FCJ-096 The Digital Given: 10 Web 2.0 Theses

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0.

The internet turns out to be neither the problem nor the solution for the global recession. As an indifferent bystander it doesn't lend itself easily as a revolutionary tool. The virtual has become the everyday. The New Deal is presented as green, not digital. The digital is a given. This low-key position presents an opportunity to rethink the Web 2.0 hype. How might we understand our political, emotional and social involvement in internet culture over the next few years?

1.

News media is awash with 'economic crisis', indulging in its self-generated spectacle of financial meltdown. Experts are mobilised, but only to produce the drama of dissensus. Programmed disagreement is the consensus of daily news. Crisis, after all, is the condition of possibility for capitalism. Unlike the dotcom crash in 2000-2001, when the collapse of high-tech stocks fueled the global recession, the internet has so far managed to stay out of the blame game. Web 2.0 only suffers mild side effects from the odd collection of platforms and services, from *Google* to *Wikipedia*, *Photobucket*, *Craigslist*, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Habbo* and so-called regional players such as *Baidu* and *51.com*. Despite its benign existence, there still is hyper-growth wherever you look. Web 2.0 applications and platforms remain 'new' but show a tendency to get lost inside the boring, stressful and uncertain working life of the connected billions.

2.

Social networks are technologies of entertainment and diffusion. The social reality they create is real, but as a technology of immediacy you can't get no satisfaction. We initially love them for their distraction from the torture of now-time. Networking sites are social drugs for those in need of the Human that is located elsewhere in time or space. It is the pseudo Other that we are connecting to. Not the radical Other or some real Other. We systematically explore weakness and vagueness and are pressed to further enhance the exhibition of the Self. 'I might know you (but I don't). Do you mind knowing me?'. The pleasure principle of entertainment thus diffuses social antagonisms —how does conflict manifest within the comfort zones of social networks and their tapestries of auto-customisation? The business-minded 'trust doctrine' has all but eliminated the open, dirty internet forums. Most Web 2.0 are echo chambers of the same old opinions and cultural patterns. As we can all witness, they are not exactly hotbeds of alternative sub-culture. What's new are their 'social' qualities: the network is the message. What's created here is a sense or approximation of the social. Social networks register a 'refusal of work'. But our net-time, after all, is another kind of labour. Herein lies the perversity of social networks: however radical they may be, they will always be data-mined. They are designed to be exploited. Refusal of work becomes just another form of making a buck that you never see.

3.

Social networking sites are as much fashion victims as everything else. They come and go. Their migration across space signals the enculturisation of software. While *Orkut* disappeared in G8 countries, it is still Big in Brazil. Is anyone still seriously investing in real estate in *Second Life*? What the online world needs is sustainable social relations. The moving herds that go from one server to the next merely demonstrate an impulsive grazing mentality: once the latest widgets are installed, it is time to move on. Sustainability is connected to scaleability. Here, we see lessons from the major social movements over the last 50 years. The force of accumulated social-political desires manifest, eventually, in national and global forums that permeate back into policy discourse and social practice: think March on Washington, 1963 (Black Civil Rights), Rio, 1992 (Earth Summit), Porto Alegre, 2001 (World Social Forum), Geneva and Tunis, 2003-2005 (World Summit on the Info-Society). None of these examples are exempt from critique. We note them here to signal the relationship between sustainability and scalar transformation. We are familiar with formats such as barcamps, unconferencing and have participated in DIY techno-workshops at those seasonal media arts festivals. But these are hardly instances of sustainability. Their temporality of tinkering is governed by the duration of the event. True, there is occasionally resonance back in the local hack-lab, but such practices are exclusive to techno-secret societies, not the networked masses.

Social networking sites are remarkable for their capacity to scale. Their weakness is their seeming incapacity to effect political change in any substantive way. The valorisation of citizen-journalism is not the same as radical intervention, and is better understood as symptomatic of the structural logic of outsourcing media production and election campaign management.

4.

8 From social to socialism is a small step for humankind but a big step for the Western subject. What makes the social attractive, and socialism so old school and boring? What is the social anyway? We have to be aware that such postmodern academic language games do not deepen our understanding of the issues, nor widen our political fantasies. We need imagination, but only if it illuminates concepts that transform concrete conditions. The resurrection of the social after its disappearance is not an appealing slogan. Some ideas have an almost direct access to our body. Others remain dead. This in particular counts for insider jargon such as rent, multitude, common, commons and communism. There's a compulsion to self-referentiality here that's not so different from the narcissistic default of so many blogs. What, then, are the collective concepts of the social networked masses? For now, they are engineered from the top-down by the corporate programmers, or they are outsourced to the world of widgets. Tag, Connect, Friend, Link, Share, Tweet. These are not terms that signal any form of collective intelligence, creativity or networked socialism. They are directives from the Central Software Committee. «Participation» in «social networks» will no longer work, if it ever did, as the magic recipe to transform tired and boring individuals into cool members of the mythological Collective Intelligence. If you're not an interesting individual, your participation is not really interesting. Data clouds, after all, are clouds: they fade away. Better social networks are organized networks involving better individuals—it's your responsibility, it's your time. What is needed is an invention of social network software where everybody is a concept designer. Let's kill the click and unleash a thousand million tiny tinkerers!

