressing the ambivalence of creating revenue through the spontaneous involvement of active networks of participants. And finally, she describes the ambiguity of the role of leadership in the US economy, wondering if the US might be considered a model for ‘state capitalism’, “since both Roosevelt and Kennedy accelerated innovation by providing government funding to start-up companies who could help the US achieve objectives related to national security (first, building a military complex to fight in WWII and second, building the capability to go to space)” (Kern, 2010, unpag).

Exposing such a set of ambiguities and incongruities concerning the role of users in networks, the concept of freedom as well as that of leadership, the analysis of business strategies becomes useful for reflecting on disruptive forms of criticism. The idea of *disrupting ambiguity* is useful for describing a flexible economical and social

system, where informational technology, cultural innovation and methodologies of networking are intertwined. The contradictions inherent in the development of digital culture in the past forty years demonstrate that business and innovation in society, culture and technology are often interconnected, as was witnessed in the San Francisco and Bay Area countercultural communities and the emerging technological hub of Silicon Valley. However, as will be seen in the following sections, the act of producing disruptive strategies of sustainability within business contexts might open a path for producing critical interventions, where contradictions are exposed and not necessarily resolved. Therefore, even if it might finally prove possible to get rid of Penelope's shroud, it might still remain lying inside a closet.

4.3 *The Art of Crowdsourcing*

This section focuses on the business strategy of creating a large network of engaged users to create revenue, exposing the constant tension between production and consumption that is inherent in the development of Web 2.0 and social media. Drawing upon the concept of *mass amateurisation*, this phenomenon can be traced back to the analysis undertaken by Siegfried Kracauer on the aesthetics of the masses, as well as to research undertaken by Walter Benjamin into art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Following a “montage method”, I propose to link such theories to the aesthetisation of networking practices in both social media and collaborative contexts. The aim of this section is to analyse the concept of social networking through the development of *folksonomy* and to reflect on the status of artistic and activist practices in the intertwining realms of Web 2.0 networking and business. I will start by referring to the dialectical perspective ‘*Ästhetisierung der Politik – Politisierung der Kunst*’ (aesthetisation of politics – politicisation of art) by Walter Benjamin⁶, used in this context to describe the development of social networks as

⁶ Benjamin W., 1936, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Eng. eds., 1968, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations. Essay and Reflections*, New York, Schocken Books.

an aesthetic representation of a social commons, and consequently, to analyse possible strategies of artistic and activist interventions in the social media. Alongside this, my analysis will show how endless cycles of rebellion and transgression coexist with the ongoing development of business culture in Western society.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) Walter Benjamin reflects on the advent of photography and cinema in modern society and connects the emergence of consumer culture with the development of technological reproducibility, analysing the consequent death of an individual artwork's aura (the unique original character of that artwork). In the age of cinematic media revolution, the masses became active players in the transformation of the arts, and the arts, by disregarding the aura through mechanical reproduction, would inherently be based on the practice of politics. The authenticity and value of a unique and singular work of art would be substituted by media aesthetics, in which the masses would recognise themselves (Pold, 1999). According to Benjamin, the destruction of the aura had already taken place at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the artworks of the Dadaists, which they “branded as reproduction with the very means of production” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 238). Dadaist artists, rejecting prevailing styles of art, created a utopian vision of everyday life by addressing anti-war, anti-bourgeois and anti-authoritarian values and imagining a form of art in which reproducibility and fragmentation embraced the logic of chaos and irrationality. In contradiction to this, in the epilogue of his *Artwork Essay*, Benjamin describes the attempt by Fascism to organise the masses “without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate”. Therefore, “the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into politics” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 241).

Similarly, in the Weimar essays known as *The Mass Ornament* (1927), Siegfried Kracauer describes the phenomenon of the aesthetisation of the masses and the emergence of a new social mentality through collective gatherings in public contexts⁷. Benjamin sees the *Ästhetisierung der Politik* as evidence of a propagandistic effort culminating in the aesthetics of war, as emphasised by the Manifesto on the colonial war in Ethiopia written by the Futurist artist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti; Kracauer describes the gatherings in urban spaces

⁷ Kracauer, S., 1927, *Das Ornament der Masse*, Eng. eds., 1995, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

and the mechanical movement of line dancers, “the mass ornaments”, as celebrations of capitalist society, where the single individual is not conscious of being part of a wider production design. Exposing the risks of using mechanical equipment and technological features to perpetuate totalitarian propaganda, the epilogue of the *Artwork Essay* today sounds quite apocalyptic; however, it should be understood within the political context of when Walter Benjamin penned it in the mid-1930s. As Søren Pold points out “the *Artwork Essay* opens up a critical space through its reflection on media, which are neither technologically deterministic [...] nor blind to the revolutionary effects of media on the political and cognitive levels, on the basic level of experience” (Pold, 1999, p. 23).

As part of his dialectical conclusion of the *Artwork Essay*, Walter Benjamin states: “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 242). However, even if Benjamin criticised the progressive aesthetisation of politics, he was never against opening technological development up to a broader public, as was outlined in chapter one when I highlighted the difference between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno in their approach to popular culture. According to Benjamin, the film industry was a tool for mobilising the masses, and mainstream culture was a framework in which the masses could find new forms of self-expression, as he pointed out in *The Arcades Project*. As has already been analysed, in modern society the demand for a politicisation of art is not alien to the experience of Baudelaire’s urban *flâneur* in the arcades of the metropolis. The *flâneur* connects on an empathic level with the goods of mass consumerism and the shiny signs of business, and the *flâneurie* becomes a method of understanding the consumerist culture from within. Quoting once again a crucial sentence by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*: “In the *flâneur*, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 10).

Applying the concepts of *aesthetisation of art* and of *mass ornament* to the contemporary networked society, it becomes useful to analyse the process of *mass amateurisation* or, quoting Paolo Virno, the “intellectuality of the masses”. As has previously been described, the

emergence of Web 2.0 brings with it a progressive commercialisation of web-based contexts of sharing and social relationships, which aim to appear open and progressive, but which are indeed transforming the meaning of community and networking. We are today in an age of “business analysts who seek collaboration as a tool to grow wealth for the already prosperous” (Lovink & Scholz, 2007, p. 9). Social networks are a clear example of the emerging trend for incorporating everyday practices into a net of constant connectivity, exposing a phenomenon of *mass amateurisation* as “the process whereby the dichotomy between experts and amateurs is dissolving and creating a new category of professional amateurs, also called Pro-Ams” (P2P Foundation, 2008⁸). As Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz argued, in many community networks of Web 2.0 “there is no total autonomy of collaborative projects”, and “working together does not exempt us from systemic complicity” (Lovink & Scholz, 2007, p. 10). They also argue that even if, thanks to social media, contexts of sharing are becoming more accessible than before, this phenomenon might reveal a lack of desire for common participation, which becomes faster and more distracted. At the same time, many online independent communities and mailing-lists which were very active in the netculture and net art scene between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s today enjoy a much less active participation, while a good number of their members are now quite active in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, participation in which usually require less attention and commitment⁹.

If we observe the structure of social media platforms such as Facebook, we gain the impression of it being symptomatic of a massive aesthetisation of personal relations. Friends are collected together and displayed on the profile of each user, while their networking activity is exposed to a wide public through comments, states, notes and “likes”. This phenomenon of aesthetisation of “mass intellectuality” exemplifies the expansion of social networking from a sharing methodology between a few artists and hackers to a larger crowd of

⁸ Definition of “mass amateurisation” in the P2P Foundation’s website: http://p2pfoundation.net/Mass_Amateurization. Retrieved June 11, 2011.

⁹ For more information on this topic, follow the thread “Has Facebook superseded Nettime?” started by Florian Cramer on 21 September 2009 on the Nettime mailing-list: www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0909/msg00024.html. My response to this question was published on the Nettime Digest (September 25), and, later, on my blog: www.networkingart.eu/2009/10/has-facebook-superseded-nettime.

users (or better said, producers). Of course there is nothing bad with this as such, but the ambiguity inherent in the practice of networking as an economically oriented modality of interaction in Web 2.0 is not often drawn attention to – nor expressed by the companies who own the users’ data. This economic logic becomes more evident in business strategies of crowdsourcing, such as the Amazon Mechanical Turk, “a marketplace for work”, which enables employers to coordinate the use of human intelligence to perform automatic tasks, and to get compensation for doing so. In these contexts networking clearly becomes a strategy for business, creating collaborations in which the users do not really interact with each other, but rather perform automatic assignments often paid for by only a few cents per task. Such a labour model allows employers to avoid problems such as the minimum wage and overtime taxes, since the structure of work is extremely flexible and the workers class their income as self-employment.

Aaron Koblin, an artist based in San Francisco who leads the Data Arts Team in Google’s Creative Lab, started to use the Amazon Mechanical Turk to create artworks which result from a combination of tasks performed by a group of people, gathered through an open call for contributions. As his website states, Koblin “takes real-world and community generated data and uses it to reflect on cultural trends and the changing relationship between humans and technology” (www.aaronkoblin.com). As in the crowdsourcing business, contributors are paid a specific amount of money after delivering their work.

Koblin used the strategy of crowdsourcing to create works such as *Bicycle Built for Two Thousand* (2009), *Ten Thousand Cents* (2008) and *The Sheep Market* (2006)¹⁰. In the first work, a project by Aaron Koblin and Daniel Massey, we have the visualisation of 2,088 voice recordings collected via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. In this experiment, workers had to listen to a short sound clip, and then record themselves imitating what they heard for a fee of \$0.06 USD. The result is an assemblage of voices singing a synthesised version of *Daisy Bell*, which is very reminiscent of the broken voice of HAL 9000 in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when HAL’s logic is lost completely, and the computer begins singing this song (referring to the first song played on a computer, the IBM 704, which was indeed, *Daisy Bell*).

¹⁰ Respectively: www.bicyclebuiltfortwothousand.com; www.tenthousandcents.com; www.thesheepmarket.com.

In *Ten Thousand Cents*, Aaron Koblin and Takashi Kawashima create a representation of a US \$100 bill, thanks to the work of 10 000 anonymous artists who participated in the project via Amazon's Mechanical Turk, "working in isolation from one another painting a tiny part of the bill without knowledge of the overall task", as can be read on the project's website. The workers were paid one cent each and the result was the creation of an US \$100 bill for a labour cost of \$100. Finally, in *The Sheep Market* 10 000 sheep were drawn by workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk for an average wage of \$0.69 USD per hour.

As with the collective dance compositions of the Tiller Girls described by Siegfried Kracauer, the members of the crowd performing such tasks were not conscious of the global design they were part of. What was gained at the end of the process, beside the almost insignificant revenue, was an *aesthetic representation of the crowd*, which is not a real collectivity, but a sum of isolated individuals. However, it is exactly through such aesthetic representation of the crowd that we are able to understand it as a whole. But we can only reach this level of consciousness at the end of the process, when the "mass ornament" is complete. What is lacking in such crowd labour is the possibility of being active subjects, and even if the final result draws attention to the production process, the networked collectivity is objectified.

If we go back thirty years to the practice of mail art, it involved individuals belonging to a non-formalised network of common interests, which resulted in sharing exchanges through the postal network. People were part of an emotional network of interests, motivated by a common desire for cooperation, homemade postcards, handmade stamps, rubber stamps, envelopes and many other creative objects. In contrast, the crowdsourcing experiments of Aaron Koblin and his partners contribute to visualising the present state of networking and of its production processes in contemporary media society: a crowd of connected monads involved in simulacra of interaction. Such aesthetisation of networking practices, which is now a common part of the business field, reveals the transformation from networked art as a collective and sharing practice into networking as management of economically oriented communities. Drawing on the dialectical statement of Walter Benjamin, should we answer the aesthetisation of networking practices with a politicisation of business through artistic interventions?

4.4 *Burning Man, A Social Network*

If we proceed using a comparative methodology based on ethnographic investigation of a constellation of cases, the above-mentioned shift from networking art as a grassroots practice to social networking as a business model becomes evident. Going back to the analysis of counterculture and cyberculture in the US, a significant example of the progressive commercialisation of networking contexts of interaction and sharing is Burning Man (www.burningman.com). Burning Man festival is a week-long art event which has been held every year since 1990 in the Black Rock Desert (Northern Nevada, California) and managed since 1997 by the business enterprise Black Rock City LLC. Despite Burning Man having been started more than twenty years ago, it is still a mass participation event in California, and resonates deeply in the technological and artistic cultural scene of the Bay Area and its surroundings. Many people today identify themselves as *burners*, a definition which conjures up a bohemian ethos of freedom, creativity and experimentation, evident not only through the creation of a shared environment - Black Rock City - a temporary build-from-nothing conurbation, but also in the extravagant behaviour that *burners* like to exhibit during the festival. However, Burning Man is a phenomenon with many contradictions. It is *both* a collective occasion to create a social commons, *and* a business enterprise; it is *both* an event where anti-consumerist practices can be experimented with *and* a resource where high-tech entrepreneurs can network with each other. It is *both* a symbol of the US ethos of a libertarian lifestyle, *and* a gathering of predominantly wealthy middle class people. It is *both* a spontaneous ecosystem of peers who come to experiment with art and technology, *and* a centralised urban geography managed by a small group of people – even though it is constructed through the involvement of all participants. Furthermore, as Fred Turner pointed out in the paper “Burning Man at Google” (2009), “Burning Man serves as a key cultural infrastructure for the Bay Area’s new media industries, supporting new forms of production in Silicon Valley – and especially at Google” (Turner, 2009, p. 145).

My point is that Burning Man is also a clear example of the current evolution of social networking. If we imagine it as a social network, we notice a clear shift from its initial phase in which it symbolised

a peer-to-peer system where all the participants organised the event and collaborated at the same level, to a company-owned networking infrastructure, where all the participants contribute for free in the creation of a shared commons, but where the owner receives the final revenues. This phenomenon becomes even more interesting if we consider that Burning Man started as a highly performative experiment, linked to the idea, clearly inspired by the avant-garde, of living everyday life as an art form. Indeed, the Burning Man festival would never have been possible without the previous existence of several underground experimental art groups: The San Francisco Suicide Club and The Cacophony Society (Doherty, 2004)¹¹.

The Suicide Club and The Cacophony Society had deep roots in experimental art practices, creating a unique way of living in the city of San Francisco, promoting and organising collective pranks, interventions, games and group performances from the end of the 1970s and through the 1980s. The San Francisco Suicide Club (1977-1983) was a top-secret group, whose actions have often been associated with avant-gardes such as Dadaism, Surrealism, as well as Situationism. Its motto was *to live each day as though it were your last*. It was founded by five people, among who was Gary Warne. Warne gave concrete form to the concept of *synaesthesia* in the San Francisco public arena, “to create experiences that would be like living out a fantasy or living out a film” (Vale, 2006, p. 39). Events held included the surreal experience of climbing San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge in the fog, gathering naked in San Francisco cable cars, or doing a treasure hunt in the middle of the Chinese New Year’s parade when firecrackers are going off and dragons are winding down the streets.

