



Introduction

For many decades, a cultural practice has existed that has avoided being named or fully categorized. Its roots are in the modern avant-garde, to the extent that participants place a high value on experimentation and on engaging the unbreakable link between representation and politics. Perhaps this is a clue as to why this practice has remained unnamed for so long. Since the avant-garde was declared dead, its progeny must be dead too. Perhaps this brood is simply unrecognizable because so many of the avant-garde's methods and narratives have been reconstructed and reconfigured to such an extent that any family resemblance has disappeared along with its public face. To intensify matters, participants are neither fish nor fowl. They aren't artists in any traditional sense and don't want to be caught in the web of metaphysical, historical, and romantic signage that accompanies that designation. Nor are they political activists in any traditional sense, because they refuse to *solely* take the reactive posi-

tion of anti-logos, and are just as willing to flow through fields of nomos in defiance of efficiency and necessity. In either case, such role designations are too restrictive in that the role boundaries exclude access to social and knowledge systems that are the materials for their work. Here may be a final link to invisibility: these participants value access over expertise, and who really cares about the work of an amateur?

All good things must come to an end. The naming and defining has begun along with a more structured flow in the form of a movement with numerous subcampaigns. The process began in 1993 when a coalition of Dutch cultural groups produced an event/scene in Amsterdam called the *Next 5 Minutes* (N5M). The topic of the event was "Tactical Television" (so named by Dutch cultural theorists involved in the production who were inspired by de Certeau's work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*). The event drew all kinds of people from Europe and North America who were concerned with issues of intervening in television, theorizing the structure and dynamics of video culture, modeling representations of political causes that further social justice, creating alternative models of distribution, and so on. The event was small (around three hundred people), but it indicated that a new kind of coalition was beginning to form. Event organizers quickly realized that tactical television was too limited in its scope, because there were people with a similar sensibility who were doing tactical work in all types of media, and that they should all come together. The event's next manifestation in 1996 addressed the topic "Tactical Media" (as it did again in 1999). This time the event was more international, and included all forms of media, although

the conversation was skewed toward electronic media (radio, TV, the Internet).

A name that would stick had emerged, along with a basic definition that was provided by the organizers of the N5M:

The term “tactical media” refers to a critical usage and theorization of media practices that draw on all forms of old and new, both lucid and sophisticated media, for achieving a variety of specific noncommercial goals and pushing all kinds of potentially subversive political issues.

These moments of solidarity via linguistic recuperation are usually accompanied by mixed feelings, and this particular case was no different. On the one hand, there was a feeling of caution and perhaps regret. Once named and defined, any movement is open to co-optation. Should tactical media become popularized, its recuperation by capital is almost inevitable. Definitions also create boundaries. What was once so liquid would become increasingly structured and separated as the movement was theorized and historicized.

On the other hand, joy can emerge out of separation that expresses itself as generative difference. There was a feeling of relief that those involved in tactical media could be any kind of cultural hybrid. Artist, scientist, technician, craftsperson, theorist, activist, etc., could all be mixed together in combinations that had different weights and intensities. These many roles (becoming artist, becoming activist, becoming scientist, etc.) contained in each individual and group could be acknowledged and valued. Many felt liberated from having

to present themselves to the public as a specialist in order to be experts (and therefore valued). It was a vindication of the proto-anarchist Fourier's idea that pleasure and learning come from what he termed the "Butterfly"—the human desire to access as many active processes and learning resources as possible, or to put it negatively, an aversion to boredom caused by redundant specialized activity.

Some of Guattari's ideas were also vindicated in the sense that this group developed a liberating collective arrangement of enunciation that denied linear separation. While this situation was not the beginning of a molecular revolution (although it may prove to be so), it was a molecular intervention. For a brief time there was and continues to be a relief from capital's tyranny of specialization that forces us to perform as if we are a fixed set of relationships and characteristics, and to repress or strictly manage all other forms of desire and expression. Participants knew that a practical process had been collectively started by many groups and individuals from around the globe (mostly by parallel invention) for a real politicized interdisciplinary practice, and that the methods needed to actualize this practice were being researched and tested the world over.

On a more personal level, the members of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) had mixed feelings on the subject. To be named seemed restrictive, and in more paranoid moments, even murderous. However, since CAE was always being named whether the collective liked it or not, to have a designation members were comfortable with was good. We had escaped the unbearable weight of being artists, and within the specialization of art we could separate

ourselves from site-specific artists, community artists, public artists, new genre artists, and the other categories with which we had little or no sympathy. Because the collective did not appear to be engaged in a particular practice, we were being saddled with such designations, or found ourselves complicit with this categorizing process just so we could start conversations with people uncomfortable with the unnamed.

