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### Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

Media activism is a relatively new subject in media studies, although it is not new in media history. Over the centuries, people have always found tools to communicate with that which could not be controlled by the prevailing normative and political systems, reaching from the ancient Greek practice of *parrhesia* and early Graffiti to the bawdy and obstreperous forms of the European medieval carnival cultures; from illegal pamphlet printing to hacking computer networks. When digital technology and online access became readily available in the early 1990s, there was very little regulation in place that would go beyond the technical protocols necessary for computers to exchange data. An open space of communication became available that soon was settled by individuals and groups with an interest in both social change and a curiosity to explore the artistic, political, and social potential of computer technology. A generation of activists emerged that no longer shared the ‘bookishness’ of both the old and the new left, and that went beyond the left’s deep-rooted scepticism vis-à-vis new technologies, which can be traced from the early Luddites to the Frankfurt School.

Instead, they created media that made use of the new technologies in ways that were capable of introducing discontinuities in hegemonic discourses, and of surprising and disorienting the strategic system of powerful institutions, be they governmental or corporate. Tactical media was born, and has since widely been understood as synonymous with media activism as such. Opportunistically using the plethora of temporarily unregulated spaces that inevitably arose in a fast-changing technological environment, tactical media activism employed hacktivism, communication guerrilla tactics, radical media, electronic civil disobedience, and many other practices tested by people who were often surprised about the unexpected success of their own interventions. The top-heavy, old-media-based institutions and structures of power just seemed too easy to fool. Anything seemed possible in this cyberspace, where effective activism was not weighed down by the relative immobility of the body. Indeed, cyberspace was understood as a “land without bodies”, as John P. Barlow’s Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace asserted in 1996.

However, the rapid advance of research in biotechnologies made possible by global data networks and powerful information technology proved that the situation was more complicated. Bodies and information were coming together in a new way, in a way that seemed to create new beings. The work of Chris Hables Gray, Donna Haraway, Steve

Mann, Stelarc and others reflected a critical understanding of how this process of computerizing life affected politics, and the very political quality of people's actions. They began to translate this understanding into a form of activism that went beyond the angelic visions of an informational space purified of matter. Artists' groups such as the Critical Art Ensemble (*Cult of the New Eve*, 2000) and scholars such as Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip (*Tactical Biopolitics*, 2008) developed projects that intervened in a new, technological form of exercising power on the body. Collectives such as subRosa intervened in the construction of gendered bodies. Indeed, the computerization of life is apparent inside the body, transferring the exercise of power to the level of the cell and the molecule. As Michel Foucault (1982) has shown, political power has long articulated itself as subjection, as constructing its own bodies rather than exercising disciplinary power over bodies in the form of an external operation. The power thus exercised was, in Foucault's terms, 'biopower', and its politics one in which 'life itself' was at stake. In Petra Gehring's words, biopower turns away from consuming life (as in labour and wars), towards enhancing life as a resource: biopower is the invention of biological surplus value (Gehring, 2006, p.10).

With the emergence of biotechnologies, constructing beings according to designs that would be opportune in terms of maintaining a hegemony of power became a real technological possibility. In terms of political agency, subjection, or bringing forth subjects that are limited by and "passionately attached" (Judith Butler) to a biopolitical matrix of power began to articulate itself through increasingly sophisticated technologies clustered around an attachment to security and to production and consumption. Technologies such as biometry and surveillance were the material forms of subjection, while the translation of the signs of life into acts of production, consumption, and information about one's desires—the purpose of social media—promised the construction of predictable subjects barred from any possibility of understanding their politics.

