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THE HACKERS OF THE STREETS:
## ART, NETWORKS AND POST-CRISIS URBANITY

Bill Balaskas

The global financial crisis of 2008 gave birth to a new generation of political movements, which grew and flourished in streets and squares around the world. From "Occupy Wall Street" in the USA to "Indignados" in Spain, a range of anti-austerity protests, collaborative actions and participatory initiatives in public spaces reflected large parts of our societies' need to find alternative modes of socioeconomic existence, which would prioritise social demands over economic ones. Notably, such activities were organised and communicated, for the first time, not only in physical spaces, but also online, through a multiverse of networks and social media platforms. Prompted by these very public, physical and online expressions of disenchantment, many socially engaged artists saw the Internet as the new battlefront of creativity for political transformation. The practices of such artists have often been characterised by a strong focus on the notion of the "commons": on the one hand, on their appropriation by neoliberal capital and, on the other hand, on the necessity to reclaim them. This idea of dispossession has been particularly evident in the case of public spaces, as these places have been subject to rapid privatisation and gentrification. This article will attempt to map such efforts by examining a diverse group of online and Web-based artworks. I will begin with a brief analysis of two works that exemplify the use of urban space as a terrain of protest, and then move to another group of works that have used urban space as a key element in the formulation of social, economic and cultural alternatives.

Maurice Benayoun, *Occupy Wall Screens*, 2011.
4th Anniversary of the Streaming Museum,
Big Screen Plaza, New York City.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

In early 2012, French multimedia artist Maurice Benayoun exhibited his real-time data-visualisation artwork *Occupy Wall Screens* (2011) in an intervention that exemplifies the spirit of reaction against the neoliberal economic model that led to the crisis of 2008. Benayoun presented this project in the large-scale public screens installed at the Big Screen Plaza of Manhattan, not far from New York's financial centre. *Occupy Wall Screens* belongs to the ongoing series *Mechanics of Emotions*, in which the artist interprets the Internet as the world's "nervous system," producing diverse visualisations of data related to people's emotional states.[1] In the work, real-time stock valuations of major companies were juxtaposed with the "emotional trends" of Occupy sites located around the world, as collected from Web search engines. On the left-hand side of the screen, Benayoun displayed the emotional currents, and on the right-hand side, the stock values. In both cases, he used the familiar stock tickers' template that is widely employed by Bloomberg-style news programs. In addition, for *Occupy Wall Screens* Benayoun only presented the stock values of financial firms; namely, just those making money with money, and that have been the main responsible for the economic crisis of 2008. By showing his works in a prominent public location not far from the Occupy Wall Street movement's actual site, Benayoun was able to "reterritorialise" meaning and the use of public space. His goal was to provide a visual depiction of the clash between the institutional agents of capitalism and the people–the 1% and the 99%.
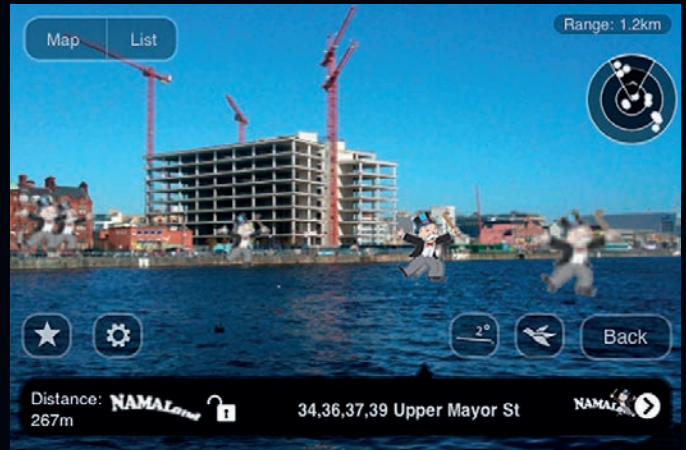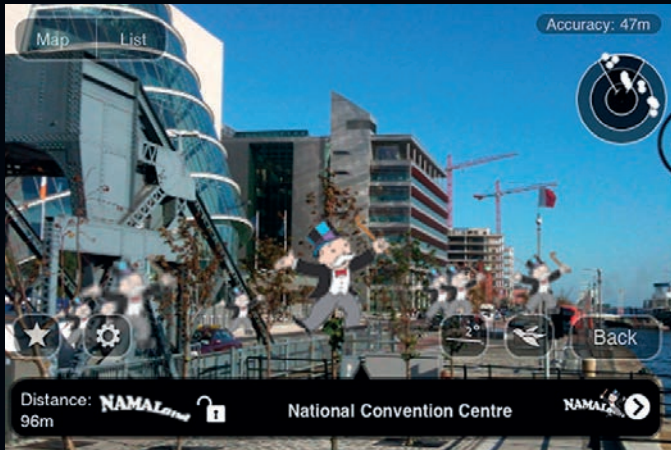
Conor McGarrigle, *NAMAland*, 2010.
Photos: © Conor MacGarrigle.