The collection of traits from which a tactical media practice emerges is bound to change depending on who is asked what these traits are. There is a constant shifting of value that parallels shifts in the roles of any given individual involved in the practice, so an individual can change he/r point of view very rapidly. In conjunction, cultural context plays such a significant part in the tactical media user's perception that the model has to be constantly reconfigured to meet particular social demands. Tactical media is not a monolithic model, but a pliable one that asks to be shaped and reshaped. It contains many different and often contradictory conjectures, but it has a few principles that seem to have general value (although there are always exceptions).

First, tactical media is a form of digital intervention.* It challenges the existing semiotic regime by replicating and redeploying it in a manner that offers participants in the projects a new way of seeing, understanding, and (in the best-case scenario)

* By "digital" CAE means that tactical media is about copying, recombining, and re-presenting, and not that it can only be done with digital technology. Please see Chapter 5, Part I, for a more detailed discussion of the issue.

interacting with a given system. The already given and the unsaid are the material of a tactical media event. As Stanley Aronowitz says about the postmodern thinker: “We deconstruct the ‘givenness’ to show the cracks that sutures have patched, to demonstrate that what is taken as privileged discourse is merely a construction that conceals power and self-interest.” Much the same can be said about the tactical media practitioner, the difference being that rather than just doing critical reading and theorizing, practitioners go on to develop participatory events that demonstrate the critique through an experiential process.

The tactical media practitioner uses any media necessary to meet the demands of the situation. While practitioners may have expertise in a given medium, they do not limit their ventures to the exclusive use of one medium. Whatever media provide the best means for communication and participation in a given situation are the ones that they will use. Specialization does not predetermine action. This is partly why tactical media lends itself to collective efforts, as there is always a need for a differentiated skill base that is best developed through collaboration.

In conjunction, tactical media practitioners support and value amateur practice—both their own and that of others. Amateurs have the ability to see through the dominant paradigms, are freer to recombine elements of paradigms thought long dead, and can apply everyday life experience to their deliberations. Most important, however, amateurs are not invested in institutionalized systems of knowledge production and policy construction, and hence do not have irresistible forces guiding the

outcome of their process such as maintaining a place in the funding hierarchy, or maintaining prestige-capital. One of the most recent examples of this trend is the tremendous job that amateur scientists and health care practitioners did and are continuing to do in shaping policy regarding HIV. Now most experts wouldn't recognize these people as scientists or health care providers; they were simply concerned individuals dedicated to social justice who collectively had an impact on policy construction. Their expertise primarily came from everyday life experience and amateur study, and yet this collection of people who rallied in coalitions such as ACT UP had remarkable vision and continue to have an impact.

Tactical media is ephemeral. It leaves few material traces. As the action comes to an end, what is left is primarily living memory. Unfortunately, as feminist performance theorist Rebecca Schneider has convincingly pointed out, no one has solved the haunting problem of the archive, an issue first isolated by Derrida. Tactical media rarely escapes the problems of secondary representation, and the few material trace elements, subservient and partial records of an immediate lived experience, often appropriate the value of the experiential process. After the event is over, photos, scripts, videos, graphics, and other elements remain, and are open to capitulation and recuperation. In spite of such problems, the situation is not entirely disastrous. Traces and residues are far less problematic than strategic products, which come to dominate the space in which they are placed. Monumental works are the great territorializers—they refuse to ever surrender space. Instead they inscribe their imperatives upon it and disallow anything other than passive view-

ing. They are the great negaters of generative difference, and are engines of alienated separation. But unlike monumental works (whether these are in fact monuments proper, or even worse, movements, coalitions, campaigns, or programs that become bureaucracies), the trace is stratified in its interpretive structure, so no matter how quickly and profoundly it is assimilated, it still contains the possibility of radical *action*. This possibility redeems the trace because it can offer the makings of minor histories that render credible the beliefs that something different from the inhumanity of capital is possible, and that a continued capacity for direct autonomous action and its initiation can lessen the intensity of authoritarian culture. Aiming for this possibility, tactical media is always ad hoc and self-terminating.

In the following pages the reader will find theoretical and documentational traces of tactical media. CAE does not present these cases so much as models but as possibilities. They are simply modest illustrations of the broad material and content base of tactical media. We trust that they indicate that no cultural bunker is ever fully secure. We can trespass in them all, inventing molecular interventions and unleashing semiotic shocks that collectively could negate the rising intensity of authoritarian culture.