

The Art of Networking

Networking practices in grassroots communities

Paper by Tatiana Bazzichelli, for the Oekonux Conference, Manchester, March 27th-29th, 2009

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Abstract

Networking means to create nets of relations. Since the 80s, platforms of networking have been an important tool to share knowledge and experience to create works of hacktivism and net art.

The Art of Networking seminar held at the Oekonux Conference (Manchester, March 27th-29th) refers to the concept of hacktivism and art as a context of active participation, through the description of Italian and international underground interventions and actions. The scope of the seminar is to compare the diverse use of art and technology among grassroots communities of artists and activists involved in underground networking processes, with the contemporary use of social networking platforms. The seminar proposes to analyze the techniques of networking developed in the expanded, pervasive and collective networks in the last half of the twentieth century, which have anticipated the structure and inspired the rhetoric of many of the contemporary Web 2.0 social networking platforms. Focus will be on situationist, multiple singularity and plagiarist projects, such as ubiquitous strategies of networking from mail art to the Luther Blissett Project (LBP); the creation of Neoism and its network-web conspiracy and the developing of hacktivism in the (mainly Italian) underground digital scene, through examples of some practical experiences. The aim is to reconstruct the roots of collaborative art practices in which the artist becomes a networker, a creator of shared networks that expand virally through collective interventions of multiple identities.

The Gift-Exchange Networking Economy

Networking is a cultural strategy that creates an open configuration, a map of connections in progress. The contemporary Internet-based networking platforms have their deep 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 art as an expanded network of relationships. Avant-garde art practices such as mail art, Neoism and the Luther Blissett Project have anticipated the structure of the Web 2.0 platforms, which have today reached a huge mass of Internet users. 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 for exchanging between individuals.

Networked culture, developed during the last half of the twentieth century, gave rise to a gift-exchange community as an alternative economy and social system (Welch, 1995; Baroni, 1997; Saper, 2001) and this model of communication, often connected with the environments of contemporary art, allowed for the "exchange" of spontaneous gifts. Since the 80s, the platforms of networking have been an important tool to share knowledge and experience to create works of hacktivism and net art. The concepts of "Openness" and "Do-It-Yourself", today more and more relevant with the diffusion of social networks and

Web 2.0, have been the starting point for the development of punk culture and hacker ethic. Punk culture refers to the idea of the death of art in order to open up creative possibilities for everyone. Anyone can play, as long as there is the desire to do it.

The same Do It Yourself concept is then found in the subsequent phenomena of networking and hacktivism; combining with the influxes of mail art, from Neoism to Plagiarism to Luther Blissett, up until the 1990s, when the network dynamic is affirmed on a mass level through the use of computers and the Internet. The "hacktivism" concept refers to an acknowledgement of the net as a political space, with the possibility of decentralized, autonomous and grassroots democratic participation.

Access for everybody, information as a free good and the conscious, use of hardware and technology, the basic concepts of hacker ethics, are referred to as political objectives. According to this point of view, networking means to create nets of relations, by sharing experiences and ideas in order to communicate and experiment artistically. Networking platforms are free spaces in which the publisher and the reader, the artist and the public, act on the same level. Art provides a critical perspective on political imagination; networking projects act inside social interstices and cultural fractures, which apparently seem to be at the margin of daily life, but instead are an important territory for the re-invention and re-writing of symbolic and expressive codes. Imaginative codes which can transform and decode our present.

The art of networking is based on the figure of the artist as a creator of sharing platforms and of contexts for connecting and exchanging. This figure spreads through those who accept the networking project invitation and in turn create networking occasions. For this reason, it no longer makes sense to speak of an artist, since the active subject becomes the network operator or the networker.

The art of networking is not based on objects, nor solely on digital or analogical instruments, but on the relationships and processes in progress between individuals. Individuals who can in turn create other relationship contexts, or give life to creative products, which are important if considered within the larger idea of sharing. Within the world of networking everyone can participate by recommending his/her own materials, and total freedom exists. Probably it is for this "gift-exchange" logic and communication strategy that few publications exist on the subject, because it has always been considered more important to live out certain dynamics, rather than to write about them.

Connecting Multiple Singularities in Collaborative Art Practices

Networking communication might be a virus that grows from contact to contact and expands through multiple actions of people who develop collective processes of creation. These people and their multiple identities, their personal relationships becomes the interface, their exchanges becomes the medium. For example, the practice of mail art took shape in a network of small works mailed to everyone who enter in the collective postal circuit and at the same time giving life to friendly bi-directional relationships, which are lived out in the intimacy of one's own mailbox.

