

## **Upload dissident culture: Public Netbase's interventions into digital and urban space**

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### **Introduction**

The production of urban space is based on a variety of social practices, which in turn are fundamental to the reproduction of society.<sup>2</sup> Over the last decades, new technological regimes have been created in order to reorganize this urban space: cyberspace, virtual reality, and informational cities, are all terms which are associated with the dissolution of physical space. In this sense, a new digital space provides a venue for individual and social practices, for ways of living, cultural patterns, knowledge, power, and domination. But, as sociologist Manuel Castells emphasizes in this context, this is a complex process that has nothing to do with a technological determinism and its simple discourse about the disappearance of urban space:

“While the prophets of technological determinism have forecast the general dissolution of cities and metropolitan areas in an undifferentiated territorial sprawl, [...] the actual processes at work are much more complex because technology is only an instrument, albeit a very powerful one, of the process of organizational restructuring dictated by economic, social, and institutional changes” (Castells 1991, p. 126).

Hence, new information and communication technologies do not dissolve the urban space, but re-order this space in a socio-technological way.

In order to understand these transformational processes, we need to analyze the specific social practices which produce regularities within the socially constructed space. In a digital environment, space and time consolidate to a new material basis on which the dominant factors of social practices are reorganized by information flows. The space of flows as “the material organization of time-sharing practices” (Castells 1996, p. 442) becomes increasingly important for the hegemonic idea of physical and virtual space, whose cultural grammar determines the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society. Yet, on the other hand, the same technology can be used to re-connect people with the local places they live in. This civic and participatory potential of new media technologies<sup>3</sup> transforms the digital as well as

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1 The present paper is based on a presentation given at the Conference “Culture, Media: Protest”, 3-5 September 2009, Lucerne University, Switzerland.

2 The idea of physical space as socially produced space goes back to Henri Lefebvre. He presents a trialectic of social space consisting of spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces (c.f. Lefebvre 2000).

3 The term “new media” nowadays refers in most cases to information — and communication — technologies that are based on digital data, such as E-mail, DVD, MP3, etc. However the term itself is not as new as it seems, but rather appeared in the last decades every time new media technologies promised to revolutionize everyday culture (besides the radio, this was also the case with video). The notation therefore fosters the current business model, in order to advertise the particular product as the absolutely new and therefore indispensable. In particular, the Cyberhype of the late 1990s fetishized the term additionally, largely replacing the critical

the urban space into a highly contested social place, and therefore brings up the question of re-appropriation strategies. To answer this question, I would like to examine some of the interventionist practices that have been produced by Viennese media art platform Public Netbase, with the goal of rearticulating urban, thus public spaces. The understanding of these practices may help to find appropriate strategies in the struggle for the re-signification of public sphere in general.

### **Building a platform for critical media work**

When the Institute for New Culture Technologies/t0, launched in 1994 by Konrad Becker and Francisco de Sousa Webber, went online with its own server on the mainframe of the Viennese general hospital (AKH),<sup>4</sup> the Internet was still in its infancy. The discovery of this medium, today inextricably linked to everyday experience, marked a moment in cultural history when artists and cultural producers began to explore new forms of engagement with information and communication technologies – and found a place to do so at the Institute for New Culture Technologies/t0. Initially, then, it was mainly the mediation work at the interface between art and technology that led to a new understanding of cultural practice, allowing the establishment of an internationally networked media platform. Before long, the platform set up its dedicated culture server at the Vienna Messepalast (later to become MuseumsQuarter), where the committed cultural project t0 was institutionalized as Public Netbase. Apart from Internet service providing, Public Netbase offered a varied program of workshops and conferences on the promises and risks of a rapidly growing information society. In his inaugural speech on 17 March 1995, philosopher and essayist Peter Lamborn addressed the challenges emerging in an increasingly media-driven world, in which information becomes the raw material of modern society. Under his pseudonym Hakim Bey, Wilson became known mainly for his notion of “Temporary Autonomous Zones” (Bey 1990), referring to a situation in which the existing order is suspended within temporal and local limitations. A far cry from immaterial cyber utopias, Bey's theory insists on connecting the T.A.Z. to real space, as this is the only way of providing it with (social) meaning.