John Law, a member of the Suicide Club, initiator of The Cacophony Society and joint-organiser of the early Burning Man festivals, during our interview in the Herald Tribune tower in Oakland (where he takes care of the tower clock), argued that the Suicide Club was not only an artistic group, but an experimental network of people who applied networking methods to carry out initiatives and actions. In the Seventies, when the Suicide Club was created, there was no Internet

¹¹ Respectively: www.suicideclub.com; www.cacophony.org. For a deeper analysis of such movements, see the books: Vale, V., ed. *Pranks 2*, San Francisco: RE/Search, 2006; and Doherty, Brian. *This is Burning Man. The Rise of a New American Underground*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004.

as it exists today, and people were linked together through very simple methods of networking, such as spreading flyers in coffee shops, creating newsletters and covering events in magazines to attract more people, as punk or rock bands often did during that time. However, the Suicide Club never advertised, and the participants joined thanks to informal connections, or previous experiences of networking between the members. Since a good number of those organising the Suicide Club were interested in pulp fiction, the roots of the San Francisco Suicide Club go back to America's APAs, or Amateur Press Associations. These were distributed groups of people whose aim was to share common interests in a single forum, even before the advent of electronic bulletin boards or the Internet. Many APAs were founded in the 1930s, as John Law recalls:

“The APAs were communities of people around the US, mostly like 14-20 year old boys who loved serial stories, science fiction or horror, and pulp fiction magazines. They would form groups, Amateur Press Associations, and they would write one another or write criticisms of the stories. Or, they would write hagiographies of their favorite writer and they would trade this information with each other. [...] Those associations later grew – in the ‘50s – into the mail art. It wasn’t a direct outgrowth of the APAs, but there were a lot of crossovers from what I have read” (Law in Bazzichelli, 2009a, unpag.).

Usually a Central Mailer (CM) coordinated the APAs. The CM's role was to distribute the association's publication to its members, to manage the subscription lists and the call for contributions, which were then sent out by mail to the contributors after the deadline. As was seen in Chapter two, this networking model is very similar to that used for mail art – even if the contents in this case involve science fiction, comics, music, cinema and other topics related to writing. Another source of inspiration for the networking models of the Suicide Club was the Communiversity, which started in 1969 in San Francisco, as part of the Free School Movement which could be found in many colleges in the United States. In these contexts, the students became the administrators of the free schools, and they had the right to manage the curriculum of the initiatives and programmes, which

ranged from discussion groups on power and politics to astrology, play writing, graphic art and gay liberation workshops. As John Law recalls, in the early 1970s, Gary Warne became one of the administrators of the San Francisco State Communiversity, and the activities he conceived in this role had a deep influence on the Suicide Club, like naked events, or prank games on campus. As John Law recalls, Suicide Club started as a Communiversity event in 1977 before taking on a life of its own, engaging around twenty core members and many others whose collaboration was more sporadic. Its aim was to create radical contexts for artistic experimentation and urban exploration. One reflection of John Law's is of particular interest for our discourse, namely the co-existence of equal collaboration and "authoritarian" practices at Suicide Club events. As John Law points out, the Suicide Club networking structure implied a double strategy, a collective aspect and an individual one.

"The collective aspect of the group was that anyone could join, if they came to an event, or to an initiation, we weren't exclusive at all. [...] They'd just leave on their own if they didn't like what was going on. And the people who stayed were usually pretty creative and very eccentric, many of them. So that was the collective nature of it. [...] No one owned the newsletter. Every month, anyone could do it. Anyone could sign up to do the newsletter [...]. There was a treasurer, and the position of treasurer rotated every four months, so there was nobody controlling the mechanism of the organization such as it was. And that was set up very specifically by Gary after being in collectives a lot, being horrified by how they always descended into political back-biting and fighting. [...]" (Law in Bazzichelli, 2009b, unpag).

In contrast to the libertarian aspects of the Suicide club, the fact that many events were actually dangerous meant they needed to be well organized – which implies a highly centralised organisational structure:

"If you came on my event, you had to agree to everything I wanted you to agree to. And you didn't have to agree to

it, but then you didn't come on the event. And if you didn't like the way the event went, you could come back and do it yourself with a different format later, and that was fine. [...] For instance, if we were going to climb the Golden Gate Bridge, I would have my write up go 'please show up at X time and X place. You need to bring tough clothing, boots, a knapsack with a little food and water in it, a flashlight.' If the event was an illegal event, like if we were climbing the Golden Gate Bridge, we had a catchphrase: 'I.D. required', identification required. What that meant was, oh, you need to bring your I.D. because we're going to be breaking the law. We had a very strong ethical view about how we went about moving through the world and breaking the law, like to go on the Golden Gate Bridge. You didn't take anything, and you would leave no garbage, we left nothing. [...] We would leave everything exactly how we found it so that no one ever knew that you were there. It's where Burning Man got it from. Most of the tenets of Burning Man came from Suicide Club" (Law in Bazzichelli, 2009b, unpag).

Another central aspect of the Suicide Club was its members' interest in social movements, extreme group activities and extreme group beliefs. Suicide Club members went out and infiltrated weird cults, like the Unification Church, or Nazi barbeques and Scientology meetings, pretending they wanted to join. The idea was to investigate how myths were created and the meaning of "belief", and "the intensity and the genuine human connections that you experience through belief" as John Law points out¹². This also helped members understand how to look at symbols, flags and mythmaking with a certain critical detachment – and irony. After the death of Gary Warne, former members of the Suicide Club in San Francisco initiated The Cacophony Society in 1986, which later spread to other US cities. It took the performative aspects of the Suicide Club by creating street theatre, urban explorations and pranks in public places – and it was directly inspired by the Suicide Club event "Dashiell Hammett", a literary walking tour of San Francisco initiated in 1977

¹² This attitude was inspired by the book *The True Believer: Thoughts On The Nature Of Mass Movements*, written in 1951 by the social psychologist Eric Hoffer – which was Garne's favourite book, as Law recalls.

by Don Herron. However, the Cacophony Society was less radical and more open than the Suicide Club, but also more playful, “a kinder and gentler Suicide Club”, as Law defines it. The best-known collective gathering of the Cacophony Society is the SantaCon event, formerly Santarchy (<http://santarchy.com>), which has taken place every December since 1994 on the streets of cities all over the world, involving tens of thousands of people dressed in Santa Claus costumes¹³.

John Law defines the Cacophony Society’s activities as *Surreal Tourism*, which “helped you look at wherever you were in a completely different way, almost like a William Burroughs cut-up” (Law in Vale, 2006, p. 51). One of the Cacophony’s central concepts was the trip to the Zone, or the idea of “Zone Trips”, inspired by the book *T.A.Z. – Temporary Autonomous Zone* by Hakim Bey (1985). Zone Trip #4: “A Bad Day at Black Rock”, conceived by Kevin Evans and organized with John Law and Michael Mikel in 1990, signalled the beginning of the annual Burning Man festival. Since 1986 the local sculptor, and member of Suicide Club, Mary Grauberger had been organising an annual beach party and sculpture event at Baker Beach, near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. It is from this event that Larry Harvey and Jerry James came up with the idea of initiating Burning Man, starting the ritual of burning a wooden sculpture of a man on

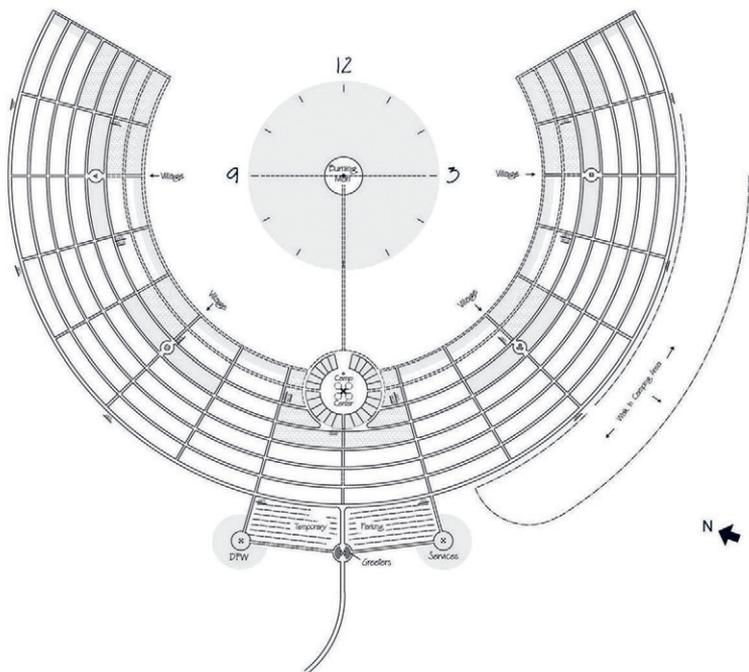
¹³ Three Cacophonists started the Santa Event in 1994 in San Francisco: John Law, Rob Schmidt and Michael Mikel, the latter co-founder of Burning Man. However, the roots of this event can be traced to Denmark. Here, on December 18, 1974, many people, each dressed as Santa Claus, arrived in Copenhagen by ferry from Oslo, and they started roller-skating, singing songs, visiting nursing homes, elderly centres and schools. The most well known of their actions was to enter the store *Magasin* where they took goods from the shelves and distributed them as presents to the customers (later, the police arrived trying to stop them). As Nina Rasmussen, one of the co-founders of the theatre group Solvognen (the Sun Chariot) in 1969, explains: “Solvognen came from Copenhagen’s hippie district, Christiania. The group wanted to create political theatre of action through humorous and peaceful protest. These were directed against the rising price of milk, the repression of the indigenous population by the imperialist United States (the Wounded Knee action), and the existence of NATO (the Nato Army action) - as well as the commercialisation and bourgeois nature of Christmas. That’s where *Julemandshaeren* came in” (Lone Nyhuus “Reality in the Theatre”, at <http://kulturkanon.kum.dk/en/Performance/The-Santa-Claus-Army>). For the Cacophonists in San Francisco, SantaCon was not started as a political event, but more as a way of having fun, singing, getting drunk, and reclaiming Christmas, as John Law points out.

the beach at the summer solstice¹⁴. In 1990, the Cacophony Society moved Burning Man to the Black Rock desert in Northern Nevada so as to avoid police disruption (which had occurred at the previous Burning Man events at Baker Beach).

The origins of Burning Man are therefore deeply connected with the experimental art scene and the early urban counterculture of San Francisco. Furthermore, as we will see when analysing the development of the festival into an entrepreneurial enterprise, this phenomenon confirms once again the idea that the rise of countercultural utopias in the US is strongly linked with the development of the computer business in Silicon Valley. Burning Man is now held every year in Black Rock City, a temporary city constructed for just one week at the end of August in the playa of the Nevada Desert. It is a community experiment, where those involved create huge art sculptures, music events, happenings and performances, and which disappears without trace after the wooden sculpture of the man, together with the art installations and the other venues, have been burned by the city's temporary inhabitants. Since 1997 the festival has been organised and administered by Black Rock City LLC, a company that, year on year, has increasingly been transforming Burning Man into a networking enterprise.

Today Burning Man might be seen as a collective social network, a virtual city with specific rules and its own economy based on the concept of sharing goods and living liberated experiences. There is no money to use in the playa, and people survive by sharing their food. As John Law points out, Burning Man is very different today from what it once was. It is a networking enterprise, with 50 000 participants each summer paying around 200 dollars to be part of, and has a very precise structure: it unleashes centrally organised chaos, where the wooden man sculpture, which is burned at the end of the festival, is raised at the centre of the city and at the top of its inhabitants (see image below).

¹⁴ John Law points out that another direct source of inspiration was the movie *The Wicker Man* (1973), even if Larry Harvey denies it.



Black Rock City 1999, from Rod Garrett's essay "Designing Black Rock City", retrieved from <blog.burningman.com/metropol/designing-black-rock-city>, April 20, 2010.

It is situated in the middle of the playa and it looks at the people from above. The participants themselves no longer raise the sculpture up together anymore as happened in earlier Burning Man events at Baker Beach, and it is obvious to all that Burning Man is no longer a non-profit event. Furthermore, its structure suffers from a formal aesthetisation (evident also from the fact that nowadays wearing an extravagant outfit at Burning Man has become almost a must).

John Law describes the difference between the early architecture of Burning Man with the mass participation event as it is today, emphasising the concept of commodification of the current festival:

“[Originally Burning Man was] complete freedom, the ability and the encouragement for people to do whatever they wanted to, which, if you're looking at the architecture of that event at the time, it would have been much more difficult and

messy than making a nice and neat little Nuremburg Rally. Originally people could set up their camps pretty much where they wanted to. We believe that the best way to lay out the city would be to have nodes of creativity, where people who had a much larger group could set up much more, rather than styled after a severe geometry, which is what it is like now. It would be styled totally organically, which would make it harder to find things and move around, but it would be much freer and much less controlled” (Law in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

John Law points out that Burning Man today is a profit-making corporation which generates money from admission tickets and through the licensing of the image¹⁵. However, “it’s a positive thing, because the people who go, get something out of it. As a consumer experience, they get their money’s worth, or if they’re a creative person who goes there and is working with a group, they get a creative and a collective social value out of it” (Law in Bazzichelli, 2009b). Similarly, V. Vale, the founder of Re/Search publications, who in 2009 published the book *Burning Man Live* (edited by Adrian Roberts), sees it as both an “economic threshold”, and a platform for experimenting with liberating practices: “at least [Burning Man] gives a socially acceptable setting for people to almost go crazy, to the limits of madness in their crazy dance thing, or they may even throw off all their clothes or whatever they do that is generally not permitted, and just reach some ecstatic state or plane in which they are expressing and transcending their former limits, of what they’d never been able to dance that well ever before or ever again” (V. Vale in Bazzichelli, 2009b). Furthermore, Olivier Bonin, the French director of the documentary *Dust & Illusions: 30 Years of Burning Man History* (2009) argues: “I think people feel a common ground out there. But I don’t think it is Burning Man that is creating that common ground. I don’t think that Burning Man is a movement. I think that Burning

¹⁵ During our interview, John Law told me that he has not been at Burning Man since 1996. In Wikipedia we read: “As of 2007, the three partners [John Law, Michael Mikel, and Larry Harvey] are currently engaged in a legal struggle initiated by Harvey over control of the name and symbol of Burning Man. John Law’s response to this struggle was to sue to dissolve the controlling partnership and release the name and symbol into the public domain”. Retrieved from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Law_\(Burning_Man\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Law_(Burning_Man)), July 5, 2011.

Man is benefiting from the movement all around the world of people who wanted to have more grassroots communities, more grassroots level of organizations. And Burning Man is riding that wave” (Bonin in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

The evolution of Burning Man from a counterculture experimental art gathering into a centralised event organised by a business enterprise could be compared with the transformation of social networking from networked art to Web 2.0. It symbolises the shift from a non-centralised and chaotic structure to a managerial organisation, which, however, is nevertheless still based on the concept of sharing and creating a commons. Social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc., represent for many users a successful model of connecting people. But at the same time, they are based on a very centralised way of generating exchanges. In the essay “Burning Man at Google” (2009), Fred Turner explores how Burning Man’s bohemian ethos supports new forms of production emerging in Silicon Valley. “It shows how elements of the Burning Man world – including the building of a socio-technical commons, participation in project-based artistic labour, and the fusion of social and professional interaction – help shape and legitimate the collaborative manufacturing processes driving the growth of Google and other firms” (Turner, 2009, p. 145).

For example, in 2006, Black Rock City LLC began the development of Burning Man Earth in collaboration with Google (<http://bmanearth.burningman.com>), and in 2007, “the corporate education program extended to making how-to videos for cooking and camping at the Playa and conversely offering internal seminars for co-workers in the remote site” (Losh, 2009, unpag.). This is not surprising, considering that Google’s co-founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, consider themselves *Burners* since the early days and in 1999 the founders famously shut down the company for a week to allow the employees to participate in Burning Man. According to Turner, Burning Man “serves as an infrastructure” which provides “commons-based peer production”, an aspect clearly inherent in the business strategy of Web 2.0 corporations based on freedom of values, sharing, creativity and openness. Management structures and communal ethos become intertwined. Similarly, contexts of exchange and spontaneous personal relations become a platform by which to generate revenues, while the digital economy and artistic practices become fully interconnected.

