

GENE YOUNGBLOOD, AFTERWORD: "WHAT WE MUST

DO"

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Gene Youngblood

On February 15, 2003 more than ten million people poured into streets, plazas and boulevards around the world to demonstrate against neoliberal globalization and U.S. imperialism. Unprecedented in human history, it was a manifestation of enormous unconquerable power, an image of boundless solidarity and hope, provided that one was fortunate enough to see it. This was a utopian image, so it did not appear on the screens, or in the pages, of the imperial Broadcast. For the majority of world citizens who restrict their knowledge of human affairs to corporate or state media, the demonstrations were invisible.

But behind that cancelled image of power in the streets was another kind of power, a virtual power that was also invisible—the global conversation on the Internet that made the demonstrations possible. We all know that it is this power, not the one displayed in the streets, that the masters of the world fear the most.

The Internet has been available to a minority of the world's population for slightly less than ten years, and digital tools of audiovisual production, best understood as integral components of the Internet, have come to maturity only within the last few years. Thus, even though the Internet was greeted immediately with the expected (and appropriate) utopian discourse, we are only now beginning to feel its true power. I say "feel" because there is a crucial difference between conceptual recognition and muscle recognition, between understanding and doing.

By utopian I mean that which is not permitted. The theatre of action is the "place" at the root of this word that means no place. And of all actions that are not permitted, uncontrolled conversation among the peoples of the world is the most powerful, and the most threatening to hegemonic authority. Conversation is the most powerful of human actions because through it we construct the realities in which we live. We can talk about things because we create the things we talk about by talking about them. (By "talk" I mean all forms of conversation including audiovisual.) It is through conversation that we define the four basic constituents of human reality—existence (what's real and what's not), priorities (what's important and what's not), values (what's right and wrong) and relations (what's related to what, and how). Conversation is generative: it brings forth worlds. The power to do this is the ultimate power; thus, a machine that can potentially connect all of humanity in creative conversation is the ultimate utopian machine, the machine that must not be permitted to exist.

Few today believe the hacker's delusion that the Internet is invincible, that we can "route around" anti-democratic interventions in its dynamic architecture; we understand that, like all utopian machines, it is exquisitely vulnerable. The real machine is not the Internet's technological apparatus but the conversations it makes possible. They are technologies of the self, tools with which we construct ourselves as desiring subjects (the ultimate and universal creative act), with the consequence, for example, that we take to the streets in moral outrage or we don't. These conversations can be swiftly closed through privatization of the apparatus and the resulting options, for example, to impose sanctions on Web sites and peremptory tariffs on e-mail. A minority, driven underground, will route around such obstacles, but conversations of politically significant magnitude will be silenced and the utopian machine will no longer exist.

Yet it must exist, for it is the only machine through which we can begin to create on the same scale as we destroy. We have always faced this challenge, but the scale of actual and potential destruction today is beyond historical precedent. We are called, possibly for our very survival, to a scale of creativity for which we have very little past experience. Before 2003 I could have said "no past experience," but we have since witnessed the organizing power of the Internet on a coordinated global scale. We are learning how to use the utopian machine.

Some say the most strategic use of the Internet will be one that is invisible—that secession from the imperial Broadcast, escape from its powers of

appropriation and neutralization, is the necessary first step toward effective counterculture. I believe this will indeed be an important, perhaps essential, aspect of what we must do; but the first step must be exactly the opposite: we must confront neoliberal globalization with an audacious display of the utopian machine's potential power. What is at stake must be made vivid in the world's imagination. To do this would be to force Empire into the light, to reveal it in its nakedness.

If the Internet is potentially as powerful as we say it is—if there is no power greater than global humanity interconnected in creative conversation—then I say we have not even come close to acknowledging, demonstrating and celebrating that power in a manner commensurate to its importance. The possible realization of humankind's ultimate utopian dream—a global democratic public sphere—is in our hands, yet we are collectively ignoring the elephant that is in the room. We need to welcome the Internet as we would welcome the arrival on this planet of a benign alien species—with a unifying global ritual that marks a transformation of human reality. That we have not done this is understandable. We fear what might happen if we let the genie out of the bottle. But we have no choice. Taking a slogan from AIDS activists, at this historical moment silence = death.

So there must be a confrontation. A global coalition of artists and activists must organize an event designed to demonstrate the organizing power of the

Internet in the most dramatic way imaginable; an event designed to galvanize worldwide desire for countercultural deployment of the utopian machine, and to foreclose any attempt to contain its power. The coalition must raise millions in world currencies to fund the project, no matter how long it takes. Five years or longer seems likely. At the same time we must remember that nothing sells; everything is sold. The event and the movement behind it must be advertised in the physical world, not just in the virtual space of the Internet. There is a sense in which something or someone does not exist without a presence on the Internet; the coalition's promotional campaign must begin there and must emanate outward from there into the streets, both of necessity and as a demonstration of the Internet's organizing power. But this will be inadequate without a massive and simultaneous public relations initiative in the physical world. Millions must be spent on advertising the event in every medium and venue around the world, starting years in advance, using the same strategies of cross-promotion and cross-marketing that the imperial Broadcast uses to create and sustain global consumer culture.

