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A different sense of time

Reading Tactical Media - some preliminary remarks

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Résumé

A different sense of time – Reading Tactical Media, some preliminary remarks This short essay explores the complicated relationship of activist and experimental / artistic practices around digital and online media to the problem of time. Both activist and experimental artistic / cultural practices seem to be deeply preoccupied with the immediacy of the present. In the case of activist practices the urgency of the issue at stake demands a continuous attention to what is

happening 'on the ground'. Experimental arts and associated cultural practices are rather more preoccupied with producing 'the new', conducting experiments (hence why we call them 'experimental') and responding to the immediate outcome, jumping from one experiment to the next in pursuit of this elusive 'newness'. The connection between activist and experimental cultural practices seems to lie in a shared temporality of immediacy.

My argument in the essay is that this entrapment in the immediacy of an 'eternal now' impedes a deeper critical discussion and understanding of these activist and experimental practices. To address these conditions from the perspective of tactical media and associated practices a different sense of time, a different temporality, is required. This different sense of time needs to be developed in at least in two distinct directions: First of all the preoccupation with the immediacy of the eternal now must be challenged and broken. Simultaneously, the temporality of tactical media and associated practices also needs to be compressed to engage with the time space of ultra-short duration of bodily affects and real-time machine operations.

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Trapped in the 'eternal now'

Both activist and experimental artistic / cultural practices seem to be deeply preoccupied with the immediacy of the present. In the case of activist practices, the urgency of the issue at stake demands a continuous attention to what is happening 'on the ground'. Experimental arts and associated cultural practices are rather more preoccupied with producing 'the new', conducting experiments (hence why we call them 'experimental') and responding to the immediate outcome, jumping from one experiment to the next in pursuit of this elusive 'newness'. The connection between activist and experimental cultural practices seems to lie in a shared temporality of immediacy. With that, they share a certain ephemerality and mobility that attempts to escape capture and fixation – quite often for good reasons (political and institutional). Yet, this preoccupation with immediacy invites the danger of becoming trapped in an 'eternal now', a never ending predominance of the present, which threatens to exclude any sense of past or future.

My argument in this short essay is that this entrapment in the immediacy of the 'eternal now' impedes a deeper critical discussion and understanding of these activist and experimental practices. The question of time in relation to what I will refer to as 'Tactical Media'[1] practices, referencing the fusion of artistic, activist and media practices, becomes particularly problematic in view of the curious inversion of the tactical and the strategic in media politics that has been playing out more or less globally over the last seven years.

However, before going into the actual topic of this text – the problem of time in relation to Tactical Media practices and the inversion of the tactical and the strategic in media politics – it is necessary to distinguish and relate a few of the basic terms used in this discussion: the notion of Automedias as proposed by Igor Galligo et Cemil Sanli (Galligo & Sanli, 2022) seems to fuse two genres of media practice that I want to briefly distinguish here: 'Self-Mediation' and 'Tactical Media'. This distinction will also help to establish more clearly what is meant with the 'tactical' in Tactical Media, and what is the problem that has emerged here in recent years.

'Self-mediation'

'Self-mediation' is probably the broadest category of media practice of

the three mentioned before. As a formal working definition, I describe self-mediation as the constitution of mediated presence through the appropriation of media production and distribution tools and infrastructures by non-professional media producers. The important implication here is that basically anyone who wants to and has the most basic means of producing media (i.e. a smart phone, photo or video camera) can and often does participate in this type of media practice. Production has become easy with the proliferation of photo and video-enabled mobile devices, and online distribution platforms make individualised forms of media distribution instant while minimising the immediate costs involved.