Instead of following the cyber utopian hype of the 1990s, Public Netbase tried to take a critical look at the nascent network society (c.f. Castells 1996). Apart from a gnostic Utopia, a new perspective for the art practice was offered, which tried to take up the fight for cultural hegemony. With the expansion of the democratic horizon and the radicalization of its principles, work in new media proves to be a discursive practice with a double strategy: on the one hand, the hegemonic common sense should be broken up by alternative channels of information; on the other hand, these strategies of disarticulation have to be accompanied by new forms of rearticulation using new communication networks. Thus, in a series of exhibitions, events, symposia, and workshops, Public Netbase tried to provide a broad understanding for the potential of new information and communication technologies, and offered a platform for the self-determined use of new media. Public Netbase was among the first platforms in Europe and in Austria to exploit digital space for critical media practice. Its efforts were focused on political awareness building vis-à-vis an increasingly networked

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discourse about the potentialities of digital media. Despite the valid critique, the term is used here, in order to take up the debate once again and to make the provenience of today's ubiquitous network technologies visible again.

4 Old website of Public Netbase: <http://www.t0.or.at/autoretr.html> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

society, in which virtual and real space progressively converged. The conflicts resulting from this development had to be taken up and translated into negotiable positions in public debate,

"particularly since contemporary art itself has now been normed, organized, channeled into the safe-havens of museums. The debate must be created, extended, deepened and resolved in public, where the issues themselves exist" (Holmes 2004).

Since digital technologies enabled a radical de-specialization of contemporary culture, a number of public spheres (artistic and educational systems, information and communication technologies, legal and political regimes) converged in a specific kind of Internet-euphoria. Thus, the expectations and hopes – which in the past have been repeatedly linked to various media (like radio, cinema, video, etc.) – were now coined by the idea of re-articulating public spaces: "[W]ith the increasing mediatization and hybrid virtualization of each of these spheres, the boundaries between public, private, commercial and government are in flux" (Dietz 2004). As is shown by US-American playwright Steve Dietz, many artists shift between these boundaries by means of new artistic instruments and practices, in order "to enlarge our understanding and practice of multiple public spheres" (Dietz 2004). With the rise of press, radio, television, and currently the Internet, the potential public sphere has expanded from physical into the virtual space of communication systems. The new public realm is both physical and virtual, and, in particular, has assumed a specific form in network discourses of the early 1990s. Hence, the emphasis on the civic and participatory potential of electronic media at that time has created new practices in art and media:

"They [the new art practices] are based or even dependent on collaboration, media access and hands on technology. In short, all three evolve around connectedness, around being connected: connected to people, to media channels, to tools and/or knowledge" (Bosma 2004).

In this context, media theorist Josephine Bosma underlines the diversity of media art practices in the public domain "as a virtual, mediated space consisting of both material and immaterial matter" (Bosma 2004).

This hybrid form is an essential characteristic of contemporary art practices. As a consequence, those projects were most influential, which knew how to expand the notion of public sphere to the new communication systems: Mailing lists, bulletin boards, and participatory art servers formed the backbone of the early network communities. Public Netbase soon recognized the need for electronic networking, in order to establish a cultural Backbone in the Austrian and European media landscape. By bundling a variety of pioneer projects in Austria, the first regional nodes of net culture emerged, providing access to creative and self-determined work with new information and communication technologies for artists and cultural initiatives. For Josephine Bosma, this community building implies a structural extension of the traditional concept of (art) work:

"These projects were definitely incorporated almost instantly, and their function quickly exceeded that of any other artwork. They not only offered Internet access and Web space, but also education and an active attitude towards the development of Net cultures" (Bosma 2004).

