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DIGITAL PARTISANS

On Mute *and the Cultural Politics of the Net*

How do new media technologies affect politics and culture? Views about those effects, always deeply divided, have been further polarized by the financial crisis and the opposition it has engendered. At the extremes, social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, are seen as at least necessary conditions for the Occupy protests and the revolutions of the Arab Spring; alternatively, those same technologies are viewed as the agents of intrusive commodification and dumbing-down, deployed against people's deepest subjectivities, which they have been duped into displaying in a privatized space where everyone's every move is spied upon. *Mute* magazine, based in London, has been examining the interconnections between new technologies, politics and culture since 1994—that is, from the moment when the internet was revolutionized by the introduction of web browsers that unified its interface, and rapidly brought large numbers of users online. It was founded by two art-school graduates, Simon Worthington (who had studied at the Slade) and Pauline van Mourik Broekman (Central St Martins), who took up the name from a periodical published through the Slade between 1989–92. The formation of Mute's founding editors not only ensured that art was discussed on equal terms, and in its complex relations, with technology and politics, but also that the magazine had a strong design, conceived as a visual object with a conceptual dimension as well as a set of ideas.[1]

A large collection of *Mute*'s articles has been gathered into a book, exploring the magazine's confluence of major themes: the ideologies of the net and social media; online art and its precursors; cyborg realities and fantasies; privatization and the commons; the relations,

sympathetic and antagonistic, between art and business; city, slum and gentrification; class and immaterial labour, among others.[2] Though *Mute*'s general position is on the far left, it has no fixed party line, encouraging debate and often throwing opposing views together. When its editorials are not merely jokey, they seek to explore the interactions of culture, politics and technology in its rapidly evolving complexity, while steering clear of broad-brush utopian and dystopian views alike. *Proud to be Flesh* contains a distinctive mix of topical articles, witness reports, skits and sustained analytical pieces; it is organized in thematic chapters, which has the great advantage of allowing the reader to track the magazine's sustained engagement with particular issues across its run, although at the cost of suppressing much clear sense of *Mute*'s chronological development.

In its first incarnation, *Mute* was printed in broadsheet form on the *Financial Times*' presses, using their famous pink paper. It later moved to a more conventional magazine format, with the aspiration to carry advertising from major companies, and to emulate the look—albeit with a large dash of irony—of a lifestyle rag, on the model of *Wired* or more pertinently *Adbusters*. The staid design of the book, with its illustrations largely corralled into a few sections of colour plates, gives little idea of the striking visual character of the magazine. Its bold, often garish graphics decorated a strange mix of hip theory, radical politics, technology news and fashion shoots; the latter protected from too much critical interrogation with a thick layer of camp. Later still, from 2005 on, *Mute* prioritized online publication, and moved to a print-on-demand magazine, which contained a selection of pieces from its website. Funding from Arts Council England (ACE) permitted this change in which all its content was offered without charge.[3]

Why did *Mute* ever print its content? After all, discussion groups such as Nettime have covered much of the same ground with email exchanges, and their debates are lively, fractious, well informed and timely. *Mute* printed on paper for reasons of access, quality control, volume, design

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[1] The editors published a book on the subject: Simon Worthington et al, *Mute Magazine: Graphic Design*, London 2008.

[2] Josephine Berry Slater and Pauline van Mourik Broekman, eds, *Proud to be Flesh: A* Mute *Magazine Anthology of Cultural Politics After the Net*, London 2009; hereafter PF.

[3] *Mute*'s online content can be found at www.metamute.org.

and comfort: in the 1990s, of course, access to the internet was much less ubiquitous than it is now, and far harder and more expensive to obtain on the move. Nettime was moderated but not edited, and so presented its readers with dozens of daily emails which they had to filter according to their own interests, while working out what some obscurity or oddity of English might mean; many people printed out Nettime emails to read in comfort (remember, too, the quality of 1990s screens), and few people had the fast data-connections necessary to view design-heavy webpages. Nettime, indeed, found it worthwhile to print its own anthology.[4] So *Mute*'s editorial selection and look made sense on paper, though those advantages were eroded as online technology became faster, cheaper and more widely available.

