# The Absent Rival
## Radical Art in the Political Vaccum

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**Cultural critic Brian Holmes explains how in communal space, which is determined more and more by technology, the privatization of knowledge continues to increase. Can language and communication still be meaningful in this context?**




Yes Men 'Erastus Hamm' photographed with a businessman and the gold skeleton of Gilda.

Was there ever an avant-garde without enlightened industrialists? Is it possible to shock the bourgeoisie in technocratic societies? Does anyone have ears to hear what artists are saying? Or has privatization destroyed even the common space where words have their meaning?

Our story begins with the archetypal scene of tactical media: the moment when the Yes Men arrive in disguise at their first pseudo-corporate lectures. They expected to raise shock, tumult, outrage, fisticuffs and all manner of projectiles hurled from the floor to halt their delirious speeches, which to their minds were twisted Malthusian parodies of contemporary neoliberal discourse. Instead everybody smiled, shook hands, discussed the finer points (could we really solve our productivity problems by convincing Italians to give up sex in the afternoon?) and asked politely for a business card. There was no awareness of the critique. In fact, what has never happened in the last ten years of intensifying debate

over the global expansion of neoliberalism is the slightest recognition from the corporate class that something might be wrong. It's as though what's called a 'pang of conscience' – that ghostly moment when the stakes of someone else's life or death impinges on your sensibility – had vanished from the minds of those who manage the world's industrial development.

To understand the consequences of the 'privatization of knowledge' we will have to discuss the conditions under which words meet ears, or the technological conditions under which human expression circulates. Simultaneously we will have to discuss the control of technologically mediated speech. And finally we will discuss the means, milieus and motives for intervention. But first let's consider what it's like to talk when no one's in the room, or what communication might mean in the absence of a conscience.

**Skeletons in Suits**

Imagine one of the most banal locations on Earth. It's called the Millennium Conference Centre in London, England. A gentleman named 'Erastus Hamm' will deliver a PowerPoint lecture for the Dow Chemical Corporation, on the subject of risk management. No one realizes that the ham actor is Andy Bichlbaum of the Yes Men, that the 'Dow Ethics' website which the conference organizers consulted is a fake, and that the speaker is about to present an ironic condemnation of the principles on which corporations like Dow are founded. The unfortunate thing is – they still won't realize it at the end of the speech, which the Yes Men have expertly captured on video.[1]

Hamm explains that Dow is about to release Acceptable Risk: the first world's first fully automatic risk calculator. AR will help corporations decide where to locate their most dangerous industrial operations, the ones that could become liabilities: 'Will project X be just another skeleton in the closet, something your company comes to regret, or will it be a golden skeleton?' Hamm discusses Agent Orange, the poison Dow sold for US Army use in Vietnam, and he claims that even in 1970, the AR calculator would have predicted a positive balance, for the corporation anyway. He brings up another case, IBM's sale of technology to World War II Germany to help identify certain races – and a Nazi sign flashes up on the screen next to the IBM logo. Definitely a skeleton in the closet, but once again, it's golden!

Applied in our time, Dow's AR device is supposed to calculate liability settlements on big industrial disasters, showing clearly that certain lives in certain regions of the world are worth a lot more than other lives in other regions. The tacit example here, which underlies all of the Yes Men's work on Dow Chemical, is the 1984 disaster at a Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India, killing an estimated 20,000 people. The corporation paid a minimal settlement and left behind over 100,000 wounded, as well as tremendous pollution. In 2001 it was acquired by Dow, which still refuses any liability.

The upbeat presentation ends with a glittering bone-dance on the screen, then a pop, flash and plume of smoke in the room as the golden skeleton Gilda is unveiled from beneath a crimson cloak. Chuckling businessmen and women are encouraged to come up, take a card and an AR keychain and have themselves photographed next to Gilda, while occasional jerky footage of the crowd, shot from a miniature camera installed in Erastus Hamm's geeky-looking glasses, reminds you that this surreal event is actually *cinéma verité*. But the astonishing part comes afterwards, in the candid dialogues the businessmen engage in with the phoney Dow representative. Simplex Consulting representative to Hamm:

*—As I understood it your risk assessor will work out what the human impact is as opposed to how much money you can make on it* (big smile)*. Whatever way you do this, you're gonna cost some lives, right? But you're gonna make some money in the process of it! It's*

*acceptable! Is that right?*
*—Well, yeah, that's exactly what I said. Did you find that not, um … ?*
*—I thought it was refreshing, actually!*

So what does the Acceptable Risk calculator prove to the watchers of the Yes Men video? That there's no risk in offering up the most extreme scenarios, so long as they come with a golden keychain? Or maybe that decades of neoliberal greed have eliminated any risk of conscience among high-level business executives? Could there be a zombie at the wheel, in the age of corporate governance? And if so, where is the juggernaut of contemporary capitalism really headed?

