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Towards a critique of social networking: practices of networking in grassroots communities from mail art to the case of Anna Adamolo

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Abstract

This article follows my reflections on the topic of networking art in grassroots communities as a challenge for socio-political transformation. It analyses techniques of networking developed in collective networks in the last half of the twentieth century, which inspired the structure of Web 2.0 platforms and have been used as a model to expand the markets of business enterprises. I aim to advance upon earlier studies on networked art, rejecting the widely accepted idea that social networking is mainly technologically determined. The aim is to reconstruct the roots of collaborative art practices in which the artist becomes a networker, a creator of shared networks that expand virally through collective interventions.

The focus is collaborative networking projects such as the network of mail art and multiple identities projects such as the Luther Blissett Project (LBP), the Neoist network-web conspiracy and, referring to the contemporary scenario of social networking, the Italian case of Anna Adamolo (2008-2009). The Anna Adamolo case is presented as a clear example of how networking strategies, and viral communication techniques, might be used to generate political criticism both of the media (in this case of the social media) and society. This case study becomes even more relevant if framed by a long series of hacktivist practices realized in the Italian activist movement since the eighties, where collective and social interventions played a crucial role.

Introduction: the gift-exchange networking economy

Contemporary Internet-based social networking platforms have their roots in a series of experimental activities in the field of art and technology started in the last half of the twentieth century which have transformed the conception of art as object into an expanded network of relationships. Avant-garde art practices such as mail art, Neoism and the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) anticipated the structure of Web 2.0 platforms, which have today reached a huge mass of Internet users. These narrow practices have shown that networked art is not mainly technologically determined, but is based on the creation of sharing platforms and of contexts for exchanging between individuals and groups. This perspective makes it possible to define the concept of networking as a practice of creating nets of relations and as a cultural strategy aimed to generate sharing of knowledge, a map of connections in progress.

Networked culture, developed during the last half of the twentieth century, was often

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connected with the concept of the gift-exchange economy, where grassroots communities promoted alternative social configurations and a more sustainable economy based on the sharing of free goods (Welch, 1995; Baroni, 1997; Saper, 2001). This model of relationships allowed for the "exchange" of spontaneous gifts, a *potlatch* based on peer technologies and peer networks. Since the 80s, networking platforms such as the postal art communities but also the BBS (Bulletin Board System) networks, have been an important tool to share knowledge and experience, and to create works of hacktivism and collective art.

The concepts of Openness and Do It Yourself, today more and more relevant with the diffusion of social networks and Web 2.0, have been the starting point for the development of the sharing models of grassroots communities. *Openness* refers to a decision-making process managed by a collective of individuals organized in a community and not orchestrated by a centralized authority (a definition which is absolutely a paradox in the centralized Internet-based social networking platforms); *Do It Yourself* (or DIY) is an "attitude" to build up, to assemble, to make and to create independently, which could be compared with the "hands-on imperative" proper of the hackers (Steven Levy, 1984). DIY, as a real subculture, could be said to have begun with the punk movement of the 1970s. In those years copying machines were widespread and their use became increasingly more constant within the milieu of "dissent", giving birth to underground zines, art-zines, punkzines, etc. (as well described by Stephen Duncombe, 1997). Punk culture questioned the notion of *high art* in order to open up creative possibilities for everyone and opposed the business of large music labels as main channel to reach audiences. Anyone could play, as long as there was the desire to do it, and bands began to apply the DIY logic to produce music, manufacturing albums and merchandise, and organizing low-cost touring.

Consequently, the DIY network dynamic was affirmed on a mass level through the use of computers and the Internet, becoming a practical philosophy in the hacktivist underground scene. The "hacktivism" concept refers to an acknowledgment of the net as a political space, with the aim of creating decentralized, autonomous grassroots participation. Access for everybody, information as a free good and the conscious use of hardware and technology – the basic concepts of hacker ethics – turn into political objectives. In this frame, networking becomes the practice of creating nets of relations, by sharing experiences and ideas in order to communicate and experiment artistically. In the hacker communities of the 1990s networking platforms were perceived as open spaces in which the ideas of sharing, openness, decentralization, free access to computers and collaboration apply (Steven Levy, 1984).