Mute contains a good deal of news comment, and the long—in new-media terms, positively epic—temporal scope of the collection reminds us that current concerns about new technology, activism and consumer culture have been discussed for many years. The claims made about technology and the Arab Spring, for example, were also made about the revolutions against the dictatorships of the Eastern Bloc. The Argentine anti-neoliberal revolt of 2001–02, like the current Occupy protests, had a highly decentralized character, and its most prominent demand was negative: that the corrupt political class should go.[5] David Garcia, one of the original theorists of Tactical Media (on which, more later), commented on the role that new forms of communication played in the collapse of the ex-Soviet regimes:

> It was as if the Samizdat spirit, extended and intensified by the proliferation of do-it-yourself media, had rendered the centralized, statist tyrannies of the Soviet Union untenable. Some of us allowed ourselves to believe that it would only be a matter of time before the same forces would challenge our own tired and tarnished oligarchies . . . it came to be believed that top-down power had lost its edge.[6]

Garcia was sounding a note of caution against such wishful thinking. One of the prevailing characteristics of *Mute* has been its informed scepticism about a series of influential utopian waves that have swept

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[4] Josephine Bosma et al, eds., *Readme! Filtered by Nettime: ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*, New York 1999.
[5] Horatio Tarcus, 'Get Rid of the Lot of Them! Argentinean Society Stands Against Politics' (2002), PF, pp. 249–50.
[6] David Garcia, 'Learning the Right Lessons' (2006), PF, p. 338.

through the discourse of new-media technologies—both those imagined and sustained by marketers trying to sell people things, and by theorists seeing a quick and bloodless route to radical social change.

Among the targets of that scepticism was postmodern theory which, it gradually became clear, was being challenged by the breakneck pace of modernization set in train by networked computer technology. *Mute* launched critiques of cyberfeminism as offering an essentialized view of women, who were seen as naturally emergent machines, being nothing and everything, nowhere and everywhere at once.[7] *Mute* also argued against the wilder notions advanced as theoretical support for high-tech, networked art. The prominent new-media theorists it published, including Matthew Fuller and Geert Lovink, were among the first to test post-structuralist thought against new-media environments, and find it wanting.

Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, to take the most pervasive of these models, had been a highly popular way to theorize the internet in the years before many people used it, and by doing so understood it. While it plausibly described the decentred principle of the web, the rhizome was useless to describe its hierarchies and actual structure, let alone the rapid commercialization to which it was soon subjected. Although some *Mute* contributors use Deleuzian terminology, the magazine published a sustained assault on digital Deleuzianism by Richard Barbrook, questioning whether deterritorialization would produce direct democracy and gift economies, and would be capable of undercutting centralized power. In supporting his case, Barbrook gave an account of the failure of Guattari's involvement with a Paris-based community radio project as a pre-web experiment in these very ideas.[8] Barbrook, along with many other *Mute* contributors, also raises questions about theoretical claims made for Free and Open Source software as a radical alternative to the closed, proprietary platforms of Microsoft and Apple: if it is really an 'anarcho-communist' alternative, how do we explain the concerted involvement of major corporations?

In the liberal press, such a sceptical, materialist account of Continental theory may have led to an ironic attitude of disempowerment and cynical reason, but in *Mute* it was the groundwork for an exploration of activism.

[7] Caroline Bassett, 'With a Little Help from our (New) Friends' (1997), PF, p. 133.
[8] Richard Barbrook, 'The Holy Fools' (1998), PF, pp. 223–36.

It was not alone in this, as postmodern resignation was eroded by the manifest opportunities offered by new communication technologies; these sat in obvious tension with TV-induced postmodernism. Suddenly, it seemed, following the rise of the browser, there was a dynamic technological, cultural and social scene, subject to dizzying change, and open to social and political manipulation.