**Counseling the Prince**

Enter an unusual figure: Bernard Stiegler, the French philosopher who leans to the left, believes in industry, dreams of technology, and wants to be the counsellor of the prince. He worries about the collapse of today's 'libidinal economy' and thinks Europe should develop a new industrial model. He's also nostalgic for the statism of General de Gaulle, dislikes anyone who wears tennis shoes and shows every sign of being a cultural conservative. One of his latest books (but he publishes three or four a year) is dedicated to Laurence Parisot, the president of the French bosses' union: a corporate crusader to whom he proposes 'saving capitalism' by 're-enchanting the world'. Stiegler's ideas are stimulating but also weirdly naive, pragmatic yet strangely delirious. Let's have a closer look.

His first move is to establish an equivalence between the technologies of cognitive capitalism and what Foucault calls 'the writing of the self'. As the ancient Greeks shaped their inner lives through the memory-aids of intimate diaries (*hypomnemata*) to which they consigned formative quotations and reflections, so we postmoderns shape our own subjectivities through the use of computers, video cameras, MP3 players and the Internet. The mediation of externalized linguistic techniques is fundamental to the process of individuation. The problem is that these 'technologies of the mind' – or 'relationship technologies', to use Jeremy Rifkin's term – now take the form of networked devices connecting each singular existence to massive service industries operating at a global level. As Stiegler says, 'service capitalism makes all segments of human existence into the targets of a permanent and systematic control of attention and behaviour – the targets of statistics, formalizations, rationalizations, investments and commodifications.'[2] Or in Rifkin's less abstract words: 'The company's task is to create communities for the purpose of establishing long-term commercial relationships and optimizing the lifetime value of each customer.'[3]

Here we see that the fundamental commodification is not that of intellectual property. Rather it is commodification of cognition itself, which becomes a calculable quantity ('lifetime value') to be channelled into relational patterns that meet the needs of giant corporations. It is *we* who then perform the service. In Stiegler's view, this 'proletarianization' of entire populations acts to destroy sublimated desire, leaving people open to the gregariously aggressive drives of 'industrial populism'. The pandering of bellicose politicians on Berlusconi's or Murdoch's TVs gives some idea of what he means. The question is whether the networked technologies will merely confirm the destructive effects of television, or whether they can be transformed.

To conceptualize the way that civilizational development shapes the thoughts and actions of individuals via the mediation of technology, Stiegler introduces the term 'grammatization'. It is the process whereby the existential flow of human thought and action is analyzed into discrete segments and reproduced in abstract forms or 'grams' – the most evident example being the writing of language. Indeed, all the varieties of *hypomnemata* or externalized memory can be seen as techniques for patterning the way people think, speak and act. This structuralization of behaviour is endless, operating

through various codes and media; its recent manifestations include the analysis of human gestures known as Taylorization (the scientific basis for the Fordist assembly line). The enforced repetition of specific sequences of actions forecloses the existential possibility of becoming oneself, or individuation. TV programming, which imposes an identical modulation of thought and affect upon millions of viewers at the same time, represents a pinnacle of enforced repetition. Similar remarks could be made about computer programs like Windows. But the relationship to grammatical patterning is not necessarily one of pure imposition.

With an astonishing historical image, Stiegler suggests that Egyptian hieroglyphic writing 'allowed for the control of floodwaters, of flows and stocks of commodities, and of the work of slaves, through the intermediary of scribes specialized in the protection of royal or Pharaonic power'. Subsequently, however, 'these *hypomnemata*, which for centuries had been in the service of an increasingly rigid royal power … became in ancient Greece the principle of a new process of individuation, that is, *of a new relationship between the psychic and the collective*: the citizen became a new dynamic principle whereby the Greeks rapidly transformed the entire Mediterranean basin.' Writing becomes not only a vector for authority, but also an instrument of self-government. Yet this transformation opens up the basic problems of democracy, as they appear in Plato's *Phaedrus*: 'Writing, which is a *pharmakon*, a remedy whereby the process of individuation takes care of itself and struggles against the poison that threatens to destroy it at the heart of its own dynamism, is also a poison that allows the sophists to manipulate public opinion, that is, to destroy the dynamism and make it into a diabolic force that ruins the symbolic: a power of dissociation leading to the loss of individuation.'