As Fred Turner points out, this strategy is very evident in Google's business model which allows every engineer to spend 20% of their working time on personal projects, the resulting inspiration being of potential use for the company. Quoting the Google project manager Marissa Mayer, Turner states that more than 50% of new products were developed during this 20% personal project time. Similarly, encouraging employees to participate in Burning Man and be involved in an "embodied commons" makes it easier for the company to gain their trust and facilitate the development of lucrative products – as gifts for the "community". In her blog commentary on the lecture by Fred Turner "The Bohemian Factory: Burning Man, Google and the Countercultural Ethos of New Media Manufacturing" (University of California, Irvine, 2009), Liz Losh writes:

"Turner claimed that this mode of production enables a number of effects: the fusion of personal and professional 'growth', the use of financial and social numeration, and the transformation of the worksite into home and home into worksite. The openness at Google isn't always divorced from coercion, Turner noted, since people were jammed into offices with three people in systems of forced collaboration that also included open e-mail lists to facilitate talking to one another and developing ideas for goods" (Losh, 2009, unpag.).

Alongside the New Communalists' embrace of the military systemic theories to create physical and virtual communities, the participants of Burning Man embrace "distributed, peer-based modes of product development" (Fred Turner, 2009) to generate social commons, and consequently, revenues for business companies. This dialectic between counterculture and networking enterprises shows once again that the art of networking today is strictly connected to the use of commercial platforms and is therefore changing the meaning of collaboration and of art itself. Is it still possible to talk today about "counterculture", when social networking has become the motto of Web 2.0 business, and business enterprises are using the rhetoric of the commons to generate revenues? Once again, we are not adopting a model of cooptation to describe the transformation of Burning Man from an underground artistic gathering into a networking enterprise,

but we are demonstrating that business, innovation, openness and participation in the contemporary immaterial economy are closely connected, and evolve alongside each other.

4.5 Hackers, Activists, Fetishists and Entrepreneurs

Section two of this chapter traced the mutual interconnections between counterculture and business in the rise of the digital utopias in the US. As has been seen in the previous section, a similar phenomenon also becomes evident through an analysis of the Burning Man festival, with its development from an artistic underground gathering into an entrepreneurial business being comparable to the evolution of gift-economy in the business of social networking. However, as we have also pointed out, analysing such phenomena through a linear evolutionary approach could lead to misleading conclusions. As Fred Turner argues in his talk “The Bohemian Factory” (2009), it should not be thought of as “one regime replacing another” but as “layering” (Turner in Losh, 2009, unpag.). Therefore, the confluence between counterculture, art, hacking and business has to be imagined as causing mutual disruptions, where each element influences the others as they develop and intertwine.

Such a process of “layering” in the US has been generating a very complex coexistence of oppositions: on one hand there are the hackers and activists who adopt a libertarian and anarchic attitude towards technology, on the other are the entrepreneurs who create business opportunities by applying networking strategies. Networks of hackers and activists use strategies of disruption to rock the establishment and business entrepreneurs use networks to generate revenues. In California, for example, hackers and activists are often entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs are often hackers and activists. This can be better understood if we consider the libertarian roots of the American counterculture, so that the vision expressed by John Law: “I am not against collective effort, but it has to be based on individual incentive, or individual choice” (Law in Bazzichelli, 2009b), becomes indicative of a wider perspective.

During my research scholarship at Stanford University (2009), I focused on the analysis of how hacker culture favoured the emergence of Web 2.0 in California, contextualising from the local hacker and artist scene the contemporary dissemination of social media and the business of social networking. The main questions facing me were: What has been the nature of the hacker culture in California since the emergence of the social media phenomenon? What happened to the hackers who built Silicon Valley and inspired many of the underground hacker networks in Europe? Is there a political approach towards hacking in California, and what is the tension between politics and entrepreneurship among hackers, artists and activists? The network of relations behind this research analysis became of key importance to the research itself, and the *experience* of my encounter with hackers and artists allowed me to build up a constellation of networks. This took shape through my direct participation in a series of local hacktivist and artistic initiatives, and my conducting of interviews in the fall 2009 in San Francisco, Palo Alto, Mountain View and Oakland¹⁶.

As previously noted, hacker culture in California has never really been expressed as a counterculture in competition with the market. In Lutz Dammbeck's documentary "The Net: The Unabomber, LSD and the Internet" (2006), Stewart Brand describes the libertarian approach of the Californian hacker during the Sixties and Seventies: "The

¹⁶ The interviews included: Jacob Appelbaum (co-founder of the NoiseBridge hackerspace in San Francisco and computer security hacker employed by the Tor Project), Olivier Bonin (filmmaker, director of the film "Dust and Illusions, 30 years of Burning Man History" – 2009), Scott Beale (founder of Laughing Squid, an online resource for art, culture and technology as well as independent web hosting in San Francisco), Lee Felsenstein (computer engineer, expert on hacking and pioneer in both the design of early personal computers and in the formation of the personal computer industry), Lynn Hershman (visual artist and filmmaker), John Law (member of Suicide Club, co-founder of Cacophony Society and Burning Man), Karen Marcelo (3D programmer and hacker, founder of the Dorkbot San Francisco and member of SRL, Survival Research Laboratory), Harry S. Robins – aka Dr. Hal (illustrator, screenwriter, voice talent and a prominent member of the Church of the SubGenius), V.Vale (founder of RE/Search Publications, independent magazine and book publisher), and Elin Rønby Pedersen. The conversation I had with Elin Rønby Pedersen, PhD and Research scientist at Google, is unfortunately unavailable because I was not allowed to record it or to quote it during my visit to Google headquarters in Mountain View, according to the policy that only Google's official spokespeople could release interviews. Therefore, the outcomes of that conversation are not part of this manuscript. I consider this episode as a clear example of the tension at Google between "openness" and "being closed".

political stance taken by hackers was: ‘don’t get in our way; we will create a world that you can sell whatever you want to sell in’. And we kept being right about that” (Brand in Dammbeck, 2006). The idea of hacktivism as an anti-capitalistic practice, typical of many European hacker communities (as the community around <www.hackmeeting.org> demonstrates), has no real tradition in California. Many hackers in Europe were inspired by the libertarian ethos of American cyberculture, but they managed to adapt it radically to the local social and political contexts in which they found themselves, transforming it into something more “antagonistic”. In Italy, the practice-based interpretation of the concept of “hacktivism”, symbolised by the politically oriented publications of the Shake Editions, is a clear example of this. Instead, as has been previously noted when referring to Turner’s analysis of the Whole Earth Network, the activity of Stewart Brand, and the Whole Earth Catalog, the development of hacker culture and cyberculture in California deeply intertwined business entrepreneurship, social networking and libertarian anti-authoritarian values. Therefore, it is not surprising that Steve Jobs, co-founder and chief executive officer of Apple, defined the Whole Earth Catalog as “sort of like Google in paperback form, thirty-five years before Google came along: it was idealistic, and overflowing with neat tools and great notions”¹⁷. Lee Felsenstein recalls a similar approach describing the situation of hacker culture in California in the 1970s:

“It may turn into the question of ‘how did that structurally happen in the business culture’ rather than so much out of the business culture. The people who ran computer systems knew that their best workers were very often these underground type people who came and went and sometimes did unauthorized things, but it was all right with them. As the personal computer developed, it really broke out of the underground within two years with the introduction of the Apple II. And it became really clear there was some money to be made in all of this. I don’t know if I want to use the word...anarchists, because nobody really brought that word up. Anarchist in the US is a very close relationship to libertarian, and libertarianism in its extreme form is

¹⁷ From the Commencement by Steve Jobs, delivered on June 12, 2005: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html> (Retrieved July 6, 2011).

anarchism, which in many cases simply blocks out many questions that the left anarchists want to ask” (Felsenstein, in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

As Steven Levy describes in his article in *Wired Magazine* in May 2010, which investigates the future of hacker culture and its involvement with business development, many of the hackers who grew up between MIT in Boston and the Homebrew Computer Club in Silicon Valley have become entrepreneurs who have gone on to found IT corporations, such as Bill Gates and Steve Wozniak to name but the most obvious. Many more are still working independently in the field, and others are working for big companies, like Andy Hertzfeld, the first designer of the Macintosh operating system, who since 2005 has been working at Google and has been the key designer of Google+, the new social network by Google (announced on June 28, 2011). The presence of Google in California has quite an influence on the local hacker crowd, and many IT start-ups aspire to be bought by it. In California, Google is not identified solely in terms of the search engine and its other web services: it has become a sort of technological connector. While many hackers see Google as a symbol of centralising power (one of the main tenets of the book *Open non è free* by the Italian collective Ippolita), working at Google is an ambition for many hackers in California. Google tends to attract many of the hackers in the area, not only by organising the Summer of Code every year (<http://code.google.com/soc>), an event which brings together a recruitment pool of programmers and geeks, but also by sponsoring emerging hackerspaces.

This has been the case for the Hacker Dojo (<http://wiki.hackerdojo.com>) the hackerspace started in Mountain View in the fall of 2009, which, from the outset, was financially supported by Google and Microsoft. This is not a contradiction according to Lee Felstenstein, nominated “sensei” of Hacker Dojo from the outset. Felstenstein argues:

“First of all, that support does not come with control, and the people involved are very sensitive to that. Hacker Dojo won’t work if it is perceived that they are following any instructions from Google or Microsoft, or if there is any restriction on activity. Google and Microsoft know this

also, they're not unintelligent. So it is to their advantage... they are really not giving a lot of money, and I would hope that it doesn't evolve in that direction, that we can make the dues nothing if we just get all our money from Microsoft" (Felsenstein in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

It is interesting to investigate the perspective adopted by the newborn hackers labs (which for some years have been called 'hackerspaces' and organise themselves on wiki: <http://hackerspaces.org>) so as to understand the goals of the younger hacker generation. In Mountain View, the Hacker Dojo is seen as an opportunity for self-training and sharing, but also as a business incubator. As with many newborn European hackerspaces, it is more of a practice-based technology club than a politically oriented collective platform of hacktivists, and the fee for being a member of Hacker Dojo is \$100 per month. According to Felsenstein, a hacker is a person who upholds the principles of sharing, and the open dissemination of information, but also one who actively seeks to innovate in the field of information technology, while creating products of ingenuity to engage a wider public. The fact that Web 2.0 companies are using the rhetoric of hacker culture and hacker practices (such as openness, Do It Yourself, social networking, etc.) to generate business at the corporate level is an obvious consequence of this. According to Felsenstein, "hacking is to make a better tool", and, for example, Facebook is a tool that allows users to get in contact with people. He argues: "I don't resent the fact that Facebook has found a way to make some money from the information I'm putting in. To me, that's a pretty good exchange. When the limitations that come with the use of their tool begin to be a problem to me, I'm going to start looking around to see where I can get something that doesn't do that" (Felsenstein in Bazzichelli, 2009b). This attitude is clearly related to the general hacker aversion towards "hegemony" that has been described previously, as well as the idea that anti-hegemonic and libertarian values and business might often coincide.

A more similar approach to the radical idea of hacking as a political and communitarian practice adopted by some European collectives lies at the root of NoiseBridge (www.noisebridge.net), a hackerspace in the Mission district of San Francisco. Jacob Appelbaum, co-founder of NoiseBridge, co-developer of Tor Project (www.torproject.org), and recently known for representing Wikileaks at the 2010 Hope

conference, argues that NoiseBridge was largely inspired by European net culture and hacktivism, such as the experiences of C-Base and Chaos Computer Club in Berlin, MAMA in Zagreb, Metalab and Monochrom in Vienna, and ASCII in Amsterdam. Therefore, while many European hackers during the Eighties and Nineties were inspired by the techno-utopias of the American cyberculture, nowadays many young hackers in the US are inspired by the European communitarian approach to technology as evidenced by some hacker and activists groups active in the last decade. As Jacob Appelbaum points out:

“It’s a mimetic feedback loop. I was inspired by MIT and by the men and women in Silicon Valley, but I also saw where a lot of that went. [...] Some people, like in the Douglas Copeland book *Microserfs*, poured their heart into everything in order to try and become fabulously rich, only to find out that is not what happens for everyone. I saw that wasn’t really sustainable, because it was directly tied towards the desire of becoming a company that Google buys, almost always, and while I respect that, it’s not what I wanted to do and it’s not what I wanted to see. [...] I saw in Europe people weren’t working towards becoming millionaires per se, they were working on improving their own communities and on improving their own lives, and writing software that was really relevant. It was like people who were carpenters for the sake of building their chair for their home. They became great carpenters and they built amazing chairs and everyone had different furniture that they’d all built. [...] That was really inspirational, so it was a combination of growing up on the West Coast, and knowing about the MIT hackers and knowing that not everyone can go to MIT, because that’s not necessarily accessible, and then seeing how that affected Europe, and seeing a lot of the leftist social movements really coming together to form cohesive communities” (Appelbaum, in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

The NoiseBridge hackerspace was created as a context for sharing knowledge and tools, and a combination between communitarian and anarchic approaches. As we can read on the website of the

hackerspace, the community of members share an ethics of *sudo-leadership* ('sudo' as in the Linux command that allows an ordinary user to become root). This means that each member of NoiseBridge can propose an activity and an event, as well as decide to carry it out, without necessarily waiting for the consensus of others. However, Jacob Appelbaum argues that the communitarian aspect was very important in the creation of NoiseBridge, and the principle of *sudo-leadership* did not clash with the idea of "the solidarity, the sharing and the fact that there was a product that everyone could use as a result of their labour" (Jacob Appelbaum, in Bazzichelli, 2009b). NoiseBridge is based on "a set of cohesive social values" which contribute to the community. For example, as soon as people become members, they get the keys to the building, to "feel the real responsibility" and "to be passionate about the values of the community".

One of the goals of NoiseBridge is to bring people together; therefore it works as a social network, which brings many other local projects into the fold. For example, when I was visiting the space, Arse Elektronika, the festival organised by the artist group Monochrom that combines hackers and experts of technology, sexual culture, and pornography (www.ars-elektronika.org), held some initiatives in the space. The same happened with an edition of Dorkbot San Francisco, the initiative founded by Karen Marcelo, where geeks meet about once a month to present their projects (<http://dorkbot.org/dorkbotsf>). In San Francisco, there is a network of initiatives and people which to some degree is very similar to that seen in European net culture. However, it is interesting that many of its members manage to sustain themselves through their networking activity, which becomes a small-scale business, such as the Laughing Squid web hosting and blog managed by Scott Beale (<http://laughingsquid.com>), which works as a cultural and technological hub for many artists and hackers in the Bay Area. This network also includes the active presence of well-known personalities who managed to engage in critical thinking and radical practices since the end of the Seventies, such as the independent publishing house Re/Search by V. Vale (<http://researchpubs.com>) and some islands of creativity in which technological experimentation are combined with artistic research, such as can be seen at the Survival Research Laboratories, founded by Mark Pauline (<http://srl.org>), and the art and activist space The LAB (www.thelab.org). And of course, the festival Burning Man and its artistic roots play a central role in

the creation of a common imagination for many members of those groups. All these experiences are deeply intertwined: for example, Scott Beale is involved in the SantaCon community¹⁸, and Laughing Squid hosts the SantaCon website. Or that Re/Search published a book on Burning Man, and the anthologies of Arse-Ekectronika. Or that Karen Marcelo is not only the founder of Dorkbot San Francisco, but she is also an active member of Survival Research Laboratories.

