

Black Magic Doesn't Swallow

The desire to create an eventful event can be bound up with a writer's frustration with words, bureaucratic paper trails and foggy electronic mail killing spirited conversation. How can we still be moved by each other's words when we are brain-dead and buried in correspondence overload? We desire eventful events because we breath in/breath out stagnation and frustration in major areas of culture and education. We propose to make something happen. We move into happenings when the appeal of radical art and academia are fading and many of us are scratching our heads. We are a pack of people enriched with sophisticated means to communicate.

When did we sign up to become immersed in the desire to stage eventful events? We are a hyper-media generation, absorbing global media events and reading media theory. We are hyper-ready to translate thought structures into events and create our own happenings and surprises. There is little sacred knowledge that we are willing to leave untouched and unspoken. We are sick of watching carefully media-orchestrated barbarisms between cultures as eventful events. We dread ongoing Wars on Terrorism and play love and peace rituals in return. Eventful events can be reclaimed as festive or uncanny explosions of the body. Intercultural events can be intriguing or dangerously 'awkward', as our perceptions of others may trigger unexpected reactions. We do not always know how to communicate with others. Let us not explain this in too many words as we will be cut off in the middle of our sentences. Sister versions of the eventful event are sweeping through the ether.

From TAZ to Porn

On a journey doing research and interviews in June 2000, I was in Amsterdam to meet with Geert Lovink and talk about my research. He showed me the old house where he used to live as a squatter and gave me a book that he wrote with the collective Bilwet in 1990, *Bewegingsleer: Kraken aan Gene Zijde van de Media*.¹ The Dutch word 'bewegingsleer' has a double meaning and can be translated as 'teachings on how to move' as well as 'teachings on how to be part of a movement.' The subtitle in both Dutch and English infers that it is possible for people to move and be a movement by operating 'on the other side of the media.' In his foreword, Patrick Van Ijzendoorn explains that the Amsterdam squat movement of the '80s was 'weird' or unusual because it consisted of 'pure' events experienced by fragile people in fearful circumstances that could not be captured by media. These events became part of another reality, a reality beyond the media, as squatters believed in the magic of metamorphosis as a unique process through which individuals can participate in writing history. Squatters therefore did not have a 'squat' identity but took on everyday identities such as student, rebel, passerby, stone-thrower, big mouth, healer, lover, and so on. They came together in an 'extra-medial' space and tried to cultivate an attitude of silence or otherworldliness rather than wrestling with the media: They became medium for better agents seeking them out.

Squatters understood that the distinction between private space and public space was disappearing in everyday life through media networks, and stood in the doorway between realities. Once the mass media entered the same doorway, the movement underwent a crisis as it replicated a different media hype. Van Ijzendoorn believes that it is an important aspect of movement to disappear in time before the actual movement dies. Thus squatters of the building HP Kade once decided to exit the building right before police would empty it and TV journalists would appear, leaving behind empty space. This empty space is not a dead space,

but a ghost space, waiting and wanting us to appear elsewhere. The squatters deemed it important to let go of worn identities and histories, existing as healthy counter-flow to that of mass media.

A notion of metamorphosis seems to have been inspired by Hakim Bey's idea that meeting or events between people in selected spaces (Temporary Autonomous Zones) can lead to societal renovation. Even though it is hard for us to imagine that major activist movements could take place outside networked spaces, Bey believed that media saturation had created an urgent need for face-to-face communication. In an interview with Geert Lovink in 1992, entitled 'Breast-to-Breast Anarchy', Bey explained that activism starts with materialities of bodies present in a particular space. A similar statement about bodies meeting and improvising was made by the Dutch media collective Billet: "A metamorphosis is possible when one enters empty space at exactly the right moment, in order to appear as someone else somewhere, not knowing what it will be"² Bey predicted cultural upheaval: "I have a feeling that the average American will look at the sky one day and call out Fuck this shit and an entire wave will go over the USA and will return carrying positive, utopian elements in the middle of it. It is about a powerful physical voice, a smell, a touch. This is how the message is carried across"³ His belief complements media theorists such as Ken Wark who registers new attachments to the 'buzz' of shocking media events. According to Wark, a vector, a line of fixed length but with no fixed position, enables the media to move information haphazardly from one point to another. We cultivate a desire

