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**Transmediale.11, *Response: Ability*, Berlin,  
<http://www.transmediale.de/>. February 4 – 11, 2011**

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## Art & Politics

Politics have always been imbricated into the artistic, at least since the modern era. Works such as Gustave Courbet's *A Burial At Ornans* (1849-50), a social commentary on the rights of the everyday man to be depicted heroically, or Pablo Picasso's political lambasting of the Spanish War via his *Guernica* (1937) are proven examples of a desire to propel political change via art. With today's increasingly volatile financial, social and environmental climate we are seeing an unheralded influx of the political within the aesthetic. News items are filled with reports of economic insolubility (such as Greece's recent reprieve from the brink of financial collapse), social unrest (the Middle-Eastern political uprisings engineered over social medias, or what has been dubbed the "Arab Spring") and the growing concerns over environmental, climate and natural-resource uses and accessibility (who can argue that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have not been propelled in part for economic gain and control of natural resources by the first world?). How can an art festival bring us closer to the truth of these events and actions?



Daito Manabe & Ei Wada, *Face Visualizer*, 2008.  
©Jonathan Gröger.

## Transmediale.11 *Response: Ability*

Transmediale.11's title, *Response: Ability*, is a call to arms for the arts, and digital culture in particular, to take a stake in the political, economic and environmental machinations of which we are often only witnesses. Felix Guattari's "ecosophy," advanced in his *Three Ecologies* (1989), argues for a greater understanding and engagement with the environment, social relations and human subjectivity wherein he encourages his reader to think through problems "transversally." Guattari also advocates for a social and cultural "deterritorialization," which aims to reshuffle conservative and set notions of this environmental/social/subjective trinity. For Guattari, "assemblages" are a useful way of understanding how events/materials and people come together in an ad-hoc and timely fashion without completely losing their distinct qualities, yet allowing for a radical elasticity of change. Seen from this light, *Transmediale.11 Response: Ability* clearly foregrounds a form of social "deterritorialization" and beckons forth the formation of new environmental/social/subjective "assemblages," which we can "transversally" survey.



HONF-Intelligent Bacteria. ©Jonathan Gröger.



Alessandro Ludovico, Paolo Cirio, *Face-to-Facebook*, 2011. ©Jonathan Gröger.

### Yes, We Are "Open"

One of the more noticeable influences of this edition's Transmediale was its engagement with Open Design practices, which are increasingly dominating the cultural scene. Open Design is a derivative of the open source movement, predicated on 3D and physical production distributed over online networks. Piggy-backing on the Fab Lab<sup>1</sup> community, which has created broad access to production facilities and methods, the Open Design movement is invested in fostering a technological culture, which can be easily accessed. This 11<sup>th</sup> Transmediale resonated an affinity with Open Design culture via its dissemination of open-system events and workshops (social and technological), collaborative platforms and the social and free exchange of knowledge as key to cultural innovation and evolution. More than a site for display, or for exhibiting the barometer of art, this festival's *raison d'être* was expressed as to be a social mediator and instigator.

This social/political contiguity was architecturally staged in the main foyer/open zone of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt via temporary architectural structures designed so as to create spatial nodes for conversation, convergence, exchanges, debates and demonstrations of practices. The open zone hosted a series of speakers, debates, workshops and ad-hoc meetings, soliciting the public to create socio-political "assemblages." Alongside the meeting spaces, a few key nominated projects were featured in the exhibition's "HacKaWay" space, which we can use as micro-examples of this festival's aims.

#### Environment: HONF: *Intelligent Bacteria Saccharomyces Cerevisiae* (2010)

Indonesian art collective HONF's (House of Natural Fibre) *Intelligent Bacteria Saccharomyces Cerevisiae* is a "performative-acoustic"<sup>2</sup> installation built in

response to the illegal bootlegging of alcohol. It provides a didactic "living" environment for the public to learn how to make safe methanol. Set up as a functional biotechnological-lab, it also staged a series of DIY workshops and "musical" concerts to sensitize and entertain the public. This creative endeavour aims to spread safe alcohol production, which socially extends far beyond the festival with many labs set up in "the wild."

#### Social: UBERMORGEN.COM: *WOPPOW* (2010)

The power dynamics of fashion, clothing production and materiality is brought to the fore in UBERMORGEN.COM's *WOPPOW* participatory hands-on "sweatshop" station wherein the public-at-large is invited to volunteer their labour, and relinquish their agency for the purpose of making "pirated" garments. The *WOPPOW* project is part of a larger social commentary on piracy, and specifically African piracy off the Somali coast. As part of Transmediale.11 *WOPPOW* subverts the "collaborative" structures of participatory workshop/events to display the inherent hierarchy in social groupings and production methods and questions show piracy methods can translate to different contexts, such as Germany.

#### Subjective: Christin Lahr: *MACHT GESCHENKE: DAS KAPITAL* (2009 - ca. 2052)

The durational performance and online event *MACHT GESCHENKE: DAS KAPITAL* is an admixture of socio/economic critique and cyber-scripture. Every day, since May 31 2009, Lahr has been transferring one cent to the German Federal Ministry of Finance as a symbolic effort to curb the mounting debt. Accompanying the online banking payment, Lahr has used the text space reserved for "reason of payment" to also "transfer" Marx's *Das Kapital* text, 108 characters at a time.



Ubermorgen.com, WOPPOW. ©Jonathan Gröger.

The goal is twofold: to repay the German debt, a task that is slated to take until 2052, all-the-while transferring “culture” to the economic structure.

**Digital: Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio:  
Face-to-Facebook (2011)**

Ludovico and Cirio’s clever *Face-to-Facebook* online project, a last in their series of *Hacking Monopolism Trilogy* after *Google Will Eat Itself* and *Amazon Noir*, re-purposes Facebook profile photos to create a mock “dating” website. Using custom-made algorithmic facial recognizing software, profile photos are re-categorized and matched according to features and expressions, unveiling the inherent superficial “judging” of profile images in social medias as well as the vulnerability of unsanctioned use of online materials.

**Transmediale’s Sea Change**

Next year’s edition of Transmediale.11 sees the departure of long-standing artistic director Stephen Kovats who has been replaced by the young Swedish curator/theorist Kristoffer Gansing. This upcoming festival’s theme, “in/compatible,” will also see a restructuring of the festival format with, for example, awards done away with. We can only hope that the social vibrancy of the festival continues to expand while also including a more extensive exhibition program. Though emphasizing the political and generating the social are key to the success and importance of festivals, Berlin and the digital arts have much to offer in terms of contemporary practices and are in need of presentation and rigorous analysis. Transmediale is a unique event that has the experience and the critical purview to offer such a staging. Let’s see what this next sea change brings!

Valérie Lamontagne

**Valérie Lamontagne** is a digital media designer-artist, theorist and curator researching techno-artistic frameworks that combine human/nonhuman agencies. She is the Founder and Director of 3electromode, a design studio invested in developing wearables that combine DIY technology with current fashion research. She holds a BFA and MFA in visual arts and is presently a PhD candidate at Concordia University where she is investigating “Performativity, Materiality and Laboratory Practices in Artistic Wearables” teaching in the Department of Design & Computation Arts.

**Notes**

- 1 Fab Labs, or fabrication laboratories, were started by Neil Gershenfeld as part of a class on “How To Make (Almost) Anything” at the Media Lab of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and have since been set up all over the world. Fab Labs are small-scale workshops, which offer open access to digital fabrication tools such as 3D printers, laser cutters and other RM (rapid manufacturing) techniques. For more information see: <http://fab.cba.mit.edu/>
- 2 Transmediale.11 catalogue, 2011. p. 135.