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Media Activism and Avant-Garde Trends in Kiasma

“TEMP – Temporary Media Lab” in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Finland (October 8 – November 9, 1999)

0. Introduction

From October to November 1999, the new information and media technology, civil activism, and academic cultural critique met in *TEMP*, a temporary media laboratory in Kiasma, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Finland. The month-long project resulted in the exploration of globalization, digitalization, and multiculturalism, among other things, as well as an active and polyphonic exchange of ideas on the future of Europe.

What was interesting about Kiasma’s *TEMP* project was that for once “new media,” often accused of superficiality and fragmentation (especially the Internet), and the more traditional aspects of cultural, media and social criticism found a common thread. In terms of research and functions, the goals of the project were ambitious. Although not every goal was reached, in the end the need for similar, spontaneous and alternative projects was clear, as well as the demand for social and technology criticism in the Finland governed nowadays by “Nokia ideology.”

For Kiasma *TEMP* was not only an interdisciplinary venture, but also a test of the institutional boundaries of the museum of contemporary art opened in June 1998. The idea of an independently, subversively, and spontaneously functioning community or “laboratory” works on paper, but not necessarily in real life. Not only was the Kiasma staff under a tremendous work pressure, but larger issues and more general principles had to be dealt with, too. How should a government museum react to anarchists and alternative-minded people planning to “take over” the building; or the fact that the museum’s department of external communications did not always know what was happening in the project room on the 5th floor? Incidentally, the curator of the *TEMP* laboratory and the founder of the concept, Geert Lovink, Dutch by nationality, repeatedly used the word “hacking” in describing the relationship between *TEMP* and Kiasma: “You have to hack this building [Kiasma]. That’s the only way to get things done.”

Although the organization worked quite well and seemed to cooperate with the museum, Lovink’s statement reveals the basic difference between the middle European “protest” attitude and the Finnish consensus society. The Finnish society emphasizes compliance and general agreement in all its functions and daily routines. Such an “affirmative” starting point is not necessarily always accepted, understood, or even seen as an alternative in the socially conscious circles of such countries as

Germany, France, or Italy. In general we could ask whether Finland even has (media) activism in the middle and southern European meaning of the word. This has been studied by Liisa Vähäkylä:

Media activism might not be as familiar a concept as media art. Very few people in Finland have declared themselves as media activists, since it is relatively easy to get a job as a journalist in the dominant media, and infuse the dominant journalism with small doses of one's own opinions.

In Finland there has never been pirate radios like in England nor alternative television networks as in Denmark. Minorities are covered in newspapers and on television. We have radio broadcasts in Swedish and in Sami; a large proportion of nationally broadcasted radio is totally in the margins, much more elitistic than media art.

However, if we consider as media activism various small magazines and other alternative publications, or the minority programs on such radio stations as *Lähiradio* (Local Radio) in the Helsinki area, not to mention various Internet publications, there is a great variety of media activism in Finland as well. In the Internet era everyone can be a media activist, everyone can have their own medium.

1. *The Temporary Media Lab: the Concept and History*

The Dutch cosmopolitan Geert Lovink is an alternative-minded thinker, media activist, critic, and curator. Previously he has become famous, e.g., for his polemic concept of “data dandy” (cf. Lovink 1996). However, his cultural critique and focus of activity are based on broader ideas. He knows personally such theoreticians and influential personalities as Noam Chomsky, Saskia Sassen, and Slavoj Žižek (cf. Lovink 1997). He has been a member of “ADILKNO,” the Association for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge, which has published such works as *Der Daten Dandy*, *Medien Archive*, and *Cracking the Movement*. Furthermore, he has been on the editorial board of several magazines and e-zines (including *Mediamatic*, *CTheory*, *MediaFilter*).

Based on all this, I dare to claim that Lovink is one of today's central networkers of alternative-minded people and communities as well as civil activists in new media. In addition to curating various events around the world, he has been an active member of Syndicate, an international group of media and technology critics. The “Syndicalists” have made up a globally active network of expertise and opinions that exchanges ideas, information, and concepts almost daily via the Internet.

TEMP is short for “temporary media lab.” It is also strongly associated with temporary computer files (tmp). According to Lovink's heuristic definition, the temporary media laboratory means a space and conditions of production that make possible the physical encounter of individuals, groups, and human networks of those sharing an interest in the themes of new information technology, media art, society, politics, and economy; as well as the collaboration to advance the development and design of projects.

Even though the phrase *media lab* might bring to mind the technological development environments of businesses and universities (e.g., the MIT in the U.S. and University of Lapland in Finland), in this context it is based on counter- and alternative culture – downright (media) anarchistic. In the terms of the media activists, it is about the “tactical exploit” of media and technology. The heyday of the alternative underground media was in the 1960's and 1970's – to fade in the general

unpoliticality of the 1980's. In the 1990's activism lifted again its head: new technical media, smaller and cheaper video equipment, and especially the Internet make virtually real-time global communication possible.

For years media activists have had alternatives to traditional forms of cheap technique and alternative formats (16mm film, leaflets produced on a typewriter and copy machine, fliers, etc.). Additional applications of the new media and information technology have also sprung up. The change is manifested in visual design and in the abundance of distribution channels. To quote media activist Vähäkylä:

Alternative media is no more fed to keep it alive; for example, when making a video, a group of activists can write, shoot, and cut it purely out of their own starting points, with no demands from an outside production machinery. In the end, the video ends up being broadcast on television – or shown in an art museum.

As exhibitors of media art, museums, centers, institutes, and festivals of contemporary art are indeed essential for media activists. Some have criticized the development for downgrading artistic criteria and aesthetic qualities. However, activists see that “art must be constantly questioned and redefined. This will help each public find their own art.”