Another interesting aspect of such a physical social network in the Bay Area is the connection of hacker culture with pornography. This mutual intersection of sex and technology, as symbolised by the activities of the Arse-Elektronika festival, which the Austrian group Monochrom started in 2008 in San Francisco, is something that characterises much of the approach to technology for some of the younger hackers in the area. For example, two members of NoiseBridge, Ani Niow and Alex Peake, constructed respectively a steampunk vibrator and a tactical corset. Jacob Appelbaum, and some other local hackers had previously worked for a company named Kink.com, which specialises in B.D.S.M., hardcore sex, bondage and fetish porn, featuring kinky and sex videos of bondage, lesbian wrestling, slave training, sex machines, etc. The business logic of Kink.com, based in the State Armory and Arsenal in San Francisco, is a perfect example of the encounter between disruption, business and communitarian ethos as described in the article *A Disciplined Business* by Jon Mooallem, published in the New York Times (April 2007). Kink.com's founder, Peter Acworth, with a PhD in finance from Columbia University, managed to create a community of employees who work applying the values of B.D.S.M., which is usually a highly ethical practice, and one which lays an emphasis on neither partner being hurt, even if superficially the opposite would seem to be the case. As Mooallem writes:

“[Acworth] describes the company as having a certain social mission. Too often, he told me, B.D.S.M. is conflated with rape or abuse. He realized early on that building a respectable company devoted to the fetish could help ‘demystify’ it. People who felt conflicted about their kinkiness, as he once

¹⁸ He is also the author of the documentary “You’d Better Watch Out: Portland Santacon ’96”, chronicling the Portland Santacon ’96, hosted by The Portland Cacophony Society.

had, ‘would realize they’re not alone and, in fact, that there’s a big world of people that are into this stuff and that it can be done in a safe and respectful way. Loving partners can do this to each other.’ Kink’s required pre- and post-scene interviews, [...] are meant to break the fourth wall, assuring audiences that, as in real-life B.D.S.M. play, everything is negotiated in advance and rooted in a certain etiquette and trust — that everyone is friends” (Mooallem, 2007, unpag.).

When Kink.com moved into the State Armory, the residents of the Mission District protested in front of the building. In response, the residents were invited inside to see how the business and the shoots worked, in keeping with Acworth’s intention of making “the Armory’s two-foot-thick walls as transparent as possible – and B.D.S.M. along with it” (*ibidem*). Jacob Appelbaum, who worked in the company running the network and computer system, points out the innovative aspect of the business, which is connected with technology entrepreneurship, networking models and radical sexual imagery:

“Kink.com is the mother ship where they have a list of different websites, and they are related to the different webmasters, who are the masters of their domain and their domains are related to the different things that are happening there. For example, one of the other sites is called Fuckingmachines.com which is run by a totally awesome webmaster who has designed different custom robots and machines. People have sex with those machines, and in fact they ‘take the man out of the machine’, so to speak. In some cases there’s still a phallus, but in others there is a chainsaw where the bits have been replaced with latex tongues. It’s also changing some of the paradigms for sex and pleasure” (Appelbaum, in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

At the same time, for Jacob Appelbaum, working at Kink.com was a means of seeing the relationship between hacking and sex culture as “participating, as opposed to simply consuming. [...] I was participating in all these different events because they were my own interests and so we were all working on driving them forwards” (*ibidem*). The idea of active and conscious participation is an established value

among hackers worldwide. In the case of Kink.com, it became the practice of pornography and business. The entrepreneurial attitude blends with the ethos of “understanding and de-mystification”, which might also be considered part of the ethics of some hackers. What emerged from my interviews in San Francisco and Silicon Valley is that the hacker culture in California is very fragmented, each group being a microcosm of a wider network. There are hackers who come from a countercultural background and run dotcoms, and there are hackers who still refuse to be part of the market and try to shun big business. However, something common to all is a general refutation of the concept of “political”, because “everything political tends towards secrecy, hierarchy and privilege”, as V. Vale pointed out in our interview, in which he argued that more emphasis is placed on cultural revolutions and anti-authoritarian practices than political ones:

“The best of hacker culture is to satirize and lampoon and attack the authoritarian parallel official culture of corporate and government websites. I love that, and I love these people who have managed to penetrate huge corporate websites. Some of them are criminals. I don’t approve of that. They have stolen and wrecked a lot of people’s lives by stealing all their identities and visa cards and committed crimes just for purely selfish, profit-making motives. I’m not in favor of that. But I am in favor of taking down all authoritarianism, wherever it shows its pyramid-shaped head” (V. Vale, in Bazzichelli, 2009b).

The question once again is how does the tension between anti-hegemony, anti-authoritarianism and collectiveness express itself? And how does this relate to the business of social networking in contemporary digital culture? The previous examples demonstrated that artistic and hacker projects focusing on networking contribute to redefining the concept of business through immanent practices. The entrepreneurs, hackers and artists addressed in this chapter tend to work inside the economic systems and the logic of these systems in order to generate disruptive innovation. They devise different ways of dealing with such systems, and adopt different models to express their attitude towards business, whether this be positive or negative.

These artistic and hacker practices are transforming the meaning of business as well, with the methods of dealing with business and political criticism becoming “plural”, both in the US and in Europe. Disruption becomes a concept that can be analysed from a multi-angle perspective.

By building up a distributed constellation of practices and models of networking, my goal is to emphasise possible methodologies of being disruptive, exposing contradictions and incongruities, and stressing multiple interferences rather than oppositional conflicts. In the next chapter, I will investigate the practices of hackers, activists and artists who create interventions in the business field of social networking and Web 2.0, where disruption becomes a political objective and an artistic strategy, to work within the logic of a network economy.



5 THE ART OF DISRUPTIVE BUSINESS

5.1 *Rethinking Criticism*

In the previous chapters I focused on the tensions between the cooptation of networking practices and hacker values by the social media business as well as disruption as a form of business, which adopts a libertarian ethos towards innovating forms of technology and social communication. Furthermore, I demonstrated how disruption is recursive, generating an intertwined phenomenon of consolidation and rebellion, where institutionalised systems create new rhetorical infrastructures of networking and new forms of sociability, and social networks work to disassemble hierarchical systems by creating new modes of business logic based on flexibility and sharing models to acquire revenues. In this chapter I will show how, since the emergence of the Avant-gardes, critical art and disruptive business have shown clear signs of interconnection. I will develop the concept of disrupting business as a form of artistic and hacktivist intervention within the business field of Web 2.0, where artists and activists, conscious of the pervasive influence of flexible and immaterial economical models in our daily life, react strategically and playfully from within these business systems. This chapter will suggest possible strategies for artistic actions, as a result of framing open contradictions without wanting to resolve them through an encompassing synthesis, but leaving the incongruities and paradoxes open to be experimented with.

The concept of *the Art of Disruptive Business* is a result of an investigation I have been conducting since last year within a research group at the Digital Aesthetics Research Centre of Aarhus University. I will refer to artistic and hacktivist practices which were attempts to hack the market of social media and Web 2.0 from within or which

started using its business logic as a means of causing disruption. I aim to answer the following principal question: is it possible to respond critically to business without either being co-opted by it or refusing to engage with it altogether? How can the “business machine” be disrupted while at the same time producing business innovation and critical interventions?

In the first chapter, I focused on the phenomenon of crystallisation which tends to embrace disruption and make it a form of stasis. Analysing the tension between the contemporary financial economy and morphogenesis, I addressed the theoretical perspectives on this subject as seen by Franco Berardi, Alessandro Sarti and Claudia Mongini. By linking those reflections with Walter Benjamin’s concept of “dialectical image” and its historico-philosophical implications, I analysed which paradigms might emerge from a petrified asset of consumption, thereby aiming to discover its holes and voids, as well as exposing the “bugs in the system”. Benjamin’s dialectical image served as an inspiration towards visualising a dialectic in which oppositions coexist, and towards conceptualising a mutual convergence of business logic, networking strategies and hacktivist interventions. Adopting such a dialectical perspective, a progressive conflict of negations leaves spaces for an intertwined network of reciprocal feedbacks, which occur simultaneously: a dialectical model of Both/And supplants that of Either/Or, quoting Marshall Berman once again (Berman, 1983, p. 24). Therefore, as Fred Turner points out, the analysis of “layering”, more than that of cooptation becomes a possible model for understanding social change.

The social and political change comes from the inside, by performing within the system and finding its contradictions and the bugs in the machine, or by using its own logic to transform it. Using business logic to criticise business logic, hackers, artists and activists might create both disruption and innovation at the same time. Disrupting the scheme of oppositional conflicts, the challenge becomes to create paradoxes and tricks, with the protagonists acting as chameleons to absorb the instances of the system and, by being able to find the system’s weaknesses, turning such weaknesses around to produce innovative perspectives and critical interventions. Thus, the aim is to create disruption by creating innovation. Morphogenesis is born of recombinant actions while performing within the system.

Similarly, performing *both* disruption *and* innovation means simulating the logic of the contemporary Web 2.0 business model, which works by adopting sharing values of networking and peer2peer collaboration and producing new networking strategies. However, in the case of the artistic and hacktivist interventions earlier analysed within this context, the difference is that innovation and disruption created by many hackers and artists does not follow capitalistic logic, and often works “out of the box” as a form of subversive action. Trying to disrupt a frozen forest of crystallisation (recalling Ballard’s novel *The Crystal Word*), such fluid molecules provoke disturbance and expose ambiguities rather than consolidate systems. Following a methodological perspective well delineated by Walter Benjamin, theory and praxis coexist in a semiotic approach, creating a continuous interplay. To perform what we might call *the art of disrupting business*, artists and activists become aware of the subject of their criticism by directly experiencing its logic, while at the same time generating disruptive innovation. In the era of immaterial economy and increasing flexibility, the act of responding with radical opposition no longer looks like an effective practice, while that of performing within the capitalist framework, keeping the dialectic open through coexisting oppositions, might become a possible path of exploration. Adopting a hacker’s strategy, hacktivists and artists take up the challenge of understanding how capitalism works, transforming it into a context for intervention.

In the essay *The Author as Producer* (1934), Walter Benjamin describes the role of the author through the figure of the engineer. Instead of reproducing the production apparatuses, the author/engineer is able to act within them, transforming the function of cultural production itself and opening it up to collective intervention. The figure of the engineer as described by Walter Benjamin is reminiscent of the attitude adopted by artists and hackers who, by engaging with the means of production, unveil unresolved contradictions in the field of art, and, more generally, in both the political and social systems. Referring to Walter Benjamin’s essay in their introduction to the book *Engineering Culture: On “The Author as (Digital) Producer”* (2005), Geoff Cox and Joasia Krysa point out: “Social change does not simply result from resistance to the existing set of conditions but from adapting and transforming the technical apparatus itself. [...] In the 1930s, under particular conditions and against the backdrop of fascism, a certain

political optimism made social change seem more possible. Can this optimism be maintained when technology operates in the service of capital in ever more insidious ways?” (Cox & Krysa, 2005, p. 7). What is therefore the function of cultural production “when activities of production, consumption and circulation operate through complex global networks served by information technologies”? (*ibidem* p. 7). Their answer is to refer to the activity of ‘engineering’, “to refer to technical *and* cultural activity, through the application of knowledge for the management, control and use of power. To act as an engineer in this sense, is to use power productively to bring about change and for public utility. In this, the traditional mechanical or electrical (hardware) engineer is evoked, but also the software engineer or software artist” (Cox & Krysa, 2005, pp. 7-8).

In his book *Imaginal Machines* (2009), drawing from autonomist and DIY politics, Stephen Shukaitis explores the condition of art and politics in contemporary capitalism, investigating the concept of constructing imaginal machines that create forms of autonomous organisation within the collective imagination. He argues that it is not possible to discuss subversion or construction as if they were external entities, or external enemies of capital. Being embedded with the capital is “part of the machinery” and we can’t avoid dealing with this when we think about critical practices. He points out that as the tension between social struggle and capitalist accumulation builds, “social struggles do not die, but rather are left in a zombified state of indeterminacy where they only desire to turn against themselves and eat the brain of the living labour of resistance” (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 26). Dynamics of resistance, or what he calls “the logic of incorporation”, are therefore necessary for understanding the course of capitalist development and he argues that “resistant aesthetics, anti-art and the avant-garde have greatly shaped the development of capitalism to the degree that it relies on rejuvenation through new images and imagery along with other forms of social energies” (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 24). His analysis of the avant-garde is quite peculiar in the context of understanding dynamics of cooptation, recuperation and innovation. He argues that what he defines as “the avant-garde ‘re//fusal’”, is “both as a refusal of a separated sphere for aesthetic activity and a re-fusing of new creative energies entering the social field” (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 27). By this, he means that the avant-gardes worked on the refusal to separate aesthetics from the social domain, incorporating everyday life

practices and objects into the artistic realm. More specifically, they refuted the previous idea of art, proposing anti-art as a new practical mode of aesthetics. But at the same time, as Shukaitis argues, they contributed to “the re-fusing and conjoining of aesthetics in the construction of an imaginal machine” (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 100). Therefore, by working against the separation of aesthetic production and politics from the body of society, they enabled their creativity to contribute to the development of social wealth, thereby becoming part of the artistic and social system. The idea of criticising the role of art as a practice separate from society, by trying to bring it into society, later became a specialised role within artistic institutions, and the anti-art aesthetic practice was reintegrated back into the art system. Innovative action therefore becomes a new logic of production within the social realm.

Therefore, as Shukaitis points out: “The problem is that in much the same way that the determining role of anti-capitalist resistance on capitalist development has often turned liberatory movements into mechanisms they turned against themselves, the compositional modes created within avant-garde arts have also been turned against themselves and zombified” (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 101). The challenge for Shukaitis becomes to keep alive an antagonism without closure, to avoid solidified patterns of circulation and the trap of ‘recuperation’ into fixed and constituted forms. As he writes, “Temporary autonomous zones are temporary for a reason, namely the realization that attempts to create such spaces will inevitably face repression and recuperation” (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 115).

However, there are three main points to consider when reflecting on the dynamic of cooptation and disruption in the framework of the avant-gardes. First, we should say that not all the avant-gardes are the same. There are differences between Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, or Fluxus, Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme, for example. Second, at the risk of generalising, we could say that Avant-garde represents a pushing of the boundaries regarding what is accepted as the norm or the status quo. Even the Fluxus artists, who clearly tried to open up the concept of art into collective practices, nevertheless remained part of the art system. They defined themselves as artists, they performed on stage, and they operated within the circuit of galleries, art dealers and art critics. Indeed, Simonetta Fadda, an Italian video artist who in the early phase of her artistic career worked together with the Fluxus

artist Giuseppe Chiari, remarks that, in any case, the figure of the artist as creator was central to the context of the Avant-gardes, and many everyday life objects, legitimised as art by the artist, became a paradoxical affirmation of the vision of artist's power over reality. "Only after, with the artistic practices of networking on the Internet, does the point of view become inverted: the goal is no longer to reinsert life into art, but to reinsert art into life" (Fadda in Bazzichelli, 2008, p. 30). The situation is therefore very different if we speak about the anti-art practices of punks, mail artists and hackers, for example. However, in these cases too, adopting radical points of view against the art system and against the culture industry in general does not always solve the tension between cooptation and innovation, as has previously been demonstrated.

My third point is that Avant-garde artists were aware of the fact that capitalism relies upon the production of new imagery and creativity. Some of them actually worked as part of the creative industry, and were conscious of being absorbed into the system. The Italian Futurists, of course, are a case in point, with their celebration of progress, war and machines. But this is even more the case with Pop Art and Andy Warhol's creative factory, from which it can be seen how the Avant-gardes can manage to produce disruptive innovation and develop new forms of business. In a famous quote, Andy Warhol states: "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art". Therefore, to say that Pop Art was co-opted by business is of course a paradox; we could instead say that at that time artists managed to turn business to their own advantage, and by innovating art, they innovated the art market (and not only that, considering the fortune that Pop Art had in mainstream culture).