Important characteristics of self-mediation are that it is primarily an amateur practice – media professionals as producers play a minor role; the content is produced from the nodes of the network, rather than centralised or de-centralised (community media); also, overwhelmingly the content of the materials produced is quotidian and non-political in nature, predominantly people sharing day-to-day experiences with friends and loved ones. And while social, economic and geographic stratification still play a significant role in the dissemination of and participation in these media practices, the adoption rate of self-mediation has dwarfed any expectation of even the early 2000s. When the American writer and theorist Clay Shirky mused in 2008, "Here comes everybody" (Shirky, 2008), then we can now almost say "Everybody has arrived"[2]. With five billion active internet users, the scale of self-mediation defies imagination and it is very hard to overestimate the political significance of that.

Tactical Media

While the media practices of self-mediation are predominantly quotidian and apolitical, Tactical Media practices are on the contrary deeply political. Tactical Media emerged in the later 1980s and early 1990s when groups and individuals started to pry open the previously monolithic media landscape (broadcast radio and TV and professional print). Spurred by the 'camcorder revolution', the genre really took off when electronic media became digital and online distribution via the internet started to develop in the middle 1990s. Tactical Media was never invented by anybody. It was something that was happening in different places around the planet where experimental (media-) arts and cultures intersected with political activism and various forms of media and technological experimentation. This activity was given a name through

the Next 5 Minutes series of Tactical Media festivals, organised between in 1993 and 2003 in Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

In-between the second and third edition of the festival, co-organisers and editors David Garcia and Geert Lovink wrote a short position paper called "The ABC of Tactical Media" (Garcia & Lovink, 1997), the text that comes closest to a manifesto of Tactical Media. At the start of this short text they state quite clearly how Tactical Media came about: "*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.*"[3]]

Importantly, Garcia and Lovink stress that Tactical Media never represent, they always participate. Tactical media practices always emanate from within the actions of a group or individual, addressing an urgency or matter of concern that is principally their own. This concern is directly expressed by (metaphorically) taking the camera into their own hands and pointing it outwards at the issue at stake. It is never the professional media producer coming into a situation from the outside, pointing the camera at an action that is never their own. This distinguishes Tactical Media principally from journalism and documentary media practices. In this specificity, Tactical Media as an artistic, cultural, and political practice, beyond addressing whatever issue might have been at stake, prefigured the emerging logic of self-mediation that would crystallise in the first decennium of the 2000s when the camera started to diffuse into the hands of quite literally 'everybody'.

Tactical Mobility

Tactical media practitioners, Garcia and Lovink observed, need to be constantly on the look out for new opportunities within a quickly evolving media landscape: "(..) *it is above all mobility that most characterises 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.*" (Garcia & Lovink, 1997)

This principle of continuous nomadic movement of the tactical operator

across the strategic terrains of power (in this case the media space) is a figure directly borrowed from Michel de Certeau. In his Practices of Everyday Life (de Certeau, 1984), de Certeau famously juxtaposed strategies versus tactics: (Powerful) strategic actors try to seize and hold a territory,
while the (powerless) tactical operator moves across these strategic terrains, appropriating any opportunity this terrain might offer them, in a continuous and unceasing nomadic movement. Agency rests in the mobility and agility of this otherwise powerless tactical actor.

Strategic versus tactical media

De Certeau's image of tactics versus strategies applied to the media landscape divides this up neatly into a corresponding binary:

The strategic media of dominant power;
versus
the tactical media operations of the powerless / ordinary citizens (the practitioners of everyday life).

At the time when de Certeau developed his ideas around the juxtaposition of the tactical and the strategic, and by and large still when the first edition of the Next 5 Minutes festival was developed (then still referring to 'Tactical Television'), broadcast media and professional documentary and film production were still homogenous spaces, operating largely in the interest of powerful state and corporate actors. Previous activities such as political cinema traditions in Latin-America and community access to cable television networks in the US and Canada had started to reveal the first cracks in this otherwise closed and monolithic edifice. The 'tactical television' makers started to insert themselves into these fissures and cracks in the media landscape - teaming up with squatter radio groups and early attempts at public networks for computer mediated communication (Usenet, BBS culture, and early forms of wider access to internet-based networks).

