

Shivers of sharing

Agnese Trocchi

I'm sitting in my living room by the seaside, it's a winter evening and I'm trying to explain to my boyfriend what I have been doing in the past ten years. He is a ballet master and he considers me a digital-video artist. Yet I'm not sure what I am, even if I have written pages and pages of papers to describe, *in progress*, the artistic-activist projects that I have been developing collectively in a decade of life in Rome, from the nineties to the first years of the new millenium, from the analogic to the digital age.

I would like to convey to him how passionate and committed we have been in the attempt at *becoming our own media*, in the attempt at sharing our vision and our knowledge and in the attempt to build an economic structure that would guarantee sustainability for the project and a wage for every one of us.

Practice, action, struggle, the creation of sense and sharing. These were the cobblestones we had in our bag for the making of the video project called *CandidaTV*. The project was legally constituted as a small-sized cooperative so as to enter the market realm and to give us the chance to earn a living from our own activity. This is for us the first important artistic gesture: to not separate the making of art from the needs of everyday life. We wanted to give space and tools to people's points of view on reality and to give legs to our dreams.

We are a group of people that grew up in the seventies, tv sets were in every house and we grew up with a television as a baby sitter, we were fed for years on visual data, information, movies, ads, on moving images over which we had no control. We were children of the *Society of Simulation* but we didn't own the tools of production for this *collective circus*.

In 1995 some of the young people who were gathering around the *Social Centers*⁰¹ were feeling constrained by political identities of the past and they adopted the concept and the practice of *Psychical Nomadism*.⁰² What they did exactly was to apply this concept to the rising reality of the digital networks. Internet was not yet as common as it is now but the *cyberpunk*⁰³ myth was running fast through the telephone lines, using the Bulletin Board System⁰⁴ as a mean of communication for fast-growing communities.

Forte Prenestina, the biggest and oldest Social Center in Rome, in 1994 hosted the birth of *AvAna BBS* (*Avvisi Ai Naviganti – Warning to the Sailors- BBS*), the first *European Counter Network* node of the city. *Avana BBS* spread the concept of the Subversive Telematic: access for all, digital democracy, the right to anonymity, freedom of expression, the sharing of knowledge.

Slowly we shaped a strong relationship between technology and activism: the encounter between the principles of the *hacker ethic*⁰⁵ and the nomadic, revolutionary attitude gave life to the experience of the *TAZ* (*temporary autonomous zones*), or, simply, illegal rave parties. At the core of the TAZ experiences were music, dance and the temporary squatting of abandoned industrial areas.

At that time we needed a new form of communication to integrate with music, one that could use moving images and texts. We felt the city haunted by an unknown mutant organism, imperceptible, visible only to the ones who, like us, were experiencing it from party to party. We wanted to reveal this subversive process by the use of such means as words and videos projected onto ephemeral screens (walls or sails). Suddenly, two of us (Coast and Loop) had the idea to write a software program for the immediate projection of texts, we called it *ShootConceptsMachine*.⁰⁶ With it we have been able to “jingle the words”. The effect was an impressive, collective, flux of consciousness.



Shootconcept machine in action during a rave party, Rome, 1999.

Imagine the set: a party in an ex-industrial area where thousands of people were raving, a bunch of us connecting tv sets, monitors, vhs players and laptops, vision and words screened on the walls: we were no more the passive consumers of what the Society of Entertainment imposes. On the contrary, we have been finally able to unleash our imaginary and to create the conditions to express it in a collective way. A real aesthetic experience: art after the death of art (or art in the aftermath).



Shootconcept projection, and the video console, at a rave party, Rome, 1999.

Over the long transition from dawn towards a new day, some of us took the camera in our hands, released it from the video-console and started to float in the ghostly morning light of the industrial slaughterhouses. It was time to infect institutional television broadcasting and let everyone becoming his/her own media. We decided to create our own TV...

CandidaTV was born by the seaside, on *Isola del Giglio*, a small Italian island, in the summer of 1999. We sat on the shore for four days discussing the creature we wanted to give life to, and, of course, what name to choose for her. We weren't even sure that it was a female, but we wanted a flexible, pure, morbid, smart, complex and fearless being. And obviously Television is female. She sits in our living rooms, in our bedrooms, in our kitchen; she speaks to us with different tongues, her voices fill the house, she gives us a sense of protection and security, our immune defences slow down and we absorb any kind of information from her reassuring stability.