But the concept of networking might be analysed as a practice of art, providing a critical perspective on political imagination. An example is given by the history of the the Italian hacktivism and net culture from the early 1980s until today – a path which began in mail art, in the neoist and Luther Blissett multiple identity projects (www.lutherblissett.net), but also in the BBS networks, and then moved on to the Italian hackmeetings (www.hackmeeting.org), to the Telestreet networks (www.telestreet.it) and to many other networking art projects managed by different Italian artists and activists (Bazzichelli, 2006, www.networkingart.eu/the-book/). In this scenario, networking art coincides with the practice of acting inside social interstices and cultural fractures, which apparently seem to be at the margin of daily life, but instead are an important territory for the re-invention and re-writing of symbolic and expressive codes, as for example the experience of the Telestreet networks might demonstrate. In the Italian underground culture, where hacker communities are very much connected with activism, the art of networking is based on the

figure of the artist as a creator of sharing platforms and of contexts for connecting and exchanging. Among the BBS culture, a networker is anyone who manages to generate areas of discussion and sharing without censorship (at least, apparently); in the mail art network, a networker is anyone who in turn creates occasions of exchanging creative postal artworks, but networkers are also those who accept the networking project invitation and create their own projects answering to the call. For this reason, the active subjects become the network operators, making art less elitist and more inclusive, trying to question the concept of art as such.

Collaborative art practices and multiple identities

In the aforementioned scenes, pre-dating the notion of social networking given by the Web 2.0 platforms, networking is a collective art practice not based on objects, nor solely on digital or analogical tools, but on the relationships in progress between individuals. Individuals who can in turn create other relationship contexts, or generate creative goods which are shared in the commons. The practice of networking might also be seen as a virus that grows from contact to contact and expands through actions of people who develop viral communication processes. As Derrick de Kerckhove points out, describing the evolution of networking phenomenon and recognizing the practice of mail art as one of its predecessors long before the Internet evolved "quoting the famous phrase by Marshall McLuhan 'the medium is the message' today one may say that *the network is the message of the medium Internet*" (Derrick de Kerckhove, 2006).

Assuming therefore that the network of relationships is the main message, an analysis of social networking today can not be done without shedding light on its historical roots, which date back more than thirty years ago and often took shape outside the Internet. The network of mail art, the Neoist network-web conspiracy and the Luther Blissett Project are clear examples of three different modalities of creating networking, which have in common the development of a grassroots networking structure, the redefinition of the concept of art through collective interventions, the critique of a rigid identity, the substitution of high art with irony and everyday life practices, the creation of a more open (and in the case of Luther Blissett anonymous) sharing philosophy which questions the institutional media and art system and often put them into crisis or shows their bugs and vulnerability.
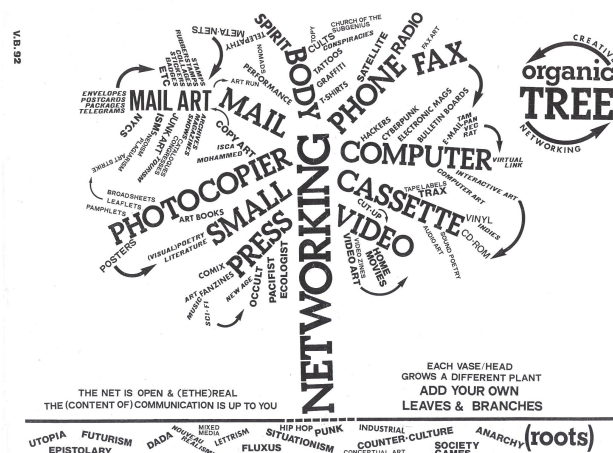
Vittore Baroni, "Organic Tree", 1992.

The practice of mail art developed through a network of small artworks mailed to everyone who enter in a collective postal circuit, giving life to friendly bi-directional relationships, which are lived out in the intimacy of one's own mailbox. Mail art is a form of art open to all (as often described by the Italian mail artist Vittore Baroni). The term that can best define it is *Eternal Network,* according to the French Fluxus artist and sociologist Robert Filliou (1926-1987): an eternal network which, starting from the 1950s, has involved hundreds of people, made up of decorated envelopes and rubber stamps, artistamps, illustrated letters and zines, and any other self-produced objects or pieces of paper turned into creative art sent by mail. It involved individuals linked by belonging to a non-formalized network, which consists of exchanging addresses and one-to-one and one-to-many mailings. The origin of mail art is connected to the figure of Ray Johnson (1927-1995) and to his New York Correspondence School, created in 1962, but the network already had roots in Dadaism, Futurism, Neo-Dada and Fluxus. Until the 1980s the mail art network was also used as a channel and propaganda for Neoism.

