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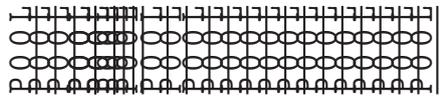
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Towards Narrative
By Harry Burke

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This essay intends to serve as a critical assimilation of two moments in art history, the emergent moments of video and (post-)internet. Although largely historical in its focus, it aims nonetheless to find a new footing from which to understand art of the present moment, or a new position from which to return.

Excursions / 'Without context there is no communication.'¹

In 1970 a new magazine was founded in New York. An initiative of the Raindance Corporation, a self-styled alternative media think tank that sought to provide a 'theoretical basis for implementing communication tools in the project of social change', this publication provided a dynamic sphere for a now mythologised generation of artists working at the frontier of networked practices.² The magazine was *Radical Software*, the medium was video, however what was achieved provides an important precedent for understanding networked art of our own time.

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Inspired largely by now familiar McLuhanist tendencies, *Radical Software* is perhaps more enticing today for its allusion to the work of Gregory Bateson, an English visual anthropologist and cyberneticist. Whereas McLuhan had famously argued for technological formats as extensions of the body, Bateson was more radical, redefining the self as an expanded mental field in which the subject and objects are no longer separable; a model of the mind propagating integration and realisation in the world through communicative ecology.³ Whilst perhaps this isn't the place to rehash the idiosyncrasies of 1960s systems thinking, this moment nonetheless seems striking, as both a rupture from latent mind-body dualisms of the traditional empirical subject, as well as a trope by which to re-imagine the formalist artwork and its emphasis on separation between technology, communication, affect and sociability. Filtered through the video art apparatus, this burgeoning awareness of media ecology inspired a practice demonstrating that 'every act of mechanical reproduction occurs within a particular spatial, social and psychological topography.'⁴ Or, reconfigured, an artwork was imagined that began to locate itself within

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structures of communication, rather than objects or even ideas.

Through Bateson, *Radical Software* and its affiliate practitioners (amongst others, Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette and Nam June Paik) learnt to explore beyond the material lens, towards context, or integration. Thus was instigated a manoeuvre perhaps not fully articulated until the turn of the millennium, in Rosalind Krauss's own explorations of the post-medium condition. Tracing three narratives, we find a pivotal moment at the intersection of video and television, or the introduction of the Raindancers' beloved Portapak. Widely held to be the first commercially available portable camera, this Sony device emphasised the revolutionary ability of video to reconfigure previously coherent forms, spaces and temporalities (an example uncannily familiar today would be watching back childhood memories on old VHS tapes). Such experiential heterogeneity, Krauss claimed, provided the nail in the head of modernist medium specificity; consequently, 'In the age of television, so it broadcast, we inhabit a post-medium condition.'⁵ It was something like this, the post-structuralist recognition of the individual's dependency on and constitution through external sources (interdependence and intermediation), that the pioneering video artists intuited in their radical ecologies.

The post-medium today seems a given, the current transience of traditional boundaries between object, action and documentation, and the centrality of this in post-internet practice, emphasised perhaps most concisely in the * new jpegs * exhibition this August.⁶ So too will the concept of art as communication be familiar to anyone versed in post-network practice. Yet I'd nonetheless like to posit an integral difference between our two ostensibly correlative (re-performative) moments, albeit one perhaps best illustrated with reference to another art historical precursor.

Incursions / 'My subject matter is in-information.'⁷

Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room* (1974) serves as an elegant example of the defining mood of both early video art and concurrent networked interests. Although not included in Tate Modern's 2005 exhibition *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970*, we can nonetheless read into it the influence of Minimalism upon networked practices, as highlighted by Boris Groys in

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the accompanying catalogue: 'The typical Minimalist installation is perceived as a fragment of a formalised algorithm of reiterations and modifications. However powerful and fascinating the immediate visual impression of these installations on the viewer may be, ultimately they point to something invisible, merely conceivable, virtual.'¹⁸ Although clearly not as monumental as a Minimalist installation, Graham's work nonetheless garners its power in revealing the hidden forces directing and shaping the viewer/participant's subjectivity in the situation. For upon realising their entrapment in its closed-circuit, the viewer is forced to confront their identity and self-awareness, how they are constructed as a self by their surrounding environment. This is a result, it is inferred, of all media circuits. Think of the last time you unthinkingly did your hair in a webcam.

It was such structuralism and phenomenology that categorised much art of the period, to once more lean on Groys: 'it is precisely such potentially infinite projects that the art of the 1960s and 1970s repeatedly formulated and presented, projects that make visible the infinite operation of the formal, logical system that determines both the individual processes of thinking and the way that modern social institutions function.'¹⁹ It is in this respect that post-network art of today dramatically differs. For if the previous generation of artists worked to identify these patterns, to place their viewer (participant) within these hidden structures, artists today begin to play with them, to construct narratives and explore new situations. In short, if network art revealed these relationships, post-network art begins to question them.

Consider here two London artists, Ed Fornieles and Ben Vickers. Although each have their own independent projects, they collaborate on businesses/projects(?) whatamithinking.biz and characterdate.com (the latter collaboration completed by Holly White). These offer, on the surface, a radical point of departure from historical projects such as Graham's, the viewer being confronted with a rather corporate and hackneyed web fill-in as opposed to the traditional video work or gallery installation. Yet of course this is far from a radical manoeuvre, following an established net art interest in revealing our complicity with the systems that define us. And indeed how far removed is this from Graham's concerns, albeit with added transparency towards the stringent bureaucracy that

defines post-Fordist capitalism? (In fact one might realise their role as 'observed observer' in the process about eight seconds after arriving at the site, with the (admittedly more active) gesture of typing in their own name). Such are the limits of formalist reading in contemporary art.

Befitting the artists' dry humour, the full scope of both projects is revealed only in their terms and conditions, which give a clue towards the prospective consequences of signing up. For far from merely placing their viewer within a certain phenomenological context, Fornieles, White and Vickers reserve all right to fully interact with them: to contact them; to offer gifts, props or incentives; to introduce fictitious characters into their life and workplace; 'without notification or justification'; or even to inform them of their 'thoughts, activities and[...] past'. This is Beuysian social sculpture, sure, yet it is social sculpture with an imagination, with a desire to question the real from without, not within, a Borgesian drive to explore reality through an added layer of fiction (and, like in the best of Borges, who's to say the two might not converge?). Fully active imaginative participation is required to grasp the artwork. It is this tendency that I'd like to highlight under the rubric of narrative.