Our creature was a grain of sand in the machine, the drop that brings down the system, the little sister that enters the bunker of Big Brother because she is too small to be seen. She was pure and fresh as snow, but dangerous and sneaky as a poison mushroom that enters your guts and makes you see other realities. It's an infection... it's *Candida, the Household TV*.

Our slogan has been: *make your own TV!* We wanted to show that television is something that you can make yourself with everyday tools: a TV set can be a monitor, a camera can be an eye, a video player can be a tool for editing.

CandidaTV aims to turn television consumers into television producers. Passive spectators become active creators when handed the tools to produce spectacle. 'Some individuals will take and use these tools, some will not. We don't bring people to our studio, but



Supervideo, the hero of *Supervideo vs G8* (2001), Genoa. <www.ngvision.org/mediabase/22>

instead create the studio in the street.⁰⁷ Our aim is at least to supply the critical tools to understand audiovisual language and how TV is made, to dismantle its mystification and open the way to the creation of everyone's preferred mystification. An interesting perspective on what we were doing with *CandidaTV* was given in 2004 in Barcelona, during an event named *Copyleft*.⁰⁸ After our presentation, during the night at a nice party, a young woman come to talk with us. She was in the conference and she really liked our presentation and then she stated: "You make art...When you manipulate and mystify with a certain amount of humor and without a final goal. That procedure does not belong into the realm of manipulation anymore, it becomes creation, it is art."

In 1967 Marshall McLuhan wrote that: “The next medium, whatever it is—it may be the extension of consciousness—will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form.”

In 1999 there were fifteen of us. We all came with different experience: in independent radio, street theatre, subversive computing, professional video making, humanistic studies and in independent underground magazines. We were all interested in expressing visions through technology and we had been learning from each other’s expertises: “we just shared everything, we exchanged responsibilities and jobs as a ‘creative commons’”.⁰⁹

Every week we would organize ourselves in groups to make clips on diverse topics: independent cinema, jail issues, news, life on the internet, entertainment, urban subcultures, queer activism. After filming, we would lock ourselves up in a studio for two days to shoot the frame for this varied material, with four people introducing the issues. After editing it all together we always had to run to get the tape to a local TV station that broadcasted *Candida* in time: “in that first period we had a deal with a local commercial TV station. The channel needed a certain amount of original programming, *Candida* needed space on-air and the deal was done.”¹⁰

The media horizon on which we were working was going to change soon: two years after, in 2002, we saw the explosion of the *Telestreet* phenomenon. The *Telestreet* network was born from the realization



Candida crew in Marino filming *Soapopia* (2004).

of a pirate TV station: *OrfeoTV* in Bologna.¹¹ Hundreds of small groups of people followed the example of *OrfeoTV* and as a result *CandidaTV* was no longer alone in the attempt to make television from below but became part of a national network: a TV made by people, made out of their desires and their needs. Our productions were no longer released for commercial broadcast stations but for independent small, local TV.

With the birth of the *Telestreet* network we had a new season of workshops to share technical expertise between everyone willing



Frames from the short video *Ciccio and the Antenna* (2003).
<www.ngvision.org/mediabase/163>

to take part in the adventure. The words of McLuhan became reality: with the encounter of the hactivist¹² scene and the creative scene, mostly in the physical events called *Hackmeetings*,¹³ we witnessed the engineering of the next medium, a kind of Frankenstein Monster, still unborn, where internet, videos, art practice in the streets and hacking technology, are mixed all together in the basic attempt to express people’s freedom of communication and people’s imaginary.



A workshop during the *Hackmeeting* in Forte Prenestino, 2000.



Hackmeeting 2001, Catania, Sicily.



Hackmeeting 2001, Catania, Sicily.

The same scene in 2001 founded *NewGlobalVision*,¹⁴ a pioneer project in the field of online video distribution. *NGV* is a video archive and video distribution project. It's a useful tool for videomakers and independent broadcasters all over the world. *NGV* sustains the *Telestreet* network to share their production efforts and it functions as a resource for each small TV station. *CandidaTV* is using it to release her videos, to circulate them and make them available for independent TV stations or cinemas in every city.