Given the gradual de-politicization of these net cultures in the last years, it is worth taking up the debate once again and questioning the potential of new media technologies for dissident practices. In particular, we see today the increasing privatization of the public sphere in favor of commercial profit interests, as well as increasing security paranoia by state agencies that

require new strategies of counter-power. The fact that self-contained discursive spaces cannot be opened without conflicts is a testament to the importance of initiatives like Public Netbase, whose 12-year-history was marked by a huge number of cultural and political clashes.<sup>5</sup>

### **Battlefield MuseumsQuarter Vienna**

A first step towards securing an autonomous position within the cultural environment of Vienna was taken by promoting public access, and thereby providing low-cost internet access to approximately one thousand art and culture projects. Acting as an interface of technology, science, and art, Public Netbase began to build digital networks of cooperation at an early stage, which made it possible to bring leading theoreticians and artists of the new cyber culture to Vienna. The diversity of Public Netbase's program and the intense demand from local and international communities soon made it possible to relocate to larger facilities. The opening of the "Media-Space" in early 1997 underlined Public Netbase's potential as a fertilizer of innovative cultural policies at the outset of the 21st century. Before long, though, Public Netbase's understanding of an adequate space for action and production – a space that would reflect the latest artistic forms of expression, and offer appropriate exhibition and performance facilities – began to fall out of step with that of the management of the MuseumsQuarter in Vienna, which at that time was initiating a large-scale reconstruction scheme. It is surely not surprising that a project of this order of magnitude – a surface of 60,000 square meters right in the center of Vienna – would give rise to opposing views, turning the project into one of the fiercest cultural combat zones in Austria.

This cultural tug of war, which resulted in the conversion of a center for contemporary art into a mere additional asset in Vienna's bid as business location, reflected a line of conflict in Austria's cultural landscape that "reduces art to its decorative exhibition value instead of understanding it as a mode of thinking" (Rollig 1995). Hence, any art mediation targeted primarily at event marketing and consumption disregards the larger aesthetic developments at the turn of the 21st century. This is a time when new technology regimes and distribution channels enabled the art field to break its hermetic closure and open itself to new social realms. The interface of culture, technology, art, and society had been Public Netbase's most central field of activity, so that its efforts to gain an autonomous creative space now found themselves in direct opposition with restorative cultural policies. Thus, at the turn of the millennium, the authoritarian shift in Austrian politics, represented by the new governmental coalition between People's Party (ÖVP) and Freedom Party (FPÖ), led an alarming intensification of hostile maneuvers against critical art institutions. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel suspected that a supposed "internet generation" was the mastermind of the fierce protests against his right-wing government. Since most of the projects critical of the government were hosted by Public Netbase, suspicions intensified and led to a repressive policy in governmental art funding.

In addition, on 5 April 2000, Public Netbase was dismissed from its facilities at the MuseumsQuarter under the pretext of imminent building works at the Fischer-von-Erlach section, the section housing its offices. The date set was 30 April 2001, and no replacement

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5 Such as the Austrian Freedom Party's cultural war against the feminist intervention "sex.net" in 1998, the protests against the right-conservative government between 2000 and 2002, and the expulsion of Public Netbase from Viennese MuseumsQuarter in the beginning of 2002. For further information see: <http://free.netbase.org> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

