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Wu Ming Yi interviews a.f.r.i.k.a/Bruenzels/Blisset

1) You wrote this handbook more than three years ago. Do you think that the theory and praxis of communication guerrilla, as you exposed them in the book, are still valid after the new global movement (Seattle, Davos, the Global Action Days, the "Italian springtime", the No Border campaign) has slightly improved the conditions of the struggle?

Even now with a new global movement taking off, there is still the local practice in boring old everyday life. After the exciting days of action, the big battles and the waves of solidarity, people are returning to their home-towns, neighbourhoods and villages, where local authorities, petty police officers and other nuisances haven't become less annoying. The existing power-relations have not gone away – but it looks as if they were in a process of recomposition. If it is correct that society currently undergoes a transition towards what has been called ‚Society of Control‘, it might even become more important to sharpen our subversive skills on a local and ‚molecular‘ level.

When we put the book together, we focused on interventions that don't rely on mass mobilisations. Looking at the new global movement, we have a feeling that the new quality of this movement is not just about global networking through temporal and geographical synchronisation, not just about the discovery of organisations like WTO and IWF as readymade symbols for capitalist re-organisation of global power relations and for newly emerging forms of coercion. New are also certain forms of intervention that are different from previous movements and mass mobilisations. The labour movement and the traditional left articulated themselves in orderly marches, the peace movement made a display of lovvy-dovvy fluffyness, autonomous activism preferred to display an attitude of hardcore confrontation, the liberal humanists against racism tend to show their concern with candle-light demos. In the current global movement, however, a ‚style' of political articulation and symbolic action is tangible that has many similarities with what we collected under the label ‚communication guerilla': Remember the ‚Guerilla Gardening' happening which Reclaim the Streets performed in London on the May 1st global day of action [http:\\www.indymedia.org.uk], or consider varions actions (people doing blockades in ‚martian' outfit or confronting the police wearing defensive armour in white) during the OECD protests in Bologna [http:\\italy.indymedia.org]. Fakes and funny interventions are a crucial feature of the bordercamps of the European noborder network [http:\\www.noborder.eu.org] (for instance, in 1999 activists unveiled a memorial for the unknown human trafficker in Zittau on the German-Polish border in 1999 [http:\\www.contrast.org\borders\camp\camp99]); last not least the European aviation campaign targeting airlines involved in deportations is drawing heavily on image pollution through fake-leaflets and invisible theatre [http:\\www.deportation-alliance.com].

In the metropolis, a wave of energy amongs activists is tangible. Large numbers of protesters, new forms of protest, and maybe also the web-hype (huh, they organise via INTERNET!) have put this movement on the agenda of mainstream media. The appropriation of information technology has facilitated a process which creates a worldwide communication network and allows for rapid communication within the activist ‚scene'. In this sense, the conditions of struggle have improved, certainly in the space of representation (everybody knows that there is a new, globally connected

social movement), certainly in the metropolis. Yet in provincial areas, local neighbourhoods, small towns and border areas, we are fewer than the images of mass demos from Seattle, Washington, London etc would suggest. Locally, we continue to rely on the molecular tactics of communication guerilla, the kind of actions anyone can prepare without the backup of thousands of activists. While the large mobilisations are highlights in the activists calendar, communication guerilla-type actions are effective interventions in local public spaces, effective not only in terms of annoying the conservative hypocrits, ordinary racists and apostles of normalisation, but also for our own pleasure and against the frustrations we are facing in daily life.