The Kiasma projects attempted to combine elements of art, science, and alternative culture. In addition to various more compliant e-zines (e.g., *Wannabes.net* which ironized the contemporary culture through such themes as contemporary art, “hippietism,” media porn, and “clubism”) and media studies interface research (University of Lapland, department of Media Studies; <www.urova.fi/home/ttk/med/media.htm>), the Kiasma TEMP was aimed at approaching criticism of contemporary culture. Not only the aforementioned issues, but also the problematics of “commercial vs. artistic” and “lowbrow vs. highbrow” (cf. Huyssen 1988) were addressed. A central issue was exploring the possibilities of artistic and political avantgarde in today's culture. As Eric Kluitenberg aptly pointed out in an e-mail message:

The boundaries of society have become so fluid and open that any attempt to define what exists ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the social framework becomes irrelevant. The edge of culture can quickly be turned around into a profitable mainstream trend. The outsider becomes the trend-setter, the oblique the eccentric, the perverted the exclusive. Otherness is embraced as a market opportunity. Meanwhile, authoritarian politics implode, but re-emerge shortly after as if nothing ever happened (Juganov).

The role of the avantgarde artist, finally, becomes a tragic joke. The advertisement industries have long understood the shock of the new, and make art look retrograde. The utopian visionaries have become entrenched in an increasingly self-referential art-scene that propagates itself through exclusive coffee-table books and glossy international art-zines.

Historically, the name of TEMP originates in the TEMPOLAB meeting in the Basel Art Hall in June 1998. It was a closed session of a distant though neighboring tribe of global contemporary artists curated by Clementine Deliss. The name TEMPOLAB also referred to Hakim Bey's “Temporary Autonomous Zones” (TAZ).

Bey has become a central figure and *Ur*-anarchist in various hacker, cracker, and resistance communities; the TAZ concept has been presented on the Internet as well as on his book *T.A.Z., The Temporary Autonomous Zone. Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (1991). According to Geert Lovink, TAZ is “a reminder that

revolts of anger and desire, of passionate bodies and souls, remain an option, despite the overall victory of global capitalism.”

Lovink sees TEMP, as the name says, as a temporary media laboratory and production unit that exists in the context of an event, museum, or similar institution. The underlying motive of the concept is dissatisfaction with the form of media projects and presentations in conferences, festivals, and other public happenings. According to Lovink, for example, exhibiting webpages in a museum is absurd:

Exhibiting webpages still does not make much sense: their lively, layered complexity gets lost. Even the interactive installation is not the proper medium to express networks. In previous years much has been done to introduce new media to an ever-growing audience. But the networks themselves, their mysterious and seductive aspects, remained invisible. It is hard to represent or even visualize what is actually happening on a mailing list, a newsgroup, a chatroom. Demo-design can give us a clue, but it remains soulless, empty and too easily turns flows and exchanges into dead information. Now that the varieties of virtual communities are growing, it is no longer enough to merely announce their existence. People demand substance – not only outsiders but, most of all, the members of the groups themselves.

According to Lovink, the idea for TEMP media laboratories had partly to do with the desire to report about events, conferences, festivals, etc. in the “Internet style.” Early examples are the live web publications during the following events: *Next Five Minutes 2* and *3* (<www.n5m.org>), the *Ars Electronica* festivals since 1996 (<www.aec.at>), the *europrotests* in Amsterdam in June 1997 (<www.contrast.org>), and the hacker conference *Hacking in Progress* in August 1997. The object of these projects has been to build a bridge between the “real” and the “virtual” by creating interactive elements to connect the online audience with the actual place of the event.

In terms of Lovink’s emphasis on media activism, the above-mentioned and other similar Internet publications research and survey (through images, sounds, texts) ways of journalism and reporting that deviate from the norm. They enable participation from a distance – before, during, and after the event. According to its goals, the Kiasma TEMP tried to reach a step further:

It no longer covers an ongoing event but, instead, targets the hands-on production of content in and around an already-existing group or network of groups and individuals. It is patently clear that networks are good at discussing and preparing but not at actual production – that has to be done on the spot, face-to-face. Only in this setting can we overcome the tensions that so easily build up in virtual worlds and, thereby, produce small multimedia pieces together using available resources.

Conferences are known and respected as effective accumulators and accelerators. They offer ideal opportunities to recharge the inner batteries in the age of short-lived concepts. Temporary media labs are even more effective in this respect: they focus, speed up, intensify, and exert a longer-term effect on local initiatives and translocal groups. Meetings in real space are becoming a more and more precious good for the way they add a crucial stage to almost any networked media projects, whether in the arts, culture, or politics. Unlike conferences, though, the role of the (passive) audience remains open yet undefined. As with any other concept, the broader public must confront the issue anyway, sooner or later.

A few more words on the history of the TEMP concept. The first version of TEMP – Hybrid WorkSpace (HWS) – was part of the *Documenta X* in Orangerie, Kassel

in 1997. The project lasted for 3,5 months. Fifteen different groups were each responsible for a ten-day unit. Among the groups were the *Innercities* campaign from Germany; projects *No One Is Illegal* and *We Want Bandwidth* (<www.waag.org>); some pioneering projects in audio technology and culture (later formed into the “Xchange” Internet radio networks; see <www.re-lab.net>); loose groups oriented toward global media culture (<www.n5m.org>); the “Deep Europe/Syndicate” group from eastern Europe (<www.v2.nl/east>); a group compiling Internet chats under the title *README!*, later published in a book (<www.nettime.org>); as well as the first *Cyberfeminist International* (<www.obn.org>). An object of Hybrid Work-Space (as that of other similar events), was to create networks of European grassroots-level new media culture. As a result of HWS, a free database called “Media-lounge” was launched (<www.medialounge.net>): it is a compilation of information on 250 media art laboratories and communities.

The HWS in Kassel was followed by *The Revolting Temporary Media Lab*, a five-week project in Manchester from August to September 1998. The event was organized by Micz Flor (<www.yourserver.co.uk>). The social framework and functional environment differed radically in comparison to the large art audience gathered by the Documenta in Kassel. However, Lovink sees that it was put together by a “similar mix of people, themes, and low-tech approaches. It brought together local groups and communities to focus on practical outcomes, small presentations, and debates. Revolting had a special emphasis on spreading specific content via different media, such as a regular free newspaper, local radio, and the Net.”