A more obscure case of contamination between Avant-garde and business transpired with a project named Mass Observation, founded in the UK in 1937. It was a social research organisation whose aim was to observe and study common human behaviour, engaging a mass of observers (both on a paid and volunteer basis) to analyse and collect a wide range of everyday life practices into databases: between 1937 and 1945 hundreds of people mailed in regular reports of their (or other people's) daily lives, keeping diaries, taking photos and collecting data. The aspects of contemporary life under observance were quite singular: "behaviors of people at war memorials; shouts

and gestures of motorists; the aspidistra cult; anthropology of football pools; bathroom behavior; beards, armpits, eyebrows; anti-Semitism; distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke; funerals and undertakers; female taboos about eating; the private lives of midwives” (Crain, 2006. unpag.). The Mass Observation project, initiated with the idea of generating a nationwide effort to document the feelings of the populace after King Edward VIII’s abdication in 1936 so as to be able to marry the divorcée Wallis Simpson, was to “establish a new standard for literary realism and liberate poetry from the grasp of professionals” (Crain, 2006. unpag.).

Those founding Mass Observation included the surrealist poet, journalist and card-carrying Communist Charles Madge, filmmaker and surrealist painter Humphrey Jennings, and renegade anthropologist Tom Harrisson¹. The book resulting from the investigation, *May the Twelfth: Mass Observation Day Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers* aimed to subvert the Government’s efforts at image-making for the British population. It is a singular experiment where surrealist practices were embedded in questionnaire techniques and data-mining processes – and where clearly, serial production and automatism became functional to surveying the masses and to documenting the status quo. Mass Observation was therefore the result of the wish to subvert the bureaucracy of the Government by creating a kind of all-inclusive and collective bureaucracy: “Only mass observations can create mass science”, Madge wrote in a letter to the *New Statesman* published in January 1937. The genesis of Mass Observation through the activity of Charles Madge, who later put into practice the concept of “anthropology of ourselves”, is described by Caleb Crain as follows:

“Perhaps, by documenting events that shook public consciousness, one could make society aware of its unexamined myths and fantasies, and thus free to change them. For this kind of liberation, the French Surrealist André Breton had explained, ‘poetry must be created by everyone.’ So Madge had started to plan a movement that he called ‘Popular Poetry,’ to be spread by ‘Coincidence Clubs’ throughout Great Britain” (Crain, 2006, unpag.).

¹ Other collaborators were: the critic William Empson, the photographer Humphrey Spender, the collagist Julian Trevelyan, and the painters William Coldstream and Graham Bell.

The members of Mass Observation tried to disrupt the system from within, but at the same time, they managed to serve the system by providing a huge quantity of personal and public data. Their goal was to generate a movement of observers with the Surrealist aim of breaking society-wide repression. However, they did so by using surveillance techniques - that is, by using the same logic as the system they wanted to disrupt (some observers even worked sixteen hours a day). In the engine room of the surveillance machine were people working with art, as part of the Surrealist Avant-garde scene, confirming therefore the assumption that art, consumption and consumer culture have been intertwined since that time, at least in that particular group of data-collectors. From the outset, their focus was on the act of subverting Government policy, but in, 1939, after Britain declared war, the government hired the Mass Observation group to find out whether its posters were improving consensus and morale. Was the subversion of the system the real objective for this group of surrealist intellectuals? As Caleb Crain argues, Madge, Jennings, and Harrison “were raised with the expectation that they would live like gentlemen, only to discover that their inheritance was tiny to nonexistent, and that they would have to struggle to make a living” (Crain, 2006. unpag.). Mass Observation allowed them to write books of statistics and facts and sell them, producing documentaries and, during the war, providing data to the Government. In 1949, Mass Observation was incorporated as a market-research firm, merely focusing on the commercial habits of the country – but the main founders had already left the group, after some disagreements about the group’s policy.

The tension between disruptive innovation / disruptive business, as well as that between cooptation / social change, also generates in this case a mutual loop of interferences. Who is disrupting whom? Is art a means of criticism or a tool for consumption? My answer is that it is *both of them*: a means of criticism, *and* a tool for consumption. And to embrace this dialectical image as a practice would mean to start the game in a different playground.

5.2 *The Hack of Performing Inactivity*

Some artists and hackers in the past few years have already moved in the direction of making interventions into the art market, investigating interconnections between art, activism and business. Even if an encompassing criticism about business strategy through artistic practices is yet to be undertaken, since the emergence of Web 2.0 many art projects have produced critical intervention from within, both disrupting business logic and innovating within its constraints. Rather than simply refusing to compromise with the market, such artists and hackers have adopted a critical perspective towards the business of Web 2.0, exposing its contradictions and paradoxes and stressing the boundaries between art and the economy². Their main objective has become how to develop disruptive business models that do not simply follow capitalist logic, but try to act upon different layers where the two-way tension between business and its criticism becomes evident. Such networked disruption generates paradoxes and juxtapositions, as well as the coexistence of oppositions, where on the one hand we see business disrupting antagonism, and on the other, antagonism disrupting business. The same mutual tension comes to the fore when analysing the concept of innovation, where a disruption feedback loop connects economically oriented strategies with other strategies that are critical of politics. Such a tension, one that we could call “the disruption paradox”, is a starting point from which to critically analyse creative intersections between business and art in the field of hacktivism and social networking. Focusing on the paradoxes as a business model, and on cultural “Trojan horses” – or better said, social hacks – generated by artists and hackers, a strategy emerges for rethinking the role of art and activism in the network economy, and consequently, for framing the meaning of cooptation and recuperation today. In order to move forward we need to ask ourselves whether it makes sense today to speak about “cooptation”, when cooperation, sharing and networking has become the motto of Web 2.0 business. Facing the progressive commercialisation of sharing and networking

² For a more detailed list of art and hacktivist projects dealing with Web 2.0 and social media, see the Arnolfini Online Gallery “Antisocial Notworking” (<http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/projects/2008/antisocial>) curated by Geoff Cox, and the projects listed in the webliography of this research.

environments, what is the response from activists and artists working with and within networks?

As has been shown by net art, hacker art and other artistic practices over the past two decades, it is possible to work critically within network technologies - not only to investigate experimental modes of interaction, but also to highlight the possible “bugs within the system”. In recent years, within the context of net culture, art practice has aimed to devise different modalities of social interaction and media intervention, possibilities which have often not been explored by the commercial environment and by the market – and often anticipating them both. Covering a wide range of artistic practices, artists have worked on creating new experimental visions and a network mode of communication. By adopting both interpersonal exchanges as well as collaborative and cooperative work as art forms, their works became an incentive for technological development itself. Not surprisingly, the recruitment of artists, hackers and cultural producers is a business strategy of many companies working on disruptive innovation today: this is certainly the case for Google, and before that, for Diesel, but also for the Madison Avenue advertising agencies in New York in the 1950s. As has been demonstrated, disruptive innovation can take different paths, and often generates a bifurcation: on the one hand the market incorporates artists and hackers, while on the other, artists and hackers become aware of the game’s rules, deciding not simply to refute them, but to appropriate them and shake them up from within. Through this perspective emerges the idea of *disrupting business as an art practice*. By this concept I mean the ability to act artistically within the market so as to highlight its limitations while at the same time disrupting its rules from within. The critique of capitalism becomes a performative act, a hacking of its mechanisms, applying a hands-on perspective to the business framework. Hackers and artists investigate new scenarios, trying to understand how social media work, exposing paradoxes and generating unexpected consequences.

The interaction with social media usually begins when the user submits data and personal areas of professional interest and recreational preferences. The business logic implies the establishment of a private contract – often hidden in the Terms of Service (ToS) document – with the social network operators, who activate the service by obtaining private data. Leaving to one side the serious implications for an individual’s privacy, what that individual gets in return for delivering

their data is connectivity and the opportunity to share with others. But in recent years, artists and hackers using social media have come to understand that it is also possible to gain in return an additional opportunity to play with identity, with anonymity and with the very practice of hacking within the framework of Web 2.0. Some have taken up the “challenge”, showing that these platforms often have programming bugs which can be seized on and played with, thereby emphasizing the limits of these platforms, using them in ways they are not supposed to be used and without necessarily needing to enter them illegally. Many artistic projects within social networks are based on the possibility of experimenting with partner applications, developed externally to the central server, which can be implemented, independently offering the additional possibility of interaction with (and to) registered users. Playing with external applications becomes an area of research interest in social media, because this enables the analysis of the limitations as well as the bugs of the central systems, exposing the strategies of the company in question, which are not obvious to all users. Furthermore, they serve to highlight that our data and virtual identities become commodities which are then claimed as company property, often leading to legal battles between artists and social media corporations. Such interventions emphasize the price we pay for our presence in social networks, making us reflect on who owns our personal data if, once we place them on the servers of these platforms, we also lose the right to experiment with them.

With the gradual commercialisation of contexts for networking and sharing, the boundaries between artistic action and critical intervention have become more and more unstable. Legal suits against artists and activists have been taken out by corporations, and Cease & Desist letters have become increasingly frequent³. The art curator Simona

³ In the history of net art and hacktivism there have been abundant examples of legal conflicts between artist-activists and business during the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s: the Digital Hijack of the Altavista search engine as part of the campaign for the release of Kevin Mitnick implemented by the group Etoy (1996, www.hijack.org); the Toywar (1999, www.eto.com) between the Etoy group of net artists and the corporation eToys Inc., due to the www.eto.com domain, registered by the group of net artists; the conflict with the Vatican in 1998 by 0100101110101101.ORG for the domain www.vatican.va (www.0100101110101101.org/home/vaticano.org/story.html) and in 2003 with Nike for the Nike Ground project (www.0100101110101101.org/home/nikeground); the legal battles by *TMark for the project [GWBush.com](http://www.gwbush.com) (1998, <http://rtmark.com/gwbush>) and by The Yes Men with the corporation Dow Chemical, which has remained

Lodi, in 2010 designed the exhibition project “Cease & Desist Art: Yes, This is Illegal!” for the LPM, Live Performers Meeting, in Rome (May 27-29, 2010)⁴. The exhibition’s intention was to shed light on the tensions between legality and illegality of the practices of artists and hackers working within the network culture and economy. These practices and interventions extended beyond the terms dictated by institutions or corporations. As Simona Lodi points out:

“For some years now, it has become common among digital artists to focus on illegal art practices. Countless Cease & Desist letters have been sent out by companies to pirates, plagiarists, hackers and disturbers, which are shown off as trophies in exhibitions, web communities and mailing lists. Action artists promote controversial forms of art, using guerrilla tactics to protest against the fairness of copyright and intellectual property laws. Receiving a Cease & Desist letter has become the latest badge in championing the freedom to create in the Corporation Age. Any artist interested in taking part in the movement chooses a good lawyer rather than a good gallery owner” (Lodi, 2010, unpag.).

The project, featuring various artists in the net.art and net culture scene who had received Cease & Desist letters, or had been involved in a trial due to their art interventions, investigated the boundaries between art and freedom, the end of techno-utopias, and the way business has co-opted hacker values, open source initiatives, and web freedom. The Cease & Desist letter is “an order or request to halt an activity (cease) and not to take it up again later (desist); or else

in the history of net art as the BBC Bhopal Hoax (2004, www.babelgum.com/4024557/yes-men-the-legendary-bbc-bhopal-hoax.html); and the legal battle of Netstrike.it, after its censorship in 2001 for presumed computer-related crimes connected with the publishing of the web site (www.autonoomcentrum.nl/global/netstrike.htm). Furthermore, as a reflection on the intersection between corporate logic and art intervention playing with the boundaries between legal and illegal, the Italian artist Franca Formenti in 2005 decided to create an artwork with the prior legal agreement to publish an interview signed by the fashion house Gianfranco Ferrè (www.francaformenti3.org/Ferre).

⁴ The project can be seen on the LPM 2010 website: www.liveperformersmeeting.net/2010/en/thursday-27/cease-desist-art-yes-this-is-illegal/, retrieved on July 13, 2011.

face legal action”⁵. In its most basic form, it is an ordination, usually issuing forth from corporations or institutions, to stop actions online (or offline). But it can also be seen as a symbol of how the financial market works today, and a paradox of its inherent logic.

Franco Berardi, in the first section of his forthcoming book *After the Future* (2011), describes how the myth of the future has been connected with the myth of energy (and action) throughout the modern age, and especially during the past century. He sees in the Futurist avant-garde the final step to full modernity, where the exaltation of progress, machines and velocity has brought contemporary society to a state of acceleration, violence and psychic instability. Facing the present reality, where “futurism is without future”, he argues that “we have to invent something beyond the obsession of the future because the future is over” (F. Berardi, 2011, unpag.). In his analysis of the 20th century, “the century that trusted in the future”, Berardi retraces the history of the imagination of “the future”, from the faith in progress as shown by the Futurists to the punk declaration of its end. As Franco Berardi points out:

“In the last three decades of the century the *utopian imagination* was slowly overturned, and has been replaced by the *dystopian imagination*. For many reasons the year 1977 can be seen as a turning point: this was the year when the punk movement exploded, whose cry – ‘No Future’ – was a self-fulfilling prophecy that has slowly enveloped the world.

A *new utopia* appeared on the stage during the last decade of the century that trusted in the future: *cyberculture*, which has given way to the imagination of a global mind, hyper-connected and infinitely powerful. This *last utopia* ended in depression, after the sudden change of light that followed the 9/11 event, and it has finally produced a growing system of virtual life and actual death, of virtual knowledge and actual war. The artistic imagination, since that day, seems unable to escape the territory of fear and of despair. Will we ever find a path beyond the limits of the *Dystopian Kingdom*?” (F. B. Berardi, 2011, forthcoming)

⁵ From *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cease_and_desist, retrieved July 14.

The idea of constant growth has led to an accumulation of goods, to an exploitation of ordinary lives and to the dictatorship of the financial economy, causing many young people to claim “we want our future now!” (as the students fighting in Italy did in the demonstrations against the educational cuts). Is there any way out of this social *impasse*? Berardi suggests starting to live in a *post-futurist way*. People need to find time to slow down, to experience pleasure and to feel, to stop “the process of subjectivation in terms of resistance”, by “being themselves without protecting themselves”. He argues that “we do not need more things; we need more time and joy. The collective has created growth: now we need to enjoy it” (F. Berardi, 2011, unpag.). People need to discover their singularity, not by separating themselves from the world, but as part of the body of the world. If financial growth has led to the fracturing of time, work and activities, which were then recombined in the network machine of abstract *semio-production*, the means to counteract this tendency is to reconnect bodies and minds, enabling individuals to decelerate, gain an awareness of those around them, while at the same time finding their singular rhythm (experiencing what Berardi defines a *thera-poetic affect*).

Therefore, the answer for artists, hackers and activists, who are the subjectivities specifically being addressed here, cannot come about solely from violating rules, as not just activists but also business entrepreneurs have shown over the past few years⁶. As Berardi writes:

“The whole system precipitates into indeterminacy as all correspondences between symbol and referent, simulation and event, value and labor time no longer hold. But isn't this also what the avant-garde aspired to? Doesn't experimental art wish to sever the link between symbol and referent? In saying this, I am not accusing the avant-garde of being the cause of neoliberalist economic deregulation. Rather, I am suggesting that the anarchic utopia of the avant-garde was actualized and turned into its opposite the moment society internalised rules and capital was able to abdicate both

⁶ For example, at the one extreme are the anti-structural utopias imagined by the avant-gardes, and on the other the *deregulation* as launched by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Following the idea of a loosening up of the rules, antagonism and business can be seen to intertwine once again.

juridical law and political rationality to abandon itself to the seeming anarchy of internalised automatisms, which is actually the most rigid form of totalitarianism” (F. B. Berardi, 2011).

Therefore activism, as a strategy of resistance aimed at opposing indeterminacy, market deregulation and precarisation, increasingly comes to look like a blind alley: the idea of mobilising social energies, the whole idea of constant “activism” to compete and to dominate, has brought us towards the acceleration in the productivity of the social machine. Berardi asks himself: “Should we not free ourselves from the thirst for activism that fed the 20th century to the point of catastrophe and war? Shouldn’t we set ourselves free from the repeated and failed attempt to act for the liberation of human energies from the rule of capital? Isn’t the path towards the autonomy of the social from economic and military mobilisation only possible through a withdrawal into inactivity, silence, and passive sabotage?” (F. B. Berardi, 2011).

