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The ABC of Tactical Media

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Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap 'do it yourself' media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. Tactical media do not just report events, as they are never impartial they always participate and it is this that more than anything separates them from mainstream media.

A distinctive tactical ethic and aesthetic that has emerged, which is culturally influential from MTV through to recent video work made by artists. It began as a quick and dirty aesthetic although it is just another style it (at least in its camcorder form) has come to symbolize a verite for the 90's.

Tactical media are media of crisis, criticism and opposition. This is both the source their power, ("anger is an energy" : John Lydon), and also their limitation. their typical heroes are; the activist, Nomadic media warriors, the prankster, the hacker, the street rapper, the camcorder kamikaze, they are the happy negatives, always in search of an enemy. But once the enemy has been named and vanquished it is the tactical practitioner whose turn it is to fall into crisis. Then (despite their achievements) its easy to mock them, with catch phrases of the right, "politically correct" "Victim culture" etc. More theoretically the identity politics, media critiques and theories of representation, that became the foundation of much western tactical media are themselves in crisis. These ways of thinking are widely seen as, carping and repressive remnants of an outmoded humanism.

To believe that issues of representation are now irrelevant is to believe that the very real life chances of groups and individuals are not still crucially affected by the available images circulating in any given society. And the fact that we no longer see the mass media as the sole and centralized source of our self definitions might make these issues more slippery but that does not make them redundant.

Tactical media a qualified form of humanism. A useful antidote to both, what Peter Lamborn Wilson described, as "the unopposed rule of money over human beings". But also as an antidote to newly emerging forms of technocratic scientism which under the banner of post-humanism tend to restrict discussions

of human use and social reception. What makes Our Media Tactical? In 'The Practice of Every Day Life' De Certeau analyzed popular culture not as a 'domain of texts or artifacts but rather as a set of practices or operations performed on textual or text like structures'. He shifted the emphasis from representations in their own right to the 'uses' of representations. In other words how do we as consumers use the texts and artifacts that surround us. And the answer, he suggested, was 'tactically'. That is in far more creative and rebellious ways than had previously been imagined. He described the process of consumption as a set of tactics by which the weak make use of the strong. He characterized the rebellious user (a term he preferred to consumer) as tactical and the presumptuous producer (in which he included authors, educators, curators and revolutionaries) as strategic. Setting up this dichotomy allowed him to produce a vocabulary of tactics rich and complex enough to amount to a distinctive and recognizable aesthetic. An existential aesthetic. An aesthetic of Poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring. Clever tricks, the hunter's cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.

Awareness of this tactical/strategic dichotomy helped us to name a class of producers of who seem uniquely aware of the value of these temporary reversals in the flow of power. And rather than resisting these rebellions do everything in their power to amplify them. And indeed make the creation of spaces, channels and platforms for these reversals central to their practice. We dubbed their (our) work tactical media.

Tactical Media are never perfect, always in becoming, performative and pragmatic, involved in a continual process of questioning the premises of the channels they work with. This requires the confidence that the content can survive intact as it travels from interface to interface. But we must never forget that hybrid media has its opposite its nemesis, the Medialen Gesamtkunstwerk. The final program for the electronic Bauhaus.

Of course it is much safer to stick to the classic rituals of the underground and alternative scene. But tactical media are based on a principle of flexible response, of working with different coalitions, being able to move between the different entities in the vast media landscape without betraying their original motivations. Tactical Media may be hedonistic, or zealously euphoric. Even fashion hypes have their uses. But it is above all mobility that most characterizes the tactical practitioner. The desire and capability to combine or jump from one media to another creating a continuous supply of mutants and hybrids. To cross borders, connecting and re-wiring a variety of disciplines and always taking full advantage of the free spaces in the media that are continually appearing because of the pace of technological change and regulatory uncertainty.

Although tactical media include alternative media, we are not restricted to that

category. In fact we introduced the term tactical to disrupt and take us beyond the rigid dichotomies that have restricted thinking in this area, for so long, dichotomies such as amateur Vs professional, alternative Vs mainstream. Even private Vs public.

Our hybrid forms are always provisional. What counts are the temporary connections you are able to make. Here and now, Not some vaporware promised for the future. But what we can do on the spot with the media we have access to. Here in Amsterdam we have access to local TV, digital cities and fortresses of new and old media. In other places they might have theater, street demonstrations, experimental film, literature, photography.

Tactical media's mobility connects it to a wider movement of migrant culture. Espoused by the proponents of what Nie Ascherson described as the stimulating pseudo science of Nomadism. 'The human race say its exponents are entering a new epoch of movement and migration. The subjects of history once the settled farmers and citizens, have become the migrants, the refugees the gastarbeiters, the asylum seekers, the urban homeless.'

An exemplary example of the tactical can be seen in the work of the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko who 'perceives how the hordes of the displaced that now occupy the public space of cities squares, parks or railway station concourses which were once designed by a triumphant middle class to celebrate the conquest of its new political rights and economic liberties. Wodiczko thinks that these occupied spaces form new agoras. which should be used for statements. 'The artist', he says, 'needs to learn how to operate as a nomadic sophist in a migrant polis.'

Like other migrant media tacticians Wodiczko has studied the techniques by which the weak become stronger than the oppressors by scattering, by becoming centreless, by moving fast across the physical or media and virtual landscapes. 'The hunted must discover the ways become the hunter.'

But capital is also radically deterritorialized. This is why we like being based in a building like De Waag, an old fortress in the center of Amsterdam. We happily accept the paradox of centers of tactical media. As well as castles in the air, we need fortresses of bricks and mortar, to resist a world of unconstrained nomadic capital. Spaces to plan not just improvise and the possibility of capitalizing on acquired advantages, has always been the preserve of 'strategic' media. As flexible media tacticians, who are not afraid of power, we are happy to adopt this approach ourselves.

Every few years we do a Next 5 Minutes conference on tactical media from around the world. Finally we have a base (De Waag) from which we hope to consolidate and build for the longer term. We see this building as a place to plan regular events and meetings, including coming The Next 5 Minutes. We

see the coming The Next 5 Minutes (in January 1999), and discussions leading up to it, as part of a movement to create an antidote to what Peter Lamborn Wilson described, as 'the unopposed rule of money over human beings.'

(This manifest was written for the opening of the web site of the Tactical Media Network, hosted by De Waag, the Society for Old and New Media: <http://www.waag.org/tmn>). a critique of this manifesto by Peter Lamborn Wilson can be read in the KRITIK section.