Yet the mechanics of this fiction are interesting. Whilst it is true to say that all art involves a degree of fiction (the historical 'art vs life' debate relies on this assumption), in these examples the relationship is complicated. Despite the characters created in the above examples being fictitious prior to activation, upon activation this is collapsed, the each becoming an echo of the other. Here is the importance of the online mediation of the project, for whilst the crucial interaction happens far beyond the computer screen, the online portal locates the projects in the shared language of the internet generation, and the implicit agreement upon the heterogeneity of authentic or real experience upon contact with any device mediated by the net. In the sense that language is heterarchical, so is narrative, and this is its importance. My apologies for all the Greek.

However as in traditional narrative we must place an emphasis on person, or more specifically its inherent distinctions. For with its direct intervention in lived situations, work such as that of Fornieles and Vickers can be characterised as second person, weaving narratives and encouraging interaction amongst other people. (Use

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x of second person as opposed to third in this context accounts for the active role encouraged amongst participants, it is intended to de-emphasise spectacle). This distinction seems a useful tool through which to highlight the differentiation in this schema from first person narrative, in which the artist constructs her own (invented) narrative, often integral to the work's context.

This latter scheme has been a popular conceit in internet practice over the last few years. However, building upon Brad Troemel's clear consideration of the web 2.0 shift towards traditional identification online, (this is not an attempt to celebrate or propagate the phenomenon of online alter-egos), I'd like to suggest that the notion of artist persona is important in both the appreciation and consideration of particular post-network art.¹⁰ An interesting example here is Jeremy Bailey, who almost parodies himself and the whole idea of himself as 'Famous New Media Artist Jeremy Bailey'. Of course, how famous Bailey actually is is debatable, offering a humorous nod towards questions of the heteronomy of new media practice in both art world and popular culture context at large. What is more significant is the way Bailey has collapsed the space between fiction and reality in his persona, in what is almost a sublimation of artistic aura, and a wry comment on the complex relationship between lived and invented aspects of our personalities in the mass-internet age. Furthermore, this becomes a tool in the reading of the work itself, (in Bailey's case adding a certain pathos, in the inaccurate use of the word), acting as a tracker in the artist's development. For by force of their imagination, by their reading this into the work, the viewer is made complicit in a new way, as part of a shared narrative connecting artist and system. It is this tendency I'd like to call attention to as first person narrative. Perhaps a more obvious instance is Helen Benigson using her Princess Belsize Dollar persona as a vehicle for her work, or even Parker Ito developing something of a mystique around the notion of Parker Ito (this is a far more subtle example than Jeremy Bailey, although it's a narrative generously supported by his America Online Made Me Hardcore project), although examples seem widespread and varied.

x Whilst perhaps edging towards a celebration of the artist as self-mythologiser, this is true only in recognition of a wider cultural trend of self-mythologising, as we

invent ourselves almost daily on social networks, negotiating the complex dynamics between what we post and what we do not post as we construct the informatics of our mirrored selves. Further, even myths can be radical.¹¹ Yet to what extent one argues for the politics of this phenomenon is more probably subject for a separate investigation, here it seems sufficient to note merely further blurring of the virtual and the real, a landscape not yet fully mapped. Only once more the invitation is inwards.

The play between the real and the virtual seems less radical every day. Thus the function of narrative seems not just to identify this convergence, or even enact it, but to activate it, to bring into real space the same fragmented moral zone we've created online, and to open this space for everybody.

Thus, perhaps, narrative makes the virtual real.

Inasmuch as reading back in a relationship between video and post-network constructs and contests its own narrative, I'd be the first to admit that this essay intimates its own blurring of the virtual and the real. To what extent we might maintain this network / post-network dichotomy seems interesting; in what ways the two moments might question each other seems key. And perhaps this new working of the digital grid might be a final riposte to the silent Modernist grid; through which lines of communication are exploited not merely exalted, in which structures are reworked and not simply revealed.

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1. Bateson, Gregory. "Cybernetic Explanation", in Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (399-410). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, 408

2. <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html>

3. See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964)

4. Joselit, David. "Art as Information: Systems, Sited and Media". in Joselit, *American Art Since 1945*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2003, 159

5. Krauss, Rosalind. *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000, 32

6. <http://www.johanberggren.com/past/11-07-newjpegs.html>

7. Dan Graham, from Kaizen, William "Steps to an Ecology of Communication: "Radical Software", Dan Graham, and the Legacy of Gregory Bateson" in *Art Journal*, 67, no3, Fall 2008, 99

8. open systems, 55

9. *ibid.*, 63

10. http://www.lulu.com/items/volume_72/11774000/11774401/1/print/Brad_Troemel_Peer_Pressure_2011.pdf

11. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/228>

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Thoughts on Artwork,
Documentation and the Internet
By Isabel Gylling &
Matthew Ferguson

The majority of people who come across our work and that of many other young artists around the world do so online. In many cases, it is not possible to experience their work first hand in its physical form; therefore it has to be translated through documentation on screen. How can the artist work within these boundaries to best represent and communicate what his or her work is?

By putting documentation of work on our website we have found that the work comes to feel more 'real': archived, providing evidence of its existence, certified and making it available to a wider public indefinitely. What do we mean by more 'real'? The word reality derives from the Latin 'realis' – 'relating to things'. What makes the Internet more real in some ways is perhaps its all-encompassing fundamental quality; almost everything in our physical reality exists within it, albeit an imitation. The Internet is a mega-context, providing its users with a multitude of potential experiences. Physical reality cannot achieve this in the same way, deficient of the key facilitators for such an experience: quantity, speed and accessibility. When exposed to a wider public, something advances from merely forming a part of an individual's reality, partially constituted by the imagined, to a social, collective reality that can confirm the existence and validity of something. The visibility and openness of the Internet supports and encourages this confirmed reality. Without this last stage the work does not feel finished, not properly brought to conclusion by this ultimate exposure. The work enters a global, universal reality and becomes part of that omnipresent, incorporeal existence that is the online.