Drawing by Pete Horobin, "Neoist Altar". Eighth Apartment Festival of the Neoist Network, London, May 1984.

Neoism expressed itself through artistic practices and experimentation in media. It embraced a philosophy that presupposed the use of multiple identities, the collection of pseudonyms, the discussion of concepts like identity and originality and the realization of *pranks*, paradoxes, plagiarism and *fakes*, components that came up again later in

collective movements such as the Luther Blisset Project (LBP) and in the actions of different net.artists, including the Italian 0100101110101101.org (www.0100101110101101.org) and the Wu Ming collective of writers (www.wumingfoundation.com). Pranks and actions of culture jamming focus on *continual poetic renewal* (Vale and Juno, 1987), creating artistic, cultural and political new experiences, using the unexpected, and a deep level of irony and social criticism.

"What is an uh, uh, Apartment Festival", image from the Centre de Recherche Neoiste, publication, 1981.

Between 1980 and 1988 Neoism expressed itself through the Neoist Apartment Festival in North America, Europe and Australia and through different publications (i.e. the "Smile" zine). It was founded by the multiple identity Monty Cantsin, an *open pop star* who spread from Canada (Montreal) to USA (Baltimore) to Europe (the name was suggested by David Zack to Istvan Kantor and Maris Kundzins). Symbol-icons of Neoism were the flaming steam iron; the clothes hanger used as an antenna to create a telepathic flow between people; the improvisational haircut during the performances; the red cross; particular types of spicy food like *chili* and *chapatti.* Monty Cantsin was not only a multiple identity, but a real way of life for many people who embraced being a Neoist in daily life; opening experimental video stores, creating performances, publishing magazines, giving life to independent projects (see the collective definition of Neoism made on Wikipedia, which reflects very well the different accounts of Neoism and its history perpetuated by the

protagonists of the movement themselves: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoism). It was the Neoists who talked about a "Web-network" in 1981, giving life to a discourse on libertarian networking based on the idea of the *Centre de Recherche Neoiste* (CRN). The Centre of Neoist Research originated in Montreal in 1980, as a consequence of the Neoist cultural conspiracy. They proposed "Open Situations", in which people who can catalyze their own energy give life to a series of collaborations between the members of the network. Between 1994 and 1999, another collective identity spread from Italy to the United Kingdom, the United States, Holland, Germany, Austria, Finland, and Hungary: Luther Blissett.

Andrea Alberti and Edi Bianco, "official" Luther Blissett portrait, achieved in 1994 by combining photos from the 1930s and 1940s of three of his great uncles and one of his great aunts; by Wu Ming 1.

Like a mental virus, the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) landed to give rise to deeply impacting media pranks, together with *happening*s, shows and performances in the subway, articles in publications, actions of overcoming art in favour of the everyday, becoming one of the most active projects of the period (see www.lutherblissett.net). Luther Blissett was the voice of a multitude of people who wanted to subvert the cultural industry, to expose the tricks of the media and to create an urban legend, a new folk hero. Luther Blissett was born because a mythological figure was missing in the underground scene of that time; there was a need for a media ghost through which everyone could speak and subvert the cultural scenario. The LBP was the example of a fertile networking strategy, the applied myth of a common cause. The entire LBP was a work of art, "an open reputation informally adopted and shared by hundreds of artists and social activists all over Europe" (Luther Blissett). Through pranks and fakes, such as the Neoist bus happening and collective adventure (1995); the legend of Harry Kipper in the "Chi l'ha visto?" TV show; the fake book to be published by the Italian publishing company Mondadori, called *net.gener@tion* (1996); Luther Blissett was able to create a common imaginary and become a popular phenomenon.

The Case of Anna Adamolo

The collective experience of Anna Adamolo (October 2008) represents a new impetus in the Italian scene of activism and, at the same time, converts radical impulses consolidated by decades of hacktivist practices in Italy into action. Anna Adamolo is an anagram of Onda Anomala, the Anomalous Wave, or the mobilization so named by the students, researchers, teachers and activists united against the "Gelmini reform", an Italian law – Law 133 – which cuts public funding of education (www.uniriot.org/downloads/anomalouswave.pdf). In Italy, a network involving students and young researchers, workers and teachers has taken action from 2008 to the present through many protests and demonstrations. Anna Adamolo becomes the alternative to the Minister for Education, Mariastella Gelmini, the new symbolic Minister listening to and supporting the movement. She is created as a collective fictional identity to give voice to this movement, becoming an icon for those who seek to re-write the cultural and political codes through the *détournement* of symbols. She is graphically represented by a woman face created combining different people faces and she could be used by whoever critically wants to change the status quo, both on the Internet and in real life. Anna Adamolo is the diverse voices of people who are fighting for a common goal. She is the face of the motto "*noi la crisi non la paghiamo*" (We Will Not Pay For This Crisis) and is the voice of an enlarged network.