Conor McGarrigle, *NAMAland*, 2010.
Photo: © Conor MacGarrigle.

A work that has attempted to connect this class division with urban space on various levels is *NAMAland* (2010) by the Irish new media artist Conor McGarrigle. *NAMAland* is an Augmented Reality smartphone application, which uses open data to visualize the Irish financial crisis after the collapse of the country's property market. The application over-layers Dublin with information about properties in the city reportedly owned by NAMA, the National Asset Management Agency. In late 2009, the Irish government created NAMA to acquire property development loans from the country's banks in return for government bonds, acting as a "bad bank."[2] Quite surprisingly, however, it was not until April 2015 that NAMA became subject to Ireland's Freedom of Information Act. Until then, the organization's dealings and assets remained semi-published, and it was only due to the efforts of political and cultural activists like McGarrigle that some information could be verified. More than 120 properties were listed in *NAMAland*, and they were revealed to its users by a Monopoly Man figure, who appeared over a listed building when users approached it. The application attracted more than 45,000 users, who downloaded it on their smartphones. Interestingly, the poignant title of the project, *NAMAland*, managed to enter into general usage as a signifier for the consequences of the bank bailouts and the post-crisis situation of Ireland at large.
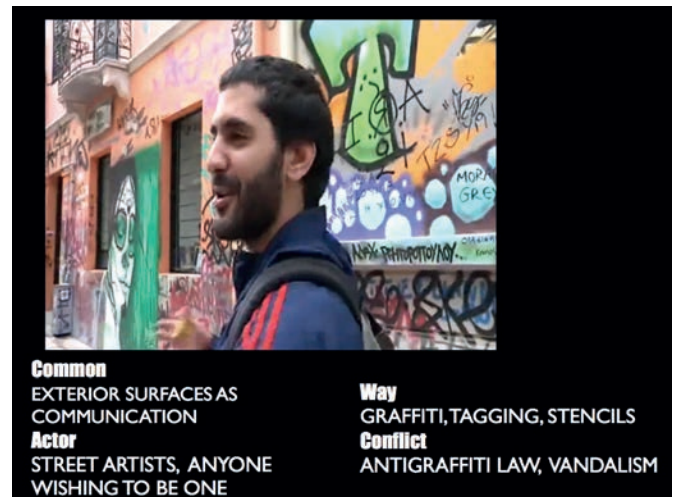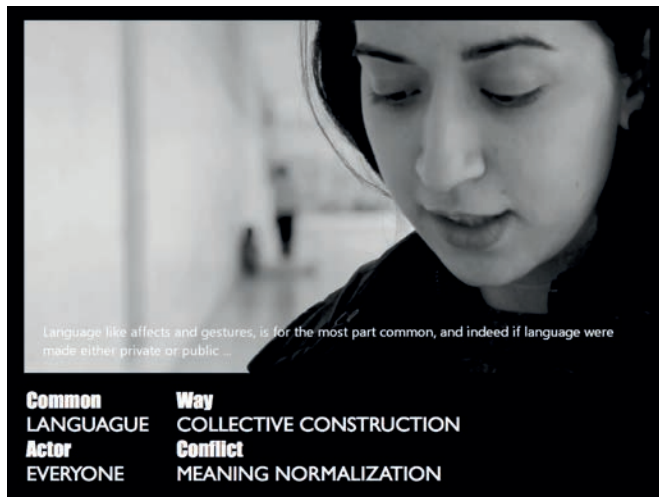
If we consider the practices of Benayoun and MacGarrigle as a means of activating public space, as a platform for protest, then, this was only the "first step" in the effort to nurture political change. The natural "next step" has been a renewed focus on public space as an active producer of socio-economic and cultural alternatives. The notion of the "commons" is a constituent part of this evolution, through its inherent orientation towards redefining what constitutes shared economic value in a society. In this context, contemporary artists should be thought of as a new generation of commoners, combining not only physical resources, but also knowledge, information and affects. As a result of the online collaborations and exchanges between artists, programmers, researchers and hardware engineers over the last decade, many art organisations have gradually adopted this perspective.[3] Not surprisingly, this has been particularly pertinent to the countries that were most severely hit by the Great Recession.

In 2010, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, in Athens (EMST), presented two new Web-based exhibitions that explored the role of the commons as an alternative to the neoliberal economic model. *Esse, Nosse, Posse: Common Wealth for Common People* was the first of the two projects—an online

EMST and Hackitectura, *Mapping the Commons*, 2010. Athens. Photos: Courtesy of Pablo DeSoto.