² Bilwet, *Bewegingsleer: Kraken aan Gene Zijde van de Media* (Amsterdam, Ravijn, 1990), p.13. This is my own translation. The book was published in English by Autonomedia in 1994 as *Cracking the Movement. Squatting Beyond the Media* (Translation Laura Martz) <http://www.thing.Desk.nl/bilwet/Cracking/contents.html>

³ Geert Lovink, Interview met Hakim Bey (1992) 'Breast-to-Breast anarchy' <http://www.thing.desk.nl/bilwet/TXT/BEY.INT.txt>

to participate in the mobility of information and get addicted to the speed of communication between points.

Several months before meeting with Lovink in Amsterdam, I had tumbled into an agreement to help moderate <nettime>, an international web-based mailing list on theory and activism, and I started to meet geek-packs online. I had already experienced intriguing cyber affairs in more private settings and then realized that my relationships online would be excentric and full of surprises. I was part of a pack. In the essay 'Meetspace,' Lovink writes that it is important to externalize and explain electronic networks or 'packs' to broader audiences, as their mysterious and seductive aspects remain invisible.⁴ I agreed with this trend, as it encourages geeks, artists and intellectual alike to meet, have conversations, organize events and circulate theory, art and porn in real-life situations.

Academia has been willing to furnish infrastructures for detached forms of theory. The web has allowed us to meet people in wider communities, to play around and construct objects of study and debate. Now we are looking for events, 'meetspaces' to debate sexuality as openness, play, and encounter. Setting out to meet with other packs, we can give rise to a cyber-renaissance without ignoring the body, the radical sex currents of political renewal.

Porn Ar(t)ound The World

I arrived back in Boston after the twelve-day event *Porn Ar(t)ound the World* in KC Nona. I amassed a huge pile of festival documents --newspaper articles, videotapes, press conference statements, cartoons, political pamphlets – the festival had gone completely beserk. I had met with Dirk Verstockt in Amsterdam, December 2000, and we agreed to collaborate on producing an

⁴ Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, MIT: 2002), p. 249

international festival of art and pornography. Verstockt suggested that we produce this festival in the progressive arts center KC nOna in Mechelen, Belgium. The ensuing festival preparations were lengthy, taking many months of correspondence yet aided by a high spirited in-house production team. After the first announcements had been sent out to journalists in October 2002, Verstockt wrote me that Belgian journalist had reacted massively yet had mostly misread our goals. We decided to showcase our program to a lawyer, who said our program was fine as long as we to an 18+ audience. Right before the opening of the festival, we were also asked by one of our co-sponsors to contact the vice-squad of the city of Mechelen to make sure we were not breaking obscenity laws. The vice-squad came by for a cursory investigation and reported back that the entire program had been accepted.

Mechelen is a medium-size Belgian town with a largely conservative government and a culture gap between the Belgians and various ethnic minorities. The festival had invited artists from different cultures working on pornography to be part of a major exhibit and present performances, film screenings and lectures. The goals of the festival were to create a fertile space for artists to present work on pornography, using sexual and other images, words, sounds and performance modes to express individual views, and to work on themes such as psychosis, capitalism, globalization, media consolidation and remote loving. The event led to a severe clash between the festival and the Belgians. Represented by journalists and the police, the Belgian 'people' voiced a series of hostile criticisms and attacked with fervor. This trend had been spearheaded by catholic journalist Mathias Danneels who had written an 'American-sounding' protest against the festival in the conservative newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Under the headline Stop Banalizing Preciousness, he wrote that the festival was full of bad taste, that the minister of culture must be have been stoned to provide funding to such event. His second argument was against pornography itself, asking artists not to replicate the low values and image-regimes of porn, as they prevent young

people from discovering peace and self-confidence and destroy their dreams, expectations and desires. Danneels and a flock of other journalists started scrutinizing the festival immediately after the first announcements were sent out. They especially condemned the event 'Show/Bring Your Favorite Porn,' where invited guests would discuss their favorite porn-scenes and amateur filmmakers would show their homemade porn movies. Former minister Luc Van de Brande was asked to comment and called the festival "perverse and pure provocation." Mechelen's mayor Bart Somers and his representative of culture, Frank Nobels, said that the festival was creating a negative image for the city of Mechelen and they would make sure the event "would never happen again"⁵ The festival argued back, saying that 'the people' had become saturated watching silicone-manufactured porn stars and announcing a new era where interested parties could share and watch art, everyday bodies or amateur porn.⁶