The political demonstrations of 2003 were united in solidarity but were separated in time. Historically they constituted a single event, a turning point. They manifested the political will of a global community, but they were not coordinated in time, and time is now the definitive feature of unification. Space has been dissolved; only time and timing circumscribe our democratic right to

peaceful assembly. The primary purpose of the event I propose must be to make visible the invisible power that was behind the political demonstrations. We need to match those spectacular images of assembly in space with equally powerful images of assembly in time—images of worldwide synchronization and coordination.

Asynchronous coordination, in which people around the world interact with and through a common database, is important too. It is, after all, the most common form of Internet art at this time, and it will be a significant part of the event I propose. But global synchronization is inspiring, dramatic and unifying in a way that asynchronous conversation is not, and it must be emphasized to the greatest possible extent.

The event I speak of in the singular will actually be a series of daily events in a continuous unbroken sequence over weeks or months. They will be of two kinds: telecollaborative multimedia performances and multimedia teleconferences. The performances must be outdoors, wireless and mobile, and they must emphasize telepresence as much as possible. There must be large local audiences that see and hear each other, and conversation between them must be enabled and encouraged. The gathered publics must not be mere spectators; they must experience their power to constitute a worldwide public sphere in public space, outside of any institutional or domestic context.

At least five large screens must be in or around performance spaces—one for seeing and hearing the other end of a collaboration, another for audience-to-audience conversation and spontaneous collaboration, a third to display the local performance (as in stadium music concerts or large conferences or trade shows) so the local audience can see what's happening in their space. A fourth giant screen will continuously display webcam-style video transmissions from all participating locations, cycling around the globe sequentially, one after another, from time zone to time zone twenty-four hours a day, to establish and sustain a sense of ~~real~~ time world community. A fifth screen (or more if needed) must be mobile.

The performances must include every kind of mobility, from walking, running and dancing to bicycles and motorcycles, cars, buses and vans, trains and aircraft. The image of the van or mini-bus equipped with audiovisual tools, transmitters and screens is archetypal in the history of media counterculture. In the United States such vehicles were associated with early video collectives like Ant Farm and TVTV. European examples include Jack Moore's travelling players in VW bus caravans across France and Italy in the early seventies, and the Casino Container built by the German design group called Pentagon for Documenta 7 in 1987. Recent Internet-connected examples of wireless mobility were unveiled by demonstrators in the streets around the U.S. Republican National Convention in New York City in September 2004. These included wireless Internet (WiFi)

connections, backpack transmitters, various forms of disruptive guerrilla radio, micro-radio, low-power FM, walkie-talkie, CB radio and video cell phones. For a protest-performance called "Bikes Against Bush," a wireless Internet-enabled bicycle was outfitted with a custom-designed printing device that printed spray-chalk messages sent from Web users around the world directly onto the streets of Manhattan.

Wireless and radio transmissions must be interfaced as much as possible with MIDI technology for dynamic telepresence. Mobile wireless telepresence—ambient and transient, neither here nor there, appearing and disappearing at (public) will—is an elusive and mysterious form of power that is always already everywhere and nowhere. Even though institutions may sponsor particular telecollaborations, the events must be staged outdoors, in streets, parks and other public spaces. Telepresence that is outdoors, mobile and wireless is a potent form of agency, even if it is only metaphorical. Individuals and groups moving through the world untethered, unfettered and unbounded, projecting their will and causing things to happen locally and globally—this is an image of collective force that transcends space and implodes time. If utopia is not a place, mobile wireless telepresence is atopia—a place without a name.

The teleconferences in this event must take place between experts and ordinary people, between featured speakers and audiences. They must be organized around themes that are relevant to the overall event—discussions of the

sociopolitical, economic, cultural and environmental implications of what is transpiring on the network as they speak. The overarching theme of the conferences must be the challenge to create on the same scale as we destroy. Essential topics in this context are democratic globalization, democratic world media, and world-collaborative solutions to environmental problems.

The full spectrum of audiovisual and computational technologies, from high end to low end, must be integrated throughout the network so that locations with lesser resources can participate in the global multimedia conversation. Finally, the telecollaborations and conferences must be broadcast on TV and radio wherever possible, and streamed on the Internet.

I have described a supremely utopian project that is unlikely to happen. I propose it in the spirit of Antonio Gramsci's dictum "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." I am trying to start a conversation about this idea. Is it reasonable? Is it as necessary as I think it is? Even if it is not, it would certainly be beautiful, and it would change the world. It would be a *gesamptkunstwerk* beyond anything yet realized. The mystery is why it has not been attempted.