However, reflecting on the possible strategies that could be adopted, we are facing a bifurcation: on the one hand we have corporations repressing dissent and demanding a halt to critical actions, by sending C&D letters, confining people to the role of consumers, or better said, controlled prosumers; but on the other hand there is an excess of information, of automatism, and of the need for accumulation, all of which should make us stop producing, running faster and obsessively believing in a hyperactive future. But how to find conscious ways of slowing down without just doing what the corporations want: namely, becoming inactive and no longer bothering them? How can we perform disruptive practices which move beyond the 20th century myth of radical action – and which extend beyond exploitation?

Some works by artists dealing with such subjects have shown that one possible path is not to violate the rules, or merely refute them, but to appropriate them and expose their contradictions as well as their paradoxes. The strategy being investigated in the context of the present research is not to instigate resistance, but to instigate disruption. Activism thus takes a different course, its goal being to trick, to stage collaborative pranks, and to exacerbate the bugs in the system. *To do it for the lulz*, as the Anonymous entity would argue. Or by remembering that: “Intimate and direct dialogue is the monad

around which is built the philosophy of networking”, as the mail artist Vittore Baroni describes it. Activism and art can become a fulfilling game, where disruption does not mean necessarily to break rules, or to create ruptures, but to perform paradoxes, engaging directly and intimately with a group of peers.

If the corporations push for consumer inactivity, while at the same time, generating passive sabotage by being inactive is seen by artists and hackers as a possible means of exiting the networking machine, then performing inactivity as an artistic intervention might be seen as a way of breaking this paradox – by being a paradox itself. This is what two group of artists, Les Liens Invisibles, and the Moddr_Lab, decided to undertake, each by creating an art project dealing ironically with virtual suicide: *Seppukoo* (2009; www.seppukoo.com), and *Web 2.0 Suicide Machine* (2009; <http://suicidemachine.org>). *Seppukoo*, a project launched by Les Liens Invisibles in November 2009 at the Share Festival in Turin, created by Gionatan Quintini and Clemente Pestelli, in collaboration with the designer group ParcoDiYellowstone. It reflects on the commoditisation of virtual identities in social networks, and on the constant connectivity imposed by the informational society, as well as on the increasingly confused boundaries between virtual and real life since the emergence of Web 2.0. As we read on *Seppukoo*'s website: “our privacy, our profiles, our identities, our relationships, they are all - fake and/or real - entirely exploited for a sole purpose: to be sold as a product. But are those lives really worth to be experienced?”⁷. The artists noticed that once registered on Facebook, users could not erase their presence, and even if they decided to remove their profile, all personal data, photos, video and texts would remain archived in the Facebook servers. “Data is the Next Intel Inside”, states a popular Web 2.0 slogan, and people's data is a crucial resource for the networking machine.

Adapting the idea of *Seppuku*, the Japanese ritual suicide of “stomach-cutting”, to the context of Facebook, Les Liens Invisibles invited users to deactivate their Facebook account as a form of “liberation of the digital body from any identity constriction”. Taking inspiration from the ritual suicide of *Seppuku* as performed by Luther Blissett in 1999, when some subjectivities of the Luther Blissett Project decided to give up the multiple-use name they had been adopting over the previous

⁷ From *Seppukoo* website: www.seppukoo.com/about, retrieved July 15, 2011.

five years – choosing another status instead to incarnate themselves in other experiences – the Seppukoo virtual suicide symbolised the collective detachment from a mechanism designed to make profit by connecting people. “Seppukoo playfully attempts to subvert this mechanism disconnecting people from each other and transforming the individual suicide experience into an exciting ‘social’ experience” (www.seppukoo.com). Users were invited to instigate a viral suicide process so as to increase their score in the Seppukoo ranking system, by inducing their friends to commit virtual suicide as well: the more friends following the lead of the instigator in the virtual suicide, the more s/he would rise in the top 100 suicide rankings. A common phenomenon on Facebook is the feeling of deriving social status depending on how many friends people manage to collect. The artists wanted to reverse this mechanism, by seeing how many such ‘friends’ would be prepared to follow someone’s example by committing virtual suicide. With Seppukoo it was not important how many friends people had, but how many followed them into the act of committing Seppukoo. Therefore the goal was not to shut down the machine, but to instigate an ironical virtual process whereby people could reflect on the issues of exploitation, commoditisation, viral networking strategies and the exposing of the centralised policy of many Web 2.0 social networks. Indeed, after committing Seppukoo, users could reactivate their account simply by logging in again to Facebook and restoring their previous data. What was required to commit suicide by Seppukoo was apparently very simple: people just needed to log in, customise their Memorial Page, and enjoy the act of Seppukoo by clicking a button. In so doing, users were deactivating their own profiles, and the Seppukoo platform was sending each user’s last words to all Facebook friends. They could follow the viral chain of virtual suicides by also committing “seppukoo”, thereby making the “instigator” rise up the suicide chart.

However, the mechanism behind the user interface was what was really of interest for gaining an understanding of the disruptive implications of such a gesture. How did Seppukoo work? The virtual suicide service functioned through a specific script, which derived from the disruption of Facebook’s “Deactivate” system. In November 2009, it was not possible for users to voluntarily erase their profiles, which could only be “deactivated” – all data was still kept by the

company⁸. The only possible way of intervening in this process was to understand how the deactivation script worked, by simulating it and tricking it. As Guy McMusker, the spokesman of *Les Liens Invisibles*, argues: “This was for us a real hacking script, because we managed to hack Facebook from the inside; we did not build anything extra, but we managed to use something which was already inside Facebook. Facebook initiated a sort of war because it started constantly changing the mechanism of user deactivation, and the process became increasingly difficult” (Guy McMusker in Bazzichelli, 2011a, unpag., my translation)⁹. Furthermore, Guy McMusker describes the internal mechanism of Seppukoo:

“The process of virtual suicide started when the user logged in to the Seppukoo service, the same usually used to log in on Facebook. Through an open source software (Open Inviter) and a PHP library, Seppukoo built a simulated process of user navigation connected to that of Facebook, in which the user accessed the home page, logged in with his or her username and password, and moved on to the deactivate page. The deactivate page on Facebook shows your favourite friends, those who you will leave after turning off. We showed a similar page, where the users had to write their last words, which were sent to the user’s friends. Deactivation in Facebook is immediate, and to avoid automatism, it requires a *captcha*. In our case, the mechanism was the same, and the user was consciously committing virtual suicide. As managers of the system we received a notification from people as soon as they committed suicide, and we peaked at one suicide every twenty seconds during the heaviest traffic periods: Seppukoo had become viral” (Guy McMusker in Bazzichelli, 2011a, unpag., my translation)

Such a process of deactivation is crucial for Facebook, and to erase a personal profile usually takes a long time because the company does not want to lose people’s data. Furthermore, Facebook is very keen to

⁸ This is now possible, but the process of erasing personal profiles takes a long time, because Facebook needs to process it and approve it.

⁹ Bazzichelli, T. *Conversation with Guy McMusker / Les Liens Invisibles*. Rec March, 31, 2011, Pisa, 2011. Translation from Italian into English by the author.

protect itself from episodes of “phishing”: an attempt by an external application to acquire usernames, passwords and other sensitive information, and it adopts a totally restrictive policy on exporting data from its server. The company usually condemns any attempt to do so – as happened in the case of the service Power.com, a social-network aggregator that lets users access a number of social networks through one portal, which was sued by Facebook for allowing users to chat with Facebook friends though an external messaging client¹⁰. However, Facebook did not restrict its own users from accessing data provided by Google. The initial expansion of Facebook also arose due to the fact that it managed to retrieve contacts from Google Gmail, using the Open Inviter library to allow users to import data from Gmail accounts (the same library used by Les Liens Invisibles and also by MySpace, LinkedIn and many other services). On the contrary, Facebook does not allow anyone to use the same script to export data from its server. Initially Google did not complain, but eventually delivered its users who were trying to import Gmail contacts into Facebook a specific message:

“Hold on a second. Are you super sure you want to import your contact information for your friends into a service that won’t let you get it out?

Here’s the not-so-fine print. You have been directed to this page from a site that doesn’t allow you to re-export your data to other services, essentially locking up your contact data about your friends. So once you import your data there, you won’t be able to get it out. We think this is an important thing for you to know before you import your data there. Although we strongly disagree with this data protectionism, the choice is yours. Because, after all, you should have control over your data. Of course, you are always free to download your contacts using the export feature in Google Contacts. This public service announcement is brought to you on behalf of your friends in Google Contacts”¹¹.

¹⁰ To find out more, see the article by Erick Schonfeld “Power.com And Facebook Are Friends Again (Almost)” (January 7, 2009): <http://techcrunch.com/2009/01/07/power-com-and-facebook-are-friends-again-almost>, retrieved July 15, 2011.

¹¹ Gmail by Google: “Trap my contacts now”: www.google.com/mail/help/contacts_export_confirm.html, retrieved July 15, 2011.

Facebook maintains a very strict policy vis-a-vis its data, thereby making the company's rhetoric of openness and equal sharing of data sound like a paradox. Such battles against anyone attempting to force the company's technical infrastructure to become more open was also the reason why, in December 2009, Les Liens Invisibles received a Cease & Desist letter from Facebook, accusing them of exporting users' data without permission. In the case of Seppukoo, users were consciously performing suicide, but despite this, the members of LLI had to stop their actions (a real paradox, considering that the artists were promoting virtual suicide!). However, the artists decided they were not erasing any data, all of which had been submitted voluntarily. As Guy McMusker points out: "The log-ins of Facebook's users were being broadcast live from the Facebook server to Seppukoo, but only the session cookies were kept by us, and just for a limited period of time. We were deleting them on a daily basis and we had no interest in keeping any users' data. Similarly, Facebook could actually save the passwords of Gmail users if they wanted, and the same accusation made by Facebook about us might apply to them" (Guy McMusker in Bazzichelli, 2011, unpag., my translation).

Seppukoo was not merely parodying the idea of accumulating friends on Facebook; it was showing that platforms like Facebook are not as liberal as they may at first seem. The ownership of private data becomes a cause of virtual battles, and information a commodity to increase revenues. If a company manages to accumulate more data, investors are willing to pay more. As Guy McMusker argues, "On Facebook, you cannot impersonate anyone other than yourself. The network structure, instead of increasing democracy, might increase control mechanisms. Distributed interventions are difficult to track and to block, and people could take advantage in secretly manipulating minds, as a recent military US spy operation on social media has demonstrated"¹².

¹² The operation used software to create fake online identities in social media to spread pro-American propaganda ("Revealed: US spy operation that manipulates social media" written by Nick Fielding and Ian Cobain and published on guardian.co.uk on Thursday March 17, 2011: www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/mar/17/us-spy-operation-social-networks. Retrieved July 15, 2011).

A similar experience to that of Seppukoo happened to the Moddr_Lab group of artists, who created the project *Web 2.0 Suicide Machine*¹³. In this case, the reason for the virtual suicide was to allow users to permanently erase their profiles from Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and LinkedIn. The artists were pushing for a radical and ironical break from Web 2.0: “Liberate your newbie friends with a Web 2.0 suicide! This machine lets you delete all your energy sucking social-networking profiles, kill your fake virtual friends, and completely do away with your Web2.0 alterego. The machine is just a metaphor for the website which moddr is hosting; the belly of the beast where the web2.0 suicide scripts are maintained” (<http://suicidemachine.org>). Predictably, the consequence for the perpetrators of the Web 2.0 Suicide Machine was to receive a Cease & Desist letter from Facebook Inc. Facebook cited once again the issue of users’ privacy and terms of service related to the use of their data by external sources. But neither Web 2.0 Suicide Machine – nor Seppukoo – had in any way used personal data contrary to the will of users, who were completely aware of what was happening and were consciously deciding to commit virtual suicide. However, both art projects managed to expose the sensitive business strategies of Facebook and other social media, where the tension between control and openness comes to affect their competitiveness.

A recent anecdote in the San Francisco Chronicle reports that Facebook hired a major public relations firm, Burson-Marsteller, to plant negative stories about arch rival Google’s services, raising privacy concerns. For example, Google’s strategy of providing “social search results” was highlighted, which integrates Twitter updates from a person’s connections or data collected from sites like Facebook, MySpace and Yahoo into its public search results, when googling a person¹⁴. Specifically, the idea was to oppose the collection and use of information by Google that had been taken from people’s accounts on Facebook. Similarly, the above-mentioned message by Google, with the sarcastic title: “Trap my contacts now”, shows that tensions between the two companies in Silicon Valley are increasing. This battle

¹³ The people who created and developed the art project are listed on the *Web 2.0 Suicide Machine* website: <http://suicidemachine.org/#credits>.

¹⁴ From the article: “Facebook’s not-so-stealth campaign against Google”, by James Temple, San Francisco Chronicle May 13, 2011. Retrieved on July 18, 2011, from: www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/05/12/BU8M1JFIL8.DTL#ixzz1SRcl2w00.

over data ownership and public perception mirrors their contrasting modes of business logic as well.

However, analysing the matter from another perspective, such proprietary business logic can become an incentive for the creation of artistic interventions within social media, provoking unexpected consequences, and exposing the bugs and limits of the systems in which they operate. Creative intersections between business and art become an important territory for acknowledging how the business of social media works, introducing unexpected incongruities and provoking unusual feedback while disrupting the machine. The strategy of disrupting business becomes a model for artistic creation.

5.3 Activist Enterprises & Venture Communism

The recent conflicts between social media corporations and the above-mentioned examples of Seppukoo and Web 2.0 Suicide Machine show that the digital economy and subversive artistic practices can be fully interconnected. Such artistic interventions, working at the boundaries between the business of social media and its criticism, contribute to highlighting business logic and pervasive mechanisms of social control. If social media, networking strategies and the construction of virtual identities constitute the business framework of analysis, artistic interventions might lead to a progressive disruption of the meaning of common participation and of networking itself. How can we critically address the issues of networking and collaborative interventions when they have become a core business for many corporations? Artistic practices and interventions today face a tension: on the one hand they stress the right to exit the capitalist machine, arresting the chain of production, and getting involved instead in something more intimate and “real”; on the other hand, understanding that refusing to compromise with business might lead to a passive form of exploitation, they try to construct an alternative, virally adopting business strategies and disrupting business logic, mostly by ironic means. Being aware that there is no escape from consumption, exposing business paradoxes and contradictions might become a possible artistic strategy.

At the beginning of 2011, a Cease & Desist letter by Facebook Inc. reached another pair of artists: Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio. Alessandro Ludovico, the founder of Neural magazine, and Paolo Cirio, artist and programmer, had already been involved in producing artworks dealing with Web 2.0, subverting the corporate logic of production from within: *GWEI*, *Google Will Eat Itself* (2005, <http://gwei.org>), and *Amazon Noir* (2006, www.amazon-noir.com), created with the artist group Ubermorgen.com. Both projects used custom-programmed software to expose (and exploit) the inner mechanisms of online corporations, generating conceptual artworks to hack their marketing and economic strategy. This time the project adopted the name of *Face to Facebook* (2011, www.face-to-facebook.net), and its main target was Facebook. As with *Seppukoo* and *Web 2.0 Suicide Machine*, it managed to expose the strict policy of data control perpetuated by the social networking corporation, and the implications of this for privacy and users' rights. *Face to Facebook* was launched in February 2011 at the transmediale festival in Berlin as a clear provocation. It functioned by "Stealing one million Facebook profiles, filtering them with face-recognition software, and then, posting them on a custom-made dating website, sorted by their facial expressions characteristics" (from: www.face-to-facebook.net).