Immaterial labour

Autonomist thinking about immaterial labour, particularly the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, were also regularly discussed and criticized—and unsurprisingly so, since this debate was connected with the great project to define the emergent class that would replace the proletariat in the information age. Negri's analysis of the immeasurability of labour time in the new economy—which can thus no longer serve as the basis for value, leaving capital to rule by domination and command alone—struck a note with digital workers for whom the time of labour and leisure had become blurred to the point of identity. Steve Wright pointed to the advantages to capital in its attempt to externalize costs by getting labour done unpaid—by eliding the boundaries between work and leisure through the use of technical devices to ensure that employees can always be called upon, and by getting consumers to do a business's administration for it (by filling in forms online, or scanning goods bought in a shop).[9] While Marx's *Grundrisse* 'Fragment on Machines' was often invoked in *Mute*'s pages, the idea that immaterial and affective labour would bind the hi-tech entrepreneur and the care-home worker in solidarity was questioned, as was the prevalence and novelty of the new era of labour. Steve Wright's 2005 article, tellingly entitled 'Reality Check', offered a contrast between high-end work which may be cooperative and allow employees some autonomy, and the low-end 'affective' labour of the service industries. He asked: 'does the obligation to ask, "Do you want fries with that?" really represent a break with Fordist work regimes?' Wright also noted the remarkable paucity of evidence Hardt and Negri offer in *Multitude* to support the idea that immaterial labour has become hegemonic.

If Continental theory, as lazily applied to new media, fared poorly, *Mute* also contained a severe—and often entertaining—critique of US-centred

[9] Steve Wright, 'Reality Check: Are We Living in an Immaterial World?' (2005), PF, p. 477.

libertarian techno-fantasies. In an influential polemic, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron skewered what they called the 'Californian Ideology' which allied futurology and libertarian Republicanism, and which still forms the worldview of a majority of Silicon Valley billionaires.[10] *Wired* magazine is a core repository for such visions in which new technology must be liberated from any state interference, so that the genius of the free market can propel its full and unfettered creativity, producing untold riches and benefits, at least for the cyber-elect—even to the point of immortality in the virtual realm. Against these fantasies, *Mute* not only pointed to the vast state subsidies that lay behind most technical innovation (including, of course, the internet) but also expressed an insistence on the bodies that labour over screen, keyboard and mouse—on the material and bodily aspects of 'immaterial labour'. Hence the magazine's long-lived strapline and the title of the anthology: Proud to be Flesh.[11] Indeed, *Mute* shifted from an examination of the 'virtual class' to a greater exploration of the underclass including call-centre workers, university students engaged in casual work, and precarious labour more generally.

Mute may in many ways be seen as *Wired*'s antithesis: leftist, not libertarian; more interested in communal action than in individualist competition; asking critical questions about the effects of new technology rather than celebrating it with a reflex technophilia; and being a magazine of dialogue rather than consumer marketing. The contrast was also formed by the magazines' different geographical bases. *Wired* is published from San Francisco, with Silicon Valley hard by, and it is marked by a fascination with the vast spending and bizarre projects of by far the most technologically advanced military machine on the planet. *Mute* is based in London which, dominated by the City, with its weak local government and run-down infrastructure, offered fertile opportunities for the symbiosis between high-tech cultural workers, finance capital and speculation in real estate. The association with the *Financial Times* thus made a certain ironic sense.

Indeed, one of the magazine's abiding themes is the effect of speculative 'development' on the UK's cities, in which public-spending cuts on welfare and infrastructure are meant to be compensated for by cultural

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[10] Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology' (1995), PF, p. 29.

[11] Introduction to Chapter 8, PF, p. 427.

projects in privatized urban spaces. In 1998, Simon Pope mocked the symbiosis between London's cultural workers and property speculators in a parodic portrait of East End 'culturepreneurs'.[12] Five years later, the development of a 'creative quarter' in Hackney Town Hall Square—dubbed 'HTH2'—was the subject of an acid analysis which made explicit this noxious compact. Benedict Seymour and David Panos described the sale of council properties to a private finance consortium as part of a wider project for the 'spatial sterilization' of the area, a form of 'social cleansing'.[13] Mute was no less attentive to the material realities of work in Britain. John Barker's essay on undocumented migrants revealed 'the dirty secret of the UK's economic success under New Labour'—a largely Asian workforce recruited to maintain low-cost production in new 'flexibile' plants, while the country's traditional manufacturing centres atrophied.[14]