The networking component is central to Anna Adamolo, and her network is based on collective identities, which represent all the demonstrators against the Law 133. She follows the path of Luther Blissett, but with different objectives. While representing a plurality of individuals, Luther Blissett was acting transversely to any political movement; Luther Blissett was like a virus attracted by the bugs in the media system; he was an urban legend. Anna Adamolo instead is developed as part of the Onda Anomala activist Italian movement, and she represents all the voices that could be directly rooted in this political and social battle. AA interprets Monty Cantsin and Luther Blissett playing with the language and the labyrinths of politics, transforming the bureaucracy of the state into open possibilities of intervention. She answers the Gelmini reform by creating an "intimate bureaucracy" (Craig J. Saper, 2001) between activists, students and young researchers, workers and teachers, creatively re-interpreting the structural elements of daily life, as the mail art and other Avant-garde practices did years ago. The symbols of the institution are reversed, from the official stamps and signatures of the Ministry of Education, University and Research to the Ministry's official website, and they become a common sharing. Signs and labels of a network of actors that wants to change the rules of action, to build its own education system and a better future.

As we read on the Anna Adamolo blog (http://annaadamolo.noblogs.org) the first action of AA was the hijacking and cloning of the website of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, on the occasion of the national students' and teachers' strike in Rome on November 14th 2008. When visiting the www.ministeroistruzione.net website, first very similar (if not identical) to the official one (www.miur.it), the visitor was redirected into another scenario: a video, which mixed images of a calm sea and street demonstrations, commented by the voice of Anna Adamolo (the "Wave Minister"), and all the students, mothers, teachers, workers, spoke through her (www.vimeo.com/2431622). The virtual journey landed in a website where AA presented herself as did all the people who had previously recorded their protest message by calling a telephone number

registered by the members of the Onda Anomala network. Some of these stories are published in January 2009 in the book: *Sono Anna Adamolo. Voci e Racconti dall'Onda Anomala*, NdA Editions, 2009 ("I am Anna Adamolo – Voices and Stories from the Wave").
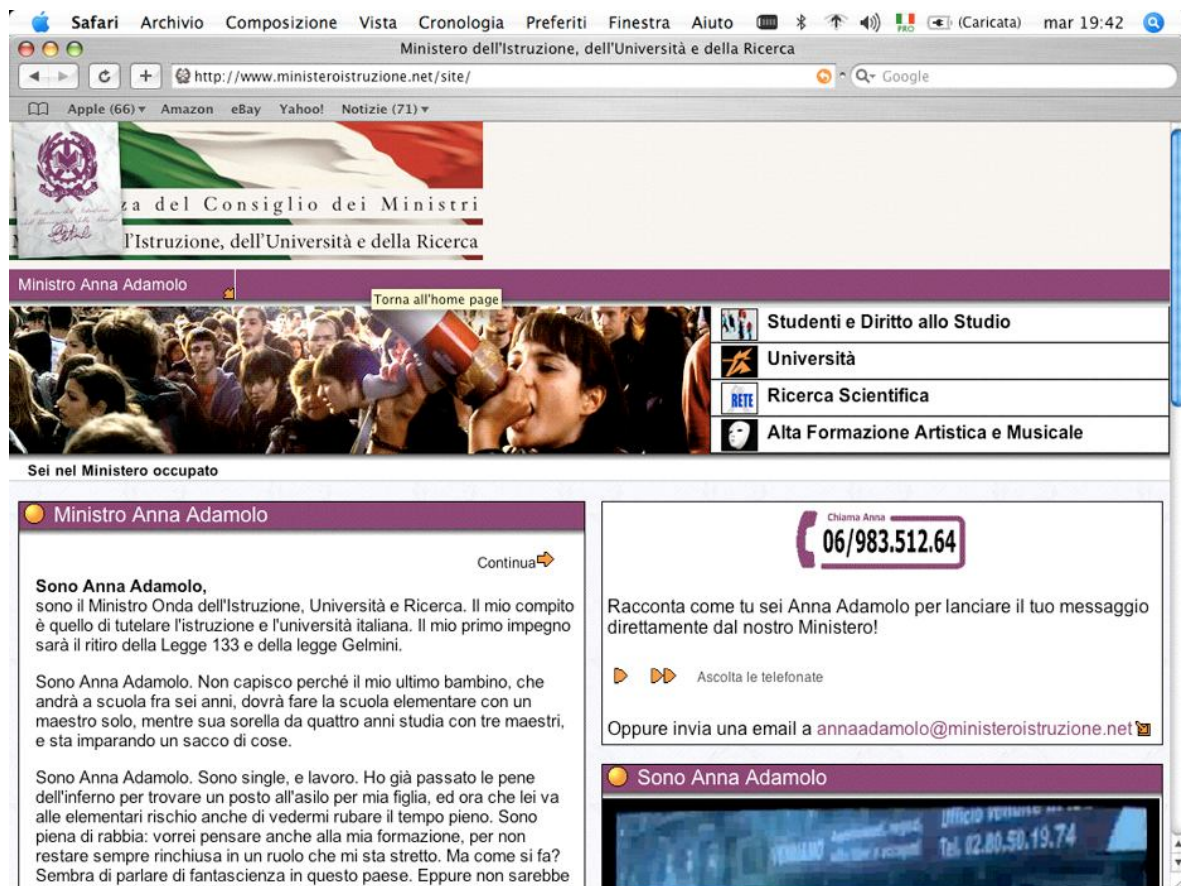
Screenshot of the Fake Ministry website