2. *The TEMP Laboratory in Kiasma (October 8 – November 9, 1999)*

This is not an exhibition nor a conference, but a localization of a virtual network. People who'd otherwise be collaborating via the Internet, meet here for real.
– Geert Lovink (*Helsingin Sanomat*, October 23, 1999)

The third TEMP was realized (mainly) in the fifth-floor project room in Kiasma. Managed by Lovink and other coordinators, the “media laboratory” was active for over a month bringing together hundreds of designers, researchers, artists, activists, etc. TEMP was mainly a closed (production and creation) environment, but was open a couple of times a week in terms of lectures, debates, etc.

The main focus of the laboratory was not only general networking and exchange of ideas, but also exploring the concept of a production unit. One of the concrete goals of the laboratory was producing new substance for new media (culturally and/or politically motivated content production) with the help of local as well as international groups. The practicalities of TEMP in Finland were organized by a core group of about ten people. In addition to Geert Lovink, one must thank Perttu Rastas, the media intendent of Kiasma, and Seppo Koskela, the producer of TEMP, for their enthusiastic, open, and good-humored work for the project. TEMP was the product of close collaboration between such instances as the University of Lapland's Department of Media Studies, artists' community MUU ry (Mediabase), kaapeli.fi (Katto-Meny), the media workshop of KSL and Låhiradio (Local Radio).

In the following, I summarize the thematic structure and central focuses of the Kiasma TEMP:

2.1. *Cross the Border (Week 41/99)*

The week with the theme *Cross the Border* was arranged simultaneously with the EU summit in Tampere, Finland, which dealt with issues of European border control and immigration. It is well known that in the recent years the flow of immigrants especially from the eastern Europe has met with increasingly strict control. For example, the number and resources of the German border guards (*Bundesgrenzschutz, BGS*) have been considerably increased. On the other hand, such future EU countries as Poland are expected to restrict their border politics and thus reject such potential immigrants as refugees already in EU's sphere of interest.

This TEMP week was closely connected with the EU shadow summit organized by civil activists and alternative political groups in Tampere. The theme "Cross the border" tried to bring together people and groups who, despite their different perspectives and political initiatives all deal with the problematics of crossing borders. The original ambitious goal was that the week would be co-organized by immigrant and refugee communities in Finland, people living in Europe without required documents, artists on the run, activists against racism, etc. In this context it is worth mentioning the "United Artists under Sanctions" movement which brings together artists that are excluded from the international community due to their unsuitable passports.

There was also some political performance: Zoran Pantelic and Dragan Rakic of Yugoslavia traveled to Finland's eastern border with Seppo Koskela and Simo Hellsten who recorded the "performance." For a few moments, the Vaalimaa check point on no-man's land had a "traffic sign" warning of human beings in both Finnish and Russian. Their second traffic sign marked the border in the demonstration march in Tampere on October 16.

New media technology – especially the Internet – has opened new possibilities for civil activism in terms of communication, exchange of information, and "semiotic guerilla action." The central source of information and a "junction" of alternative cultures during TEMP was the Linux server (temp.kiasma.fi). Extra drama was provided by the Ministry of the Interior which informed the server's maintenance that they were going to confiscate the server and thus stop it from running (cf. the fate of Johan Helsingius's *penet* server some years ago). The activists' answer to the threat was typical of the digital age: the problematic pages were copied on a server in Holland and destroyed from the TEMP server.

2.2. *The Future State of Balkania (Week 42/99)*

This workshop formed a close continuation for the Syndicate meeting in Budapest in April 1999 (see colossus.v2.nl/syndicate/index_frames.html). The critical situation in Yugoslavia and Kosovo inspired then establishing a "virtual state" (a sort

of a “state of mind”) named the *Future State of Balkania*. The concept was tested in Budapest, and continued after the meeting through a mailing list.

With this as their starting point, the participants of the second week of TEMP simulated the virtual state of “Balkania.” Kiasma brought together artists and activists from Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, as well as outside the Balkan peninsula! During the week, issues of identity and future were addressed bearing in mind the motto that the Balkan torn apart by wars and conflicts cannot look into its history with respect. Therefore, there were attempts to rewrite the history by looking for new and different heroes and creating new signs to strengthen the unity and identity of the Balkans to replace the torn flags, burned passports, and blashed national hymns. Thus, the motive of the “Future State of Balkania” week was strongly political, but not administrative in the traditional sense. To quote an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*: “Although there are some traditional signs of a state, they are parodical and ironical; this is not what EU has planned for the future of the area.” (*HS*, October 23, 1999)

Simultaneously with the rapid expansion of Internet culture the situation of the European nation-states changed drastically during the 1990’s. We have witnessed the European process of integration managed from Brussels while the Soviet Union and Jugoslavia have fallen apart into particularistic nation-states. The Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek has become known for his texts on Hegel and Lacan, but also for his political opinions on the future of Balkan and other nations as well. In a way, the Balkania workshop at Kiasma was an attempt to answer Žižek’s challenge. The artists and activists from the area were encouraged to construct a provoking parallel reality. The starting point was that it had to be crucially different from the scarred and torn *status quo* of today. To quote from the week’s plan of action:

Artists and thinkers from the area are invited to construct a thought provoking parallel reality that, although deriving its meaning from the history and problems of the Balkans needs to be crucially different. Either utopian or pragmatic, it will add a virtual layer to the already layered map of the Balkans and investigate what would be needed to form a synthesis of conflicting historic views and colliding identities. The virtuality of Balkania offers numerous options to obtain such a synthesis. To name a few directions: manipulation of the time-factor, developing a semantic machinery to achieve consensus, working out new decision-making algorithms or altering the concept of identity through switches and merges.

According to Geert Lovink, “virtual states” are becoming an established phenomenon, a type of “virtual communities” (cf. Rheingold 1993). They range from various Utopian “idea forums” of political thinking to refugee republics and to computer game applications. According to media activists, a virtual state provides an opportunity to comment and criticize the conditions of the real world; it is a medium for fantasizing and simulating political possibilities.

During the week, among other things, there were attempts to deconstruct the sexism of web porn. In the words of Liisa Vähäkylä, the Croatian artist Darko Fritz “searched for porn on the net, sliced it up and showed how on the cutting board its sexism and subjugation become insignificant and random, as harmless as baking a pizza.”

