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The Italian Countercultural Digital Network

**for the "Crime and Political Aspects in New Media Art" Seminar
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The Italian Countercultural Digital Network

1. Abstract

Focus of my paper is to present to an international public the multitude of Italian media and net hacktivism. The aim is to give an inside view into this very heterogeneous and often so far rarely recognized Italian scene, to provide links to the field of art as well as politics. Furthermore it attempts to connect and interlink Italian and international projects.

Main topics of this presentation are:

- (a) definition of Hacktivism in Italy: how the word hacker is not related to crime;
- (b) the Italian countercultural communities: how to create networking operating at the border of artistic, political and technological action;
- (b) hacker community and queer network in Italy: how to integrate sensual and provocative aspects in the computer culture...and enjoy it!

2. Hacktivism in Italy

What is a countercultural digital network? Perhaps the best answer could be given analysing the Italian movement of digital counterculture which exists for more than twenty years and has a strong backing in the country. In Italy, technological, artistic and political activism is closely interconnected in a common network spread over the whole country and consisting of collectives, activists and artists alike. Their common denominator is the development of alternative and independent ways of producing and disseminating information, cultural consciousness and communication through independent and collective projects. These people use diverse media (computers, video, television, radio and magazines) and deal with technological experimentation, or **hacktivism**, depending on the terminology used in Italy, where the political component is a central theme.

Hacktivism is the fusion of hacking and activism, technology and political action. Hacktivism is the use of one's collective or individual ingenuity to circumvent constraints. It means to hack clever solutions to complex problems using computer and Internet technology. Hacktivism is a continually evolving and open process; its tactics and methodology are not static. In this sense no one owns hacktivism - it has

no prophet and no canonized literature; hacktivism is a rhizomatic, open-source phenomenon.

In this point of view, hackers are not just those who destructively intrude computer systems or spread viruses into the Internet (and who should be more correctly called "crackers"), but those who share the good of knowledge, fight for free communication and open access to information, with the objective of a public domain of knowledge. This political aim of 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, non-commercial use of hardware and technology, the basic concepts of hacker ethics, are referred as political objectives.

Furthermore, the Italian counterculture network links the concept of hacking to the concept of art, aside from the fact that hacking itself could be considered a form of art with its own experiments with code, specific language and specific aesthetics.

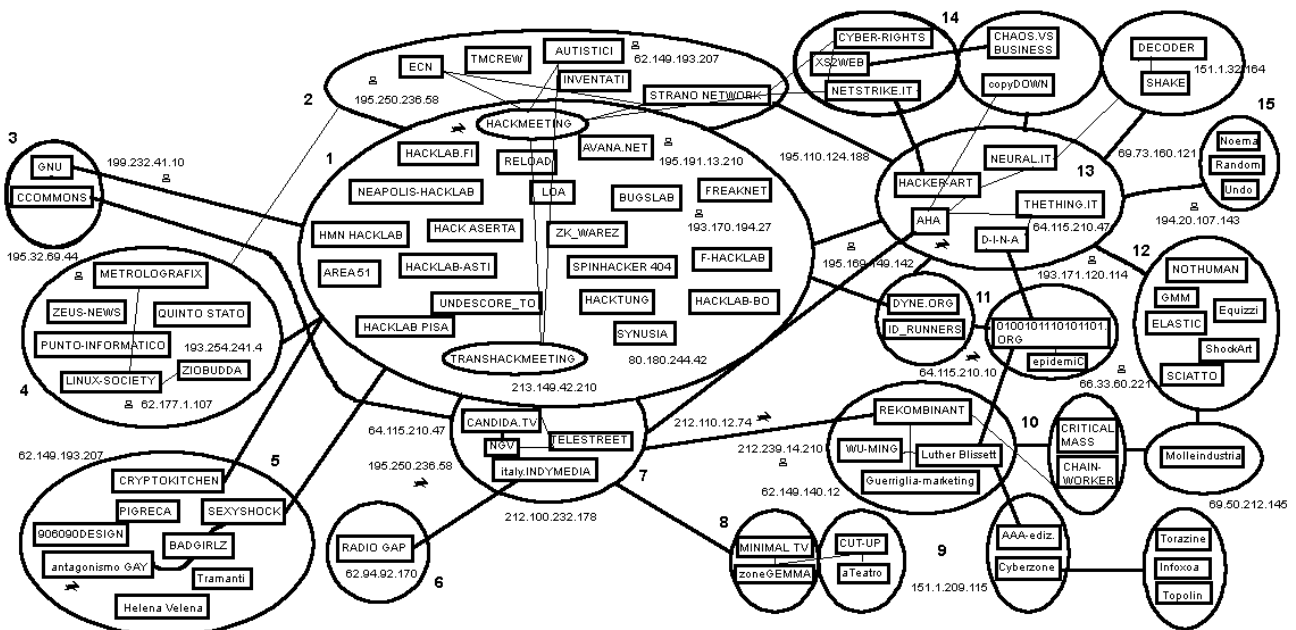
3. Networking communities at the border of artistic, political and technological action