5.

9 We are addicted to ghettoes, and in so doing refuse the antagonism of 'the political'. Where is the enemy? Not on *Facebook*, where you can only have 'friends'. What Web 2.0 lacks is the technique of antagonistic linkage. Instead, we are confronted with the Tyranny of Positive Energy. Life only consists of uplifting experiences. Depression is not a design principle. *Wikipedia*'s reliance on 'good faith' and its policing of protocols quite frequently make for a depressing experience in the face of an absence of singular style. There ain't no 'neutral point of view'. This software design principle merely reproduces the One Belief System. Formats need to be transformed if they are going to accommodate the plurality of expression of networked life. Templates function as zones of exclusion. But strangely, they also exclude the conflict of the border. The virus is the closest thing to conflict online. But viruses work in invisible ways and function as a generator of service labour for the computer nerd who comes in and cleans your computer.

6.

10 The critique of simulation falls short here. There is nothing 'false' about the virtuality of social networking sites. They are about as real it gets these days. Stability accumulates for those hooked to networks. Things just keep expanding. More requests. More friends. More time for social-time. With the closure of factories comes the opening of data-mines. Privacy is so empty of curiosity that we are compelled to slap it on our Wall for all to see. If we are lucky, a Friend refurbishes it with a comment. And if you are feeling cheeky, then *Throw A Sheep!* You would be hard-pressed to notice any substantive change. But you will be required to do never-ending maintenance work to manage all your data feeds and updates. That'll subtract a bit of time from your daily routine.

7.

11 The Network will not be Revolutionized. What does this mean for *Indymedia* 2.0? The question of why *indymedia.org* failed and did not further develop into an active and open social networking site or clearly take up a position in the Web 2.0 debate is something that needs to be addressed (see the nettime debate of May 2009). Have media activists already learnt enough of the Brechtian *Indymedia* Lehrstueck that started in the late nineties? Is global branding and branching, as in the case of *Indymedia* (one name, often similar design, sharing of servers, some syndication of content, etc.), still as important as it used to be? *Indymedia* met the challenge of scaleability in amazing

ways only to discover its limits. Contamination seems key for transnational social-political networks. As do regular face-to-face meetings. Let your network connect with the concrete and adaptation and transformation will undoubtedly kick in. Then try reconnecting across networks (and other institutional and organizational forms) on the global scale. Conflict will already have multiplied and the primary condition of sustainability will be underway.

8.

12 Web 2.0 is not for free. 'Free as in free beer' is not like 'free as in freedom'. Open does not equal free. These days 'free' is just another word for service economies. The linux fiefdom know that all too well. We need to question naïve campaigns that merely promote 'free culture' without questioning the underlying parasitic economy and the 'deprofessionalization' of cultural work. Pervasive profiling is the cost of this opening to 'free market values'. As users and prosumers we are limited by our capacity as data producers. Our tastes and preferences, our opinions and movements are the market price to pay. At present, *Facebook*'s voluntary and enthusiastic auto-filing system on a mass scale represents the high point of this strategy. But we cannot succumb to the control paranoia and to the logic of fear. Let's inject more kaos in it! So what if you have your anti-whatever Facebook group? What does it change other than expanding your number of friends? Is deleting the radical gesture of 2009? Why not come up a more subversive and funny, anti-cyclical act? Are you also looking for rebel tactical tools?

9.

13 Soon the Web 2.0 business model will be obsolete. It is based on the endless growth principle, pushed by the endless growth of consumerism. The business model still echoes the silly 90s dotcom model: if growth stagnates, it means the venture has failed and needs to be closed down. Seamless growth of customised advertising is the fuel of this form of capitalism, decentralized by the user-prosumer. Mental environment pollution is parallel to natural environment pollution. But our world is finished (limited). We have to start elaborating appropriate technologies for a finite world. There is no exteriority, no other worlds (second, third, fourth worlds) where we can dump the collateral effects of insane development. We know that Progress is a bloodthirsty god that extracts a heavy human sacrifice. A good end cannot justify a bad means. On the contrary, technologies are means that have to justify the end of collective freedom. No sacrifice will be tolerated: martyrs are not welcome. Neither are heroes.

10.

14 'Better a complex identity than an identity complex'. We need to promote peer-education that shifts the default culture of auto-formation to the nihilist pleasure of hacking the system. Personal exhibition on Web 2.0 social networks resembles the discovery of sexuality. Anxiety over masturbation meets digital narcissism (obsessive touching up of personal profiles) and digital voyeurism (compulsive viewing of other's profiles, their list of friends, secrets, etc.). To avoid the double trap of blind technophilia and luddite technophobia, we have to develop complex digital identities. They have to answer to individual desires and satisfy multiple needs. Open-ID are a good starting point. 'Steal my profile'. It's time to remix identity. Anonymity is a good alternative to the pressures of the control society, but there must be alternatives on offer. One strategy could be to make the one ('real') identity more complex and, where possible, contradictory. But whatever your identify might be, it will always be harvested. If you must participate in the accumulation economy for those in control of the data mines, then the least you can do is Fake Your Persona.

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Note

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