2.3. *Linux Land / Nokia Country (Week 43/99)*

The basic problem concerning communication and information technology continues to be the lack of research carried out from the perspective of the humanities and social sciences. Accounts based on technical and techno-economic premises – as well as various strategies by governments and central administrative agencies – can be easily found. However, qualitative and critical research focusing on such issues as values, morals and social implications of technology is rare. This despite the fact that the role of information technology can be considered so central as to justify W. C. Zimmerli's view of it as the "cultural technology" (*Kulturtechnik*) of our time. It is this vacuum for which the "Linux Land/Nokia Country" week aimed at providing some answers.

A special issue in the critical research of technology and media is the overly optimistic and technocratic tone of the *rhetoric* of new technology. In the 19th century, great techno-optimistic expectations were directed towards new technical innovations (steam and electric power, railways, telegraph, etc.); in the contemporary political, economic, and even academic discourse there are similarly oversized, almost science fiction-like fantasies of the civilizing and educational effect of new technology. This seems to be the case especially in the United States, Scandinavia, and Finland, where technology has met with less "cultural resistance" than in, e.g., central European countries. One of the central themes of the "Linux/Nokia" week was in fact cultural differences of the "global village."

2.4. *Baltic Sea Media Space & Net.Radio (Week 44/99)*

The object of bringing together various new media project initiatives from the Baltic Sea countries was the (1) exchange of media art and (2) development of the possibilities of web culture between countries and societies. The object was establishing a Baltic Sea Media Space: a supportive network and a framework for virtual activity.

The workshop focused on such issues as micro culture and majority/minority media, and themes such as the importance of creating independent new media networks and microcultural projects. Cooperation between communities and projects for funding was also a central issue (one option being the Interfund).

The ideas were put to practice through live radio shows on the Internet; the Xchange net radio meeting was planned to be held in Riga, Latvia in August 2000. The Baltic Sea Media Space was coordinated by Rasa Smite from e-lab in Riga and Terhi Penttilä from MUU ry. It might be surprising that Latvia played such a central role, but there are reasons for it. In the slightly overly optimistic words of Liisa Vähäkylä: "Riga has become a media city. E-lab has attracted a London DJ or an Australian conceptual artist to move there. Other centers of the new world and new optimism are Vilna or Minsk in Belarus where new kinds of new media centers are established. Media gives space for all, media is space for all."

2.5. *eko.katastrofi* (Week 44/99)

The aim of the media art association “katastro.fi” was an ecologically sound project with an alternative bend. In the tradition of the avantgarde, the project included *Earth Power*, a documentary film about ecological alternative communities by Marko Yliniemi; and the Internet project “eko.katastro.fi.” To quote from the description of the latter:

“The tangle of ecological sites on the net combines observations from the point of view of the expert as well as of the man on the street: it brings together the grassroots-level experience with scientific models. The aim of the project is to create a chain of causes and effects that can be modified by the public; at the same time, the complexity of causal connections start to take shape. The effects of one’s consuming habits are visualized in a personal eco-profile; examples of good ecological practices can be shared with others.”

3. *Other Events in the TEMP Laboratory: Seminars, Visions, Criticism*

In addition to the projects discussed above, there were several interesting seminars and panel discussions in the TEMP. Here is a brief listing of the most important ones:

3.1. *Does Finland Need an Independent Media Center? (October 28, 1999)*

During fall 1999 there was much discussion about the need for a *media center* that would specialize in media studies as well as the production of Finnish media art and media culture. The aim of this panel discussion was to survey the need for such a media center and the interest of various instances in establishing one. The discussion was chaired by Perttu Rastas, the media intendent in Kiasma, and Minna Tarkka, professor at the University of Industrial and Applied Arts. According to Tarkka,

an analysis of media technology and critical discussion of its meanings are central cultural political fields – especially in Finland which has become a kind of a common global practice field for versatile media technological applications and hardware. [...] Artists in general and so called media artists and new media designers especially build bridges between media technology and the larger cultural structures in the society. [...] They] create motives and functional horizons that make us all use (and buy) various media products. Using a variety of media is a central form of spending in an information society.

The Kiasma meeting was addressed by Jouni Mykkänen (The Finnish Film Foundation), Tetta Jounela (Ministry of Trade and Industry), Henrik Gröhn (Lume Media Center), Marikki Hakola (Kroma Ltd.), Marita Liulia (Medeia Ltd.), Mika Hämäläinen (Satama Interactive), Juha Huuskonen (katastro.fi), Terhi Penttilä (MUU ry.), Juha Samola (Promotion Centre for Audiovisual Culture in Finland), Asko Mäkelä (The Finnish Museum of Photography), Teppo Turkki (Finnet Corporation), Otto Romanowski (Sibelius Academy), and artist Harri Larjosto, among others. The tone of the speeches and spontaneous discussion was strongly in favor of

establishing a new media center. The idea of a coordinating and unifying meeting place for Finnish media researchers, artists, and designers was rather unanimously favored by government officials, artists as well as by the corporate world.

Let's take a brief look at the situation elsewhere in Europe. In central Europe various media centers and laboratories have been established by three instances: firstly, by universities for the needs of media studies programs (e.g., Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne, Germany, see <www.khm.de>); secondly, as offshoots of larger media institutions (e.g., the ZKM [Zentrum für Kunst und Medien] Image Media Institute in Karlsruhe, Germany, see <www.zkm.de>; or the Ars Electronica Center FutureLab in Linz, Austria, see <www.aec.at>); and thirdly, by organizations of artists and media activists (e.g., the V2_Lab in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, see <www.v2.nl>; and Waag in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, see <www.waag.org>).

The Kiasma meeting emphasized the importance of an independent cooperative unit made up by businesses, universities, and designers. In my own speech I summed up the general pro-media center attitude on behalf of the entire field of media scholars and researchers. I also made a request to invest not only in hardware, seminars, etc., but also in a state-of-the-art media studies library and archive.