On- and offline independent, community, and movement media initiatives have persisted to this day in the face of strategic media empires (ranging from global satellite TV networks to the rise of corporate online platforms after 2005 – the start of YouTube). Tactical media operators have been equally persistent, but here in resisting such divides between mainstream and alternative media channels, cross-connecting between sub- and

mainstream cultures, cross-wiring media circuits between the independent and corporate and state networks, and appropriating the strategic media space of so-called 'social' media. Their continuous nomadic movement across all media channels – mainstream and alternative – in the service of the powerless is juxtaposed to the desperate yet successful attempts of strategic power to hold the terrain of corporate and state media spaces.

An inversion of strategies versus tactics

However, this division of strategic *versus* tactical media no longer holds. Tactical media operations have in recent years been co-opted by some of the most dominant and powerful strategic political actors: On the one hand, we regretfully had to witness the emergence of the alt.right and its collusion with 'Trumpism' during the 2016 presidential campaign in the US. On the other hand, the appropriation of distributed media infrastructures by mega-scale corporate platforms has revealed how 'tactical' uses of distributed media (the internet) could be successfully aligned with 'strategic' political and corporate interests.

What the political theorist Jodi Dean early on termed 'publicity's secret' (Dean, 2002) became palpable in these and other dynamics in online distributed media: politically contestational and even subversive materials and content could be pushed from the nodes into the network, appropriating large scale networking infrastructures. However its circulation reinforced rather than diminished existing power hierarchies, as these hierarchies (and their monetisation mechanisms) are no longer geared towards 'content', but much rather to 'traffic'. More traffic means deeper monetisation, means increased power. Dean terms this process the 'decline of symbolic efficiency'. In some cases (such as the 2016 Trump campaign) these tactical operations were also content-wise co-opted by strategic power players and contributed to the 'efficiency' of the overall presidential campaign – even though they most likely were not a determining factor.

The implication here is that tactical media forms now perform powerful strategic political functions. This constitutes an absolute paradox in terms of de Certeau's model, but one that turns out to function highly efficiently.

The problem of time

The insistence on the here and now by activists and tactical media practitioners, on the 'event', the intervention, and the vitality of immediacy is increasingly becoming a problem and a liability. To meet the demands of the urgency of the moment, the issue at stake, the matter of concern, the incident or crisis, these practices run the imminent danger of an entrapment in the immediacy of the 'eternal now'. Every sense of past and future seems to have become absent from the action, the response to the immediate problem at hand.

This dominance of the 'eternal now' obscures a clear and critical view on the mechanics of strategic power and exactly its appropriation of the tactical operations of the powerless. While activists are continuously inventing new tactics of mobilisation and new ways of giving visibility to problems that are ignored or deliberately obscured, giving voice to the voiceless, they seem particularly inapt at translating these into structural political change. Occupy Wall Street was perhaps the most iconic example of an activist 'campaign' that was simultaneously characterised by an enormous success in terms of popular mobilisation, and paradoxically an almost complete lack of political efficacy.

The mobilisation tactics employed by these activist campaigns subsequently resurfaced in the service of strategic powerful actors. These actors, most notably the successful Trump 2016 presidency campaign, were able to direct the energies they unleashed towards a deeply regressive and reactionary politics, drawing on extensive material, financial and institutional capacities that the Occupy Wall Street protestors lacked access to.

The play on / of the affective registers

One of the preferred tactics of online reactionary right wing political groups and pranksters such as the alt-right movement who played a significant part in the 2016 Trump campaign was Meme Warfare. Meme Warfare was not invented by these groups but originates from media-savvy progressive contestational, anti-capitalist activism. In particular, it emerged out of the context of Adbusters magazine and media foundation, spearheaded by director Kalle Lasn and editor Micah White (White, 2013). More than building on a sophisticated analysis of a given political problem these tactics play on the affective registers (affect and emotion). The essence of their tactic was to draw on early forms of culture jamming and Guy Debord's artistic practice of *détournement* to

'hijack the corporate conceptual universe' (White, 2013) by appropriating and inverting corporate cultural symbols (brands, slogans, narratives, visual identities) to engender an affective response with the general public.