In the Italian net culture, the word "networking" means to create nets of relations, by sharing experiences and ideas in order to communicate and experiment artistically. In Italy, thanks to the alternative use of Internet, during the past twenty years of experimentation a vast national network of people who share political, cultural and artistic views has been formed. The Italian countercultural network proposes a form of critical information where the idea of freedom of expression is a central theme.

To outline this complex activist network, I created the following map of Italian digital counterculture:¹

¹This map is online at <http://www.ecn.org/aha/map.html>, was originally made for the *Read_me* software art festival, in Denmark <<http://readme.runme.org>> (2004) and draws upon <http://map.jodi.org> by the Dutch artists Jodi.

The map shows in which way the hacktivism network in Italy is related to other experiences (from hacking to art). For this purpose, in the map are not only included collectives involved in the hacktivist Italian scene, but also other groups which have a less political approach and other groups which are more based in the artistic scene. In Italy, a thread of continuity runs through the avant-garde artistic practices of the 1960's (first and foremost Fluxus), mail art, Neoism and Luther Blissett, punk culture, graffiti sprayers and hacker practices up to digital net cultures and net art. These Italian independent realities during the past twenty years have given way to a creative, shared and aware use of technologies, from video to computers, contributing to the formation of Italian hacker communities. Those practices contributed to break a traditional concept of art to pour in real life and concrete action of people. The role of the artist as an all-powerful creator has been gradually broken up as well,



possible to make one's own art and create self-made media. Through the independent use of media, punk culture let everyone realize their own music and magazines (called punkzines), breaking up the dualism between cultural industry and a mass audience. The concept of *do-it-yourself creation* also applies to the culture of graffiti writers which turns the artwork into a performative act wrapped up within the life and dynamics of the city, and synchronous with its accelerated rhythm. A graffiti tag is considered a travelling act and nomadic identity sign that communicates with other travelling identity signs.

The concept of audience creation is therefore central for understanding the development of digital art in Italy where artists become creator of platforms for interaction, and the public directly participates in the process of the artwork. Digital communities can be set up as rhizomatic, radical networks for which the artist creates rather the context than the content. Digital art thus becomes a space for people's actions, for the mixing of dematerialized bodies in a joint experience travelling through networks like a reproducing virus. The artwork turns into a collective patchwork, a stream of contaminations, copying, and alteration of codes and icons.

Therefore, it shouldn't be a surprise that many Italian artists and activists linked to (or involved in) the hacker movement are connected with punk and anarchist culture and the Italian phenomenon of Social Centers. These artistic practices are part of an Italian political and artistic context since the 70s which was a source of inspiration for numerous individuals and groups (see, for example, the Radio Alice experience).

A path which began in BBS, alternative web platforms diffused in Italy half way through the 1980's even before Internet even existed, and then moved on to Hackmeetings <www.hackmeetin.org>, to Telestreet <www.telestreet.it> and networking art of different artists and collectives such as 0100101110101101.ORG <<http://0100101110101101.org>>, [epidemiC] <<http://epidemic.ws>>, Jaromil <www.dyne.org>, Giacomo Verde <www.verdegiac.org>, Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici <www.gmm.fi.it>, Correnti Magnetiche <www.arcnaut.it>, Candida TV <<http://candida.thing.net>>, Isole nella Rete <www.ecn.org>, New Global Vision <www.ngvision.org>, Tommaso Tozzi <www.wikiartpedia.org>, Federico Bucalossi <www.nothuman.net>, Massimo Contrasto <www.strano.net/contrasto>, Mariano Equizzi <www.marianoequizzi.com>, Pigreca <www.pigreca.com>, Molleindustria

<www.molleindustria.it>, Guerriglia Marketing <www.guerrigliamarketing.it>, Sexyshock <www.ecn.org/sexyshock>, Phag Off <www.phagoff.org> and many others.