The Internet could in this light be considered the final, or ultimate context for work. Ultimate as in the end of a process, the final stage of the work, but perhaps also the better, superior? Representing work online gives the artist a second chance; images can be manipulated, enhanced, altered or omit aspects of reality that weren't necessary or attractive. The artist directs this updated, improved version of the work; potentially to the extent where the documentation better represents

the work. These renderings of work may be closer to the intention or idea of the artist than what was physically possible. The Internet provides a context for these refined versions of work and may therefore be considered superior. Artie Vierkant plays with the relationship between physical objects and their documentation in *Image Objects*¹. The work consists of prints of digital files mounted on a wall. The subsequent documentation of these pieces are digitally altered, adding colour and shapes etc. In turn, these updated versions become new works. The documentation of this work doesn't directly represent the physical objects but instead broadens and highlights the gap between the two.

The Internet lends itself to distraction. It is beyond comprehension and does of course induce 'scrolling on', habitually dismissing images or information that is seemingly not worthy of our attention. If we at times experience work, in physical reality or online, it is, as stated in the dictionary, 'an occurrence that leaves an impression' on us. An encounter on the other hand is something or someone that we 'meet unexpectedly and confront'. When viewing work in a physical space it is potentially easier to be more generous with time, allowing an experience of work to take place, embodied and 'slower' as it is. Whilst on the other hand of course experiences of work online take place, the chance of works being only encountered is higher. Online presentation of work is so sensitive in this respect; too easily it can become an encounter as opposed to an experience, with the power to undermine the value of the primary artwork. Online presentation that communicates well is as such a crucial aspect of how the work eventually exists. Documentation of work is separate from the physical work itself, but nevertheless it too offers the possibility of having a profound experience. Oliver Laric states in an interview with Domenico Quaranta that, "Walking around a sculpture and viewing a single perspective in a catalogue are different experiences, but both are authentic and vivid"². The documentation of work needs to be able to exist on its own, separated from and as a substitute for the work. How can the artist present work online that conveys the essence of that work, and which lends itself to being an experience, as opposed to an encounter?

The artist Tino Sehgal makes live performances in museums and galleries, often directly involving the audience. What

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differentiates Sehgal from many other artists is the way he refuses to document his work. For Sehgal the embodied experience of the audience/participant is primary, and he fears that documentation of this work could destroy the live experience. "If you make live work, once you start to produce secondary material it becomes a primary thing"⁵. This illustrates a risk associated with the Internet as well; the primary, physical work becomes digitized and potentially transforms what is a secondary reproduction into the paramount form of the work. Instead of images or videos that potentially completely misrepresent Sehgal's work, the way he intends us to engage with it, other forms of communication take place. These are in the form of articles and reviews, or through conversations. A mystique builds around the work – What is it like? How does it work? – encouraging the audience to use his or her imagination. Online, what we are left with is a trail of articles and the odd bit of footage to interpret the work. This way of accessing Sehgal's work may capture the essence of it more genuinely, be more truthful, more engaging, more of an experience.

As with anything represented online, documentation of artwork offers a very limited, constricted view or point of access to the work. Like seeing images of a place you have never been to, seeing documentation of work online can't depict the totality of it. Of course as artists we have to consider the documentation of work carefully, but to what extent can we do so? Can we be even more resourceful in making sure that the confined view of work that we offer an audience is as relevant as possible?

Best Value⁴ is a work by Timur Si-Qin. It is a sculpture that comprises 16 plastic boxes containing water and electrical extension cords. The documentation of this is particularly interesting. Si-Qin has created a slideshow of photographs, and a short video clip where someone pours water into one of the plastic boxes, these are placed over the music video Swag OD by Soulja Boy feat Lil B. The music is aggressive, enhancing the aggressiveness of the piece itself; it angles the work more pointedly in this direction. The time element that the video brings also makes us view the photographs more intently. At the edges of the video, strips of the music video behind are visible, they bring movement to the otherwise (mostly) static representation of the work. Together with the rhythm and sound of the music the work becomes energized.

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The documentation adds to the work, there is something extra, an additional entry point that potentially gives an audience more of an insight, depending on Si-Qin's intentions for his work. This documentation certainly offers one type of experience of it in a very generous way.

Kimi Conrad is an art practice whose documentation of performance-based works in many cases differ from the traditional photo-realistic image or straightforward video recording. The documentation of LLAUNCH EVENTY⁶ comprises a small number of photoshopped images. Some of them depict people and what appears to be some form of action that can be discerned through a dark grey, blurred layer. As an online visitor and with no physical experience of the work it is to say the least an enigmatic representation of the event. We can only imagine what it must have been like. These obscure images do just that; entice us to imagine, in a more inquisitive and engaging way than what a realistic form of representation perhaps could. These images aren't purely renditions of finished work but in a sense they are re-made in a new format, held together by the essence of the work.

It is easy to overlook documentation as being a 'dead' process, simply a way of recording what is already finished. Fundamentally documentation can never be completely transparent or give the viewer a direct, total experience of its physical version, it forms a layer, and is a translation. We need to be aware of what kind of layer we place between the viewer and the work and to what extent it enhances or detracts from the essence of it, making sure to capture the properties without which the work would not be what it is. Perhaps we must not view the documentation as a separate entity merely mirroring the physical state of the work, but as part of the making and conceptualization process. It can make us think more carefully about what the work is, ultimately furthering how we understand it and helping us communicate to an online audience.