Common   **Way**
LANGUAGE   COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION
Actor   **Conflict**
EVERYONE   MEANING NORMALIZATION

Common
EXTERIOR SURFACES AS
COMMUNICATION
Actor
STREET ARTISTS, ANYONE
WISHING TO BE ONE

Way
GRAFFITI, TAGGING, STENCILS
Conflict
ANTIGRAFFITI LAW, VANDALISM

EMST and Hackitectura, *Mapping the Commons*, 2010. Athens. Photos: Courtesy of Pablo DeSoto.

platform that introduced the museum's audience to the main principles of the commons, through a variety of artistic projects, open software initiatives and texts of critical theory. In December of the same year, EMST launched *Mapping the Commons*, which naturally evolved from *Esse, Nosse, Posse*. The project was a collaborative cartography of Athens that used free participatory software in order to produce an interactive map of the Greek capital based on the commons. Starting as a workshop, *Mapping the Commons* was co-organised by EMST and Hackitectura, a Spanish collective of architects, artists, computer scientists and activists, founded in 1999 in Seville. The participants of the workshop were postgraduate students and researchers in architecture, media studies, and social and political sciences from various Athenian universities.

Building on the team's diverse research interests, the mapping of the Athenian commons aimed to be as comprehensive as possible, covering all types of physical, cultural and digital commons. Entries varied from self-managed parks to free Wi-Fi providers, and from the languages spoken in the different parts of the city centre to the locations of graffiti artworks. Those urban commons were documented over a period of eight days, during which participants registered and updated information on the online interactive map, with selected case studies also being documented in short videos. Furthermore, the project's website featured a blog, where the team members shared their personal experiences and work processes. The online maps as well as other sections of *Mapping the Commons* website remained open to contributions with full functionality until 2016, thus reflecting the dynamic character of the urban environments and the potential to continuously explore new forms of social interaction and organisation.

According to the curator of both projects, Daphne Dragona, we could locate four main characteristics in *Mapping the Commons* and *Esse, Nosse, Posse*: first, the formation of new online and physical spaces that enable social encounter and interaction; second, the provision and empowerment of social and artistic tools that are–quite often–already available; third, the emergence of a new ethos of collectiveness and communality; and, finally, the creation of a new system of values, beyond exclusions and the profit-based understanding of social progress.[4] In combination, the two projects highlighted the creative appropriation of public spaces as a prerequisite for the production of common wealth. This function can be traced back to the simple fact that "there is no commons without commoning"[5]–namely, there is no commons without the people who will reclaim, use and communicate whatever may constitute shared value.

In 2012, Science Gallery in Dublin presented the exhibition *Hack the City*, another example of an institutional response, which investigated ways of rethinking our socio-political relationship with urban environments. Inspired by the fact that cities are rapidly becoming the dominant habitat for the planet's population and, as a result, the main site of civic life, the exhibition invited the audience to adopt a "hacker mindset." The subtitle of the exhibition, *Take Control*, was indicative of this mission of combining elements of connectivity, openness, exchange, public good, autonomy and freedom. Accordingly, *Hack the City* hosted artworks, projects and interventions that engaged a diverse group of artists, programmers, researchers, activists and community leaders, with the aim to bring the practice of hacking into the streets of Dublin.

Exhibition *Hack the City*, 2012.
Photo: Science Gallery at Trinity College Dublin.

Julian Oliver, *The Artvertiser*, Madrid 2008.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Julian Oliver and Damian Stewart, *The Artvertiser*,
Rotterdam 2010. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

This objective was vividly reflected in many of the presented works, including Julian Oliver, Damian Stewart and Arturo Castro's *The Artvertiser* (2010). The work is a hardware device as well as an AR software through which billboard advertisements are replaced in real time by artists' works. The software is able to recognize the advertisements on buildings, magazines, or vehicles and, then, treat the surfaces as a white 'canvas' that can display different images or videos. For *Hack the City*, the members of the audience were able to see the transformed billboards by wearing Artvertiser's AR goggles, or by simply using any kind of handheld Web-connected device, such as a smartphone. The platform through which the advertisements are replaced featured a variety of artworks chosen from the Web, which attack consumerist culture and the "financialization of the bios."[6] As a result, the work transformed the read-only imagery of our urban spaces into an open platform of communication; an attempt to reclaim the commons of (visual) information.