While you might be right in saying that the conditions of the struggle have improved, we are (unfortunately) not under the impression that the changes of social and economic power relations are in our favour. Yet the emerging global movement does raise some questions about the use of communication guerilla and priorities of political articulation. First, we might ask whether it makes sense to use communication guerilla tactics in mass events. Communication guerilla is about distorting the rules of normality and challenging the hegemonic discourse. The new global movement attacks neoliberalism and economic globalisation – and CG type actions may help to challenge the legitimacy and the quasi-natural status assumed by present-day worldwide capitalism. The global mobilisations rely on "political tourists" from all over the world, people who bring their own cultures of resistance with them. The difficulties in the preparations for the anti-WTO protests in Prague, for example, show that the cooperation across difference still needs a lot of work: Is it possible to communicate local knowledge effectively so that it can be used by a larger community of activists? Does it make sense to transfer specific types of actions (like Ya Basta!s white overalls)? Continuous communication, as it happens in many of the current, interconnected networks, would be a crucial feature of this process. We might look at ways to plot stylish, decentralised actions in a way that is open enough to leave space for the creativity of autonomous affinity groups, yet clear and defined enough to provide an effective focus which can link a variety of actions into a catching and empowering image.

Second, in the present political situation, we might also need to reformulate some of the conclusions that came out of our reflections on communication theory. Three years ago, our focus on communication guerilla was motivated by the insight that counter-information which nobody wants to hear is useless – and at that time, nobody seemed to be interested in any broader social movement. Nowadays, herds of journalists keep turning up before and at the global days of action events. They may just be after the spectacle, the "story". But there is definitely an interest within mainstream media – very obvious in London before Mayday, when filmers from police and media gathered every Tuesday in front of the pub where Reclaim The Streets held its weekly meetings. The 60 thousand dollar question is whether we will be able to change the game, so that it becomes difficult for them to affirm the old binaries – militant terrorists on one hand, justice and order on the other. Communication guerilla might be one possible way to achieve this. When we wrote the book, we had the feeling that counterinformation was so dusty that not even the radical left payed much attention. Nowadays, there seems to be a revival of counterinformation – it's getting almost sexy, maybe partly due to the web-hype. A new type of public sphere is being created in and around the net. The explosion of indymedia-centres all over the world [30 on 4 continents and 9 countries within 10 months] and the impressive amount of hits they get indicates a need amongst activists to get involved in the autonomous production and use of information. Often, this implies the phantasy that counterinformation may reach an unlimited global audience – even if the main readership of indymedia might well be the community of activists itself. Indymedia is not the only web-medium for counterinfo – a-infos, nadir in Germany, the webmagazines of the border camps and the deportation-alliance.com page of the anti-aviation campaigns are just a few other examples. The rapid emergence of counterinfo-webpages in Austria since the extreme-right government was elected is another example that shows that counter-information has become again more important as

a form of political articulation. By stating this, we are not implying that communication guerilla is now disfunctional – to the contrary, the increase in counter-info in Austria went hand in hand with an increase in communication guerilla interventions.

2) Is there any group or political current, emerged after the publication of the handbook, whose activities suit your description of communication guerrilla?

Oh, many! Too many to list them all. Some of the groups in People's Global Action are using spoofs and fakes (Evading Standard – J18, Maybe - M2K and Financial Crimes – S26 in London, for expl.). The european noborder network has already been mentioned, with internationally linked anti-deportation campaigns and series of border camps - both are skillfully using fakes, invisible theatre, image-pollution and more. The image-polluting deportation-alliance is a particularly good example as to how communication guerilla tactics can be internationalised, without loosing local specifity. Under the umbrella of a shared website, each campaign works differently according to local/national discourses, at the same time they are drawing from each others experiences and ideas. The nation-wide coordinated inner-city actions in Germany in 1998 and 1999 criticised the privatisation of public space and the tendency to remove unwanted city-dwellers – not by organising one single big demo, but by staging many small discourse-distorting interventions from Hamburg to Munich. The Austrian movement against the new conservative/neofascist government uses mass mobilisations but also takes to pieing unwanted polititians, declaring street-parties as folklore [http:\\www.volkstanz.net] and faking the neofascist FPOE party's webpage. In Germany, a racist referendum of the Christian Democrats against dual citizenship was countered with a fake-campaign which was disseminated through simple emails referring to a webpage [http:\\www.kulturserver.de\home\ep]. The faked referendum lists claimed for conservatives exactly the treatment they had demanded for "foreigners": language courses, cultural education for integrating them into civilised society, blah blah.. (Of course their racist supporters on the streets proved unable to read and signed the lists with these demands by thousands.) And we have learned about many more local CG-type interventions: treatments against the violence-virus administered on occasion of military parades, penitential processions against homophobic catholic fundamentalists, levitations of racist police-stations, and so on.