Today, biopolitics holds significant business opportunities—genetically modified food, seeds, biopharmaceuticals, military technologies, biometrics, surveillance. Biopower suspends the traditional boundaries of the 'human', isolating a sphere of what Giorgio Agamben (2001) calls "bare life" as the leverage of the political, a sphere that is both within and outside the law, at the cost of a lived life, a political life. Activist interventions in biopolitical contexts, be they direct interventions in biotechnologies or disturbances of subjection, thus happen in highly securitized settings. While tactical media declined as a result of the normalisation of the Internet, biopolitical activism challenges the sphere of bare life where law is not fully in force and political agencies cannot be held accountable. Activism hits the electrical fence of the state of exception, as it must in order to be effective. The detention of Steve Kurtz (Critical Art Ensemble) in 2004 illustrates the level of violence applied at this boundary, and it shows just how little it takes to cause a violent reaction of a biopolitical state security apparatus inherently unable to distinguish

between criticism and terrorism: Kurtz was preparing a new project, *Free Range Grain*, to be exhibited in a modern art museum and was detained by US federal police as well as the Joint Terrorism Task Force and investigated for ‘bioterrorism’. This example also shows how big an investment biopower has in governing life itself.

The purpose of this book is to bring together contributions that look at these issues from a variety of perspectives. We have grouped the contributions into four sections: Beyond Tactical Media, Borders and Boundaries, Politics, and Biotech.

Carolyn Guertin’s contribution, “Mobile Bodies, Zones of Attention, and Tactical Media Interventions” looks at locative media as the third generation of activist media, following Net.art and tactical media. Locative media such as the Electronic Disturbance Theater’s *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, which provides orientation for immigrants crossing the desert near the US-Mexican border, are more effective than previous incarnations of activist media as they “bring real, live bodies into the picture”. With mobile technologies being part of the body rather than “merely extensions of eye or ear”, a new kind of activism is emerging. Embodiment, mobility, and versatility are the empowering properties of locative media, allowing users to relate to the histories of a place, rather than reducing places to a disembodied calculus as previously. The second section of Guertin’s contribution concerns interventions in the scientific process, such as Oron Catt’s and Ionat Zurr’s Tissue Culture and Art Project, which purposefully obliterates divisions between species, genders, races, the living and the dead.

The contribution by Cliff Hammett and Alexandra Jönsson focuses on the biopolitics of sexuality and its technologies of control over bodies: sex work. In a political setting that views the sex worker body primarily as a “site for the transmission of biological and social infection”, the authors focus instead on the histories of the men and women working in this industry: often with a migrant background and limited knowledge of English, sex workers are particularly susceptible to the exploitative structures of the market. In their essay, Hammett and Jönsson introduce X\_MSG, a telephony-based social software system that allows sex workers to create effective, affordable, and easily accessible communication networks via text messages. The system works with a telephony server on a recycled computer and allows users complete anonymity and a possibility to collectively alter the conditions under which they work. Thus, the “sex worker is no longer the secluded stigmatized body, but a potential switch of power in a socially and materially organized system.”

Clemens Apprich’s contribution describes another case of post-tactical media activism, a semiological intervention into biopolitical historical representations. His analysis focuses on the 2005 action of a group called Zellen Kämpfender Widerstand (ZKW), directed against Austria’s right wing government and its lopsided representation of the country’s Nazi history in the official anniversary celebrations of the country’s liberation from Nazi rule in 1945. The government had commissioned a series of installations in

Vienna's public space called Twenty-five Peaces. These installations simulated what it was like to survive in Vienna during and shortly after the war, when the city's baroque gardens were turned into agricultural land on which to grow cabbage and graze cattle. The ZKW kidnapped one of these commemoration cows, using it as a hostage in order to force the Government to correct the official history-writing, and admit to its own right-leaning tendency in the official representations of the Nazi period. When the far-right government failed to meet these demands, Apprich tells us Rosa was killed.

Andreas Oberprantacher's essay opens a section of contributions focusing on biopolitical regimes around borders and boundaries. Oberprantacher engages in a philosophical critique of spatial regimes with reference points provided by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Judith Butler, and Giorgio Agamben. He focuses in particular on the question of detention and borders as manifestations of biopower. These regimes, Oberprantacher argues in response to Butler, "secure life by discriminating its forms". Often run by private corporations, they materialize the "state of exception", where subjects are constructed as "life unworthy of life", alien, and unprofitable. However, as Foucault states in *The Will to Knowledge*, resistance is constitutive to power. Thus, in the second part of his contribution, Oberprantacher discusses a number of media interventions that articulate a locative resistance to biopower. These include the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* referred to above, and two other platforms: zone\*interdite ([www.zone-interdite.net](http://www.zone-interdite.net)) and Machsomwatch ([www.machsomwatch.org](http://www.machsomwatch.org)). The former provides information on classified military locations, including 3-D models, challenging secrecy and lack of accountability; the latter is a tool for tracking Israel's "flexible border" with Palestine, referencing how soldiers are taught about the fluidity of borders by reading poststructuralist theories.