The vice-squad closely followed the media hype and became more eager to screen the materials as the festival went along. Danneel's sentimentalizing argument seemed to harken back both to an era of catholic repression, and to 1996, the year of Belgium's global media event and public protest. Hundreds of thousands of Belgians paraded in Brussels carrying white balloons to demand peace and condemn child molester and murderer Marc Dutroux. In a gridlock between the police and the court system, the Belgian state had been too slow to find that Dutroux and Belgian officials were heavily criticized by the people. Dutroux claimed six Belgian victims, four girls buried and two alive in his basement after he got arrested. Belgium was deprived of national pride and media virginity in 1996. Six years later, this small country was still wary of child porn rings, and demanding justice for Dutroux who would be tried in March 2003. Dutroux and

⁵ Peter Verbruggen, 'Pornokunst bezorgt Mechelen fikse kater' *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 15 November 2002.

⁶ KC nOna's artistic director Dirk Verstockt paraphrased this objective in 'Tussen Kunst en Commercie: Festival' *De Standaard*, 15 November 2002.

his (unproven) relationship to child porn inspired festival opponents such as the catholic demonstrators 'Real Men against Pornography' who picketed quietly outside the theater on Annie Sprinkle's last day of performing Herstory of Porn. They distributed brochures citing murderer Ted Bundy's addiction to porn and argued that: "God is the founder of sex. Sex is a unique bodily experience a man and women can share when they love each other in marriage ... Porn is a disgraceful invention that prevents people to discover the pearl of true divine sex."⁷

Journalists were out to cover the festival yet were bypassing new ideologies, misinterpreting art events and copying each other's notes copiously, recording hours of conversation and stage actions, but leaving behind only the most obvious and often slanderous headlines. Stop Banalizing Preciousness/ Arts Center Collects Porn/Entire City gets French Kiss/Vice Squad visit Porn-Expo/ Tongue Kissing with Suzuki/ Artist distributes/ Tongue kisses/ Does Art Have to Shock?/ Japanese Girl Kisses Mechelen like a Maniac/ Vice Squad Screens Videos Erotic Festival/ Police Interrupts Mechelen's Porn Festival/ If you Feel like Masturbating, Go Ahead/ Let there Be Pleasure and Let it Starts with Me/ Sex, Sex and Once Again, Sex/ Porn has Become Culture/Porn Art Gives Mechelen Big Hangover/ Porn King Disapproves of Festival/ Dennis Black Magic Against Porn Exhibit/ Porn King Black Magic Doesn't Swallow Naked Expo

Reading these newspaper articles, it became apparent to the festival organizers that there was very little difference between statements made in progressive or conservative newspapers. For instance, journalists flocked around Yoshie Suzuki and tried to capture her body art she walked around the streets of Belgium to find

⁷ Information Brochure Real Men Against Pornography distributed during Porn Ar(t)ound the World Festival.

kissing partners. Aided by saucy headlines in conservative and progressive newspapers, 'the people' were reconsidering their reactions to Suzuki, who found it harder and harder to find kissing partners. Zohra El Aissaoui wrote in the progressive paper *De Morgen*: "Japanese girl searches the streets to kiss anyone who is open to it ... She will not shy away from supermarkets, clothing boutiques or laundromats. Whomever comes across a little Japanese girl in the next days, make sure that your breath is fresh and clean, 'If not,' says Suzuki, 'I will kiss you just the same.'"⁸ Most journalists constructed Suzuki as a sexually aggressive 'other,' a little Japanese nymphomaniac girl. In actuality, their coverage of Suzuki was so blunt that it damaged the spontaneous nature of her act. It became nearly impossible for Suzuki to do performance art on the Belgian streets. While her work was covered in more than fifty newspaper articles, her Belgian act remained shy and Belgian kisses short.