3) Is there any group or political current you regret not having included in the book?

Of course our collection doesn't claim to be THE Complete Encyclopedia of Communication Guerilla. During the last years, we've met many exciting groups. Some of them have been practising what we chose to call communication guerilla long before we even started to think about it. The Biotic Baking Brigade [http:\\] should be mentioned for its merits in popularising the art of pieing. It was only through our workshops that we came across Reclaim the Streets, and it took a while for us to understand the party-style of subversion – today, RTS would definitely be included. Three more groups we'd like to mention - one is acting in a small, provincial town in Germany, another in big cities in Spain, a third one in virtual space. The Office of Applied Realism in Ludwigshafen, Germany is a bunch of weird people who got so bored with their town (a clone of Mestre) that they felt forced to create their own entertainment. Sometimes that's articulated in DIY-art exhibitions where everybody is invited to bring instant-artworks, sometimes it's a shadow-theatre featuring Mao's long march including many flowery quotes. Sometimes they get political and start performing their favourite game, Croquet, in those public parks where punks and drunks are being evicted - putting police and autorities into trouble because it is not easy to tell whether "respectable" people cross-dressed in suits and dinnerclothes are committing an offense when they mix with local punks, drink champagne in a no-alcool area while playing Croquet on a fenced-off green. The Applied Realists are creating a critical cultural articulation in an industrial town where nothing much happens. Fiambrera Obrera, Spain (http:\\www.sindominio.net\fiambrera) is another group which combines a visual approach to the ridiculities and nuisances of daily life with the political attitude of experienced activists. For example, their campaign to criticise the neglection of certain

neighbourhoods and the gentrification of others in Sevilla was started by marking dogshit on the streets with little flags carrying the emblem of the city authorities - easy, cheeky and effective. With this introduction, they had created a recognisable identity for further interventions (ah, it's the ones with the dogshit again!). RTmark [http:\\www.rtmark.com] is probably well-known to the readers of this book. We would have liked to include them especially because of their involvement in the battle against etoys.com which efficiently used communication guerilla tactics in virtual space. Targeting a company which is situated in the immaterial economy of web-based business, the virtual attacks of RTmark and others were extremely successful – creating an atmosphere of anxiety and uneasiness among etoys.com shareholders was sufficient to decrease the value of the etoys.com stock by 70 %. RTmark have taken the guise of a New Economy enterprise (RTmark.com), their "local grounds" is the discursive space of corporate newspeak, which they have admirably copied and adapted to their needs.

4) Did you perceive any influence of your work on German activists after the success of the handbook? Did the German scene understand the logic and insight of your cataloguing?

Due to our relentless efforts, the revolution is well under way. Honestly - a book will never change the approach of a whole activist scene. Nevertheless many groups in Germany have recently taken to communication guerilla type actions, for expl at the expo-protests in Hannover or at the "Spackparade" on N30 in Berlin ("Property gives Beauty, Beauty gives Wealth!... Order, Order, Order..."). Let's put it this way - we picked on the "communication guerilla" approach at a time when many activists were looking for ways to spice up their rather boring and frustrating practices of the late eighties and early nineties, when many groups were starting or willing to experiment with new-old forms, drawing on art, performance, theatre, parties... Quite a few groups used the book to discuss these possibilities or develop them further, or reformulate their ideas on politics more generally. Some of the discussions we had with distinguished activists during the last years were of course rather heavy - if you've spent 15 years organising marches and distributing leaflets, it isn't that obvious why you suddenly should dress up as a dinosaur, or on the contrary undress on your local market place in front of a police platoon or a bunch of right wing extremists performing archaic rituals. And it is even more difficult to grasp why stylish interventions into cultural grammar can have a deeply political meaning and sometimes create more impact than the straightforward ‚information plus demonstration' approach of traditional activism.

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