Art and social networking

Mute was also founded at the time when 'young British art' was an unavoidable media phenomenon. The magazine ignored that trend, aside from the occasional piece of mockery, and offered its implicit alternative: what was (for many) a dauntingly smart mix of new technology and cultural politics. In the mid 1990s, technologically aware artists/activists with a knowledge of the historical avant-garde alongside Marxist and post-Marxist theory were pretty rare—if, in retrospect, emergent. *Mute* was, naturally, one of the main places to read about net.art, the art of the web browser that rapidly explored the avant-garde possibilities of the new technological form. Its historical affinities with conceptual art, especially the idea that the activation of the viewer would complete the work, were ably explored by Saul Albert.[15] At the same time, the magazine was hostile to hi-tech art that was used to showcase and market gadgetry, and adopted as one of its main aims the criticism of such practices using avant-garde theory. Scepticism about technophile art was

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[12] Simon Pope, 'The Futile Style of London' (1998), PF, pp. 435–8. The term was coined by Antony Davies and Simon Ford in 'Art Capital', *Art Monthly*, no. 213, February 1998. Davies also has an essay in PF, 'Take Me I'm Yours: Neoliberalizing the Cultural Institution' (2007), pp. 494–501. The establishment of new technology companies in the Hoxton 'Silicon Roundabout' was still far in the future.

[13] Benedict Seymour and David Panos, 'Fear Death by Water: The Regeneration Siege in Central Hackney' (2003), PF, pp. 358–64.

[14] John Barker, 'Cheap Chinese' (2005), PF, p. 375.

[15] Saul Albert, 'Artware' (1999), PF, p. 89.

conveyed through essays that examined previous examples of art's deep complicity with consumer and military technology: Simon Ford's essay on the auto-destructive artist Gustav Metzger, who had long offered just such a critique; and Michael Corris's account of the entanglement of conceptual art and cybernetics.[16]

Mute was also suspicious of the art museum's strident interest in net.art, which coincided with and did not outlive the dot.com boom. One of its pioneer thinkers, Josephine Bosma, put the matter clearly by citing curator Benjamin Weil, who claimed that, in its digital incarnation, art could approach business not for charity but as an 'asset'.[17] In a typical and ideal *Mute* combination, two insightful, funny, ironic and brief essays set out the reasons why the art world loves and hates digital art. Matthew Fuller wrote on love, citing the need for the art world to hold in reserve abstruse minority interests in the event of a legitimation crisis, as well as the attraction of digital art's cheapness and built-in distribution systems; on the side of hate, Ewan Morrison parroted the art-world position on digital art destroying distance: 'without objective distance, there is no contemplation; without contemplation, there is no metaphysics. Virtuality and interactivity are the death not only of art but also of culture itself.'[18] This was followed with complaints about digital art claiming authenticity for simulation, and being stuck in the infantile stage of creating rather than deconstructing its language. This was an accurate account of the standard art-world objections, spelt out with enough clarity to render their ideology explicit and absurd. It also parodied the reactions of those postmodern art types who found themselves aghast at History and modernity's renewed lease of life.

A later wave of hype, this time about so-called 'Web 2.0' or social networking, in which user-generated content is framed by sites that offer

[16] Simon Ford, 'Technological Kindergarten: Gustav Metzger and Early Computer Art' (2003), PF, pp. 114–20; Michael Corris, 'Systems Upgrade: Conceptual Art and the Recoding of Information, Knowledge and Technology' (2001), PF, pp. 107–13. The complicity of artists in the technological war machine is discussed in Pamela M. Lee, 'Aesthetic Strategist: Albert Wohlstetter, the Cold War and a Theory of Mid-Century Modernism', *October*, no. 138, Fall 2011, pp. 15–36.

[17] Josephine Bosma, 'Is it a Commercial? Nooo . . . Is it Spam? Nooo . . . It's Net Art!' (1998), PF, p. 79.

[18] Matthew Fuller, 'Ten Reasons Why the Art World Loves Digital Art' (1998), PF, pp. 86–8; Ewan Morrison, 'Ten Reasons Why the Art World Hates Digital Art' (1998), PF, p. 85.

an easy way of uploading and sharing material, was also the subject of sustained critique, particularly in a detailed essay by Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick. Large organizations, using expensive proprietary software on closed systems, had long been able to share information in a proto-Web 2.0 manner, so the technology was not new but had simply been made cheaper and more accessible.[19] The critique could be offered in part because *Mute* writers—and many of its readers—had experience of its more radical precursors, particularly peer-to-peer systems, which had allowed users control of the frame as well as the content, and which had offered efficiency, privacy and lack of censorship. Tools such as Usenet, for example, had allowed for the sharing of journalism and photography among activists without central control and ownership.