Belgian cartoonist Kim came out with two witty drawings in *De Morgen*. Her first cartoon depicts an older man visiting a prostitute while phoning his wife to tell her: "Hey darling, You got what you wanted, I did not go to that festival." The second cartoon is more of a spooky hallucination, as it depicts two huge octopi swimming around and grabbing the nose of Michael Jackson. This cartoon referred to *Meat Sexu Taco*, the 1996 performance by Dutch artists Zoot and Genet. In this action, they investigated Japanese eroticism by putting a live octopus on their naked bodies in P-House Gallery in Tokyo. Referring to intercultural bed-ins such as John Lennon and Yoko Ono's honeymoon in Amsterdam, their display of grotesque nakedness somehow made the Japanese audiences shiver.

The artists wrote a nifty artist statement: "In Japan the use of Tako (octopus) is found on every street corner in the shape of fried octopus- snacks. The animals live inside Japanese bowels and are immanently present in Japanese people. The

⁸ Zohra El Assaoui, 'Tongue Kissing with Suzuki' *De Morgen* November 15 2002.

animal has to be beaten for a long time before it can be eaten, otherwise the meat is tough. In every Manga strip we open, a woman is strangled by the 8-legged animal. The octopus is the ultimate sex symbol, strangling, sucking, pulsating, tying up, penetrating from every side. This fantasy is mythologized like a common cultural symbol and inscribed in erotic heritage.”⁹ The concept of the *Meat Sexu Taco* performance was complex but the action ended in brutal surprise as the animals attacked and almost strangled the couple using its tentacles and also biting them with a parrot-like beak. The artists were screaming as they were being bitten by the octopus. Japanese audiences seemed unaffected. *Meat Sexu Taco* tackled a ‘live’ deconstruction of a Japanese fetishism but received little recognition from the live audience.

In Japanese animated pornography, the octopus is mostly depicted as a surreal and omnipotent creature out to conquer females, strangling their organs and penetrating their cavities. The Dutch deconstruction of the Japanese octopus was interpreted by most Belgian journalists as an obscenity. The media constructed the artists as aggressors rather than victims and tried to find different categories of victimization. The festival had openly discussed the content of the art works with Mechelen’s vice-squad. The vice-squad had first reported that *Meat Sexu Taco* was not obscene, not an instance of bestiality as it did ‘not contain sex with a mammal.’ The idea that the octopus could be a legal bed-partner became the running joke of the festival and constructed a new myth in Belgian sex history. When the vice-squad returned later to re-investigate *Meat Sexu Taco*, they did not mention why it was removed and did not bring up the mammal-question. The unofficial charge was that the artwork would offend the people because it contained an illegal urination scene. This act of urination, shown on blurry video-footage, was the actual result of immense pain as Zoot was being bitten by the

⁹ Zoot and Genant artist Statement *Meat Sexu Tako*. My own translation.

octopus. It was investigated as deviant behavior by the vice-squad after they received a complaint from an unforeseen source, Belgian's Porn King, Dennis Black Magic.

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What exactly happened during the *Porn Ar(t)ound the World Festival*? Francesca da Rimini predicted the concurrence of events in her *Strange Packets of Desire* workshop-synopsis: "An inhabitation of space and memory, time and imagination, in a temporary media space somewhere in Belgium facing one thousand and one winter nights. Strange weather falls upon strange attractors, consciousness awakened and touched, scrambling what is territory and what is map, who is the observer and whom is the observed" The local community was ruthlessly approached by the media, who were gregariously covering the festival on television in daily news and other programs. As a result of this, Belgian people attended the festival in large numbers and scrutinized the exhibits, leaving behind mostly supportive messages in the festival log-books. The media constructed the 'people' as an angry mob, or as vying parties who had been manipulated into funding a festival of porn as 'art.'