In Israel/Palestine, Roy Wagner offers a critical view of mobility-visibility regimes applied to sexuality and nationality. Addressing Israeli politics around LGTB parades in Jerusalem and Bil'in, Wagner shows the trade-off between visibility and mobility: "the stronger the elimination of mobility (as measured in arrests and damaged human flesh) the more media visibility protesters gain". The politics of sexuality influences the politics of nationality and vice versa. On the other hand, Palestinian non-citizens are forced to avoid visibility in order to survive in a placeless "state of exception", crossing the borders to Israel while circumventing the Panopticon of surveillance maintained by the Israeli army. What emerges is a "caste of beaten bodies" under constant threat of violence and death, used as a source of economic gain. Wagner identifies a range of elaborate activist practices of overriding the mobility-visibility trade-off, instead gaining mobility while retaining the visibility required for effective public action and yet avoiding detention. He analyzes them in terms of varying topologies: media coverage, law and order, and urban interaction. The latter allows for tactics of place-making that rely on opaque messages or the simple presence of testimony.

Focusing on the skin as the interface between the implicit and the explicit body, jan jagodzinski explores the activist potential of bioart. Taking up Gilles Deleuze's theory of the fold, jagodzinski examines a number of bioart projects that work with skin as a membrane not just between the inside and the outside of the body, but between art and science, between individual and society, and between species. Exploring the work of artists like Stelarc, Kac, and Orland, jadodzinski unfolds a rich questioning of some of the most radical forms of bioart, where politics avoid any solid signifier.

Online platforms, in particular social media such as Facebook or twitter may currently be the most powerful media of subjection, bringing forth biopolitical subjects that are both consumers and labourers and whose autonomy is reduced to the constant generation and processing of personal data. The only effective way of regaining some political agency and to reclaim one's life altogether against this background, as Geoff Cox suggests in the first of three contributions in the politics section, is to obliterate the very subject thus created, engaging in strategies of refusal rather than protest. As Butler suggests, turning away from the law that constitutes subjection—and in the online environment, that would be primarily the law of social media platforms—requires a “readiness not to be” (2001, p. 122). One radical way in which activists articulate such a readiness is virtual suicide: the deletion of one's user profiles and data on social media platforms, which may, as Franco Berardi states, be the “decisive political act of our times” (2009, p. 55). It is not surprising, then, that tools of virtual suicide such as the Web 2.0 Suicide Machine or Seppukoo, which make it easy for users to delete their data on several platforms at once, immediately encountered a legal reaction from the companies targeted. Such companies often do not provide for user data to be deleted and are thus put into peril by radical strategies of refusal.

Biopolitical issues are not only addressed by liberal or left-wing activism. With its anti-abortion, pro-death penalty, and anti-stemcell research politics, the right has its own biopolitical agenda—and, as Joshua Atkinson's and Suzanne Berg's contribution shows, its own activism. Critical media studies, Atkinson and Berg argue, must become aware of how the political right creates its own alternative media networks to advance its agendas.

The third contribution in the politics section deals with critical (subversive) practices coming from within mainstream TV. For a young, media savvy, radically globalized generation, television as a platform for news has lost momentum. Ironically however, in a media landscape with a variety of news providers competing for audiences and trust, television news parodies like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* attract new audiences as they seem to fill a gap. How can it be that a comedy show succeeds in promoting reason and gets young people to stand up for more sanity in politics and culture? And how do they work differently in comparison to the subversive practices of tactical media and media activism that question the methods of biopower? Claudia Schwarz' and Theo Hug's paper examines several responses to the (more and less serious)

calls for action of the two shows and discusses their delicate role as entertainers, watchdogs, and activists for reason, sanity, and what is left of ‘truth’ in the media.