Web 2.0, then, was seen as an enclosure of what had been a commons—for example, on YouTube: 'Private appropriation of community-created value is a betrayal of the promise of sharing technology and free cooperation.' In another externalization of costs, people offered their unpaid labour to populate the sites of vast corporations (and here, in connecting people, economy of scale is all). Worse, peer-to-peer systems were actively attacked under the new business model through asynchronous broadband connections that allow much faster downloading than uploading, and through contracts offering online services that explicitly forbid people to run their own servers. Kleiner and Wyrick offered a vision of 'a "landless" information proletariat ready to provide alienated content-creating labour for the new info landlords of Web 2.0'. The *Mute* anthology offers little to balance this informed but mordant view: users may be alienated from the frame and the rules of social-networking sites, as controversies over Facebook privacy policies attest, but it is less clear that they are alienated from the content. The extraordinary effects of this vast expansion in the numbers of cultural producers remain largely unexplored.

Necessary contradictions

Mute contains a sustained engagement with anti-capitalist activism and protest—both online and in bodily form. As Berry Slater writes:

> While, for many, the November 1999 demonstration against the WTO in Seattle marks the consolidation of the 'anti-globalization' movement, the

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[19] Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick, 'Info-Enclosure 2.0' (2007), PF, p. 66.

> Carnival Against Capitalism in the City of London the previous June marked its spectacular beginning, at least for *Mute*'s editors. At that time, our office was located in Shoreditch, a few minutes' walk from the demo's meeting point in Liverpool St Station and I think it's fair to say that the infamous 'starburst' of activists from multiple station exits, heading for the financial district beyond, is a force that propelled our editorial in a new direction, and one that increasingly came to dominate the focus of the magazine.[20]

Examples of this engagement in *Proud to be Flesh* include a potted history of the Italian 'White Overalls' movement, so prominent at the time of the Genoa protests, but now struggling to 'maintain abrasive contestation, autonomous from the party system, without being relegated to the margins, where the only dividend is unceasing police attention'.[21]

In the post-9.11 context of imperial warfare and ramped-up surveillance, the magazine attacked liberal myths about information technology, most notably the idea that the availability of data in and of itself will set the recipient free. In one essay, Anustup Basu described how the information and media field was used to propagate lies, repeated until believed, about the links between the Iraqi regime and the attacks of September 11, and also invoked the darkest precedent: fascism as a product of 'the electrification of the public sphere' through radio and cinema.[22] *Mute* took a generally anti-war stance during the invasion and occupation of Iraq, publishing a piece by Retort, as well as a brief text on the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' in which military assets, including soldiers, are strictly monetized and 'collateral' damage discounted; another analysis underscored the continuities in the suppression of working-class activism under the Baath Party and the Occupation.[23] In all of this, the magazine took no consistent line on the war, any more than it had done on any other issue, and in an editorial, it laid out the claim that what had evolved, in many quarters, was not a singular anti-war movement but rather a rich variety of critiques from many angles, to which the magazine would contribute.[24]

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[20] Berry Slater, 'Disgruntled Addicts: *Mute* Magazine and its History', PF, pp. 17–18.
[21] Hydrarchist, 'Disobbedienti, Ciao' (2005), PF, p. 266.
[22] Anustup Basu, 'Bombs and Bytes' (2004), PF, p. 59.
[23] J. J. King, 'War's Exciting New Features: The Revolution in Military Affairs', *Mute*, Summer/Autumn 2003; Ewa Jasiewicz, 'Internal Intifada: Workers' Struggle in Occupied Iraq', *Mute*, Summer/Autumn 2004.
[24] Van Mourik Broekman, 'Weapons of Choice', *Mute*, Summer/Autumn 2003.