Both affect (non-conscious and precognitive) and emotion (conscious) are directly embodied. The memes spread over online networks invoked (involuntary) bodily responses. Thus the 'somatic turn' – the turn towards the body – that has dominated recent critical theoretical enquiry was already inscribed in these tactics. Micah White must have intuitively grasped this connection when he wrote the call to 'Occupy Wallstreet', and others followed suit who called for giving the US it's 'Tahrir moment' – after the iconic massive popular occupation of Tahrir Square in Caïro, Egypt in early 2011, which lead to the downfall of the autocratic military ruler Hosni Mubarak.

What the 'constructive failure' (White, 2016) of Occupy Wallstreet managed to do, despite its apparent lack of political efficacy, was to reveal the enormous potential for affective mobilisation.

Affect Space

In a conceptual and interdisciplinary public research project, initiated with Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain, called Technology / Affect / Space (Seijdel & Kluitenberg, 2017), we explored the concept of Affect Space. In the project we positioned Affect Space as an emerging techno-sensuous spatial order constituted through the interplay of (mobile / wireless) technology, the affective intensity of highly 'charged' social events, and the simultaneous offline / online presence of social actors in hybridised (media/physical) public urban spaces. This emerging techno-sensuous spatial order is characterised by highly unpredictable non-linear dynamics that while unpredictable are in no way arbitrary. These dynamics were revealed most clearly through the repetitive spectacle of very large public gatherings in dissent around the globe from 2011 onwards. Tentatively named the 'movement(s) of the squares' they emerged seemingly spontaneous across different geographies, political and cultural contexts, appearing as if 'out of nowhere' around ever changing issues at stake.

The concept of Affect Space was first proposed in a long-read essay written for the Open! platform and published in 2015 (Kluitenberg, 2015),

and subsequently developed further in a second essay in 2017 (Kluitenberg, 2017). In these essays the contours of a model were suggested that builds on three constitutive elements:

A technological component: Interconnected communication networks, in particular internet, mobile media and wireless networks perform a crucial function to mobilise large groups of people around ever changing 'issues at stake'.

An affective component: A recurrent characteristic is the affective intensity generated and exchanged in these mobilisation / activation processes in overlapping mediated and urban public spaces — instantiated in the body of the physical actors at the screens and in the streets. Reasoned arguments seem to play much less of a role here than affective images, aphoristic and suggestive slogans and embodied collective rituals.

A spatial component: The affective intensities generated in the activation process cannot be shared effectively in disembodied online interactions at the screen. This lack stimulates the desire for physical encounter, which can only happen in a physical spatial context — paradigmatically in (urban) public space, where mobile media then feed the action in the streets immediately back into the media networks.

Yet again, while the tactic of creating large scale hybridised public gatherings (simultaneously offline and online) utilising a variety of affective attractors[4], this potential for affective / physical mobilisation was exploited most effectively by the Trump campaign. In particular the frequent crowded and highly charged town hall meetings and their mediated extensions created a framework for somatic activation eerily similar to the mobilisation tactics of the Occupy movements. However, now this framework for somatic activation stood palpably in the service of strategic power. This play on / of the affective registers eventually culminated in the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 by Trump supporters attempting to disrupt the electoral college vote certifying the presidential election win by Joe Biden. The Capitol storming of that day is a prime example of the techno-sensuous spatial order of Affect Space operating in full (violent) force.

A different sense of time

To address these conditions from the perspective of tactical media and associated activist practices a different sense of time, a different temporality is required. This different sense of time needs to be developed in at least in two distinct directions:

The first is the most obvious: The dominance of the 'eternal here and now' that activist and experimental cultural producers find themselves trapped in – the immediacy of 'the event', the 'real-time' (Paul Virilio) – needs to be challenged and broken. This requires an extension of the temporality of tactical media beyond its nomadic 'hit and run' tactics.