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1. <http://www.image-objects.com/>
 2. Domenico Quaranta, The Real Thing / Interview with Oliver Laric, <http://artpulsemagazine.com/the-real-thing-interview-with-oliver-laric/>, 2010
 3. Lars Vilks Vimeo account, <http://vimeo.com/10139041>
 4. <http://timursiqin.com/2011/best-value.html>
 5. <http://www.kimiconrad.com/launch%20eventy.html>

How Free is Free?
Netlabels and the Politics of Online
Music Distribution
 By Leo Merz

In early 2003, a couple of friends and I started to run the weekly FM radio programme Hyper-ground on Freies Radio für Stuttgart (FRS). As the name suggests, the FRS station is a noncommercial institution. Specifically, this not only means that the programme is advertisement-free, but also that none of the DJs, hosts or journalists are paid for their jobs. In return, the grassroots organisation of FRS grants its participants a maximum freedom of expression with regards to the broadcasted content. Besides enabling a highly heterogeneous programme schedule, ranging from support groups over political activism to dedicated music formats, the platform also proves to be a fertile environment for all kinds of experimentation. Every wednesday, for two hours, the studio was transformed into a laboratory. Around midday, a cacophony of electronic noises and phone calls trapped in feedback loops, accompanied by our host Gün's declamation of street knowledge and dadaesque pseudo-journalism, was sent to the station's transmitter mast (located on top of an incineration plant) and broadcast to the town. Gün would typically wind up the show with the sentence "am Mikrofon war irgend so'n Türke" [This show was presented by one of those Turks], thereby both breaking one of the radio station's few iron laws (the obligation to name the responsible party after each show) and highlighting the prejudices many immigrant workers and their offspring are facing in Germany. Apart from this playful exploration of the medium of radio, we always had a feeling of resistance—against what, however, was never clearly defined. Maybe it was what we perceived as mushy listening habits or the hegemony of the big broadcasting stations. While we were always aware that we had nowhere near as many listeners as the major radio stations, the idea that around one million people could potentially tune in and listen to our programme remained exciting. Around the same time, my close friends Dennis Knopf, Pierluigi Cau, Paolo Elmo and Giacomo Fazi created the online platform Upitup, with the objective to share their homemade music among themselves and with the rest of the world. This was preceded by a lively exchange of letters

and CD-Rs that were sent from Stuttgart to Rome and vice-versa. When Upitup started networking with like-minded creatives, the site gradually evolved from a very personal endeavour to a platform that would accept demos and release music by other individuals. It was at this stage that they realised they were running what is commonly referred to as a netlabel. Knopf (2010, pers. comm., 6 September) suggests that the initial motivation for Upitup came from the fact that "We all made music, per conto nostro, for ourselves, on our own and felt like we'd love to 'exist', just like those artists we liked. We wanted to be part of a 'musical public'".

This aspiration can be related to Jenny Sundén's (2003) analysis of early MOOs, text-based virtual reality systems. In reference to Sundén, Danah Boyd (2006) asserts that "in order to exist online, we must write ourselves into being". Arguing from a feminist perspective, Sundén challenges early utopian visions of cyberculture that frame virtual life as an immaterial, disembodied reality that is entirely disconnected from the physical constraints of "real-life". This relational view is mirrored by Cau's (2010, pers. comm., 6 September) perspective on the early days of Upitup:

"We basically felt that we had founded our own society—it was our own virtual reality. I was not a musician, but I had my music up online. We dreamed of playing gigs, but online we had the proof that we were doing our thing. I could even say that my music only existed online, when people found it, downloaded it and gave feedback."

While these two examples could be dismissed as manifestations of the type of teenage egocentrism that Boyd (2006) identifies within online social networking services, they are also inextricably linked with wider economic, political, social and technological contexts. From a Foucauldian perspective, the technologies of the self, that is, the methods and techniques through which individuals constitute themselves, are always already part of a macro-social structure of power. Foucault states that "the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And, conversely, [...] one has to take into account where techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion." (1999: 162) If we acknowledge

x the potential bottom-up exertion of power Foucault proposes, we have to ask in which ways these micro-relational techniques of the self relate to “structures of coercion”. How do these wider schemes of domination work? And, consequently, how can one resist them?

“One element we can put our finger on at the most basic and elemental level is the will to be against. [...] Disobedience to authority is one of the most natural and healthy acts. To us it seems completely obvious that those who are exploited will resist and—given the necessary conditions—rebel.” (Hardt & Negri 2001: 210)

A POLITICS OF CONFRONTATION

x Essentially, a netlabel is a curated online platform that distributes digital music files for free. However, “free”, in this context, does not mean without restrictions, but rather without payment, or “free of charge”. Netlabels are in some ways similar to traditional independent record labels. Many netlabels adhere to the concepts of the album, EP or single and distribute collections of related audio tracks by individuals or bands, which are often presented with a cover artwork. Most netlabels have a curator or curatorial board (often the directors themselves), who determine which artists and music appear on the label—this type of organisation is similar to the A&R division of traditional record labels. Besides the fact that netlabels distribute music for free, the main distinction between netlabels and traditional record labels lies in the circumstance that the former organise the whole production and distribution process primarily online. The benefits of this type of organisation are rather obvious: in comparison to offline labels, netlabels have extremely low distribution and administration costs and a maximum degree of curatorial freedom. According to a study by Patryk Galuszka (2009: 6), almost all netlabels claim that their goal is to promote artists and their music online. Only about 20% of his respondents sell digital files, CDs or vinyl records. But where does this apparently altruistic devotion to the production, organisation and distribution of music stem from? While there is no simple answer to this question, a similar motivation can be observed when looking at the thriving exchange of music via peer-to-peer

(P2P) technologies. On a more fundamental level, Kelly (2008) notes that:

“The internet is a copy machine. [...] In order to send a message from one corner of the internet to another, the protocols of communication demand that the whole message be copied along the way several times. [...] Every bit of data ever produced on any computer is copied somewhere. The digital economy is thus run on a river of copies. Unlike the mass-produced reproductions of the machine age, these copies are not just cheap, they are free.”