Stiegler points to the need to take care of the role of mental technologies in the process of psychic and social individuation. He borrows from Gilbert Simondon the idea that each technological system gradually transforms over time, becoming increasingly distinct *as a system* through the progressive differentiation of all its interdependent devices. He also borrows the related idea that each singular pathway of human individuation (the process that allows one to say 'I') is inextricably bound up with a broader pathway of collective individuation (the process that allows us to say 'we'). The individuation of each 'I' is inscribed in that of the 'we' from its very outset; but it is only the differentiation of the two that allows both processes to continue. And this differentiation is multiple: each 'I' is intertwined with different 'we's' unfolding at different scales (family, town, region, nation, language group, etcetera). What Stiegler claims to add to Simondon is the realization that the twofold process of psychosocial individuation is inseparable from the process of technological individuation, to the extent that the former is dependent on the specific kinds of externalized memory made possible by the latter. In other words: I become who *I* am, and we become who *we* are, within the range of possibilities offered by the concomitant evolution of the recording machines to which *I / we* have access. And this specific and constantly evolving range of technological possibilities can serve to further the process of twofold individuation, or to destroy it.

In this new light the industrial development of the Internet appears as a potentially dynamic principle of technological writing, offering an historical chance to go beyond the stultifying effects of television. Stiegler illustrates those effects by quoting Patrick Le Lay, CEO of the premier French commercial channel TF1, who infamously declared at a corporate strategy session that what he could sell to Coca-Cola was 'available human brain time' for their advertisements. Le Lay is the epitome of a cultural manager without a gram of conscience. But a similar predatory instinct is behind the developments of American-style service capitalism (and it's surprising that Stiegler doesn't draw the parallel with Kenneth Lay, former CEO of Enron, who practiced the most extreme financial sophistry of the entire New Economy [4]). The Internet as a 'global mnemotechnical system' is itself threatened by industrial populism, whose massively damaging consequences we see all around us – above all in global warming created by the Fordist economy, whose effects

have become undeniable at the very moment of war for oil hegemony in Iraq.

A response would have to be imagined at a continental scale, as the smallest possible rival to Anglo-American globalization. Only at the European level could one envisage an effective, upward-leading spiral of reciprocal emulation, where singularities challenge each another in the quest for a better world that lies beyond everyone's horizon. Stiegler's thinking reaches its peak when he imagines a continental rivalry. But this also provokes the desperate appeal to the French corporate elite, whom he thinks could be convinced of the need to spark a European response to really-existing cognitive capitalism.

Here we come to the heart of the question. Who could possibly believe that the corporate raiders who gathered around Patrick Le Lay are now going to band together to save capitalism from its own self-destruction? Who really believes, that the businessmen who met in Davos last January are ready to rescue the planet from climate change? Maybe the better question is whether Stiegler's elaborately crafted appeal to the corporate elite is not a subtle fiction, stimulating readers to imagine all the practical changes required to transform the technological basis of what is ultimately a cultural system. The pragmatic political text would then become a piece of delirious philosophical sophistry, whose real target is the formation of public opinion. The key thing to realize is that epochal change could come from either end of the techno-cultural system: just as the industrial production of better mnemonic devices would stimulate a higher level of participatory culture, so the latter would itself create a broader demand for more intricate and useful machines for self-government. And if we consider the track-record of our capitalist elites, then the cultural demand might seem a much more likely starting point than the industrial offer.

So instead of following the philosopher any further – either in his attempts at counselling the corporate prince, or in his dodgy ideas about sublimation [5] – let us take the avenue offered by his delirious fiction, and look instead for the real driving forces of a critical and emancipatory use of mnemotechnics. I refer, of course, to the production of free software and to the recent upsurge of media interventionism, including but not limited to the exploits of the Yes Men. Here we shall again encounter forms of rivalry and questions of conscience – all mixed into a poison which is also a remedy.

### Letters and Destinations

There is an obvious place to look for positive transformations of networked technology: in cooperatively written, non-proprietary computer code, which comes to most people's desktop as a Linux *[ en.wikipedia.org - Linux is a Unix-like and POSIX-compliant computer operating system assembled under the model of free and open source software development and distribution. The defining component of Linux is the Linux kernel, an operating system kernel first released on 5 October 1991 by Linus Torvalds. ]* operating system. But Linux forks into as many as 300 different 'distributions', from Debian to Red Hat via Slackware and Ubuntu, all constructed out of a basic core. Linux and its various 'flavours' are related like Saussurian *langue* and *parole*. The collective project of free software creation continually opens new possibilities from a shared horizon, differentiating along a singular path even as it consolidates the fundamental distinction of a non-commodified technical system.