According to the artists, the custom-dating website "lovely-faces.com", was an attempt to free personal data "trapped by Facebook" (Cirio & Ludovico, 2011, p. 1). Of course, it was also an ironical attempt to disrupt Facebook's policy, but at the same time, also a way to expose the vulnerability of personal data in a social networking service. As Cirio and Ludovico state: "Our mission was to give all these virtual identities a new shared place to expose themselves freely, breaking Facebook's constraints and boring social rules. So we established a new website (lovely faces.com) giving them justice and granting them the possibility of soon being face to face with anybody who is attracted by their facial expression and related data" (*ibidem*, p. 1). Naturally a reaction from Facebook soon followed, in which the company asked Cirio and Ludovico to "give back the data" of the one million users, also asking them to remove the contents from Face-to-Facebook.net domain, and closing their personal Facebook accounts. Facebook assumed that the artists were violating the Facebook trademark, but the artists argued that the "stolen" data was publicly available, and Face-to-Facebook.net was actually just the

documentation project website. Consequently, after a warning by Perkins Coie, a law firm that represents many companies including Facebook, the artists put up a notice that Lovely-Faces.com was temporarily unavailable, adding a link to visit the *Face to Facebook* website for more information.

Face to Facebook forced the system to expose the lack of openness of social media platforms like Facebook and to denounce the fact that user data is “trapped in Facebook”, a denouncement similar to that emanating from Google. It also showed that it is relatively simple to manipulate users’ data in Facebook, and that such platforms are not at all safe – despite their rigid policy, external sources are able to intrude into their systems, giving a green light to marketing companies to carry on their data-analysis. Indeed, it is not impossible to collect people’s data from Facebook and Facebook’s terms of service require those who want to do so to apply for permission. However, I would argue that by disrupting Facebook’s business logic, *Face to Facebook* raises an interesting contradiction showing how business practices and hacktivism often intertwine in the contemporary networked society. As we read in a *Wired* article commenting on the intervention by Cirio and Ludovico:

“Moreover, it’s a bit funny hearing Facebook complain about scraping of personal data that is quasi-public. Mark Zuckerberg, the company’s founder, made his name at Harvard in 2003 by scraping the names and photos of fellow classmates off school servers to feed a system called FaceMash. With the photos, Zuckerberg created a controversial system that pitted one co-ed against another, by allowing others to vote on which one was better looking. So even if Facebook’s anticipated legal nasty gram makes its way to the duo, who seem to be based somewhere in Europe, they’ll have an excellent defense. ‘I learned it by watching you, Zuck’”(Singe, 2011, unpag.).

On the one hand, the *Face to Facebook* project opposes business logic, generating unexpected holes in the social media architecture and exposing the lack of safety of virtual data; on the other hand, the project replicates business logic, “scraping” personal data without permission, and making users vulnerable. It is not therefore surprising

that after the launch of the projects, the artists received fifty-six messages of concern from people asking to be removed from Lovely-faces, and also thirteen website partnership proposals (four of them coming from commercial dating websites). When I interviewed Paolo Cirio, expressing this paradox to him, he argued:

“Awareness-raising about the conditions of social oppression has no price and in the *Face to Facebook* project we came closer to reaching that goal. [...] I understand that *Face to Facebook* can be seen as a very controversial artwork and unfortunately in the art world as well there was someone who did not want to understand the importance of such a provocation. I associate such an attitude with those who complain about the occupation of train stations or highways during a demonstration. Actually I think that Facebook has become so widespread and used also by those who claim to be against it, that nobody really wants to take responsibility and become aware of his own behaviour, almost like we were talking about a social taboo. Finally it is really important that Lovely-Faces.com dating website contents were not indexed by Google. So the person who found his classmate, friend or even himself/herself, came from the context of the artistic project. And we removed all the people who requested to be taken out of our dating website. So, we didn't want to harm anyone, nor ruin marriages” (Cirio in Bazzichelli, 2011b, unpag.).

When I asked Paolo Cirio if *Face to Facebook* could be seen as a commercial operation, its logic differing little from that of a business company, pointing out that Cirio and Ludovico's scraping operation was paradoxically similar to the genesis of Facebook, he answered:

“Yes, it is true; most of the big firms' business is based on the goods and time of others. Exploitation of resources which someone else owns or produces at a lower price or even for free, just like in the case of the private social media platforms like Facebook. The *Face to Facebook* project was about a parody of the business world, just like in the *Drowning*

NYC project¹⁵. Language, practices and corporate interests were emphasised, almost by making fun of them. Although these operations may be seen as classic *détournement* of the language, or variations of this practice, in both projects there are important strategic and aesthetic innovations. In the case of *Face to Facebook*, custom software was the medium which turned information into a new form for a new contextualisation [...]. My audience are not so much those of the exhibition spaces, but specific targets I want to influence.” (Cirio in Bazzichelli, 2011b, unpag.)

Face to Facebook does not simply criticise exploitation by reproducing it, but evidences a crucial aspect inherent in contemporary business logic. The idea of liberating identities staged by the activist project coexists with the idea of emphasising what business does, creating a feedback loop between cooptation, innovation, and disruption. Therefore, more than exploitation, we are facing a coexistence of oppositions. From the activists’ perspective, liberating identities from the trap of centralised client-server applications is clearly a criticism of business; but for business enterprises, “stealing” user profiles and recombining them in a custom-data website is seen as a business opportunity to get technical innovation feedback. This would explain the business proposals received by the artists from potential business partners and, by validating the assumption that data has become the most important source of revenues, the sudden legal reaction of Facebook. *Face to Facebook* was a parody of business logic, but at the same time, a creative example of how to remodel such logic to create disruptive innovation.

However, there are different methodologies for creating disruption and often the meaning of disruption itself can differ depending on whether it is defined by business enterprises or by activists. Similarly, the term “business” often generates distinctions of belonging among artists, hackers and activists, depending on the individual’s personal artistic perspective or political leanings. I discussed the concept of “disruptive business” with Paolo Cirio after our interview for *Digimag*

¹⁵ *Drowning NYC* is a project of Recombinant Fiction by Paolo Cirio, as an attempt to weave a fictional story into the daily reality of the residents of Lower East Side Waterfront in Manhattan: www.drowning-nyc.net (note of the author).

in March 2011¹⁶, and he showed reservations about the concept of business, claiming that “with respect to the notion of business, I do not find my activity so much in this analysis...beyond the criticism of the language I can not see in my project many links with the market. As I wrote in the interview, I understand business as identified in private benefits/advantages, while in most of my works I am doing something for common people, and as the result of many personal sacrifices” (Paolo Cirio, personal communication, March 28, 2011, my translation).

I believe that this perspective is also derived from a common misconception of the term “business”, which usually has very negative connotations (especially in the Italian, but also in the wider European activist scene), while business in its etymology refers to an occupation, undertaken with both care and anxiety, and is not in itself derogatory or directly linked to capitalism¹⁷. In the context of this research, “disruptive business” has to be interpreted as a mutual tension between art, hacking and the business of social networking. Artists and hackers disrupt the social media business by introducing unexpected reactions and unusual feedback to acknowledge how business works, by analysing its mechanisms of production from within. Business entrepreneurs also disrupt business by providing new contexts of interactions and systems of collaboration, by introducing innovations that helps create a new market and value network – not only in the business of Web 2.0, but in the broader context of a “network economy”.

One contradiction emerging from the business analysis of web-based user services is that they are both an increasingly participatory culture and free exchange *and* they lead to pervasive forms of control. To be successful, a Web 2.0 company needs to create a centralised infrastructure where mechanisms of sharing and collaboration become the main source of revenue. The idea of being trapped in the World Wide Web and in desktop-based client-server technologies, as described by Dmytri Kleiner in *The Telekommunist Manifesto* (written between 2004 and 2010), introduces a new topology of networks where

¹⁶ Bazzichelli, T. “Paolo Cirio. Quando il furto diventa arte / When Stealing Becomes Art.” *Digimag*, Nr. 63 (2011).

¹⁷ Commonly, in the Italian context, business – as understood without recourse to translation – directly refers to management tasks and company entrepreneurship, while to use the word “market” (*mercato* in Italian), is often preferable and more “politically correct”.

users are monitored and controlled by creating social exchanges. The process of making the Web the primary online social platform, and the focal point for investments and business innovation, is provoking a deep transformation of networking systems at the expense of the more decentralised and distributed Internet. The potential of peer-to-peer systems has been replaced by the growth of centralised client-server technologies, based on community-created value as a source of profits for platform-owners and investors. Usenet, Internet email, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and other distributed systems are becoming obsolete for many users, while Cloud computing, provided mainly by Google and Amazon, is the next trend¹⁸. However, if we consider that networking systems and methodologies of decentralisation have been key to the rise of cyberculture (and even before, if we consider the philosophy of the laboratories of World War II described by Fred Turner), and that business and counterculture have been intertwined for a long time, such commercialisation of networking platforms is not surprising. It is an inherent phenomenon that had already started in the Sixties, which also shows that Internet- and business development are two sides of the same coin.

We are therefore not merely facing a progressive process of exploitation, which has led from a free Internet to a system of capitalist financing, because the Internet has been connected with industrial, military and business development since its inception. However, over the past decades, there was still space for the evolution of a set of networking practices which provoked criticism and established the freedom of speech and anti-authoritarian values. The question is whether we can still imagine a way of creating distributed networking practices today, rather than merely following capitalist logic, or if we can imagine a business logic that does not lead to a private appropriation of community-created value. In the *Telekommunist Manifesto* (2010), Dmytri Kleiner introduces the concept and practice of Venture Communism, which he coined in 2001. He writes: “An alternative to venture capitalism needs to provide a means of acquiring and efficiently allocating the collectively owned material wealth

¹⁸ Even if many group are still using IRC and Usenet as a source of sharing: for example the newborn Anonymous entity is mainly coordinated through IRC, and the newsgroup *alt.slack* is still the main social forum for the Church of the SubGenius, while alternative porn communities have long since been using Usenet to share photos, texts and images, and continue to do so.

required to build free networks and free societies. We need venture communism, a form of struggle against the continued expansion of property-based capitalism, a model for worker self-organization inspired by the topology of peer-to-peer networks and the historical pastoral commons” (Kleiner, 2010, p. 8).

Venture capitalism is the model of reproduction for capitalism; venture communism is the model of creation for a peer-to-peer social commons. The former creates mechanisms for sharing and collaboration that are based on property; the latter generates co-operatives, P2P and commons-based systems owned by everybody and nobody. According to Kleiner, many open source projects have led to key innovations in the development of Web 2.0, such as Linux, Apache, PHP, Ruby, Python, etc. (Kleiner, 2010, p. 18). But with Web 2.0 only a few companies control the data sources generated by the users, and it is thanks to such unpaid collective work that those companies become richer. Venture communism allows the community to own what it creates and to redistribute it accordingly, using the great peer-to-peer potential of network systems, where the source of wealth is no longer venture capital. As Kleiner argues: “We must start by preventing property owners from turning our productivity into their accumulated wealth. The wealth they use to impose restriction on our freedoms is the wealth they have taken from us. Without us they would have no source of wealth” (Kleiner, 2010, p. 20).

The change lies not in the concept of networking topology, which is already part of capitalist business, but a modality of working together and sharing across national borders, which is able to create a distributed commons. “For peer production to have any effect on general material wealth it has to operate within the context of an overall system of goods and services, where the physical means of production and the virtual means of production are both available in the commons for peer production” (Kleiner, 2010, p. 21). The idea of peer production is distinct both from capitalism and from collectivist modes of production, which can both be exploitive, and it disrupts centralised methods of production based on the existence of an elite of owners:

“A community of peer producers can grow without developing layers of coordination because they are self-organising and produce independently, and as such they do

not need any layers of management other than what is needed for the provision of the common stock of productive assets. [...] Thus what is needed for peer production to be able to incorporate material goods into the common stock is a system for allocating material assets among the independent peers, which imposes only a minimal coordination burden. Venture communism is such a way” (Kleiner, 2010, p. 23).

Extending those forms of material production into the sphere of creating immaterial value (such as free software, for example), venture communism becomes a model for independent producers to share a common stock of productive assets. The model is based on the corporate form of the “venture commune”, which works by sharing material property on the basis of a distributed network of independent peer producers who are geographically distributed. In the community of peer producers, ownership can only be acquired by contribution of labour, not property, while the venture commune does not coordinate production, but acquires and allocates material assets among the members. “The main activities of the venture commune [...] do not impose a high level of coordination and, just like the computer networks that manage the allocation of immaterial goods, are activities that are well suited for computerized automation. Many venture communes could exist, and as they become interrelated, merge together forming larger, and more stable and sustainable communities of commons-based producers” (Kleiner, 2010, p. 24).

This proposal, which converts the vision of class conflict into a model for workers’ self-organisation, is also a creative adaptation of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels into a Manifesto for a networked society. In *The Manifesto of the Telekommunisten Network*, Dmytri Kleiner rewrites part of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), transforming the more hegemonic assumptions (such as the proletariat as the ruling class, the political supremacy of the proletariat, or the centralisation of credit into the hands of the state) into a distributed, decentralised and commons-based vision of a networked asset based on an alternative economy to capitalism. However, as the author writes, such a vision should not automatically be interpreted as a new dogma, but as a beginning or an introduction for new imaginations. By writing “Venture communism should not be understood as a proposal for

a new kind of society” but as “an organizational form with which to engage in social struggle” (*ibidem*, p. 25), Dmytri Kleiner also avoids the risk of falling into a totalitarian vision of society by paradoxically proposing a decentralised one. In fact, the idea of proposing a comprehensive vision of society, which actually erases the possibility of any alternative, might lead to the risk of replicating competitiveness and power conflicts, and therefore capitalistic values. If a decentralised model is to be imagined, it must be plural, and must probably work initially on a micro scale.

Such an idea for a decentralised organisational form is what the Telekommunisten collective, founded by Dmytri Kleiner and active in Berlin since 2005, is putting into practice by creating technologies and network services, where technical infrastructures are shared and distributed: *Dialstation* (2006, www.dialstation.com) a prepaid service which enables cheap international calls to be made from any telephone; *For Miss Information, Call* (2008, http://hackfemeast.org/web/?page_id=72), a playful and interactive city-scale experiment arising from miscommunication; *deadSwap* (2009, www.deadswap.net), a clandestine offline file sharing system; and *Thimbl* (2010, www.thimbl.net), a free, open source, distributed micro-blogging platform.

In the case of Thimbl, the metaphor of venture Communism as a new model for worker’s self-organisation is transferred into a technical infrastructure by creating a distributed platform to enable social connections. It is a decentralised web-based client alternative to Twitter or identi.ca, integrating classic Internet technologies into the Open Web (therefore, going beyond the limited vision of Internet as merely the Web). Thimbl is based on the Finger User Information protocol, which was originally developed in 1970 and is supported by all server platforms and available in each server’s software repository. This is a genuine alternative to Twitter by dint of the fact that with Thimbl it is not necessary to sign up, and it can run on any server on the Internet, therefore creating a model for a decentralised and self-organised social networking architecture, which is distributed, with no need to incorporate users’ data to generate revenues¹⁹.

On the Thimbl website we read: “The most significant challenge the open web will need to overcome is not technical, it is political” (www.thimbl.net).

¹⁹ The functionality of Thimbl is well described in the Thimbl presentation, and in the Thimbl video, respectively at: www.thimbl.net/presentation.html, and <http://vimeo.com/18749871>.

thimbl.net). If capitalism is now an integral part of our daily lives and we are at work before going to the office, as Christian Marazzi describes in *Il posto dei calzini: La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti sulla politica* (1999, p. 76)²⁰, to imagine forms of disruptive business means to imagine forms of innovation that affect many areas of our everyday life. Business logic today is versatile and infinitely adaptable. Technological development, interpersonal relationships and desire are all intertwined. Technologies are linguistic machines which contribute to a redefinition of the assets of production, creating a process whereby communication and productivity are connected in a mutual feedback loop²¹.