An issue in itself is defining the focus of such a media center. Although it might sound somewhat too ambitious and old-fashioned, personally I would suggest an independent and theoretically oriented research unit similar to the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt, Germany. Such an organization could counterbalance the profit orientation and business dependence of the academic world. All in all, I am strongly in favor of such a critical and untrendy tradition in the 21st century media studies.

3.2. *Night of the Critic (October 29, 1999)*

This discussion session was coordinated by Mikael Böök, a computer network activist and producer of the "Sanoma Open" on-line discussion forum (<www.kaapeli.fi/sanoma-open>). One of the central issues of the meeting was whether e-mail and the world wide web are literature: is the Internet part of the "Republic of Text"? Furthermore: how much have literary critics contributed to the new and developing Internet literature? Have critics been able to exploit the web's critical potential?

The communicative, artistic, intellectual, and critical aspects of the Internet have been under development for under a decade. The Night of the Critic aimed at a critical assesment of literature published on the Internet, electronic poems, classics as text attachments, experiential hypertexts, databases of essays and articles, critical discussion forums, etc. Participants included literature critic Jarmo Papinniemi and Leena Krohn who has written many texts about digital culture (cf. <www.kaapeli.fi/critics>).

3.3. *Media, Millennium, Zeitgeist. Critical Viewpoints on the Information Society (October 30, 1999)*

“Information society,” “network society,” and “media society” have become central concepts to describe the contemporary culture and society as well as the “spirit” of our times loaded with communication and technology (*Zeitgeist*; cf. Inkinen 1999b, 1999c). It has been said that the contemporary techno society is characterized by a rapid *transformation* that shakes the familiar structures and traditions of our societies. Furthermore, it has been claimed that human thinking, daily activities, and the survival of the entire *homo sapiens* are closely related to the issue of technological innovations and media technological systems. According to the boldest claims a new evolutionary human being is developing: the *homo cyber*, grown into computer networks and digital technology.

The aim of the “Media, Millennium, *Zeitgeist*” session was to analyze these issues on the basis of introductory remarks by academic researchers. Rather than a traditional seminar, it was intended as a more spontaneous meeting. Open to public, the seminar room in Kiasma was filled with people who wanted to contribute. Discussion was lively, but unfortunately as the chair of the meeting, I had to end the discussion after a few “encores” when we ran out of time. The discussion is outlined in further detail below.

3.4. “Utopia and Crisis” Seminar (November 6, 1999)

Towards the end of the TEMP month, the exhibition *Cities on the Move* was opened in Kiasma. Curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the exhibition had received much attention and media coverage even before its opening. Its focus on urban conditions in cities in southeastern Asia, the exhibition has traveled around the world.

The exhibition and its theme – the changing Asian city – were discussed in a seminar arranged in connection with TEMP. In addition to the curators, the main speakers were Cedric Price, architect and theoretician of urban development from London, and Shigeru Ban, a Japanese architect known for his recyclable materials and temporary buildings; Ban also designed the architecture of the exhibition. The participating artists also presented their work and contributed to the discussion.

3.5. *The Concluding Exhibition of the TEMP Laboratory (November 9–14, 1999)*

The concluding exhibition of the TEMP laboratory was put together by Liisa Vähäkylä who calls herself a “curator, media activist, journalist, critic, artist, and producer.” The texts, www pages, e-mail messages, videos, manifests, etc. produced during the project as well as the articles covering the events were displayed.

Vähäkylä’s idea was to analyze the transfer to the “post-media” era in which the role of media has changed from a traditional messenger to something else: “As media lose their meaning as shapers of the public opinion, they also lose their power. On the other hand, this increases the individual’s responsibility in choosing

what to believe. As the society becomes more pluralistic, we must accept the fact that there is the new left and the new right, racism and love that crosses borders. [...] With media technology any event can be recorded from the first planning session until the conclusion; this recording can be broadcast without any outside media institutions. It is increasingly easy to catch media that get stuck on their own status for propping up their value and subjective opinions. On the other hand, this might challenge journalists to work better without ever underestimating their audience.”

4. *Life in the “Linux Land” and “Nokia Country” (October 24–30, 1999)*

Finland is one of the leading countries in terms of information society. [...] Thus, has Nokia-Finland succeeded in its development? Many would say ‘yes.’ The financial indicators of the nation are positive. In the early 1990’s a land called Finland needed a utopia, a strategy for the future to believe in. In addition to the financial and political changes the small country provided a suitable environment both in terms of available technology and level of education to create a success story led by Nokia.

– Helena Tapper in Kiasma (October 30, 1999).

In the 1990’s, Nokia became a synonym for Finnish success. All around the world cellular phones affect people’s lives shaping both public and private space and communication culture. But what are the educational values, ethics, and technological ideas on which this development is based? What kind of a financial agenda do the technocrats and new ruling class promote? How tightly is Nokia connected with the state government, politics of science and technology, or, for that matter, Sonera?

Helena Tapper, who has studied information societies, says that “nations need success stories in which to believe. Finland has received hers in the form of an information society. But now it would be time to start paying more attention to culture and the quality of living. What kind of nation, that kind of culture. What kind of culture and society, that kind of media. Media is the teller of a nation’s stories. Lately Finnish media have been dedicated to reiterating Finland’s technology-based success story.”

What about Linux and the open source? Open source for all, profits for only a few? How should the political economics of new media be? What kind of critical tools do we need to develop in order to better understand digital culture, electronic shopping, and e-business? Who will define the standards of the future and own the technological backbones? What is the role of an independent, alternative-searching (new) media culture in the midst of an informationalist general development (Castells)?

The aim of the *Linux Land/Nokia Country* week was creating intensive debate on globalization, information society, and the cultural aspects of new media. A central issue was the significance of multimedia and cellular phones in Finnish communication culture. The event was curated by Toni Alatalo (University of Oulu) and Sam Inkinen (University of Lapland).

It has become a cliché that Finland represents the forefront of computer culture, the *technological avantgarde*. In addition to being called an ultramodern society, Finland is also – almost routinely – called a pioneer of information and communications technology. Against this background, it came as no surprise that the “tech-

nology bible” *Wired*, the magazine for electronic culture, discussed Finland in 1999 from two points of view: namely, the open source based Linux operating system and Nokia (the September issue of *Wired* had a total of 17 pages of “Nokia hype”).