Kelly’s statement hints towards the problems that the configuration of digital media poses to neoclassical market theory, in which the scarcity of goods determines their price. It has widely been reported on the music industry’s ambitions to strengthen the enforcement of intellectual property rights, either through extensive lobbying efforts and strong-arming ISPs or by filing lawsuits against file sharing platforms, social networking services and individuals (Frith & Marshall 2004, Lessig 2004, Demers 2006, Sell 2008). As Clay Shirky frames it so aptly: “Institutions will try to preserve the problem to which they are the solution.” (Rosen 2010) While many entrepreneurs in the post-fordist economy still cling to the concept of supply and demand and try to perpetuate its applicability by legal means, the prosperity of legal and illegal file sharing shows that not only netlabels, but the majority of internet users have almost naturally adapted, albeit often unconsciously, to the logic of digital replicability. A 2009 report by UK Music and the University of Hertfordshire shows that 97% of the surveyed 14-24 year old UK youths have copied data from a music CD to another device. 61% percent download music illegally via P2P technologies, out of which 83% do so on at least a weekly basis. Curiously enough, those who refrain from illegal file sharing state that they are more worried about artists not getting paid (27%) than the fact that it is considered an illegal activity (23%). (Bahanovich & Collopy 2009) This finding should provide a positive outlook on the music industry. However, the users’ “willingness to pay” can only be tapped by harnessing the possibilities offered by the technologies of sharing, not by draconian intellectual property regimes. Many web-based music services such as Last.fm, Spotify or Soundcloud have embraced a

business model that has come to be known as “freemium”, a portmanteau of the words “free” and “premium”. Usually this means that the core functionality of a service is provided for free, while certain features can only be enabled by upgrading to a paid premium account. It is common that a service starts out entirely free and introduces these additional features after a significant user base has been established. A more insidious, but still very popular strategy is to wait for the users to become acquainted to a service and then remove previously free functionalities, requiring the users to buy them back.

Herbert Simon noted as early as 1971 that “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (40-41) Considering their reliance on this scarce and unstable “commodity”, the arbitrary decisions on what is free and what is premium have to be balanced carefully in order not to scare the user base of a given service away. For Henry Jenkins, this contact point is not only as an economic issue, but also a possibility for political resistance. He seems to have abandoned the idea of an autonomous countermovement by suggesting that the only way to induce change is to bow to the capitalist imperative. In doing so, he incidentally reduces the political subject to a mere consumer:

“we can’t change much of anything if we are not on speaking terms with people inside the media industry. A politics of confrontation must give way to one focused on tactical collaboration. [...] The new model is that we are pressuring companies to change the products they are creating and the ways they relate to their consumers.” (Jenkins 2006: 260)

ROOT TRACING

In the few published scholarly publications about the phenomenon, it is often stated that netlabels have emerged from the online music groups of the demoscene and, more specifically, the tracker scene (Röttgers 2003, Hartmann 2004, Timmers 2005, Michels 2009). The term demoscene refers to an international collective of programmers, graphic designers and musicians who create real-time audio-visual presentations (demos) with home computers. These demos are usually shared among

the collective in a non-commercial manner. Trackers are a breed of music applications that originated from Karsten Obarski’s 1987 software “Ultimate Soundtracker”, which was written for the Commodore Amiga platform and has established the MOD file format. Tracker software allows for the playback, creation and manipulation of so-called module files. Although several other, often platform specific formats, such as the SID format on the Commodore C64, have preceded module files, the latter enjoyed widespread popularity, partly due to their support for audio samples. A particular quality of the MOD format and its derivatives is their accessibility: within module files, all editing capabilities and the original sample files are preserved. The composition contained within a module file can therefore be analysed and modified without restrictions. Ville Heikkilä (2009: 2-3) summarises what he considers the demoscene’s pioneering aspects regarding “digital subcultures”:

* global unrestricted peer-to-peer sharing of digital data [...]

* creating music and other types of art primarily or even exclusively for free non-commercial digital sharing [...]

* using elements taken from video games and other creative digital works in one’s own creations

Although it would be misguided to portray either the demoscene or netlabel culture by way of generalisations, this list indeed applies to netlabels quite accurately. While netlabels do not engage in the illegal distribution of copyright protected files, they generally encourage the dissemination of their releases via P2P networks and other channels. Although the main focus is on the distribution of music files, most netlabels cross-pollinate with graphic designers, who mostly supply cover artworks for releases. Alterations and appropriations of existing works, in the form of remixing and sampling, are also common practice—many netlabels put on remix competitions or provide sample collections to the public. However, there are some important factors that should be considered when collating netlabel culture with the demoscene. The latter, at least in its earlier organisational structure, can be seen as a more or less closed “community”, primarily focused on its internal structure. Markku Reunanen (2010: 3-4) states that the demoscene, having its roots in the illegal practices of software (predominantly videogame) “cracking” and “swapping”, intentionally

chose to remain outside of mainstream visibility. It is common for both the warez scene (the community dealing with pirated software) and the demoscene to organise in groups. These groups engage in a constant battle for recognition, which leads to great productivity within the “scene”. In the case of the warez scene, this involves being the first group to distribute a so-called “release”, meaning a cracked program, “patch”, “keygen” or similar, packaged piece of software, written predominantly under the premises of copy protection removal (Rehn: 364). In the demoscene, this competitive character is equally present. While aesthetical aspects, such as the overall style of the presentation, are integral to the evaluation of a demo, the quality of the technical skills involved in sound and video programming are quintessential. One could say that there are similarities with certain offline subcultures, such as Graffiti writing, where the prime motive of gaining “fame” within a community is likewise constituted by a combination of artistic and technical expertise. (cf. Lachmann 1988) Traditionally, the demoscene’s approach is closely tied to the modernist idea of medium-specificity. Demos often exploit properties that are characteristic of, or even exclusive to the computing platform they were designed for. This is especially apparent in demos written for more restricted platforms, such as, for example, the Amiga 500, where a number of visual tricks could be achieved by reconfiguring the video co-processor (Heikkilä 2009: 6) The sound chips in Amiga computers can play four, the ones in the Atari ST merely three separate voices simultaneously. Writing rich and complex music for such platforms therefore involves a thorough understanding of the given technology and a creative engagement with its limitations. Besides compositional techniques, this also involves tricks that deal with the hardware. An example would be the “Hardwave”, a CPU saving technique on the Atari ST, where the sound chip’s envelope generator is used as a new waveform type (D. Espenschied 2010, pers. comm., 13 August). As the artist and programmer Joseph P. Beuckman of the Beige Programming Ensemble frames it:

“We’re interested at the hardware level -before corporations write their proprietary ‘anything goes’ interfaces. Computers have personalities, shapes and architectures like a canvas that influence what we make. We don’t want to build a flat white

surface over that and ignore the features of the machine.” (Arcangel, Davis & Beuckman 2001)