Another AA action took place on Facebook, where she initially created a profile as the Minister of Education, Mariastella Gelmini, easily reaching a number of 2,000 "friends": supporters and antagonists expressing themselves on her Facebook wall. After some days, in November 14th 2008, the profile of Mariastella Gelmini turned into that of Anna Adamolo, who in the meantime had become a symbol of the street demonstrations of many activists and members of the Onda Anomala network. This action generated a chain of support for the Onda Anomala protest and immediately after the virtual heroine became one of the most popular Facebook icons in the Italian activist network. After these interventions in the social media and on the Internet, Anna Adamolo becomes another symbol of a movement of precarious identities in Italy, which has also previously acted radically through visual messages, and which has transformed the heaviness of traditional politics in a spiral of ironic activism. In fact, in 2004 the precarious movement created San Precario, the patron saint of precarious workers (www.sanprecario.info) born inside the collective Chainworkers (chainworkers.org), and Serpica Naro (www.serpicanaro.com), the

designer of imagination created in 2005, whose name is an anagram of San Precario.

The fictional identities of San Precario and Serpica Naro, together with the previous experiences of Monty Cantsin and Luther Blissett, constitute a source of inspiration for the creators of Anna Adamolo. However, AA tried to reach a community of generalized actors, beyond the hacker movement, the precarious network and the activists of guerrilla marketing, seeking to reach those who decided to respond to the official politics by going out in the streets in a comprehensive network.

Conclusions

This article shows how it is possible to create successful critical and creative routes that involve networking practices, which aim to deconstruct hierarchical logics of communication and question the meaning of artistic creation. Connecting networked art such as mail art, the Neoist and LBP network, hacktivist projects in Italy and the social media intervention of Anna Adamolo, it demonstrates how it is possible to activate an open process of creation, producing new models of technological and cultural criticism, activated by a conscious use of technology and a deep understanding of how the media themselves work.

Reframing the notion of social media and social networking, and contextualising it through some underground and grassroots experiences of the past thirty years, it becomes necessary to investigate what the meaning of "social" is, and to critically redefine the notion of networking itself. While many of the contemporary social media are providing access for a large public and high quality technologies of sharing, they substantially differ from peer2peer technologies and from many of the experiences mentioned before. The rhetoric of openness and self-production is the same, but the aims are quite diverging: as described before, artists, hackers and activists were fighting to create open channels of communications, not centralized technologies and often non-monetary models of interactions; instead, many of the social media of today store data in proprietary servers and do not allow a flow of information and sharing beyond the limits decided by the companies which own the infrastructures. Moreover, they collect high revenues through the activity of sharing made by users, which are not equally redistributed among them. Furthermore, these platforms define as "social" something that often is not, because they do not normally include a bidirectional and face-to-face exchange, and the level of communication is often too fast and concise to create a deep conversational context.

Understanding and knowing different models of networking might constitute a tactical response and a challenge to the limits of the social media themselves – as the Anna Adamolo project demonstrated – opening up possibilities of interventions, where users become actors and networks become a tool for artistic creations and socio-political transformation.

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