facilities or prospective date of re-entry were indicated. In spite of the "readiness for dialogue" recurrently claimed by Wolfgang Waldner, General Manager of the MuseumsQuarter's carrier company, there was an overwhelming impression that Public Netbase, by then a successful cultural institution, was supposed to be stripped off its vital assets. All of a sudden, the assurances given by Waldner's predecessor, according to which Public Netbase would not only remain a crucial and integral part of the new MuseumsQuarter, but that its presence would even be strengthened, no longer seemed to count. The structural plan for the future Quartier 21, produced by Markus Weiland and Vitus Weh, neither considered the space requirements of Public Netbase, nor reflected the standard phrase of "cultural diversity". Instead of a non-hierarchical platform of different cultural groups that would develop their programs autonomously, Quartier 21 turned out to be a centralized organization allowing Waldner to directly intervene into content development. After the governmental subsidy was first cut for political motives and then eliminated altogether, Public Netbase now had to fear for its location at the MuseumsQuarter. Since Waldner delayed the conclusion of an adequate rental agreement and instead made every effort to force all the institutions concerned into the rigid Quartier 21 scheme, the affected tenants (which included, apart from Public Netbase, Basis Wien, Depot, and springerin) informed Waldner on 11 June that they considered the dismissals as null and void.

As a consequence, Waldner canceled Public Netbase's participation in the inauguration festivities scheduled for late June 2001, whose motto "Baroque meets Cyberspace" seemed an appropriate headline for the existing conflict. Public Netbase's idea to involve the anonymous masses in the celebrations by "urban screening", projecting spontaneous text messages, graphics and animations onto the front of the historical MuseumsQuarter buildings, aroused fears of an art practice that could – at a time political protests against the right-wing government were taking place – not be calculated. However, since obviously censorship cannot censor itself, the ban provided the occasion for an art action pointing at the heart of the matter: An army tent circled by sand bags, tank traps and barbed wire was set up in MuseumsQuarter with the idea of highlighting the political maneuvering of "curator" Waldner. The statements screened by "remote viewing"<sup>6</sup> were intended to underline the continuing need, contrary to public declarations, to struggle for and defend cultural diversity. How serious Public Netbase was about this became manifest when in the night from 26 to 27 September, 2002, a tent installation was surprisingly set up in the central basin of MuseumsQuarter (and, later on, outside the area). The "BaseCamp"<sup>7</sup> acted as a literally shining example of participatory media culture by featuring a novel internet application that allowed a world-wide audience to participate in a real-time musical composition – a loud and clear signal in favor of Public Netbase's re-entry. An agreement proposed by Vienna's government seemed to facilitate a compromise solution, but failed as a consequence of Waldner's rigid position, leading to the final eviction of Public Netbase in early 2002.

## **Practices of digital resistance**

Since the 1990s. artistic and political developments within the field of net cultures have been shaped by a consequently growing, although loosely connected. movement of online activists.

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6 For further information see: <http://remote.t0.or.at/remote/english> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

7 For further information see: <http://basecamp.netbase.org> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

So-called "hacktivism"<sup>8</sup> therefore indicates a computer-based form of action which has evolved from its technological context to a new strategy of political resistance. The declared aim is the temporary occupation and exploitation of (mainstream) media, in order to draw the attention to existing power and domination relations. In addition to this illuminating function, the use of the Internet can also trigger short-term irritations, which transform closed discourses into open situations. These tactical media practices take advantage of the increasing fusion between physical and virtual space, as the architectural form of the modern city is more and more overlaid by a variety of data streams. Besides mobile communication technologies (e.g. cell phones or laptops), this data sphere contains expanding surveillance systems (such as the omnipresent CCTV) and the advertising media which is becoming ubiquitous within the townscape. Given these developments, Brian Holmes calls for a critical examination of these new forms of practice: "One could ask about the specific kinds of game that we have begun to play in the age of the so-called new media" (Holmes 2004). This question, however, is not merely arbitrary, but takes into account the fact that the contemporary field of new media represents one of the decisive places of hegemonic struggle. And because of this, "it becomes important to produce counter-experiments, to up the stakes of the game, to deploy the primacy of resistance in the key arenas of our epoch" (Holmes 2004). Given the rapid penetration of new technologies into all areas of social life, the critical practice with electronic media has become increasingly important.