The spiraling of raunchy headlines grew thicker, yet we escaped into believing that the audience could still be reached and the media coup of Black Magic could be re-routed. A friend of the festival encouraged us to accept an invitation to participate in a talkshow on commercial Belgian television VTM, entitled *The Right to Defend*. He argued that this media event would give us a chance to talk back to the popular press as the show would be watched by 800.000 viewers. Two teams of debaters would enter a televised debate about the festival, moderated by a media celebrity, sexologist and ex-Miss Belgium, Goedele Liekens. We were advised to get a haircut and reduce our ideas to catchy and preferably humorous phrases. A jury of three 'wise (wo)men' who would determine at the end of the

talkshow who had won the debate. Our board of directors interfered heavily in planning our participation and warned us that we had to win the debate, as public opinion might grow more hostile if we would give a bad performance. This could lead to a precarious future and a potential defunding of the arts center KC nOna. Our debating opponents would be the catholic journalist Mathias Danneels, joined by a spokesman of the Christian organization 'Real Mean Against Pornography.' We decided to not cut our hair and appear on the talkshow with messy hairdo's to fulfill a surreal mission – win the debate and regain the trust of Belgian 'people.'

A weird vision flickered through my mind when Dirk Verstockt, artistic director of KC nOna, and myself entered the VTM studio to face the 'opposition,' Danneels flanked by two 'supporters', a representative of 'Real Men Against Pornography' and Dennis Black Magic. Black Magic 'himself' had been invited by the VTM team to support the anti-festival debating team. Black Magic appeared on the scene to buttress their attitude of spectacle and condemnation. His opinions had been graciously hosted by the progressive newspaper De Morgen the day before the talkshow. He argued that porn should be exchanged only in private home-spaces and designated retail zones and that it would be illegal for the festival to publicly screen amateur porn videos as such activity would incite the community to commit misdemeanors. His famous line "If this is art, then I am Picasso" was never challenged by any of the journalists.¹⁰

Meanwhile the debate about porn and the Belgian people, the (de) funding of provocative art, had started inside the 'lively' VTM studio. Black Magic was silent throughout most of the show until he was cued by Goedele Liekens to give his speech. He stood up, adjusted his dark blue shades, then suddenly lost his temper

¹⁰ Sue Somers, 'Dennis Black Magic' *De Morgen*, November 18 2002.

shouting out that we were showing obscenities and encouraging the community to commit misdemeanors. He said that we would not be able to get away with this in the name of 'art' and he would file a complaint with the police and have the festival closed within 24 hours. The day after the talkshow, which we had 'won' according to members of the jury, the vice-squad arrived to investigate Black Magic's official complaint against the festival. They took away 60% of the exhibit, six artworks by the artists Yoshie Suzuki and Adam Zaretsky, Zoot and Genant, Francesca da Rimini, Alex Mc Quikin, Annie Sprinkle and Libidot. They also insisted on screening all the videos for the evening event Show/Bring Your Own Porn.

The mood of the festival plunged entirely and we had to hire a lawyer to deal with the legal matters now dominating the festival. We prepared for a new press conference to announce the recent turn of events. Even though journalists showed up to the press conference, many of them decided not to cover the removal of artworks. Following the advice of the lawyer, we also had to cancel several other events that had been scheduled because they included potential objectionable scenes. A lawyer and the vice squad had previously investigated the festival and given us permission to show all the selected art works. We had made an agreement to keep the festival closed to minors and to reject all images of bestiality and child porn. When Black Magic informed the vice-squad that we were showing illegal categories of porn, the vice-squad reconsidered their judgement and took away the following categories: anal sex, urination, excremental sex, sado-masochism, fisting, bestiality, and child porn. As a result of Black Magic's coup and the hostile media coverage, the artistic value of the artworks was no longer taken into account

Sex in the Temporary Media Lab

Victor Turner's theory of ritual postulates that a culture's renewal through radical rituals was traditionally displayed in 'in-between spaces,' liminal zones where people try out sexual identities without affecting the community. Turner believes that most individuals and communities go back to orthodox living after liminal periods, hence the impact of festival moments on culture and politics may be slow, in-existent, or difficult to measure. During the Porn Ar(t)ound the World festival, we wanted to construct a safe ground for people to collectively test out art and ideas around porn and changing sexualities.