In 2005 *NewGlobalVision* won an Award Of Distinction together with the *Telestreet* network in the *Ars Electronica Competition* within the *Digital Communities* category: "programs, artworks, initiatives and phenomena in which social and artistic innovation is taking place, as it were, in real time. *Digital Communities* spotlights bold and inspired innovations impacting human coexistence, ... sustaining cultural diversity and the freedom of artistic expression."¹⁵

In the era of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), to struggle for freedom of artistic expression is an artistic practice in itself. When I look back to see what we have been doing with *CandidaTV* I understand that, if we want to gain freedom of expression, the attempt to share visions in the real is not only necessary, it is also beautiful, and beauty has been always a sign of the existence of art.

At least this is what I think when I watch my ballet master dancing!

Links:

CandidaTV

<www.candidatv.tv>

Forte Prenestino

<www.forteprenestino.net >

Ordanomade

<ordanomade.kyuzz.org>

Italian Hackmeeting

<www.hackmeeting.org>

Transhackmeeting

<www.transhackmeeting.org>

Telestreets

<www.telestreet.it>

New Global Vision

<www.ngvision.org>

Endnotes

01

CSOA, Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti: in Italy, places that are squatted and self-managed not only for housing but for cultural and political activities as well.

02

Psychical Nomadism implies taking (as one needs) from any moral, religious, political, ethical, or whatever system, and leaving behind the parts of that system found to be unappealing. It is one of the main features of the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* by Hakim Bey. <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychical_Nomadism>

03

Cyberpunk is a science fiction genre noted for its focus on “high tech and low life”. Its name is a portmanteau of “cybernetics” and “punk”. It features advanced science such as information technology and cybernetics, coupled with a degree of breakdown or a radical change in the social order.
<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberpunk>

04

A **Bulletin Board System**—or BBS—is a computer system running software that allows users to dial into the system over a phone line and, using a terminal program, perform functions such as downloading software and data, uploading data, reading news, and exchanging messages with other users.
<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_Board_System>

05

The term “**hacker ethic**” was coined by journalist Steven Levy and used for the first time in *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984). In Levy’s codification, the principles of the Hacker Ethic were:
- Access to computers—and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works—should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-on Imperative!
- All information should be free.
- Mistrust authority—promote decentralization.
- Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position.
- You can create art and beauty on a computer.
- Computers can change your life for the better.
See also: <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacker_ethic>

06

The software is written in C++ and runs on Windows only. You can download it from <ordanomade.kyuzz.org/Spara.htm>

07

Interview for *Untitled Magazine*, London, March 2007.

08

<copyleft.sindominio.net>

09

‘Business Model – The Candida TV Approach’ • A.Trocchi, in *Media Mutandis: a NODE. London Reader*, London, 2006. <publication.nodel.org>

10

Ibid.

11

OrfeoTV was set up in 2002. Based in Bologna and broadcasting in the shadow of MTV, it initiated a network of small pirate stations, combining low-tech television with high-tech internet. More info: <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telestreet>

12

Hacktivism (hack and activism) is often understood as the writing of code, or otherwise manipulating bits, to promote political ideology—promoting expressive politics, free speech, human rights, or information ethics.
See also: <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacktivism>

13

The **Hackmeeting** is a reunion of people with a passion for computing, especially

digital rights activists, coming from all over Italy but also from abroad. It took place every year in the Social Centers in different Italian cities. The first Hackmeeting took place in Italy in 1998. The topics usually are: cryptography, artificial intelligence, digital divide, and free software.

From an email dated 19.01.07 on the *Transhackmeeting* lists “[...] we all agreed on the attempt [to do] an event that is not sponsored, [but] spontaneous and grassroots, as a Temporary Autonomous Zone (see Hakim Bey’s book *TAZ*), and we did it as an experiment, to see what comes out, instead of the many other funded events that have always been available (...) in that sense, the term *hackmeeting* defined itself as the practice of _hacking the format of any other meeting_ and the hierarchical system behind it.”
<it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hackmeeting>

14

<www.ngvision.org>

15

<www.aec.at/en/prix/cat_digital_communities.asp>