Nevertheless, the emancipatory potential of new media technologies should not be overestimated. Even the Utopian ideas of net cultures during the 1990s brought forward an organizational regime of inclusion and exclusion, in order to draw the line between the visible and the invisible, the speakable and the unspeakable, between order and chaos (c.f. Apprich 2009). In this sense, cyberspace<sup>9</sup> does not represent a new continent which provides an "unmarked space" beyond the electronic frontier, but rather, it functions as "a projection surface for our own phantasms" (Marchart 1997, p. 92).<sup>10</sup> Cyberspace is not an utopia, conceived as a genuinely exceptional place, but on the contrary, a highly contested social place that reflects the cultural forces contributing to its development. While in the past bourgeois values and urban space provided the framework for what was called a civic community, we have to redefine this community in virtual space. Because although the traditional public gathering places – such as the marketplace, the town hall, the park, the university or the cafeteria – still remain, they serve less and less as places of democratic debate and political organization. As a consequence, computer-mediated communication yielded hope for the restoration of a new "community spirit" based on the potential of computer networks as a "many-to-many" medium.<sup>11</sup> Instead of mourning for the traditional notion of public space,

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8 Since the term "hacktivism" – in addition to political activism – includes the word hacking, it is often attributed to the technically adept computer scene. Nevertheless, the technical implementation of online-sabotage and digital forms of direct action is in most cases quite simple, and, due to the symbolic value of widest possible participation, explicitly desirable. Because of this, and the negative effect on the technical resources of the Internet, these electronic forms of civil disobedience (such as virtual sit-ins or denial of service attacks) stand in direct contrast with the rather elitist hacker principles.

9 The term cyberspace is composed of the English abbreviation for cybernetics (from the Greek *kybernetike*: the art of the helmsman) and space. Colloquially, cyberspace is used as a synonym for the Internet, whereas the Internet, technically speaking, only provides the technical infrastructure of cyberspace.

10 Translation by the author.

11 The specific characteristic of the Internet consists – in contrast to traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio or television – in its heterogeneity, which usually allows several channels of communication, and in its interactivity, by which people can both contribute and receive information.

theorists tried to exploit the potential of digital communication networks:

"The magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolization, in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production" (Poster 1997, p. 222).

Thus the hope was that the interactivity of computer networks could promote the decentralization of political discourse and challenge the illusion of a hegemonic public sphere, in order to enable new forms of democratic communication and organization.

But with the increasing segregation of society by neoliberal relations of production, the old dream of "virtual communities" (c.f. Rheingold 1994) vanished. While the Internet has opened itself up to a broader public after the end of the cold war,<sup>12</sup> it created its own myth as a domination-free sphere, which should allow the possibility of self-organization beyond commercial or state interests. The exaggerated hopes, which were linked to the medium during the 1990s, refer to a long tradition of techno-utopianism:

"It was rather like the early 1970s, when cable networks and video were seen as ways of democratizing the mass media, [...] the Internet was now seen as a means of democratization" (Arns 2004).

What the "digital revolution" promised was nothing less than a technical revolution of social conditions and, as a consequence, the self-regulation of society by means of electronic networks. But while the self-proclaimed avant-garde of cyberspace sought to exploit the anarchic structure of the Internet for their libertarian dreams and desires,<sup>13</sup> state and economic interests – partially in cooperation with the libertarians – created procedures and regulations in order to subject the electronic space to their particular interests. In particular, the massive concentration of private capital interests in the realm of technological development, as well as a new quality of security policy by state actors, soon led to a gradual displacement of public interests in the design and use of new media technologies. Instead of a broad discussion on the possibilities of democratic participation within a nascent network society, digital space was appropriated more and more [for/by] private interests.