In this research the concept of the *Art of Disruptive Business* must be interpreted beyond categorical definitions. “Disruption” implies a multi-angled perspective and is a two-way process, where business and the antagonism of business intertwine, as we have seen in the previous chapters. The notion of disruptive business is useful for reflecting on different modalities of generating criticism, shedding light on contradictions and ambiguities *both* in capitalistic logics *and* in artistic and hacktivist strategies, while rethinking oppositional practices in the context of social networking. Therefore, in the framework of this analysis “business” is neither analysed through classical business school methodologies, nor seen as positive or negative, but is a means for working consciously on political practices – and for raising questions on art and media criticism. The *Art of Disruptive Business* is therefore a multi-layered concept which highlights the current transformations – and contradictions – inherent *both* in the fields of art and technology *and* in that of the network economy.

Rethinking strategies and modalities of opposition implies that new forms of interventions and political awareness should be proposed without replicating the capitalistic logic of competitiveness and power conflicts, but rather by playing with them and disrupting them.

²⁰ Forthcoming in English in August 2011, as: *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, Los Angeles. Semiotext(e).

²¹ As Christian Marazzi writes: “Nella valutazione/misurazione del capitale intellettuale delle imprese, infatti, l’idea centrale è che il sapere è al contempo materiale intellettuale e relazionale, contenuto e cultura” (Marazzi, 1999, p. 76). English translation by the author: “In the evaluation of intellectual capital by business companies, indeed, the central idea is that knowledge is both relational and intellectual material; it is both content and culture”.

The challenge is to try to alter business logic, following a process of distributed morphogenesis. The vision of a distributed network of practices, thoughts and relationships can only be fragmented, and based on multiple layers of imagination. Holes in the system are everywhere, ready to be performed and disrupted by the smiths of the networked society.

5.4 Future Directions

At this present time²², while inside the Internet bubble 2.0, analysing the topology and the effects of artistic and hacktivist practices in decentralised social networks implies a reflection on power structures, business methodologies as well as on the relationship between art and economy. The social media and social networking phenomenon brings about contradictions and ambiguities, where the progressive involvement of users in the production process generates new possibilities of peer interaction, but also of hierarchical control. It becomes necessary to rethink concepts and dichotomies such as innovation and disruption, political and commercial, cooptation and opposition, users and producers, as a two-way disruption. The research subject of social networking is constantly transforming, and requires both a theoretical and empirical involvement of researchers and artists, theoreticians and practitioners before it can be fully

²² I wrote the reflections and directions described in this paragraph before handing in my dissertation, at the end of August 2011. Since September 2011, after completing my PhD degree, the framework of my research has been developed within the project “reSource transmedial culture berlin”, working as programme curator at transmediale festival in Berlin. This practice-based research activity was initially funded by a four-month research grant (September-December, 2011) awarded by the Aarhus University Research Foundation (AUFF), and since July 2012 by the Institute for Culture and Aesthetics of Digital Media, (Institut für Kultur und Ästhetik Digitaler Medien /ICAM), Faculty of Culture Studies, at Leuphana University of Lüneburg. In April 2012 I became a Postdoc researcher at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg, as part of the Innovation Incubator/ Centre for Digital Cultures (Art and Civic Media cluster). In July 2012 my contract extended to the Institute for Culture and Aesthetics of Digital Media, where I have been working within the framework Transmedial Culture – A Practice-Based Research Project of Networking Art and Culture, as a cooperation project between Leuphana University of Lüneburg and the transmediale festival.

understood. In the course of writing this manuscript, groups and activities have been constantly reshaping, and often case studies have been developing, transforming, multiplying and moving elsewhere²³. Flexibility, direct participation and constant updating have become part of my research methodology. It was necessary to adopt a similar attitude towards the literature consulted as a theoretical source as well, which often depends on fluctuations in practices and the innovation of technologies. Thus, in some cases, I asked some authors to send me their manuscripts before these had been published²⁴.

This research must be imagined as a starting point for further analysis of disruptive hacker and artistic practices in the business of social media, but also as an investigation into the practice of networking as a research method. Methodologies and technologies of networking are used to investigate new models of production of Internet content and creative innovation explored by artists and creative communities working with media and art. Since the publication of my first book, *Networking, The Net as Artwork* (written in 2006) my objective has been to investigate how collaborative practices among communities of artists, activists and hackers engaging with participatory technologies and networks has contributed to the shaping of new courses of action, techniques and contents within (and beyond) digital culture. My theoretical approach has been based on the analysis of artistic practices as a resource for producing cultural innovation, but also as a strategic challenge to generate media criticism.

This present research should be seen as merely an initial input, and hopefully a source of inspiration for further reflection and practices in the field of hacktivism, art and social networking. What it lacks is a broader analysis of business disruption beyond the Western social

²³ While I was writing about Anonymous, a former participant disrupted their IRC channel, and the main platform of communication and sharing had to move somewhere else. Recently, another entity, named LulzSec, emerged, as a computer hacker group responsible for several high profile attacks, including the compromise of user accounts from Sony Pictures in early 2011 (see: <http://lulzsecurity.com>, and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LulzSec>). But on 26 June 2011, they released a “50 days of lulz” statement, as the final group release (see: <http://pastebin.com/1znEGmHa>, retrieved July 18, 2011). Furthermore, in early August 2001, Anonymous launched Anonplus.com, the Anonymous Social Networking site (<http://anonplus.com>).

²⁴ This was the case with the upcoming publications of respectively Marco Deseriis, Gabriella Coleman and Franco Berardi (for more details see the Bibliography section of this research).

media landscape, clearly limited as this research is in its analysis of merely European or North American practices (with a specific focus on the scene in northern California). The challenge remains to explore multiple dynamics, including fieldwork in postcolonial countries, and situated approaches including local minorities and micro-political perspectives. For example, a further investigation into gender studies and feminist literature and practices within social media is necessary, and central to further developing the concept of anti-hegemony, through the analysis of decentralised and distributed strategies of networking among feminist, queer, transgender and porn communities. It will be the aim, therefore, of my future investigations to be multi-angled and decentralised, not only theoretically, but also empirically. To develop a practical research approach becomes of crucial importance when investigating topics and activities which are fragmented, collective, translocal and constantly in movement. It is necessary therefore to integrate the activity of research into those of networking and curating. The increasing commercialisation of the contexts of sharing and networking is currently transforming the meaning of art. Artistic practices are developing within the framework of technology and business, often outside the realm of artistic institutions, and some of those practices are transforming the meaning of business as well. If business is adopting hacker and artistic strategies of disruption, what should be the answer of artists and hackers working on a critical dimension of networking? And what is the responsibility and role of cultural institutions engaging with art and digital technologies in contemporary society towards a critical articulation of the relationship between technology and culture?

After the completion of this dissertation, my research will be framed within the project “reSource transmedial culture berlin” (Gansing, 2010; Bazzichelli 2011), as part of the team working on the art and digital culture festival transmediale in Berlin. From September 2011, I will be running the reSource experimental project, a new initiative within the transmediale festival initiated by the festival’s director Kristoffer Gansing. My role will be to develop and curate a networking distributed platform that extends into an ongoing, year-round activity with touchdowns at each festival. The reSource will work towards the creation of a shared knowledge laboratory within transmediale, and a project for distributed networks by organising events, workshops and talks involving artists, hackers, researchers

and cultural producers. The reSource will be oriented towards giving something back to the local art and activist community in Berlin, towards creating an accessible and dynamic forum for the translocal media art scene, as well as towards interdisciplinary cultural producers and researchers. Within this framework of networking communities as a research practice, I plan to analyse three main research hypotheses:

- To advance upon earlier studies on network culture by analysing the significance of sharing communities in the local and translocal media and art scene (with transmediale festival as the focus of this fieldwork), rethinking the concepts of social networking, collaborative practices, innovation and participation, through the activities of grassroots communities of hackers, artists and cultural producers;
- To apply the concept of disruptive innovation to the art field so as to open up a critical perspective on the “network economy”. To achieve this objective, I plan to further develop the analysis of artistic interventions within the market, working in collaboration with local artistic communities, trying to understand how the market works after de-assembling its strategies and mechanisms of production;
- To create an ethnography of distributed networks, working in collaboration with local and translocal communities of artists and hackers in Berlin and abroad, by developing an empirical methodology based on mutual exchanges between the members of the (post-) media art scene and researches in the field of humanities.

Adopting the networked methodology I have been testing in the context of this PhD research, I will apply a comparative approach based on in-depth ethnographic investigation of a limited number of cases, which will result in the organisation of practical events and forums for collaboration and sharing. First, I plan to map the fieldwork of art and hacktivism working with collaborative practices, to sort out the communities of artists, hackers, activists and cultural producers in the city of Berlin. Secondly, I plan to examine their development and influence on a cross-national scale using a mixed-media method (Clifford, Geertz, 1988), working in the context of translocal micro-

politics and situated practices. Alongside this, I will conduct a further analysis on the literature on networking, social hacktivism and curatorial research practice, developing comparative research on the practice of networking communities. Contemporary works of media art and methods of cultural production in the field of net culture will be analysed, and new curatorial strategies will be investigated within the framework of the “reSource transmedial culture” project.

Within such a framework, I intend to examine disruptive modalities of art production developed by artists and activists after the emergence of social media, reflecting on distributive, decentralised and socially engaged contexts of participation and innovation. Furthermore my objective will be to develop mutual exchanges of methodologies, knowledge and experiences between researchers, hackers and artists within the framework of *networking communities as a research practice*. Following on from my PhD research, my themes of investigation will be: an analysis of the concept of *transmedial culture*, investigating creative approaches across digital and analogue media, reflecting on the intersections between artistic production, networking and disruptive innovation; distributed social networks as new modes of producing and spreading cultural content, as well as new ways of forming a cultural public; international communities of artists, hackers and activists active in the city of Berlin (and in the broader field of net culture) who use computers and technology as channels for sharing knowledge, co-developing experiences which invite exploration and reflection.

Within the aegis of facilitating collaboration and the sharing of resources and knowledge between the transmediale festival in Berlin and other research institutions, the aim of my research is to act as a link between the cultural production of art festivals and theoretical research in the field of hacktivism, art and social networking. The reSource transmedial culture will be my principal case study and will be central to analysing the collaborative processes of knowledge production and networking and its contribution within an international media art festival in order to develop an accessible and dynamic forum for both the media art scene as well as for cultural researchers and producers.

As described in the introduction to the network platform and project *Unlike Us: Understanding Social Media Monopolies and their*

Alternatives (July, 2011)²⁵ promoted by Geert Lovink (Institute of Network Cultures/HvA, Amsterdam) and Korinna Patelis (Cyprus University of Technology, Lemasol) much has still to be done to promote and research 'the alternative in social media'. Even if today social media dominate Internet and mobile use, many questions must still be raised and answered within the framework of a highly contradictory field of study, since social media both facilitates the free exchange of social relationships and provokes their commercial exploitation. The analyses of these subjects necessarily imply methodologies whereby artists, hackers, activists and researchers join together to inform practice-oriented research and give feedback to both theory and practice through an interdisciplinary, distributed and polyphonic approach.

To understand social networking today means to integrate a multiplicity of perspectives and to listen to a plurality of voices, where economical, political, technological and artistic reflections become intertwined with practical interventions in a multi-layered dialectical image.

Tatiana Bazzichelli, Aarhus University, August 2011

²⁵ Posted on Nettime mailing list, July 15, 2011: www.mail-archive.com/nettime-l@mail.kein.org/msg00262.html.



APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

During my visiting scholarship at Stanford University in 2009, I collected a body of audio material through interviewing hackers, artists and free thinkers based between San Francisco and the Silicon Valley. Those interviewed include: Jacob Appelbaum (co-founder of the NoiseBridge hackerspace in San Francisco and computer security hacker employed by the Tor Project), Olivier Bonin (filmmaker, director of the film “Dust and Illusions, 30 years of Burning Man History” – 2009), Scott Beale (founder of Laughing Squid, an online resource for art, culture and technology as well as independent web hosting in San Francisco), Lee Felsenstein (computer engineer, expert on hacking as well as pioneer in both the design of early personal computers and the formation of the personal computer industry), Lynn Hershman Leeson (visual artist and filmmaker), John Law (member of Suicide Club, co-founder of Cacophony Society and Burning Man), Karen Marcelo (3D programmer and hacker, founder of the Dorkbot San Francisco and member of SRL, Survival Research Laboratory), Harry S. Robins – aka Dr. Hal (illustrator, screenwriter, voice talent and a prominent member of the Church of the SubGenius), V.Vale (founder of RE/Search Publications, independent magazine and book publisher).

The transcription of the interviews amounted to more than a hundred pages; therefore I decided to quote selectively from the interview material. Although not all hackers and activists I approached have been quoted in this manuscript, the perspectives of all of them have been crucial in the development of this research. I am planning to publish an edited version of the interviews on the disruptiv.biz website. The only exception is the interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson, which was published on “MISH MASH”, Leonardo Electronic Almanac, in August 2011, with the title: “Hacking the Codes of Self-representation: An Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson” (see bibliography for further details).

Additionally, I conducted a more informal conversation on the Anna Adamolo network with a member of the Italian AutArt collective (rec. May 15, 2011), but the person I interviewed chose to remain anonymous in order to preserve the collective nature of Anna Adamolo, which is why I decided to keep our conversation private; similarly, I discussed strategies of networking and hacktivism with Guy McMusker, the spokesman of Les Liens Invisibles (rec. March 31, 2011), and I am planning to publish a selected version of this interview in a further publication. Finally, in March 2009 I conducted an interview with the mail artist Vittore Baroni, which was published in *Digimag* nr. 43: “Interview with Vittore Baroni: From Mail Art to Web 2.0” (April, 2009); and in March 2011 I conducted an interview with Paolo Cirio, published in *Digimag* nr. 63: “Paolo Cirio: When Stealing Becomes Art” (April, 2011).

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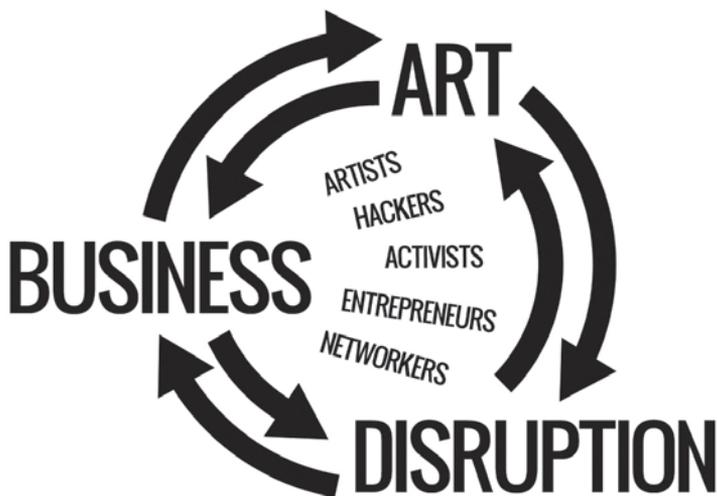
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After the emergence of Web 2.0, the critical framework of art and hacktivism has shifted from developing strategies of opposition to embarking on the art of disruption. By identifying the present contradictions within the economical and political framework of Web 2.0, hacker and artistic practices are analysed *through* business instead of in *opposition* to it.

Connecting together disruptive practices of networked art and hacking in California and Europe, the author proposes a constellation of social networking projects that challenge the notion of power and hegemony, such as mail art, Neoism, The Church of the SubGenius, Luther Blissett, Anonymous, Anna Adamolo, Les Liens Invisibles, the Telekommunisten collective, The San Francisco Suicide Club, The Cacophony Society, the early Burning Man Festival, the NoiseBridge hackerspace, and many others.

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