Common interpretations speak of a 'high-tech gift economy', where each contribution to the collective pot translates into the multiplying wealth of riches for everyone. But holding closer to the ideas of anthropologist Marcel Mauss, one could conceive certain 'gifts' as charged with antagonism, devised in reality to crush an opponent with overwhelming abundance. When the wildly popular music-exchange service, Napster, was shut down by legal attacks from the record companies, free-software programmers immediately launched new formats of peer-to-peer exchange, which had no central clearinghouse. Let the thousand song-lists bloom, they said. The record companies began to founder – and Hollywood trembled as P2P video made the scene. Why such a concerted reaction from the

hacking community? Behind the copyrighted tunes were all the metaphysical subtleties of free software's ancient enemy: private property.

Seizing upon the very device that is used to secure the exclusive ownership of intellectual property, Richard Stallman created the General Public License. This specially formulated copyright contract insures that any computer code written cooperatively will remain open to future modification by other programmers for other uses. The poison of copyright is turned into its own remedy. Stallman himself makes a curious observation about how this came to pass: 'In 1984 or 1985, Don Hopkins (a very imaginative fellow) mailed me a letter. On the envelope he had written several amusing sayings, including this one: 'Copyleft – all rights reversed.' I used the word 'copyleft' to name the distribution concept I was developing at the time.' [6]

Few people realize that the keyword of today's most emancipatory technology came mailed through the post. Even fewer probably realize that the term 'copyleft' was independently invented by the artist Ray Johnson, founder of the 'New York Correspondence School'. [7] But one thing is obvious when you consider art history: Mail Art provided the matrix from which radical uses of the Internet would spring. Participatory practices of cooperative and differentialist creativity put an indelible stamp on the letters of contemporary activism, which are still reaching their destination in the world of technopolitics.

Robert Filliou coined the name of the 'Eternal Network' to describe the mail art circuit way back in the 1960s. In 1992, Vittore Baroni sketched a prescient diagram that history has confirmed. In the centre of a tree of words is a vertical trunk that reads networking. Radiating out from the top are the technical possibilities: small press, photocopier, mail, phone, fax, cassette, video. Amidst all the others, computer is still just one more, already sprouting the leaves of email, virtual link, interactive art. [8] Exchanges from peer to peer were already a reality, even before the Internet as we know it.

In between those two dates is an interview with Ray Johnson, published in 1982 in *Lotta Poetica* (Verona, Italy), with a preface by Henry Martin that may give the best feeling for the prehistory of the net: 'To me, Ray Johnson's Correspondence School seems simply an attempt to establish as many significantly human relationships with as many individual people as possible... . [R]elationships where true experiences are truly shared and where what makes an experience true is its participation in a secret libidinal energy. And the relationships that the artist values so highly are something that he attempts to pass on to others. The classical exhortation of a Ray Johnson mailing is "please send to ..."' [9] Mail art is an addressing system for the multiplication of desire. Or as William Wilson wrote, 'Ray Johnson is a mild-mannered choreographer who sets people in motion.' [10]

Contact through a far-flung network became part of what Ulises Carrión referred to as the shift from 'personal worlds' to 'cultural strategies.' [11] These were initially restricted to a few hundred, then a few thousand artists exchanging singular desires. But as time progressed and technologies ramified, the pleasurable consciousness of the existence of one's peers became doubled by letters coming from further afield, bearing that affect of conscience that pierces the narcissistic mirror. Hackers inspired by Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* changed the postal system into a real-time flux of underground information. News from the South of the planet, brought by the new functionalities of email, reminded inhabitants of the North what their money was actually doing. Namely, impoverishing entire regions in the name of single-commodity exports and forced loan repayments administered by the IMF. After the first Global Days of Action in 1998, 'cultural strategies' came to mean the art of mobilizing tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of people. The networked protests of Seattle and Genoa, then the anti-war marches of 15 February 2003, appear as watersheds in retrospect. But that's because we don't know the responses to the disasters that lie ahead. The privatization of everything may still be confronted with the contagion of contrary desires. It all depends on what we make of

technology – and with whom.