Linux and Nokia could be seen as parts of an ongoing revolution in information and communication technology. However, the starting points of these projects are opposite to each other. Although Nokia is not (at least not yet) Microsoft, and the companies are hardly the best of friends, these mega companies (cf. an.org/mega-corpse) do have many characteristics in common. Their growth is largely based on buying smaller companies for their resources and innovations, and establishing strategic alliances with other companies. Workers are recruited in masses, as conveyed by the (self)ironic slogan “Nokia – Collecting People.” Market activities are financed by issuing shares.

The roots of the Linux interface, however, are in the left-wing “GNU” project, originally established by Richard Stallman, “the Saint of Emacs of the Free Software Foundation.” Although Linus Torvalds, the Finnish innovator of Linux, or a large part of the Linux movement have never been identified with this early alternative culture, even the most commercial and business-enhanced Linux product must include a “Gnu Public Licence” – and an ideological manifest.

The mortal enemy of various free software movements is Microsoft. This issue has been addressed by, e.g., the so-called Halloween documentaries brought into daylight by Eric Raymond. What about Nokia? Does size give it the right to try to dominate all aspects of Finnish economy and culture – in other words, is Nokia, too, becoming an “enemy”? And how will the future citizens feel about their life with their Nokia TVs, Linux cell phones, and Sonera evening news? These are questions that may not have been addressed enough. In the end, what difference do these things make in people’s everyday lives? In the corporate world the opinion is naturally clear: “The company produces what the clients want.”

During the “Linux Land/Nokia Country” week, research focused on four aspects and themes: firstly, the financial and political connections of Finland’s leading figures in the field of information and communications technology; secondly, the political, financial, and cultural significance of free software such as Linux (introduction by director Hannu Puttonen); thirdly, standards, copyrights, and synergy (integration, convergence) in different fields of industry; fourthly, media, culture, and social criticism, which “test the concepts” (Hegel).

Most of the events during the “Linux/Nokia” week were broadcast live on the Internet. Towards the end, Geert Lovink described the laboratory as “playful.” In the words of curator Toni Alatalo, this “felt wonderful. Both on the net and in the project room in Kiasma there seemed to be a kind of an improvised performance going on. ‘Fun’ is often the most important thing in computer and hacker cultures, and at times things got pretty wild.” Surprisingly, the events had also some nostalgic aspects:

[...] we who grew up playing computer games were stirred to find so many of the classics on the net. Over the decade our perspectives have changed, so maybe we also understand the games better. For example, Henkka [a computer veteran] made interesting comment on his “Green Barret” hypnosis. [...] I also did a small experiment by playing a song and asking how many could recognize it. Most people recognized the music, but couldn’t remember which game it was from until I revealed it: “Samantha Fox Strip Poker.”

Furthermore, one of the more exotic aims of the “Linux/Nokia” week was combining information technology with *dance* and *performance*. This was concretely manifested in the final social gathering on October 30 when the Erä group (<<http://an.org/era>>) of the Oulu Dance Center “JoJo” performed to the noise of the crowd and a variety of ambient music in the background.

5. *Media, Millennium, Zeitgeist. Critical Views on the Information Society*

The climax of the “Linux/Nokia” week was an open discussion entitled “Media, Millennium, Zeitgeist. Critical Views on the Information Society,” held in Kiasma on October 30. The aims of the meeting were summarized in the invitation:

Time and Zeitgeist? Media, technology, and values? Is the recent enthusiastic and optimistic talk of an “information society” substantiated? Has Finnish culture forgotten the traditional humanistic and aesthetic ideals in its focus on building a technocratic “Nokia-Finland”? Does the third millennium open in front of us through utopias or anti-utopias? What kind of ethical and cultural philosophical questions does the recent development raise? What about the qualitative changes caused by the new technology?

The meaning of the debate was to give a critical summary of the central themes, ideas, and results of the week. The invited speakers were philosopher, PhD Pekka Himanen (University of Helsinki); lecturer, PhD Kari Kallioniemi (University of Turku); professor, PhD (Soc.Sc.) Tarmo Malmberg (University of Vaasa); researcher, PhD Ilkka Mäyrä (University of Tampere); researcher, Lic. Soc. Sc. Helena Tapper (University of Helsinki); and professor, PhD Mauri Ylä-Kotola (University of Lapland). Doctor Kallioniemi had to cancel his speech due to an illness, which was a great loss in terms of views on popular culture.

The discussion began with a “classic” debate on whether the information society is (going to be) divided into new social classes: a local proletariat that is estranged from information technology; a middle class that adapts to e-mail, net surfing, etc.; and a global hyper-elite. Helena Tapper, among others, noted that she is waiting to find out about Finland’s values, risks, and investments in the new millennium:

In addition to the continuous development of technology, our values must include communality and respecting individual citizens’ possibilities to realize themselves as part of the nation. The current vision points to a division: the lottery people by their television sets vs. the cosmopolitan Internet people surfing the web. Can they meet even virtually? What will represent community and solidarity in the new millennium? Are cosmopolitan technology experts the elite that will lead the development of the world, after the stock prices have first dictated the direction [...]? What is the meaning of state and political decision-making in such an environment?

The question of the role and meaning of a nation-state has been addressed in several recent studies on, e.g., globalization (e.g., Alasuutari & Ruuska 1999). The question is becoming ever more central not only in terms of a nation-state, but also in terms of the Nordic concept of civil society and welfare state. We should hear not only the opinion leaders, but also the citizens that have become increasingly passive politically. To quote Liisa Vähäkylä on the feelings of the younger generations:

On the other hand, who should be responsible if the state as a lower form of a mega brand interests no more? Are we still interested in the e-mail and domain addresses reserved to us by the state of Finland if we have been using our own hotmails and nokia.coms for years? What do we need an electronic I.D. card à la Finland for if there's plenty of credit on the American Express or Eurocard?