Mail art is a form of art open to all. The term that can best define it is *Eternal Network*, according to the French Fluxus artist and sociologist Robert Filliou (1926-1987). An eternal network that starting from the 1950s has involved hundreds of people, made up of decorated envelopes and rubber stamps, artistamps, illustrated letter and zines, and any other self-produced object or pieces of paper turned into creative art sent by mail. It involved individuals linked by belonging to a non-formalized network, which consists of

exchanging addresses and one-to-one and one-to-many mailings. The origin of mail art is connected to the figure of Ray Johnson (1927-1995) and to his New York Correspondence School, created in 1962, but the network has its roots already in Dadaism, Futurism, New-Dada and Fluxus. Until the 1980s the mail art network was also used as a channel and propaganda for Neoism.

Neoism expressed itself through artistic practices and experimentation in media. It embraced a philosophy that presupposed the use of multiple identities, the collection of pseudonyms, the discussion of concepts like identity and originality and the realization of *pranks*, paradoxes, plagiarism and *fakes*, components that came up again later in collective movements such as the Luther Blisset Project (LBP) and in the actions of different net.artists, including the Italian 0100101110101101.org (www.0100101110101101.org) and the Wu Ming collective of writers (www.wumingfoundation.com). Pranks and actions of culture jamming focus on *continual poetic renewal* (Vale and Juno, 1987), creating artistic, cultural and political new experiences, using the unexpected, and a deep level of irony and social criticism.

Between 1980 and 1988 Neoism expressed itself through the Neoist Apartment Festival in North America, Europe and Australia and through different publications (i.e. the "Smile" zine). It was founded by the multiple identity Monty Cantsin, an *open pop star* who spread from Canada (Montreal) to USA (Baltimore) to Europe (the name was suggested by David Zack to Istvan Kantor and Maris Kundzins). Symbol-icons of Neoism were the flaming steam iron; the clothes hanger used as an antenna to create a telepathic flow between people; the improvisational haircut during the performances; the red cross; a particular type of spicy food like *chili* and *chapatti*. Monty Cantsin was not only a multiple identity, but a real way of life for many people who embraced being a Neoist in daily life; opening experimental video stores, creating performances, publishing magazines, giving life to independent projects (cfr. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoism>).

It is the Neoists who talked about a "Web-network" in 1981, giving life to a discourse on systemized libertarian networking based on the idea of the *Centre de Recherche Neoiste* (CRN). The Centre of Neoist Research originated in Montreal in 1980, as a consequence of the Neoist cultural conspiracy. They were proposing "Open Situations", in which people who can catalyze their own energy, give life to a series of collaborations between the members of the network.

Between 1994 and 1999, another collective identity spread from Italy to the United Kingdom, the United States, Holland, Germany, Austria, Finland, and Hungary: Luther Blissett.

Like a mental virus the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) landed to give rise to deeply impacting media pranks, together with *happenings*, shows and performances in the subway, articles in publications, actions of overcoming art in favour of the everyday, becoming one of the most active projects of the period (cfr. www.lutherblissett.net). Luther Blissett was the voice of a multitude of people that wanted to subvert the cultural industry, to expose the tricks of the media communication and to create an urban legend, a new folk hero. Luther Blissett was born because a mythological figure was missing in the underground scene of that time, there was the need of a media ghost through which everyone could speak and subvert the cultural scenario. The LBP was the example of a fertile networking strategy, the applied myth of a common cause. The entire LBP was a work of art, "an open reputation informally adopted and shared by hundreds of artists and social activists all over Europe" (Luther Blissett). Through pranks and fakes, such as the Neoist bus happening and collective adventure (1995); the legend of Harry Kipper in the

“Chi l’ha visto?” TV show; the fake book to be published by the Italian publishing company Mondadori, called *net.generation* (1996); Luther Blissett was able to create a common imaginary and become a popular phenomenon.