After the Internet was liberated from its military context – certainly without ever having left it – and subsequently created a broad base in the scientific and academic community, a restructuring of electronic space under commercial preconditions has taken place with the implementation of the WorldWideWeb in the mid-1990s. As a consequence, economic interests could realize a lucrative trading area within digital space, which is based primarily on the production and distribution of immaterial commodities. In order to prevent the free flow of information and knowledge in form of cultural goods, (media) industry attempts to privatize the informational basics of today's society. Under the slogan of "intellectual property" (IP), the access to socially relevant knowledge becomes subsequently restricted,

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12 The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPAnet) was developed by a small group of researchers led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the United States Department of Defense during the cold war and is the predecessor of today's Internet.

13 The so called "Californian ideology" evolved from the fusion of the cultural Bohemia of San Francisco and the high-tech industries of Silicon Valley during the 1990s. Supported by magazines, books, television programs, web sites and newsgroups, the Californian ideology connected the spirit of the hippies with the entrepreneurial drive of the yuppies. This fusion of extremes was made possible by a profound belief in the emancipatory potential of new information and communication technologies (c.f. Barbrook/Cameron 1995).

rather than enabling a pluralistic and democratic use of new media technologies in favor of an open culture. In this sense, the former director of Public Netbase, Konrad Becker, states that "the sources of cultural expressions in the knowledge society cannot be reserved to the digital divide of single segments of society or global elites and the free exchange and vibrant renewal of knowledge and culture has to be secured under maximal participation" (Becker 2004, p. 33).<sup>14</sup> Access to the resources of the information society beyond existing corporate interests, therefore, is a democratic and political necessity.

## **Reclaiming Viennese Karlsplatz**

Following its eviction from the MuseumsQuarter, Public Netbase now focused more and more on re-appropriation strategies as a place of media staging and of symbolic dominance. The specific occasion was provided by a debate that had been going on for years, and that concerned the rebuilding of the Viennese Karlsplatz-square. In the public mind, this centrally located square is a busy, traffic-ridden nightmare, whose underground stations provide shelter to Vienna's drug addicts. Following decades of enlargements and reconstruction, Karlsplatz was now supposed to be converted into an "art space" that would generate more attention for the adjacent cultural institutions (Secession, Technical Museum, Musikverein, Künstlerhaus, Historical Museum, Kunsthalle). The reconstruction of the Viennese underground did, in fact, provide an opportunity to transform the traffic hub Karlsplatz into an attractive urban environment, and to turn its sub-surface space into a thriving cultural location. A "Free Media Camp"<sup>15</sup> set up by Public Netbase, Radio Orange 94.0, and PUBLIC VOICE Lab on 27 June, 2003, in cooperation with MALMOE magazine and cultural lobbying group IG Kultur Wien, left no doubt that there was no lack of concrete initiatives towards a cultural renovation of Karlsplatz. The Media Camp, whose presence at Karlsplatz throughout the summer carried a strong symbolic value, offered more than one hundred events dealing with the precarious survival of free media in Austria, and demanded strong foundations for a participatory public in a future network democracy.

In order to step up political pressure in the Karlsplatz-campaign, Public Netbase staged the project "nikeground – rethinking space"<sup>16</sup> in cooperation with the Italian artists' collective 0100101110101101.org in autumn 2003. During four weeks, a high-tech glass pavilion suggested the upcoming renaming of the historical square to Nikeplatz. In addition to this symbolic act, a website announced the establishment of a 36-metre-high monument in the form of the company's logo, and provoked harsh reactions in politics, media and the public.<sup>17</sup> However, the action was not directed against Nike per se; it was meant to illustrate the symbolic dominance of global business in public space. Hence, the world-wide interest generated by the installation may also be explained by the fact that the "hardly believable nikeplatz trick" underlined the important function of contemporary artistic practices that employ the real means of production of a society increasingly determined by the media and technology. The artistic reflection of symbols of everyday culture provides an example of a

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14 Translation by the author.