Although module files can be played back on modern computers using either emulators or media players such as Winamp or VLC, the format has never been embraced by the music industry. While some early Netlabels such as monotonik did initially distribute module files, the vast majority of contemporary netlabels resort to audio compression formats, such as the popular (proprietary) MP3 codec and, more recently, the lossless (open-source) FLAC format. When opposing module files to MP3 files, we are presented with two different concepts of openness. Module files feature the aforementioned transparency and manipulability of the composition, while MP3s are compatible with a wider range of media players and may contain any kind of recorded sound. At first glance, MP3 is a format that encourages its consumption, rather than a creative engagement with its contents. However, as Andersson (2010: 62) points out, MP3 files indeed require a kind of cognitive and aesthetic investment. This includes the creation and manipulation of ID3 metadata embedded in the format and, on a more general level, the “tagging, browsing, indexing, recommendations and active search queries for finding the content in the first place.” (ibid:62) On the other hand, these activities seem to be primarily of an archival type—form filling processes, reminiscent of the tasks of a registrar. The point here is that the medium-specific practices of the demoscene create an awareness of their technological surrounding that is rarely present among today’s digital artists and creatives. The concept of medium-specificity should to be seen here as a form of technological determinism, but rather as a perspective that enables critical discourse and analysis. As Sterne notes, the MP3 is not simply a technological artefact, but also, and perhaps most importantly, a cultural artefact that acts on the way we perceive, organise and engage with music:

“The mp3 is a form designed for massive exchange, casual listening and massive accumulation. As a container technology designed to execute a process on its contents, it does what it was made to do. The primary, illegal uses of the mp3 are not aberrant uses or an error in the technology; they are its highest moral calling: ‘Eliminate redundan-

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cies! Reduce bandwidth use! Travel great distances frequently and with little effort! Accumulate on the hard drives of the middle class! Address a distracted listening subject!” (Sterne 2006: 838)

ONE LICENSE TO RULE THEM ALL

From a more economic perspective, the transition from the platform-specific file formats of the tracker scene to consumer standard audio formats means not only that the music can be played back on a wider variety of platforms but also that it fulfils the potential to integrate with competitive music markets. In analogy, we can observe that in the demoscene files primarily circulated among members of a “community”, whereas netlabels distribute their music predominantly to an anonymous online public. The question seems to be less about how far netlabels share aspects with the demoscene, but rather under which premises these aspects relate to a market that has only played a marginal role in the previous configuration (Reunanen: 4). Despite the lack of a substantial revenue model, the organisational structure of netlabels appears to be more characterised by an entrepreneurial than an underground network approach. However, Hartmann (2004) portrays the netlabel scene as a community and sees the main connecting element in netlabels’ widespread use of Creative Commons (CC) licenses. Indeed, there is evidence that the introduction of CC licenses has had a major impact on netlabel culture. According to Galuszka’s (2009:2) research, the year 2002 saw the establishment of ten new netlabels. In the following year, after the introduction of the first CC licenses in December 2002 (Creative Commons n.d. a), this number had almost tripled to 29 and culminated in 65 newly founded labels in both 2005 and 2007. However, the assumption that the widespread use of these licensing schemes single-handedly constitutes a netlabel community is fraught with difficulties.

A point that often causes confusion is that Creative Commons licenses do not function as a true alternative to copyright—they are based on copyright and therefore do not oppose the concept of IP. CC licenses rather allow for the stripping of certain features from the legal framework of default copyright, thus enabling the author of a work to determine which rights are preserved and which ones are waived.

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This makes CC licenses comparable to those used by the free software movement, such as the GNU GPL. However, the GPL and similar licenses are designed to match a clear definition of the rights a piece of software has to grant to the public in order to be free. These rights are determined in Richard Stallman’s (2010) free software definition (FSD):

* The freedom to run the program, for any purpose (freedom 0).

* The freedom to study how the program works, and change it to make it do what you wish (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

* The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor (freedom 2).

* The freedom to distribute copies of your modified versions to others (freedom 3). By doing this you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

Free software licenses use a strategy known as “copyleft” to ensure that the conditions of the FSD are met. This involves modifying copyright in a way that enables the non-exclusive rights to distribute copies and modified versions of a work, with the added requirement that these rights are preserved in all derivative versions. While the CC Share-Alike license qualifies as “copyleft” in that it “allow[s] others to distribute derivative works only under a license identical to the license that governs [the] work” (Creative Commons n.d. b), the number of other, often incompatible, licensing features that CC offers result in a fuzzy, unsettled perspective on the concept of intellectual property. Apart from the Share-Alike clause, users can decide whether their work may be used commercially, whether they request attribution and if they permit the creation derivative works. All of these stipulations can either be granted or negated. Furthermore, they can be freely combined. Mako Hill (2005) notes that “despite CC’s stated desire to learn from and build upon the example of the free software movement, CC sets no defined limits and promises no freedoms, no rights, and no fixed qualities. Free software’s success is built upon an ethical position. CC sets no such standard.”

Note Stallman’s use of the words “neighbor” and “community” in points three and four of the FSD. Arguably, he makes these references because the FSD seeks to ensure a maximum degree of openness with respect to the access, distribu-

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tion and modification of software, granting every member of the public the same rights and freedoms. In contrast, the only definite claim CC makes could be framed as “anything is better than default copyright”. The fact that the Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license, which, as the name suggests, prohibits remixing and commercial use, is by far the most popular pick among netlabels (Galuszka 2009:8), carries the notion of “free music” away from the idea of a musical public domain towards a mere “gratis”. In addition, the “hodge-podge of pick-and-choose [...] features” (Mako Hill 2005) often leads to an arbitrary, unreflected application of CC licenses. An example would be the use of a Non-Commercial No Derivatives license for a composition that samples extensively from copyright protected, commercial music. Such an act would obviously prevent others from applying the same production techniques that oneself utilises. This does not mean that Creative Commons licenses are bad or useless, but rather that without a well-defined ethical position, key questions concerning the concepts of authorship and intellectual property might slip from view. Take, for example John Cage’s composition 4’33”, a piece consisting of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. Who is the creator here, who is the owner? One could reply that Cage is the creator of the concept and the owner of the (blank) scoresheet. Indeed, there is a copyright on the notation, which is currently owned by the sheet music publisher Edition Peters. The disturbing part is that Edition Peters also believes that it owns the rights to the performance and recording of 4’33”—that is, the performance and recording of silence! This is demonstrated in a lawsuit Edition Peters filed against the musician Mike Batt in 2002 (BBC News). There seems to exist a gross misconception about the artistic value of the composition, which is not the idea of silence per se, but rather the use of silence to enable a mode of performative listening that recognises the sheer inexistence of silence. By removing the indexical cue from the performance and transforming the composer and performer themselves into listeners, Cage’s piece ridicules the concept of Intellectual Property.