From Networking to Hacktivism: The Experience of Anna Adamolo

The collective experience of Anna Adamolo (October 2009 to date) represents a new impetus in the Italian scene of activism and, at the same time, converts into action radical impulses consolidated by decades of hacktivist practices in Italy (see Bazzichelli, 2008). Anna Adamolo plays with language, but also with the concept of collective identity, becoming an icon for those who seek to re-write the cultural and political codes through the *détournement* of symbols. Anna Adamolo follows the subversive path of the Luther Blissett multi-identity, and of the open-pop-star Monty Cantsin.

Unlike Monty Cantsin, more reconnected to specific members of Neoism, Anna Adamolo is the voice of an enlarged network. In the past months in Italy a network of people that involves students and young researchers, workers and teachers, all those who wanted to transform a political, cultural and social utopia into concrete action, has acted through many protests and demonstrations. The students, followed by the media, named their mobilization Onda Anomala, the Anomalous Wave; (www.uniriot.org). Anna Adamolo is the acronym for Onda Anomala. She is the virtual heroine against the “Gelmini reform”, an Italian law – Law 133 – that cuts down on public funding of education (see: www.uniriot.org/downloads/anomalouswave.pdf).

The networking component is central to Anna Adamolo, and her network is based on anonymous identities, following the path of Luther Blissett, but with different objectives. While representing a plurality of individuals, Luther Blissett was acting transversely to any political movement; Luther Blissett was like a virus attracted by the bugs in the media system; he was an urban legend. Anna Adamolo instead is developed as part of the Onda Anomala activist Italian movement, and she represents all the voices that could be directly rooted in this political and social battle. She is represented by a face that could be used by whoever critically wants to change the status quo, she is the diverse voices of people who are fighting for a common goal. She is the face of the motto “noi la crisi non la paghiamo” (We Will Not Pay for this Crisis).

Anna interprets Monty Cantsin and Luther Blissett playing with the language and the labyrinths of politics, transforming the bureaucracy of the state into open possibilities of intervention. She answers to the Gelmini reform creating an “intimate bureaucracy” (Craig J. Saper, 2001) between activists, students and young researchers, workers and teachers, creatively re-interpreting the structural elements of daily life, as the mail art and other Avant-garde practices did years ago. The symbols of the institution are reversed, from the official stamps and signatures of the Ministry of Education, University and Research to the Ministry’s official website, and they become a common sharing. Signs and labels of a network of actors that wants to change the rules of action, to build its own education system and a better future.

As we read on the Anna Adamolo blog (<http://annaadamolo.noblogs.org>) the first action of AA was the hijacking of the website of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, on the occasion of the national students’ and teachers’ strike in Rome on November 14th 2008. When visiting the www.ministeroistruzione.net website, first very similar (if not equal) to the official (www.miur.it), the visitor was redirected into another scenario: a video, which mixed images of a calm sea and street demonstrations,

commented by the voice of Anna Adamolo (the “Wave Minister”), and all the students, mothers, teachers, workers, spoke through her (www.vimeo.com/2431622). The virtual journey landed in a website where AA presented herself as did all the people who had previously recorded their protest message by calling a telephone number registered by the members of the Onda Anomala network.

Some of these stories are now published in January 2009 in the book: *Sono Anna Adamolo. Voci e Racconti dall'Onda Anomala*, NdA Editions, 2009 (“I am Anna Adamolo – Voices and stories from the Wave”).

Another action of AA took place on Facebook, where she had initially created a profile as the Minister of Education, Mariastella Gelmini, easily reaching the number of 2.000 “friends”: supporters and antagonists who express themselves on her Facebook Wall. After some days, in November 14th 2008, the profile of Mariastella Gelmini turned into the one of Anna Adamolo, who in the meantime had become a symbol of the street demonstrations of many activists and members of the Onda Anomala network. This action generated a chain of support for the Onda Anomala protest and immediately after the virtual heroine became one of the most popular Facebook icons in the Italian activist network.

Anna Adamolo becomes a symbol of a movement of precarious identities in Italy, which has also acted radically through visual messages in the past, and which has transformed the heaviness of traditional politics in a spiral of ironic activism: San Precario, the patron saint of precarious workers (www.sanprecario.info), and Serpica Naro (www.serpicanaro.com), the designer of imagination, have shown the way.

The message has finally reached a community of many actors, beyond the hacker movement, the activist and guerilla marketing practices, and opened to all those who wanted to transform our present creatively. In this sense, Anna Adamolo was a real semiotics revolution in Italy, because she has successfully sought to reach those who, for the first time, decided to respond to the official politics getting down to the streets and acting actively in the network.

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