The magazine was prepared to countenance illegality in opposition to enclosure, offering the pirating of proprietary software as a realistic alternative to the use of Open Source software, and publishing a sympathetic interview with Pirate Bay's Palle Torson on the social bases of the movement, political moves against it, and the extension of piracy from music and film to textbooks for students.[25] Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), the artist, theorist and activist collective, were also interviewed, arguing that while anti-capitalist pranking and spectacle are fine in themselves, they represent no real challenge to power. That can only be achieved through undermining data communications and slowing the velocity of information. Such activity is criminal and must hide itself:

> Any institution that was struck by this action would never go public about it for reasons I am sure you can deduce. And, if CAE did know of any examples, we certainly wouldn't speak about them! This kind of activism is real political action and not the politics of spectacle, so it has no public forum. Only the theory can appear; the activity is underground.[26]

The FBI later took the criminality of one CAE member, Steve Kurtz, seriously enough to arrest him on bioterrorism charges in 2004. In what became a notorious case, Kurtz was eventually charged with mail and wire fraud, although these charges were eventually judged to be without foundation after four years of legal struggle.

The engagement with activism was pursued in a fine essay by David Garcia charting changes in Tactical Media—a 'movement which occupied a "no man's land" on the borders of experimental media art, journalism and political activism'. This radical tendency was founded on the rejection of objectivity in journalism, of the discipline and instrumentalism of conventional political movements, and of the myths and personality cults of the art world. It placed emphasis instead on 'fast, ephemeral, improvised collaborations'.[27] As such activism developed, many came to realize that speed and ephemerality were not core values in themselves, and that micropolitics could be built into larger assemblages; that duration and sustained engagement were often necessary, and that new media actions could work with physical ones, including street protest. J. J.

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[25] 'Copy that Floppy!', Palle Torson interviewed by Anthony Iles (2005), PF, pp. 197–200.
[26] 'Vector Block on Telecom Avenue': Critical Art Ensemble interviewed by Mark Dery (1998), PF, p. 283.
[27] Garcia, 'Learning', p. 334.

King, meanwhile, exposed the tendency of anti-capitalist movements to focus on the form of organization rather than political content, with the effect of playing down or even masking political divisions.[28] Openness was too much prized as leading automatically to radicalism, in an alliance of Free and Open Source software models and political organizing. In fact, King argued, this apparent openness often conceals hierarchies and movements that are dominated by a small number of active individuals. Such an arrangement may be necessary, given the climate in which protest operates, since true openness would require an already radical socio-political field. Once again, *Mute*'s line of questioning was acute and valuable, but perhaps it underplayed the dialectical process by which the open procedures of direct democracy in the protest movements begin to radicalize an environment, which in turn contributes to greater openness in a process of mutual reinforcement.

Among the pranking and spectacle were art works that echoed corporate forms. Josephine Berry examined the case of etoy, an online art collective that took on a corporate structure (in part for legal protection) and engaged in a victorious tussle with a huge online toy company, eToys, which had attempted to force the artists to close their site. The etoy collective organized denial-of-service attacks on eToys' servers which coincided with a crash in the company's share price. Berry argued that the etoy strategy, in which the market and corporate model becomes not merely the subject of art but the art itself, just as modernist painting collapsed the separation between canvas and subject matter, poses a risk to art's autonomy by moving from pastiche to market manipulation.[29] Her concerns were shared by Paul Helliwell in an essay on the close connection between enterprises selling film and music, as the commodity basis of those media is challenged, and the art world move to 'relational aesthetics', in which social interactions are taken as artworks.[30] Helliwell's essay put the problem sharply because art and business have been emulating each other closely, and the gap is shrinking from both ends.

Protest, too, apes business, as a number of *Mute* contributors point out. Berry Slater again:

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[28] King, 'The Packet Gang: Openness and its Discontents' (2004), PF, pp. 255–65.

[29] Josephine Berry, 'Do As They Do, Not As They Do: etoy and the Art of Simulacral Warfare' (2000), PF, p. 292.

[30] Paul Helliwell, 'Zombie Nation' (2007), PF, pp. 537–45.