The relevance of history was introduced by Prof. Dr. Tarmo Malmberg who referred to one of the initiators of Finnish national identity, philosopher J. V. Snellman (1806–81). According to Malmberg, it is illustrative to compare two Finnish strategies for an “information/knowledge society,” i.e., Snellman's in the 1840's and the recent plans by the Ministry of Education. According to Malmberg,

the idea of an information society, as it is transmitted to us from Socrates through Kant, is to lead the society with information. As such it represents the long project of the Enlightenment in Western culture. For Snellman, the information society is realized through three media: the newspaper, literature, and the university. The newspaper is the realization of public opinion which is necessary for the self-awareness of Finnish society. Finnish literature is the realization of the process of cultural maturing which requires expression in one's mother tongue. Finally, the university prepares people for society – people in whom is combined the personally absorbed and tradition-based conviction of the importance of knowledge and advancing common good.

As Malmberg ironically pointed out, the point of view in the documents of the Ministry of Education and other central administrative boards differs drastically from Snellmanian ideals and policies of education. No longer is the development of newspapers and other media regulated by social ideals; rather, they are lead by the technological integration of different media. Overall, the viewpoint on national culture (e.g., literature) is either technological or economical or both. Even the university's main job is to serve the competitive state that needs externally regulated project researchers rather than self-regulated, independent personalities. As Malmberg summed it, “Do we need to ask which strategy is more attractive?”

In the discussion, recent strategies by governments and central administrative boards were constantly referred to. These issues are closely related to such fields as media education and pedagogy as well. Keeping in line with the European Union's strategic policies (so-called *Bangemann report* and follow-up reports) as well as the policies of other Western governments and their administrative boards for the development of education, in *Education, Training and Research in the Information Society. A National Strategy* (1996) Finland's Ministry of Education has also defined computer science and the applications of new media technology as a crucial part of developing education:

The effects of information technology are revolutionizing almost every sector of society. Few areas of human activity remain untouched, the results are felt most strongly and immediately in the economy, in business and industry, as well as in education, training and research.

As the information society develops, information and the know-how based on it will become more and more decisive as factors of production. Networking based on the application of information and communications technology, especially telecommunications, is a major trend. As well as creating new ways of communicating and working, information technology has made possible new methods of producing and distributing products and services.

Prof. Dr. Ylä-Kotola pointed out that such political administrative papers have become a “Song of Solomon” which is humbly and blindly respected. He also considered the recent university discourse on this inconsistent: on the one hand, it is being emphasized that state and the civil society are (almost alarmingly) losing their importance; on the other hand, what has become the basis of general discussion, pragmatic decision-making, and distribution of finances are the documents and papers from various ministries. Furthermore, Ylä-Kotola drew attention to the latest developments in new media, such as virtual environments and the “bioparadigm,” and their role as social contexts shaping everyday life (cf. Ylä-Kotola 2000).

“The metanarrative is back,” was Helena Tapper’s central message in her introductory speech. All through the 1990’s cultural and social scientists have been trying to demonstrate that “grand stories” and history are over: reality and society have been seen as a mosaic; the relationships of time and space have been understood as reformed, reality has been understood as multi-layered and constantly changing. According to this view, reality is something that is being shattered into the sea of multilayered links in the “hyper world.”

When philosophers look at the veracity of a phenomenon, they look at its correspondence in reality. In today’s world of multilayered virtual realities the construction of common meanings, the experience of sharing something in common, is becoming increasingly limited. According to Tapper, this is being replaced by “worlds of individuals,” where solidarity is based on (monadistic?) personal needs and changes rapidly. Future is projected in the ultimatum: *I want it all and I want it now*. Moreover, Tapper referred to the discourse related to the public crisis: “We have stepped into a new era after the project of world construction; the name of this project is *global information society*. Earlier we talked about the information society, but quickly changed to talking about the global information society.”

In the “Media, Millennium, Zeitgeist” event the exchange of ideas was at times quite intensive and dwelled on such concepts as globalization, digital optimism, and technological determinism. According to Tapper, what is relevant about the construction of a new, Utopian Grand Story is the fact that once again the central agent of change is *not the human being but technology*. It has been argued that information and communication technology is the central factor in catalyzing the world’s change (clear example of technological determinism). Moreover, it has been claimed as the basis for economic, cultural, and social crises.

These (assumed) changes are local, regional, as well as global. Different levels also influence each other: for example, through media culture the global is present also locally. Previously such so-called *issues of glocalization* (glocal = global + local) have been addressed by, e.g., Roland Robertson, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck (1997). To sum it up:

The information society is a futuristic utopia project and a process in which information technology enables the integration of communication media, increase of communication and information flows, and changes in organizations (which become less hierarchical); it is also the motor of economic growth. The development of information technology is seen as a possibility, not as a risk. What is essential for this development is that economic growth is based on growth in the field of information and communication technology. At the same time, financial flows separate themselves from practical economy. Thus, information technology becomes both the field of economic growth, as in Finland, as well as the enabler of financial flows and the integration of global economy. (Tapper)

Evident in the recent academic studies as well as in the general cultural discussion is the need for a critical diagnosis of the contemporary age. Incidentally, in their talks both Tarmo Malmberg and Pekka Himanen referred to sociologist Manuel Castells. Indeed, both in terms of his bibliography (1996, 1997, 1998) as well as his biography, Castells seems like a credible commentator for the networked, multi-cultural world. Born in Catalonia, he has become a cosmopolitan both mentally and physically: he fled Franco to France in the 1960's; moved to California in the 1980's; and currently travels lecturing around the world. His aim has been a *total synthesis in the contemporary era* that takes into account the social changes caused by globalization, digitalization, and informationalism.

