ACTION MELANCHOLIA

FLORIAN CRAMER

From Katherine S. Dreier's and Marcel Duchamp's "Société Anonyme" to Res Ingold's "Ingold Airlines," many artists have posed as corporations; since Kurt Schwitters' "Merzreklame," artists have worked as P.R. agencies, and since Johannes Baader's Dadaist interventions in the Weimar Reichstag parliament and Berlin Dome church in 1918 and 1919, artists have physically, and subversively, intervened into the public sphere. Contrary to initial expectations, the rise of the Internet as a mass medium and of Internet art in the 1990s did not yield an aesthetics of "virtual" disembodiment, but quite to the contrary help to escalate and radicalize artistic interventionism.

Through official-looking web sites and domain names, groups like the Yes Men could believably pose as the World Trade Organization and instigate communicative processes that allowed them to be invited as WTO representatives and pull off critical pranks at highbrow economic conventions. Similarly, the mass availability of software design tools and skills equalized the means of corporate identity production between artists and companies. Thanks to professional-grade graphics and web design, the "Nike Ground" project of the artist collective 0100101110101101.org was a believable simulation of Nike's corporate identity. The alleged renaming of Vienna's Heldenplatz into "Nike Ground" managed to confuse both a common audience – which took the project literally – and gullible leftist critics who failed to get the ambivalence of the project, as something that simultaneously subverted and reinforced the Nike brand.

In the 1990s, there was much talk in Internet art-related discussion forums and conferences about "tactical media," a concept that is not quite clear in its mere words. It took artists to go from actionist performance into the Internet and, eventually, from the Internet back into the non-electronic public sphere to give the concept a meaning: as communication technology being cleverly used as a door-opener to otherwise inaccessible social spheres. In comparison to Res Ingold's

awkward pretension of an airline through a series of dinner party receptions, the Yes Men's fake WTO and 0100101110101101.org's fake Nike websites tactically used advantages of the Internet for more elegant and thus more efficacious simulations, realizing at the same time that the simulacrum isn't powerful unless it leaves the realm of the symbolic and affects face-to-face social situations. This approach to "interactive art" is squarely opposed to the mainstream "media art" notion of the same term as cybernetic feedback devices, or, in other words, the pseudo-interactivity of Pavlovian stimulus-and-response systems forcing the audience to act within the constraints of programmed machine logic.

The Yes Men, 0100101110101101.org and the – tactically no less proficient – Viennese Monochrom collective form closely linked nodes of the artistic and personal network of ubermorgen.com. The development of artistic approaches is similar, too, from an early embracement of the Internet in the corporate over-affirmation of etoy.com to its dystopian tactical use as ubermorgen.com. From a realm that was open to be appropriated by self-designed corporations, the Internet ended up being artistically perceived as corporately controlled territory. This change of perception proved to be productive and, as the comparison between Etoy's (ongoing low-brow) work and ubermorgen's reveals, a leap in artistic quality.

Unlike the WTO web site fake of the Yes Men, ubermorgen's Internet is thoroughly dystopian. It is not even a corporate space that can be hijacked for a morally good cause, but the hijacking is no less dark and abysmal than its object; there is no way out the system. Unlike the Yes Men's subverted WTO, no parodistic or utopian device exists that disrobes corporate logic like the emperor's new clothes. Instead, a project like "Google Will Eat Itself" (GWEI) just lets it run amok.

Beyond that, ubermorgen.com's dark humorism has a side that transcends corporate identities and ostensible impersonality. "Psych.OS", a series of video and images subconsciouly recorded as an audiovisual "écriture automatique" inside a psychiatric hospital, at first doesn't seem to be related to projects like GWEI or www.vote-auction.com at all except that it was created by the same artist. The correspondence between the former's highly subjective and the latter's highly corporate art consists of more than the former depicting the individual inside yet another controlling institution and the latter injecting imaginative hackerdom into a corporate cosmos. In 2006, ubermorgen.com was part of the "Smile Machines" exhibition during the

transmediale festival in Berlin, a show on humor in contemporary and computer-based art. Ubermorgen's piece "G3-Bureaucrazy" consisted, among others, of a web-based psycho drug recipe generator. After filling out a multiple choice questionnaire of psychotic symptoms, users would receive a hardcopy of an officially looking prescription for strong psycho drugs, complete with a fake doctor's signature. Combining the psychotic and the corporate and turning it into a business, this piece bridged the gap between GWEI and PSYCH.OS, precarious machine logic and precarious subjectivity. It is the most concise present-day update to reflections of psychoses in modern art, bare of all the romanticizing that marked surrealism from Breton to Artaud, and bare of the bourgeois "art brut" aesthetization of undrugged psychotic expression.

The contemporary artist no longer works on the grounds of deliberately unrestrained and self-fashioned 'craziness,' but, having turned into a marketing director and self-managing freelancer in the art world, on Prozac or Effexor. But ubermorgen's piece is not just a satirical reflection of a contemporary world where you find, such as in L.A., billboards for "South California's favorite antidepressant." It also is a very personal piece that evokes abysses of one's individual condition, precisely by depicting it not as an unpredictable psychotic, but as impersonal software automatism.

What in Renaissance art and philosophy was known as melancholia first transformed in early 20th century modernism, from Surrealism to the Vienna actionists, into violent psychosis and finally into self-controlled conditioning and chemical self-normalization in our time. Nevertheless, ubermorgen.com's art remains actionism even in such a formal piece as the recipe generator. First of all, the recipe printed from the web site can actually be used to alter one's condition, just like the Yes Men's WTO site has been tactically used to intervene into business congresses; and finally, the work has a more profound personal dimension. ubermorgen's humor is existential, unlike the lighter-weight humorism of, for example, Kurt Schwitters or Robert Filliou. It also transcends the mere pose and postmodern play with signs that still seemed characteristic for etoy.com. In combination, humorism and existentialism create a powerful mixture in ubermorgen's art. It is simultaneously reflexive and actionist, introverted and extroverted, melancholy put into action: an "Action Melancholia," performed at high personal risk in its conflict with lawyers and courts and in the danger of personal burn-out. Unlike academic artists who call themselves "critical," but shout foul once they actually get in

trouble, there is a silent melancholic feedback loop in ubermorgen's actionism between troublemaking, being troubled and getting into trouble.

In Renaissance emblems, the melancholicus was depicted as someone with a gagged mouth sitting near a river and reading in a book. In ubermorgen's art, he sits in front of a computer near Internet data streams and wears a corporate mask.