15 For further information see: <http://mediencamp.t0.or.at/mc/english> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

16 Archived Website of "nikeground – rethinking space":  
<http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/nikeground/website/index.html> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

17 For further information see: <http://www.t0.or.at/nikeground> (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

new form of intervention in public space: "We see it as our task to initiate a debate on the conflict between public interests and the commercialization of all realms of life, and to expand the scope of action by directly intervening in urban and media space" (Becker 2003). The action was meant to spark off new ideas for the future "art space" by showing how a combination of net art, politics, and theory delivers alternatives to a culture of representation.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, Nike International sued Public Netbase for 78,000 Euros for the violation of their trademark! That raises another important question with respect to the cultural construction of dissent: Do artists and activists have the right to use symbols of everyday culture - like Nike sees its "Swoosh" as part of this culture – or should companies be able to forbid the use of their signs under reference to the copyright? Actually, what "nikeground" merely proposed here, has in fact become reality in other places: for some years now Nike has been occupying public space by temporarily putting up "experience zones" and thereby transforming open urban space into semi-public areas. This process of privatization, also manifest at railway stations, sport facilities, and shopping centers, leads to the exclusion of large segments of the public, in particular of groups already at the margins. With regard to urban space, the increasing semiotization of public space raises the crucial question of how far the city has to project a positive image for tourists, gentrifiers, and investors, or, on the other hand, whether it should maintain its role as a contested place of social, cultural and political interests. Thus the choice of the place was not arbitrary: the artistic intervention wanted to give a concrete impulse to the decision making processes at Karlsplatz. But the attempt to open the "area"<sup>19</sup> in front of Karlskirche for contemporary art failed in the end. Instead of an "art space" providing a solid base for critical culture and media discourse, Vienna witnessed the establishment of Austria's first "protection zone" symbolizing police order and zero tolerance vis-à-vis the local drug scene.

The security aspect was at the center of yet another Public Netbase intervention at Vienna's Karlsplatz: together with Slovene artist Marko Peljhan, the fictive "System-77CCR"<sup>20</sup> was presented under the slogan "Eyes in the skies for democracy in the streets" to the Viennese public in May 2004. In reflection on the political unrest in the years 2000/2001, a civil counter reconnaissance system operating with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) was supposed to provide civil society with the required information advantage, in order to observe police forces during mass demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. The idea of a civil counter reconnaissance device generated a certain amount of anxiety, as the response from the Interior Ministry indicated: former minister Ernst Strasser made it clear that the expansion of surveillance systems as promoted by the Government did not represent a "charter for so-called counter-surveillance". Sure enough, the sneaking privatization of public space – as can be seen at stations, central squares and shopping malls – is itself a result of the

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18 In this context, semiotics looks at culture as a form of communication which broadcasts its messages on the basis of socially accepted codes. And these are codes that represent a certain system of symbols, whose definition establishes the cultural hegemony over our everyday life. Hence, new forms of intervention into urban space enable political reflection on symbols of everyday culture and symbolic representations of the city. This reflection can, as has been mentioned by some critiques, remain on a purely symbolical level, particularly if the action is not linked to a physical, that is, materialized struggle. On the contrary, the action is political when it is able to create critical consciousness in those struggles, thereby transforming the situation into an antagonistic process.

19 The German term "Gegend" has already been used by Austrian architect Otto Wagner in the end of the 1890s in order to characterize Viennese Karlsplatz.

20 For further information see: [http://s-77ccr.org/index\\_en.php](http://s-77ccr.org/index_en.php) (retrieved 15 October, 2010).

outsourcing of public security to private contractors. "Lawful" surveillance by third parties thereby undercuts the distinction between the public and private spheres, and fosters the acceptance of control technologies in all areas of life. The progressive disappropriation of public space, and the consequent weakening of civic rights, therefore requires concrete strategies of re-appropriation. By reclaiming public spaces and symbolic cultures, protest media may help to intervene in the existing hegemony, in order to re-articulate democratic struggles. That is because "the regulation of this integrated and post-public sphere indicates an imbalance wherein all critical communication is subject to political normalization", as art theorist Timothy Druckrey puts it. And these normative policies "serve to sustain authorized – perhaps legalized is better – discourse with little or no regard for disagreement, opposition or a re-legitimation of the public sphere as a zone of contestation, difference, otherness and dissension" (Druckrey 2003).