With ‘race’ being one of the persistent and perhaps most violent concepts in biopolitics, the oppression of both Native Americans and African Americans in the US reveals the workings of biopower. Eddie Glenn shows how the Cherokee Nation used for their own purposes the melodramatic narrative applied by mainstream US culture to the tribe. This was done in response to the widespread criticism that followed the removal of voting rights for former slaves in the Cherokee Nation in 2007, when the tribe itself was accused of racism. However, as Glenn shows, the appropriation of melodramatic narratives in a film launched to influence legislation, although failing to criticize the biopolitical *dispositif* of blood percentage determining tribe membership was an “act of sovereignty, strategically implemented for political purposes”.

The last section of the book contains three contributions that revolve around biotechnology. In his contribution on garage biology, Alessandro Delfanti shows how practices of media activism, such as hacking and free software, are alive in noninstitutionalized biological research. Garage biologists work in an environment that combines the hacker ethic with a radical anti-institutional approach to the life sciences, denouncing ‘Big Bio’ for its monopolization and exploitation of knowledge that should be freely available. But the story is more complex than a simple opposition between the rebel garage laboratory and well-capitalised hi-tech research. Often, Delfanti finds, garage biologists are in an ambivalent relationship with Big Bio: “Most of them are not interested in a critique of academic capitalism or biocapitalism, but rather in the possibility of opening up new markets where smart, small scale and open source models could compete with Big Bio and its Hulking Giants.”

In “Pests, Monsters, and Biotechnology Chimeras”, Pau Alsina and Raquel Rennó show how the biopolitical obsession with governing life, securing security, and creating markets cannot but generate its own monsters. What seems to mark the fringe of the biotechnological quest thus appears to occupy the oblique centre of the biopolitical mastery over life itself. The bioart-works described by Alsina and Rennó translate this seeming paradox into a readable code: from Eduardo Kac’s fluorescent rabbit, Alba, to Critical Art Ensemble’s *Molecular Invasion*, artists and activists question the opacity of the politics of life. According to Alsina and Rennó, by creating works that play with the cultural shadow of biotechnology, bioartists show that “life sciences are political sciences and geneticized life is biopower, the result of matter and semiosis interwoven within power relationships.” Such works inaugurate perspectives on the technologies of life that are capable of challenging biopower, which means they attack both the hyper-objective claims within the life sciences, and the essentialist, reactionary responses to them that are sometimes mistaken for criticism.

The boundary between life and death has been at the core of biopolitics and the various forms of control over subjection it has brought forward, along with a preoccupation about where the subject begins and ends. In their contribution, Valerie Hartouni and Etienne Pelaprat bring together pop culture narratives with the claims of neuroscience around the question of the threshold between life and death. Advances in neuroscience have created a new subject: the cerebral subject, described as a form of subjectivity that takes on contours once in the process of dying—today a “particular stage of life” surrounded by a set of legal, ethical, and economic issues. The boundary between life and death has become a matter of a neuroscience bent on identifying the brain’s function as producing biological consciousness, reducing being to the technical existence of a machine that can think, leaving aside the wider cultural and social implications of the end of life. “The framing of cerebral subjectivity offers narratives of hope, belonging, and eternal life”, Pelaprat and Hartouni conclude, “abetting the rational instrumentalization of human life in the name of ‘freedom’.”

Most of the contributions compiled in this book were first presented as conference papers at the Activist Media and Biopolitics conference organized by the Innsbruck Media Studies research group in November 2010 (<http://medien.uibk.ac.at/amab2010/>). The conference was conducted by the editors and Felix Stalder as part of a research project on media activism funded by the Austrian Science Fund (project P21431-G16). The editors wish to thank Max Söllner for his invaluable help in preparing and organizing the conference; Gerhard Ortner for maintaining the conference website; Victoria Hindley for her work on the manuscript and her masterful work in designing the book’s cover; Birgit Holzner and Carmen Drolshagen for their publishing support; and our sponsors and partners, namely the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, the Austrian Science Fund, the University of Innsbruck, and the Federal State of Tyrol. With English having become the *lingua franca* of international academia, we chose to allow both British and American English in the book (applying one single style within the individual essays).

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