It could be contended that CC promotes a different, more restricted understanding of freedom—one that focuses on the freedom of the individual to decide how her creative work is used. However, such a

position rather emphasises the impossibility of any substantial social movement under the banner of CC. Undeniably, one can observe cooperations and alliances among netlabels, but at the same time normative values and discursive action are highly fragmented (cf. Denegri-Knott 2004). In what he calls “liquid modernity”, Bauman (2007: 89) notes that “Ever larger chunks of human conduct have been released from explicitly social [...] patterning, supervision and policing, relegating an ever larger set of previously socialized responsibilities back to the responsibility of individual men and women.” In a similar vein, McRobbie (2002: 522-523) puts forward that the “decline of political antagonism” in cultural production has to be traced back to the “pervasive success of neo-liberal values [...] in the culture and media sector”. While the political implications of licensing schemes constitute but one matter of debate that requires in-depth dedication, the question remains, how netlabels can establish vital discursive environments. According to Galuszka’s study, 24% of his respondents run an internet portal, forum or virtual community, however, it is difficult to assess this finding. Without qualitative evaluation, the combination of these terms remains rather ambiguous. This is reflected in some of the interviews the author has conducted with a number of international netlabel directors (cf. Appendix B). As an example, Barry Prendergast, director of Brighton based netlabel Open Music (founded in 2008) takes up a pragmatic, entrepreneurial stance. He sees no need for exchange among netlabels and openly rejects the concept of a “community”:

“I don’t think it’s necessary for all of us out there to have such a network. We have our artists, and the public, and that’s it for now. We don’t bang drums for a cause, we just let the positive results make their own noise.” (Prendergast 2010, pers. comm., 8 September)

Another view comes from Dino Spillutini, head of Vienna/Berlin based Beatis-murder.com. Spillutini (2010, pers. comm., 6 September) acknowledges the existence of a netlabel “scene”, but criticises that it has failed to scale up:

“The netlabel scene was new and exciting a couple of years ago, and I really enjoyed being part of that. But the scene has not evolved. It has not yet come out of its nerdy niche. I have to admit that I somehow moved

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on. I'm still releasing netlabel stuff, but I'm no longer really active in the 'scene'. I wish I could feel part of a movement though. I just don't know any that would fit."

While the "nerdy niche" existence could be proposed as an advantage, in the sense of alternative centres of cultural production that cater for equally niche audiences, Diederich Diederichsen (2010) hypothesises that "an economy that consists of nothing but niche production would be an entropic horror—one in which there would be no public realm and no aesthetic experience." From an economic perspective, this is nothing to worry about yet, since the Long Tail (Anderson 2004) of the music market—provided it exists at all (cf. Page & Garland 2009)—is still far from outperforming the industry's big hits. However, Diederichsen's claim for "reference points for everybody" does not address economy, but politics and culture. These reference points are to be seen as means to "remain in contact with the world" (op cit.), a necessity that corresponds with Spillutini's desire to partake in a movement.

NEW NEW ECONOMY

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Despite the fragmented political discourse within netlabel culture, there is one point that almost all interviewees agree on: that the traditional music industry has failed to adapt to technological and social change and now has to suffer for it. Some share a very cynical view on the subject and claim that they would be very happy to see "the industry" die (A. Fernandez, M. Subjex, PK, E. Phizmiz, 2010, pers. comm.,). If we stick to the assumption that netlabels probably share more aspects with some kind of avant-garde "cultural entrepreneurial-ism" (Leadbeater & Oakley 1999) than with community based online networks, it seems rather strange that netlabels conceive of themselves as being autonomous from the music industry. While some claim that the non-commercial sharing of digital artifacts is something that occurs outside of economic contexts (Bollier 2003, Hartmann 2004), Barbrook (1999) has argued that this type of exchange rather constitutes a different kind of economic system, one that he refers to as the "high-tech gift economy". Barbrook portrays the high-tech gift economy as a type of digital anarcho-communism resisting against the commodification of digital

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artefacts by the market economy. But just how radical is this type of gift economy? Although he realises that "the 'new economy' is a mixed economy" and that "the purity of the digital DIY culture is compromised" by interests of corporate capital and the state (ibid: 138), Terranova argues that Barbrook's concept puts too much weight on the gift economy's autonomy from capitalism, for "the gift economy, as part of a larger informational economy, is itself an important force within the reproduction of the labour force in late capitalism as a whole." (2004: 77) This is emphasised by Pasquinelli, who shifts the discussion about the politics of participation from the symbolic to a material level. He makes a point of crucial importance in stating that:

"all the immaterial (and gift) economies have a material, parallel counterpart where the big money is exchanged. Obvious examples include the combinatorial relationship between MP3 files and iPods, P2P and ADSL, free music and live concerts, Barcelona lifestyle and real estate speculation, the art world and gentrification, global brands and sweatshops." (Pasquinelli 2007: 80)

These statements are staggering.

They urge us to reframe the introductory question: How can one possibly resist an adversarial organisational structure, if the perceived counter-practice is not only embedded within it, but also perpetuating its regeneration? In order to tackle this question, it makes sense to take a step back and look at the way resistance worked prior to the globalised information economy.