We invited Australian artist Francesca da Rimini to hold a workshop in a temporary media lab, which she baptized Strange Packets of Desire. As her synopsis explains: "More experimental workspace than workshop A de-classified research zone. Small group prototyping of fantasies. Beta-testing expression of the personal and the pornographic. The creation of a discourse of love to give to everyone the right to claim each personal sacred legend. Each participant an individual packet of desire, forming a node in a network of other body/minds." The lab turned out to be a warm, friendly and dark rehearsal space for the networking of individual ideas. The lab was physically located inside a refurbished old printing house in Mechelen, whose large connected rooms had been painted in a mix of pastel and astro-bright colors. Strange Packets of Desire was a workspace hidden away from journalists and the public where young participants were engaged in constructing magazines and web-sites using pornographic materials. The lab consisted of fourteen networked computers with basic imaging software programs. Using Linda Dement's idea of integrating scanned materials into digital collages, there was a separate room for scanning materials and an extra table with documents and magazines.

An important goal of the workshop was to investigate spaces-between media and bodies, such as the 'plastic relaxed bodies' exercise which asks participants to move and record body parts moving in 'weird' ways. In another exercise,

participants are blindfolded and whisper words around the exchange of chosen objects. 'Strangeness' was the keyword as participants performed several movement/acting exercises to get to know each other and their 'avatars,' fictional doubles which they would bring alive. Media labs benefit from carefully arranged material architectures that encourage participants to sink back and get charged in a friendly environment. Since media labs often envision a coming together of people from different cultures, curiosity and shyness are aspects of 'strangeness' that need to be allowed for and mediated. The transitions between 'strangeness' and 'togetherness' enable a group of people to be inspired and work together on collective art projects. Strange Packets of Desire encourages participants to move around in physical and virtual spaces, discussing and externalizing bodily experiences and ideas-in-progress. Exercises such as chatroom dialogues make participants aware of the potential to experiment with collective states of communication. Avatars become 'packs' when they partake in virtual union and visit actual spaces. Liminal zones allow packs to experience collective variations on sexuality, as sexual personas and cultural modes are 'packed together' and presented to audiences as a group experiment in aesthetics and sexual imaging.

Geert Lovink's writings on the temporary media lab or 'meetspaces' are relevant in analyzing media labs such as Strange Packets of Desire. Lovink's participation in media labs grew out of a need to have alternative meeting spaces to academic conferences, where work is mostly shared within selective in-crowd communities. 'Meetspaces' mediate between fancy ideas, networked communities and media policies. Participants experience new ideas through hands-on collaborations and take responsibility for sharing experiences with wider communities. Lovink writes: "Though the immediate outcomes can be presented at the end of a session, the real impacts of such small task forces, perhaps only comes later, elsewhere,"¹¹

¹¹ Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet*

Lovink is convinced that the outcomes of media labs are strong motors behind the networks of digital culture as they boost “sustainable models of an independent new media culture.”¹² *Strange Packets of Desire* further develops this model by questioning a-sexual learning, disembodied attitudes and complacent networking. A 21st century media lab needs to ‘have sex’ occasionally to revitalize communities and help dissect pornography as one of the backbones of digital culture. In *Porn Ar(t)ound the World*, hybrid artists, technicians and theorists came together in such experimental meeting space. Participants worked in secluded zones and were able to present their works to live audiences during the festival and to online audiences through a website. Amidst ongoing political uproar and media hype, da Rimini’s workshop survived quietly as students produced complex and intriguing performance pieces and web sites around sexuality. Their projects were open-minded and strong, suggesting that younger generation are again in need of radical workshop such as *Strange Packets of Desire*.

Culture (Cambridge, MIT: 2002), p. 249.

¹² Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, MIT: 2002), p. 252.

ABOUT

LIBIDOT is a project initiated by Katrien Jacobs, scholar, artist and activist who grew up in Belgium and migrated to Ireland, the USA, and Australia in 1990. She currently teaches new media politics and aesthetics at Emerson College, Boston. She has lectured widely about Internet pornography and organizes workshops around web communities, collaboration and communication. She studied the 1960s and 1970s performance avant-gardes and theory movements in her Ph.D. dissertation. She currently works as a curator and artist and has published several essays in anthologies and academic journals such as **Parallax** and **Cultural Studies**. She is also working on P.O.N.A, an irregular book highlighting twenty international artists and their visions on sexuality and culture.

For a full overview of her work, see her curriculum vitae (link to <http://www.libidot.org/emerson/cv/cv3html>) or download the cv as pdf file.

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Contact Libidot at libidot@comcast.net (email link)