> The 'movement of movements' shared many of the same organizational forms and techniques as the companies being restructured to suit the needs of capital and post-Fordist managerial thinking. Flat networks, hollow organizations, alliances—capitalism and anti-capitalism were mirroring each other, as solid companies and once-unified political parties dematerialized into flexible, virtual and dynamic structures.[31]

The case may be overstated for rhetorical effect: corporations do, of course, retain marked hierarchies, all the more sharply delineated by the rise in pay differentials that has accompanied neoliberalism. 'Flexibility' is foisted on those who are most powerless to resist it, as other essays in the anthology show. Nevertheless, part of the task that Tactical Media and groups like Critical Art Ensemble set themselves was to attack corporate structures using corporate techniques. *Mute* sometimes offered a challenge to such tactics—one of the section introductions in the anthology quotes the artists' collective, Inventory: 'Ironic mimesis is not critique, it is the mentality of the slave!'[32]—but it also exemplified them. The art school trains super-individualists and inculcates in them the ethos of flexible business, and *Mute* found itself offering simultaneous 'criticism and support'. The initial copying of the look of the *Financial Times* was again a register of this very tension. In the attempt to sustain a lifestyle magazine of radical activism, there is an acute form of the dilemma found in any left project: the necessary and contradictory task of marketing communism.

Autarky and autonomy

One consequence of the financial crisis and the election of the UK's Coalition government was a round of Arts Council England funding cuts. Announced in March 2011, these were unevenly applied to reward some groups and punish others. Mute Publishing, with its array of activities which included producing the magazine, had their funding withdrawn entirely. In response, Pauline van Mourik Broekman wrote an extraordinary account of the decision and the system of competitive funding:

> We regard the process of being placed in competition with other arts organizations as poisonous and distracting . . . We recognize it as a familiar part of the divide-and-rule principle that has long marked the operations

[31] Berry, 'Disgruntled Addicts', p. 18. See also Anthony Davies, 'J18 and All That' (1999), PF, p. 239.
[32] Introduction to Chapter 6, PF, p. 271.

> of support agencies like ACE, where a chronic reliance on the parent body for the basic apparatus of organizational reproduction nurtures fear among the 'dependents'—slowly but surely stripping them of all sense they can do anything for themselves, let alone together . . . The spectacle of slavish gratitude for the spoils of public funds, in which even organizations cut or killed felt compelled to reiterate the basic tenets of ACE's funding paradigm (excellence, innovation, global leadership and creativity), were truly depressing in this regard—not one voice standing out for offering a different vision or lexicon of practice.[33]

There were, indeed, few dissenting voices, at least in public, against the artificial competition into which arts organizations are put (along with schools, universities, hospitals and medical practices), or of its socially corrosive effects. Van Mourik Broekman continued by criticizing ACE's claim that it rewarded risk-taking; in fact, it demanded conformity:

> To be a 'winner' in the arts variant of this competition . . . several kinds of compliance are required. Firstly, a near religious belief in the power of art to 'deliver' personal transformation. Second, a normative and by now entirely standardized model of art-organizational development, where success is measured via the ability to diversify funding sources (via trading activities, rights management, sponsorship, philanthropy and a variety of non-public sources), have 'reach and impact' (loose catch-alls combining audiences, media reception, influence), and offer 'engagement'.

This corporatized version of art that flattens diversity and antagonism, and discourages critique, is 'one of the great untold stories of mainstream contemporary culture'. As already mentioned, the ACE subsidy had allowed *Mute* to offer its content free online. Web readership grew but demand for paid services, including the print edition of the magazine, slumped. Is *Mute* better off without ACE funding and the managerialism and audit culture that come with it?

The instrumentality of culture is ever more keenly felt, as arts organizations are caught between the demands of states and corporations, and autonomy becomes less of an ideal than an ideological mask that conceals the control of culture. *Mute* has had its final ACE cheque. The magazine's survival, or otherwise, will in itself be a test of the powers of cooperation and immaterial labour, about which it has raised such

[33] Pauline van Mourik Broekman, '*Mute*'s 100 per cent cut by ACE—A Personal Consideration of *Mute*'s Defunding', at www.metamute.org.

searching questions. At the beginning of 2012 the *Mute* website carried this message:

> *Mute* would like to publicly thank all those reader-supporters who, since the announcement of our funding cut, have made donations. We'd also like to thank those writers who have waived their fee in solidarity. Without readers and writers there would be no *Mute* and we hope, with your continuing support, to maintain the heterogeneous and critical voice that assembles itself as *Mute*.

Cooperation and gift-giving are indeed essential to any such web venture, and running such an outfit needs less capital than setting up a steel mill; but can enough revenue be raised to sustain its workers and their dependents, and keep the servers running? Can this courageous and inconvenient voice be maintained?