### B – B Prime

The philosopher Christoph Spehr sums it all up, in a recent film which violates every provision of copyright. *On Blood and Wings: A Study in the Dark Side of Cooperation* is a contribution to the cutting edge of Marxist theory, clipped from the archives of B-grade vampire flicks. [12] The point is to describe a senseless momentum. As Tony Conrad's ghostly voice intones against a gory backdrop: 'The blood thing is the only thing you have to know to understand capitalism. The vampire can't act without the blood. And he doesn't keep it, he doesn't feed on it in a way that he would ever be full… . He's more like a machine that is fuelled by blood. And the blood he takes only drives him to search for new blood. Like Marx put it in *Capital*: B leads to B prime. If you understand this, it will greatly improve your life under capitalism.'

Spehr ranges through the depravity of a civilization and its spectacles, showing how everyone in the developed societies – whether in the academy, the technology sectors or even in activism – comes gradually under the fangs. We are the dash between B and B prime. But the leading edge of a new productive system carries its promise along with its poison, at least when it remains in touch with the past that gives the future meaning: 'Technology becomes more and more important in the fight against capitalism: networking, communications, the Internet, new forms of organizing. But the core of the action – the social struggle – is still the basis, and cannot be replaced by any of that.'




Stills from the film 'On Blood and Wings: A Study in the Dark Side of Cooperation'.

The film that began with the Prince of Darkness comes to an end with a sunrise in Mexico, and with a reflection on the way that solidarity acts as a grounding force to control the avant-gardes, who are necessarily infected: 'The ones we expose to highly contaminated areas – like boards, parliaments, any forms of leadership and representation – are always in danger, and they *are* a danger.' So while the would-be hero from the North goes off to a new struggle, the comrade from the South tells him he will 'pray … pray for the good medicine'. And the lesson of the *pharmakon* returns, as we hear the ghostly voice repeating 'pray … pray for the good medicine'.

Tactical media comes back here with a vengeance. Christoph Spehr has produced a bottom-up vision of transformations that Bernard Stiegler can only imagine from top down. The aim is to produce a confrontation with the absent rival. But the means can only be a complex alchemy of emancipation, where artistic motifs and advanced technology encounter the mobilizing powers of desire.

Today the latest Yes Men *[ en.wikipedia.org - The Yes Men are a culture jamming activist duo and network of supporters created by Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos. Through actions of tactical media, the Yes Men primarily aim to raise awareness about what they consider problematic social issues. ]* film is being produced by Arte and Channel Four. The industrialists have still not felt the fangs of conscience, but a few cultural bureaucrats are starting to see the work of the vanguards, and to respond to a deeper call of solidarity. A disclaimer on Spehr's film says it's designed for political education only: 'Any screenings outside this context may be a violation of copyright laws.' It's time to reopen the space where words meet ears. In the age of global war and global warming, what's the danger of being bit by the law? The least we can do is to bring some political education into the infected realms of public institutions.

**Brian Holmes** is a cultural critic living in Paris and Chicago. He holds a doctorate in Romance Languages and Literatures from the University of California at Berkeley, was a member of the editorial collective of the French journal *Multitudes* from 2003 to 2008, and has published a collection of texts on art and social movements entitled *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (New York: Autonomedia, 2007). His book *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* is available in full at brianholmes.wordpress.com. Holmes was awarded the Vilém Flusser Prize for Theory at Transmediale in Berlin in 2009.

## Footnotes

1. For the lecture, photos and a clip from the video, see www.dowethics.com.
2. Bernard Stiegler & Ars Industrialis, *Réenchanter le monde: La valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 38. All further Stiegler quotes are from this book.
3. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (New York: Putnam, 2000), 109.
4. See the excellent documentary *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, dir. Alex Gibney, 109' (USA, 2005).
5. Cf. B. Stiegler, *Aimer, s'aimer, nous aimer* (Paris: Galilée, 2003).
6. Richard Stallman, 'The GNU Project,' at www.gnu.org.
7. See McKenzie Wark, 'From Mail Art to Net.art: Ray Johnson and the Lives of the Saints', at www.nettime.org.
8. Vittore Baroni, Arte postale (Bertiolo: AAA Edizioni, 1997), 235.
9. Quoted in Donna De Salvo and Catherine Gudis (eds.), *Ray Johnson* (Columbus: Wexner Center / Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 186.
10. Ibid., 147.
11. Ulises Carrión, 'Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies?' in: *Second Thoughts* (Amsterdam: Void, 1980).
12. The film can be downloaded at www.wbk.in-berlin.de.

## Tags

Activism, Capitalism, Commons, Public Domain

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