### **Critique as counter-hegemonic intervention**

Embedded in an international network of arts, media, and sciences, Public Netbase had to create resistant places within the urban space, in order to anchor the approach of participatory net culture within local structures. It was this dissident positioning which ultimately led to the financial end of Public Netbase: As a consequence of the ongoing struggle about adequate spaces for autonomous art and media production, the City of Vienna decided in the beginning of 2006 to eliminate any subsidy for the group's basic activities. Given the numerous awards (Prix Ars Electronica 1995, Award of the City of Vienna 2000, etc.) and the international reputation of Public Netbase, the local and international net culture thereby lost an important platform for a self-determined use of new media.<sup>21</sup> All the more so as resistive places within digital and urban space become even more indispensable, as these spaces are increasingly determined by new network technologies. Thus the question of the possible use of new media technologies remains a very crucial one, that cannot simply be approached from an technologically optimistic, nor a pessimistic standpoint. Instead we have to deal with this subject in a political sense, and acknowledge the necessity of conflicting interests and values for a democratic society. This "agonistic pluralism" refuses the idea of society as an organic body, and lays emphasis on the role of dissent and divergent opinions in the creation of new "chains of equivalence" within a multiplicity of heterogeneous, and often conflicting, demands. In this context, the question about the democratizing potential of network technologies was taken up by Chantal Mouffe at *Public Netbase's* "Dark Market" conference in October 2003 in Vienna:

"This is precisely how a project of radical and plural democracy should be envisaged. And it is within such a framework that the role and the possibilities of the new media should be examined in order to visualize, for instance, in which manner they could be developed so as to facilitate the creation of this chain of equivalence" (Mouffe 2008a, p.52).

New media, therefore, has to articulate democratic conflicts in order to open up the public space and foster a pluralistic media landscape as an essential precondition of (radical) democracy. Critique as counter-hegemonic intervention, therefore, is always a critique as hegemonic engagement with public space. In this sense, the increasingly closed spaces have to be *re-opened*:

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<sup>21</sup> For further Information on *Public Netbase* see: <http://netbase.org/t0/intro> (retrieved October 15, 2010).

"To make public in this context means two things: one to expose, disturb and thwart the neo-liberal strategy of permanent expropriation, the other the *creation* of public sphere specifically in places that are in danger of expropriation" (Raunig 2003).

For Gerald Raunig, this requires resistive places as places of counterattack like *Public Netbase*. Thus, it continues to be an exemplary of the possible intervention into hegemonic concepts, for digging trenches into the cultural landscape. However, one can not stop at the level of intervention, because every disarticulation of the existing order entails the necessity to construct a different one:

"What is needed is therefore a strategy whose objective is, through a set of counter-hegemonic interventions, to disarticulate the existing hegemony and to establish a more progressive one thanks to a process of re-articulation of new and old elements into different configuration of power" (Mouffe 2008b).

As has been shown, interventionist practices using new media technologies may allow a critical reflection on the symbolical representation of everyday culture, in order to reveal existing relations of submission as relations of oppression, and therefore to transform them into places of antagonism. Because it is precisely this strategy of visualizing unrepresented views and experiences that enables the re-articulation of existing discourses and practices by which the current hegemony is established and reproduced. Due to the ability of networks to eliminate non-compatible nodes as well as to integrate dissent into their own functionality, the range of articulation is always at risk of being limited. That is why the same technologies, which awakened the hope for a redemocratization of society in the mid-1990s, may undermine the condition of possibility for an articulatory practice – that is, democracy itself.

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