A recent BBC documentary on the record store, distribution company and independent label Rough Trade portrays the struggle against the hegemonic structures of the music industry from the perspective of the 1970s punk and DIY movement. In 1977, Rough Trade released the single Smokescreen by punk outfit Desperate Bicycles. With the goal to demystify the record production process, the band printed an instruction manual on the single's cover that explained how to record and produce your own at minimal costs. In the documentary, a member of the group states that they made the record "to show that anybody could go ahead and make a record... [that] you didn't need the backing of a large record company, or a contract, or anything like that". A year later, the band Scritti Politti took this concept one

step further, by listing the recording and production costs on the sleeve of their 7" record *Skank Bloc Bologna*. (BBC 2010) Although *Rough Trade* was by no means the first independent record label, their punk background, coupled with a business ethos that treated artists as equal partners (offering fifty-fifty deals), served as a stronghold for DIY activists fighting for the democratisation of the music publishing business. Back then, it was rather unproblematic to discern the antagonist as the corporate monopoly of the big record labels and the associated exploitation of artists' labour and creative energy.

But now, in light of the traditional record industry suffering from huge losses and the fact that professional recording studios, vinyl plants and distribution companies have become dispensable for the production and publication of music, it might seem like the DIY activists have won the battle. A hasty judgement could propose that now that the institutionalised enemy is gutted and digital information technologies have democratised the creation and distribution of music, autonomous, non alienated creative and cultural activity will follow. Of course, such simplistic utopian promises lead us up the garden path if we strive for a critical examination of cultural production within digital networks. If we take Barbrook's argument that the high-tech gift economy promotes a kind of anarcho-communism for granted, we should ask about its wider implications, not just on a symbolic, but also on a material plane. A crucial concept for the Italian autonomists is Marx's concept of "alienation". In his early Manuscripts, Marx advances an idealist view on humanity, suggesting that in their "pure" form, human beings are first and foremost "social beings". Marx argues that labour within capitalist production becomes objectified, which results in the worker's "alienation" from the social essence of human being. (Berardi 2009: 37-38)

"the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form" (Marx 1844)

This commodification of labour itself,

which transforms the social being into a mere worker being, deprives the human from finding pleasure and fulfilment in work. However, in postindustrial societies, work is increasingly characterised by immaterial labour, which Lazzarato (2006: 133) defines as "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity". This type of labour is of an abstract kind, inasmuch as it creates value through the creation and manipulation of signs, or semiotic fragments (Berardi 2009: 74-76). The creative and cultural industries are consequently being shaped more and more by linguistic, rather than manual labour. Paolo Virno emphasises that factory labour is mute, while post-fordist labour is loquacious (2001: 181). This pervasion of language into the world of work results in the liquefaction of the binary distinction between work and leisure time. A prime example for this shift are social networking services. In the age of Web 2.0, the culture industry, as defined by Adorno and Horkheimer (1987), has widened its scope. It now produces and extracts commercial value, where it was previously not thought to inhere: participatory culture. As Schäfer (2008:216) notes, "the cultural industries are shifting from creating content for consumption to providing platforms for creation." While users spend hours of their alleged leisure time feeding the databases of the "free" services offered by Facebook, Myspace, Last.fm etc. with personal information, they are often unaware that their communicative performance within these applications is regulated by software that was designed in the first place to commodify this performance. The open secret of these companies is that their protocols are written to exploit voluntary social interaction into free labour via comprehensive surveillance networks. In return, the fruits of this labour are fed back to the users in form of advertisement and refined monitoring features. This feels especially awkward when Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of the most successful social networking application, proclaims that "A more transparent world creates a better-governed world and a fairer world" (Kirkpatrick 2010: 288), and further, that "Having two [online] identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity" (ibid: 199).

With reference to these substantial economic shifts, Christian Marazzi (2008: 10) deduces that "Labor produces social life and, in turn, all of social life is put to

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work". This radical view is put into perspective by Matt Subjex, director of Lille, France based netlabel Bedroom Research, who seems to be able to clearly tell apart social activity from work by differentiating between the French notions of "travailler" and "œuvrer", the latter implying that:

"There's some work done, but its purpose is not personal enrichment, capitalization, climbing hierarchies and things like that. I do it because I am committed to a certain idea of music and the reward is the support of the 'fans'. It's very interesting to be in touch with artists, get their tunes, unfinished tunes, dive into their universe [...] you meet nice and interesting people often sharing some common values. You may also have the 'impression' of working out of the regular market crap and domination relationships" (2010, pers. comm., 31 August)

George Yudice (2003: 331) writes that "Nonalienated activity is, of course, the major utopian aspiration in capitalist modernity, and the artist's creativity is the emblem par excellence". One could argue that Subjex's "impression" of non-alienated work is less a utopian aspiration than a "social imaginary" (cf. Taylor 2004: 23), an imagined reality of political resistance. In his analysis of geeks, who he roughly defines as tech savvy programmers, engineers and system administrators concerned with questions about the interplay between technology, politics and the internet, Christopher Kelty asserts that "The social imaginary references the freedom to imagine another world—whether in speech or in code—but it also implies the need to get other people to share this imaginary and make it the basis of political action." (2005: 201-202) Kelty employs Taylor's notion of the social imaginary as a tool for his own concept of a "recursive public":

"A recursive public is a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives." (Kelty 2008: 3)

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Kelty's model of a "recursive public" appears like a promising path to elude the

collapse of political representation. It is, however, difficult to accept a conception of power that proposes that the complex power relations that shape and condition social and political life can simply be imagined as existing on a separate plane. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that netlabels should strive towards the creation of such a public—not as an end in itself, but rather as a way to create a structure that enables critical discourse and material engagement with the topics I have addressed in this text. It is much to be hoped that such a recursive public provides the bedrock for actions that eventually overcome the inward focus on its own existence and permeate the wider public sphere. Ultimately the goal is to create an economy that is characterised by sustainable business practices and an ethics of responsibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See:

<http://pooool.info/uncategorized/how-free-is-free-netlabels-and-the-politics-of-online-music-distribution/>

Colophon

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The first commercially successful typewriter (as well as the QWERTY keyboard) was invented in 1868 by Christopher Latham Sholes, Carlos Glidden and Samuel W. Soule in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA.

Based on these lettershapes, Joel Kaden and Tony Stan designed the typeface American Typewriter for phototypesetting in 1974. It was later digitized and is now radiating its quaint warmth from the previous pages.

– Rasmus Svensson

Pool is a platform dedicated to expanding and improving the discourse between online and offline realities and their cultural, societal and political impact on one another.

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18