In his address, Doctor Himanen briefly mentioned his cooperation with Castells, touched upon the values and paradoxes in the business world, and drew attention to the "Linux spirit" and hacker ethos coming from cellars and garages. Several projects that start on the grass-roots level (cf. Inkinen & Salmi 1996) are characterized by alternative-mindedness and (semi)anarchistic spirit, but also by general enthusiasm and optimism. Characteristic of the postmodern era, commercial and uncommercial interests are not necessarily seen as complete opposites in these circles. An essential question in the development of digital (media) culture over the next few years has to do with the change in technology, identities, and our perception of the human being (cf. Inkinen, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d). Doctor Ilkka Mäyrä descriptively summed up his observations on "unpure media culture":

- Rather than thinking of our cultural situation in terms of unidimensional information policies, we should consider it in terms of multilayeredness and mixing. There are people in our society whose thinking is strongly influenced by the agricultural or industrial society, while there is also the younger generation for whom the information society is already everyday life.
- There are several realities and they are related to each individual's reality and wholeness of life. Instead of being so technology-centered, we should consider possibilities for an "unpure media culture." That would be a flexible way of accepting different ways of thinking, based on true multiculturalism.
- This kind of thinking is supported by the concept of "hybrid." Each of us is the result of some kind of collisions and mixes: there is no one source from where the influences that form our thinking would come.
- Living media culture can answer this kind of "mix of media" by developing "media hybrids" which is a form of media culture that combines traditional and new media.
- New technology might not always be an "extension" of man, something that makes life and living better, but also a "prosthetic," a kind of a surrogate or an attachment. Thus, it has positive potential, but also (especially if one becomes addicted to technology) negative aspects symptomatic of our time and lifestyle.
- What is central to "unpure media culture" is the concept of *empowerment* and the practical question of how to make new technology truly advance different people's capability to function and feel potent. One example is using technically simple solutions. Some sort of "retro techno aesthetics" can produce more interesting and liberated media culture than automatically embracing the latest tools and trying to keep up with new technology.

6. Conclusion

I conclude by summing up the central ideas brought up during the TEMP project. Media based on images, sound, and text – and their combination, i.e., *multimedia* – becoming increasingly dominant in our culture means that interpreting, decoding,

and understanding multimedial messages becomes more important. Thus, the aesthetic values that have always been a part of education are renewed, but also emphasized.

In the next few years, the effects of computer networks and hypermedia will reach all aspects of life and practically all people, even those who are not directly involved or interested in them. In terms of substance, however, the quality of new media has been satisfactory at best. Firstly, we can criticize the focuses of content on the Internet and CD-ROMs: for the most part, they represent (compared to, e.g., books) educationally questionable applications of “edutainment,” “infotainment,” and “tittytainment.” As Lovink points out, people, including members of relevant groups, are starting to demand more substance from new media.

Secondly, the narratives in new media can be criticized. Applied models have often been found in literary and cinematic culture which is often more flexible and imaginative than the link structures in hypermedia. Despite all the inspiration, visions, and overwhelming promises, it can be said that new media is still dominantly written along the lines of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In the future, special attention has to be paid to the semiotic-cognitive development of link structures in hyper and multimedia works; furthermore, designing new kinds of inter- and intrafaces must be taken into consideration.

There has been much effort to make the general public familiar with new media and information technology. However, the substance of networks – their “mysteries” as well as many central aspects – has remained invisible. It is difficult to explain or even visualize what in fact is happening in mailing lists, news groups, or chatrooms. Various demonstrations can give a hint, but easily make these activities seem banal and the exchange of information seem like dead data.

Finally, the meaning of such happenings as TEMP is in the *political* and *tactical* exploitation of new media. According to Lovink, “the best way to stimulate the production process is to meet in a real space, to make the loose virtual connections concrete, to commit oneself to the multiple and messy circumstances in real time – aiming at presenting actual results to the audience (and the possible future co-workers). And then to return to the virtual space and conditions of the online world.” As strange as it may sound in today’s society, a central role in such “alternative work” can be given to *political art*. In the words of Vähäkylä:

Does art need to be political? Isn’t it enough that it is aesthetic? Advertising is aesthetic, or at least it tries to be aesthetic in the eyes of the target group.

Advertising is everywhere. Before there was advertising, it was easier to see art, or things that were made only because they were aesthetic. Nowadays you don’t notice them anymore. The pure aesthetic nature of things gets lost in the fuss, therefore quiet places like museums are needed. [...] How do we then shape our communication when we have more possibilities for it than ever before. Do we use advanced communication to talk about, for example, those things that normally are not talked about.

At the turn of the millennium, media activists emphasize that new media not only record the past; nor do they merely offer an access to existing information. Instead, “the most active and attractive aspect [of new media] is related to communication, cooperation, and cultural exchange.” This is the core of contemporary computer culture. The situation is aggravated by the fact the large media companies see these

innovations in a different light: for the ruling “virtual elite” new media is mainly electronic commerce and “e-business.” From their point of view, new media and information technology offers efficiency, flexibility of skilled labor, and control over the online-behavior of the masses.

As Lovink puts it, “[t]he role of the former welfare state is ambivalent, to say the least. On the one hand, it was the state which did the groundwork and built the costly infrastructure, while this very state now is selling out, cutting social costs to zero, installing a new regime of (private) control, and policing its populations (mainly young people). Communication means noise to them, empty exchanges that can be studied to maximize their attention profit. Users are being reduced to potential buyers of goods and services, controlled by companies and police units.”

Like an echo, Lovink’s “preaching” actually partly resembles the essential message of media activism in the 1960’s and 1970’s:

This is not a doomsday scenario. It is becoming a reality, despite all naive, neoliberal talks of bright cyberfutures, dating from the early days of the Internet hype. People are indeed becoming aware of the dark aspects of the use of digital technologies. One way not to give up on these positive, utopian aspects is to increase awareness, to fight conspiracy mythologies, and, most of all, to organize scattered users in the struggle against surveillance and corporate takeover. Should we still dream of interactivity and other, more accessible interfaces? Access to what? Are portals with the CNN type of WebTV the only remaining option now that the Net is rapidly approaching its controlled and regulated status of mass medium? And is this return of the real closing down our phantasies? How would we define tactical use of media? Which particular connections between text, audio, image (and noise) do we find useful? In what way could radio, Internet, print and real-time/on-line events be combined?

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The quotations in this article are from comments and e-mail messages during the event, the concluding exhibition assembled by Liisa Vähäkylä, and the Kiasma tabloid *TEMP – temporary media lab* (1999; texts by Geert Lovink)

For more information:

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