Finally, an even more direct engagement with the commons is demonstrated in Éilís Murphy's *Uncommon Land* (2011), which used a variety of urban interventions in order to reveal what the artist calls the rise of "pseudo-public space" within our cities. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, ownership and control of urban spaces is increasingly being transferred to private companies and other entities that lack democratic legitimization. Very often, this is not visible, with streets and plazas appearing to be public,

whereas—in fact—they are governed by rules set by private bodies. Activities like busking, begging, skateboarding, or photography are restricted or even prohibited in such spaces, with private security ensuring that use of the space remains fully regulated. For *Uncommon Land*, Murphy invited the public to help him "hack" and reveal those invisible borders, by participating in flash mob events, photo-shoots, mapping and video documentation sessions, the results then were uploaded on the project's website. Often moving on the edges of legality, Murphy, by way of his work, asks us to activate public space through the subversive use of already existing technological tools.

This drive against monetisation, exploitation and exclusion has been a shared characteristic in most of the projects that I have briefly presented in this article. In combination with the proliferation of alternative institutions within the fabric of cities around the world (e.g. hackerspaces), the "hackers of the streets" have aimed at consolidating commons on a regular and sustainable basis, parallel to protest actions and ephemeral cultural interventions. It is through such hybrid strategies, which combine networked media and physical spaces—the temporary and the permanent—that we can hope to challenge the neoliberal definition of urbanity that increasingly dominates our visuality and our everyday lives.

Éilís Murphy, *Uncommon Land*, Still from *Tallaght Cross flash mob*, 2011. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Éilís Murphy, *Uncommon Land*, 2011.
Photo : Courtesy of the artist.

1.
For instance, in *Emotion Forecast* from *Mechanics of Emotions*, this information originates from websites related to current events in 3,200 cities around the globe, through these posts Benayoun is able to "measure" 48 different emotions. By associating the emotional state of the inhabitants as declared online (e.g. social media statuses) with the proximity of the locations, the work "predicts" the tendencies for the next couple of days. The forecasts are projected on a map that uses a hybrid visual language, combining a stock ticker display with words-emotions such as "happy," "confused," "weak," "afraid," "strong" and "guilty," amongst others. In addition, the maps were available in real time on the project's website. As Benayoun notes, "playing with words is sometimes the best way to connect different layers of information, different territories, different fields." See: Michael Kurcfeld, "'Occupy Wall Screen': A Renowned French Media Artist Takes on Wall Street", *Huffington Post*, January 30, 2012. [Online]: bit.ly/35Vb49C.
2.
A "bad bank" is a corporate structure set up to isolate illiquid and high-risk securities by buying the bad loans of a bank's nonperforming assets at market price. By transferring the bad assets of an institution to the "bad bank," the bank is able to clear its balance sheet of toxic assets, although it is also forced to take write downs. Shareholders lose money from this solution but not the depositors. However, when the state undertakes this role and bails out a bank, the shareholders are—in effect—all the citizens.
3.
Daphne Dragona, "Artists as the New Producers of the Common (?)" in Lanfranco Aceti and others (eds.), *Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism*, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Leonardo/ISAST, San Francisco, 2014), 165.
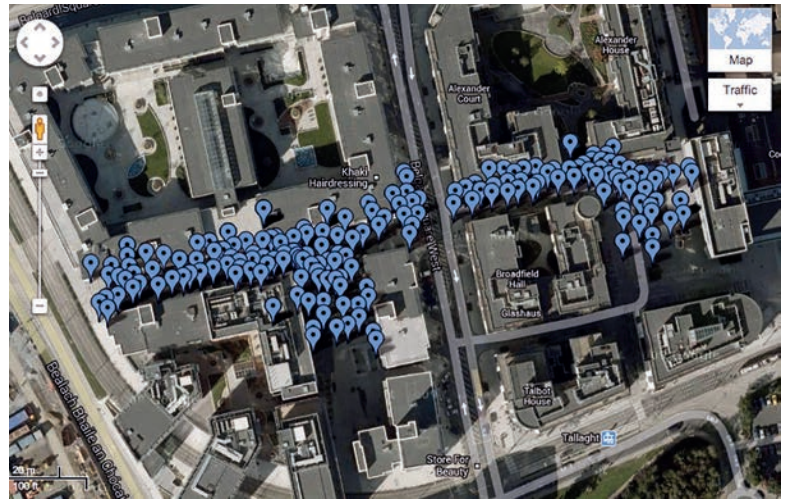4.
Dragona, "Artists as the New Producers of the Common (?)", op. cit., 170-171.
5.
Ibid.
6.
Matteo Pasquinelli, "Communism of Capital and Cannibalism of the Common: Notes on the Art of Over-Identification" in Lanfranco Aceti and others (eds.), *Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism*, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Leonardo/ISAST, San Francisco, 2014), 75.

Éilís Murphy, *Uncommon Land*, Still from *Tallaght Cross flash mob*, 2011. Google Maps. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

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