N.B. All these topics are analysed in my book "Networking, the Net as an Artwork", which is going to be published in November 2006 by the Italian publisher "Costa & Nolan" (Milan), with the preface of Derrick de Kerckhove and the epilogue written by the Italian videoartist Simonetta Fadda. The book describes the evolution of the Italian hacktivism and net culture from the Eighties till today and builds a reflection on the new role of the artist and author who become networker, operating in collective nets. The book is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License and a digital copy will be soon available from the website: <http://www.networkingart.eu>

4. Hacker Community and Queer network in Italy: Sensual and provocative aspects in the computer culture

In Italy, queer digital communities and gender activists are closely connected to those of the hackers. They are part of the same network and share a similar approach to technology. By emulating the hacker way of combining and recombining hard- and software into a more critical and all-encompassing technology, they want to subvert rigid cultural paradigms and create new interstice cultural zones for themselves. Rigid identities and rigid divisions between women and men are replaced with spaces in between where people can freely fashion and express their sexual and gender identities. A collaborative cut-up, or cultural collage, combines hacker ethic, political activism and independent sexual culture. This open network has the name of Queer (or Pink) Network: the word "queer" means to express sexuality beyond boundaries of identities and to cross the limits of fixed genders and stereotype. The word queer doesn't exist of course only in Italy, but in that country the idea of being queer is closely connected with the D.I.Y. (do it yourself) of punk and hacker culture.

Many Italian projects in this field (such as Phag Off <www.phagoff.org>, Sexyshock <www.ecn.org/sexyshock>, Carniscelte <www.carniscelte.info>, Pornflakes

<www.pornflakes.it> and many others) wants to encourage everyone to express themselves using their bodies and media from an independent point of view, thereby creating new experimental queer languages.

Starting from this idea of queer, together with Gaia Novati, I recently organized a Festival in Berlin (14-22 October 2006, <www.cum2cut.net>) giving an opportunity for participants to play with concepts of sexuality and pornography by producing and enjoying indie-porn-short-movies.

Aim was to broaden possible imaginaries and "desirescapes" related to pornography. CUM2CUT, Indie-Porn-Short-Movie Festival is created as an experimental concept starting from bodies and space, spreading pornography as clouds of pollen to eroticize the city of Berlin, mixing up fluid bodies, nomad identities and playful sexualities.

According with the idea of Queer Network, the concept of play is directly linked to CUM2CUT: body-games and sex toys have been the starting point for subverting mainstream expression of pornography, through the practice of détournement. CUM2CUT has been a funny - and I hope, interesting - experience for those who were fed up with mainstream pornography, who were frustrated by tolerating the rules of normalized society. At the same time, Cum2Cut wanted to provide a critical perspective on political imagination and reject the notion that radical politics must always be boring and serious.

It will be possible soon to download the indie-porn videos from the website of CUM2CUT, <www.cum2cut.net>...I think watching them could be a perfect example of how to integrate sensual and provocative aspects in the computer technology!

And I personally hope that there will be a lot of hackers in the next edition of CUM2CUT Festival ;-)

5. Links

To visit the Italian Countercultural Digital Network websites, go to:

www.networkingart.eu/link.html

where it will be possible to find links to many Italian hacktivism and media art projects.

6. Author Biography

Tatiana Bazzichelli

Tatiana Bazzichelli, a.k.a. T_Bazz (Rome, 1974), has a degree in Communication Sociology and gave a dissertation on Italian interactive art at the University of Sapienza in Rome (1999). She is an expert in New Media Art, Hacktivism and digital culture. Towards the end of the 1990's she organised events and conventions, such as "Cum2Cut" (Berlin, 2006), "Hack.it.art" (Berlin 2005), "Art for the Net in Italy" (Berlin 2005), "MediaDemocracy and Telestreet" (Munich, 2004), "AHA" (Rome, 2002), "Hacker Art Lab" (Perugia, 2000). Founder of the networking project AHA:Activism-Hacking-Artivism (2001), she manages a mailing-list of the same name regarding artistic activism. She is a free-lance journalist and writes of art, media and new creative trends for "AD-Architectural Digest", "Next Exit", "Digimag", "Tk-Off". She wrote articles and reviews published on "Neural", "Avatar", "Noemalab", "Cluster", "Cut-up", "Flash Art", "XL" of *La Repubblica*. She wrote *"Networking. The Net as an Artwork"* for the editor Costa & Nolan, Milan (2006).

www.ecn.org/aha

www.networkingart.eu

www.cum2cut.net

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