The increased interest in forensic investigation and documentation, most visibly developed by the research agency Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths University of London5] and the Bellingcat investigative journalism research collective6], points in a productive direction. New forms of (online) tactical and autonomous archiving (Artikis□ler, 2016) suggest another important route to extend the temporal awareness of activist initiatives.

Documentation practices counteract the apparent amnesia, voluntary or involuntary, that seems to befall activist and experimental initiatives. They reveal correspondences and divergences over time. More importantly still the perspective of strategic power is always long-term, while the practice of the nomadic tactical actor is almost by necessity entrapped in a short term perspective. Much of the political agency and efficacy of these different actors lies in their capacity to construct extended structures in time (sustainable strategies), and not just in space (mobilisation tactics). In that sense, we might call Occupy Wall Street not so much a 'constructive failure', but rather a 'failure by design'.

The time space of absence and disappearance

The second change in the sense of time (temporality) that is required to address the curious inversion of the tactical and the strategic here is far less straightforward – it requires a redirection of attention towards the affective and in particular to what I would call the 'affect-driven', or what Brian Massumi refers to as the non-conscious (Massumi, 2002).

Both the time space of affect and the intensified machine time of ultra-short duration mark a space of absence and disappearance. In his famous text 'The Autonomy of Affect' Massumi has described this time

space of absence strikingly as 'the missing half second' (Massumi, 2002). While the bodily interaction with the environment is immediate and overfull in asignified potentiality, cognitive processing (filtering) is delimitative and takes time – in fact the vast majority of possible and actual sensations are filtered out by the human cognitive system. Countless experiments by neuropsychologists and neuroscientists have timed this process of filtering and capture at an average of 0,5 seconds (Massumi's 'missing half second'), though it may extend even to 0,8 seconds.

However, the body registers signals from the environment and from within the body itself much quicker. These responses, regularly measured in laboratory observation settings (mostly when testing product, visual, auditory, olfactory designs) through changes in bodily states (eye movement, galvanic skin resistance, temperature and respiration levels, or hormonal excretion), can be timed on average at 0,25 seconds. This registered but not yet conscious (precognitive) bodily intensity is what can be called affect. The implication here is that affect moves at twice the speed of conscious perception.

Massumi's notion of the 'missing half second' bears more than an accidental similarity to Paul Virilio's suggestion of a division of human and technological time into two distinct time forms: the 'Extensive Time' of human perception and decided action, where past, present and future are still preserved, and the 'Intensive Time' of the ultra-short duration of machine operations that collapse the three time forms of decided action (past, present, future) into one: the real-time by operating in a time space too fast, too short, too intense to be accessible for human consciousness (Virilio, 1994).

Because of the ultra-short duration of the bodily affect and the real-time machine operation, both are equally inaccessible to human cognition - this is their time space of absence. However, we know more and more about how affect works as a bodily event and how it affects behaviour. Because they escape direct conscious assessment the time space of affect and the intensive machine time are ultimately manipulable (not least by means of real-time media).

To be able to address this critical dimension of ultra-short duration effectively the temporality of tactical media needs to be not just extended but simultaneously compressed. The analysis of the emergent techno-

sensuous spatial order of Affect Space has offered first steps in this direction.

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1 See for a first overview of different theoretical positions the collection "The Concept of Tactical Media" at the Tactical Media Files documentation resource: http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/collections/41572/The-Concept-of-Tactical-Media [accessed: August 30, 2023

2 This is of course not literally true, slightly over 5 billion people out of a global population of 8 billion can be considered an active internet user (mid 2023).

3 See the archived version of the text at the Tactical Media Files resource: http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/articles/3160/The-ABC-of-Tactical-Media [accessed August 30, 2023

4 The essay (Re-)Designing Affect Space (Kluitenberg, 2017) offers a preliminary typology of different 'affective attractors' at play in these hybridised public gatherings.

5 https://forensic-architecture.org/ [accessed: August 30, 2023

6 https://www.bellingcat.com/ [accessed: August 30, 2023