TALKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD: TALKING BACK TO THE MEDIA AND GENEALOGIES OF CRITICAL MEDIA ART

Sven Lütticken

Much has been made of the 'digital divide' separating the economies and ecologies of media art from that of 'art-world art'.[1] 1990s 'net art' largely existed in its separate sphere, and later art-world based 'post-Internet art' was largely seen as a conservative attempt to integrate elements of digital culture into object-based production of collectibles that was all too much at home in the high-end meatspace of the white cube. Yet it would be false to suggest that these two camps have no contact. The relation between art-world art and media art is complex and fraught with contradictions and compromises, and littered with double agents and projects that try to play the two logics against each other – attempting to infiltrate non-art media while using some of the art world's institutions, establishing a critical feedback loop. Here, I will use the 1985 Amsterdam-based project *Talking Back to the Media* (TBTTM) (see the contribution of Angela M. Bartholomew and Chapter 4: Institutional and Other Platforms) to think through the potential and limitations of such endeavours. Organised by David Garcia and Raúl Marroquín under the aegis of a purpose-made foundation and in collaboration with De Appel and Time Based Arts (TBA), this 'manifestation' encompassed a photo exhibition, posters, lectures and theatre, a film programme, newly commissioned video art pieces and four programmes on local cable television (which included the videos and more).[2]

Originally developed under the working title *Artists Talking Back to the Media*, the project can be situated in interlocking genealogies of institutional critique and appropriation art, and media art/activism/theory. These genealogies can be tracked back in time, through the 1970s and into the 1960s, but also forward, to the net art and Tactical Media in the 1990s. Throughout, Amsterdam will serve as locus and focus. The city had an infrastructure in place: an infrastructure of official institutions as well as squats that became important cultural and social centres. The Aorta art space, where the exhibition part of TBTTM took place, was one such squat. Cable television played an important role; at first the cable system was only used for broadcasting Dutch and foreign TV channels, but by 1984 the network was made available for local initiatives on the open SALTO channel. Such technological, economic, political, juridical and cultural parameters helped put Amsterdam as 'digital city' in the forefront of 1990s net culture and Tactical Media. Rather than writing a heroic and whiggish (art) history, I want to explore the contradictions and hesitations as much as the synergies and continuities; the latencies and missed moments as much as the exciting events.

FROM WORK TO FRAME, FROM BROADCASTING TO NARROWCASTING

If a veteran artist such as Richard Prince now appropriates Instagram pictures of young women for his *New Portraits* and sells them as expensive prints via his galleries, this is the contemporary version of Prince's appropriation of analogue media images for his art around the 1980s. The 'digital divide', then, seems to be announced in the practices of the so-called Pictures Generation – specifically, practices of appropriation. Did the operation of critical appropriation not depend on the gallery space and its opposition to 'the media'? Did modern art not depend on its supposed alterity to mainstream media and their images, with the appropriation art of the late 1970s and early 1980s establishing a dialectical critique of such images in the context of art? Cindy Sherman's film stills, which were represented in the photo exhibition of TBTTM, are a classic and iconic case in point. However, this is a reductive reading of 'Pictures' art, which reduces it to a generic type of appropriation in and for the white cube.

In his 1985 essay 'From Work to Frame, or Is There Life after "The Death of the Author"?' Craig Owens defined and analysed a key trait of critical practice in the 1970s and 1980s as effecting a shift from the production of objects for art spaces to an engagement with the frame(s) of art.[3] Making a fairly broad and crude distinction, one can distinguish between two forms that this took: on the one hand, artistic institutional frameworks were used for the appropriation and critique of images (appropriation art); on the other, the frames themselves examined. To denote the latter approach, the term institutional critique became established around 1985.[4] In practice, of course, artists such as Louise Lawler or a collective such as Group Material engaged in both, staging a dialectic between imported images and materials and the context they were shown

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1 See Claire Bishop, 'Digital Divide', in *Artforum* 51, no.1 (September 2012): 434–442.

2 See also Angela M. Bartholomew's contribution to this volume.

3 Craig Owens, 'From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After "The Death of the Author"?', in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 122–139.

4 An early use of the term institutional critique can be found in Mel Ramsden, 'On Practice', in *The Fox* 1, no.1 (1975): 69, but this was a somewhat isolated case. In the mid-1980s, it started to be used by Andrea Fraser and Fredric Jameson; see Fraser, 'In and Out of Place' (1985), in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 17–27; Fredric Jameson, 'Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism', in *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York/Cambridge, MA: New Museum/MIT Press, 1986), 38–50.

in. While this context was often a museum or gallery space, it could also be a cinema – for instance in Louise Lawler's 1979 project *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*, in which the projected image was subtracted from the cinema experience.[5]

In the Netherlands, the American artist Barbara Bloom likewise staged a number of cinematic interventions, for instance with her 1977 nachtvoorstellingen (midnight screenings) of the films *Le cercle rouge* and *The Big Sleep*.[6] The latter was preceded not only by commercials for Bacardi and tobacco, but also by fake slide ads made by Bloom, who intercut a few additional still images as well as filmed scenes into the movie. Those film intercuts show a character Bloom has described as a female detective, who's reflecting and commenting on *The Big Sleep*'s convoluted plot and its patriarchal macho world forever threatened by the whims and wiles of inscrutable dames. In this contemporary media detective's apartment, a TV set is playing the film – reflecting the increasing mediation of film by television and home video.[7] Like *A Movie Will Be Shown without the Picture*, Bloom's *nachtvoorstelling* of *The Big Sleep* uses the old dispositive of the cinema, but it is precisely this that allows the project to shift the focus from a single act of appropriation by an artist to the film screening as a collective séance – a collaborative act of production and consumption, of filmic *détournement*, of viewing and also of discussion. In the screening series and exhibition *12 Films Chosen by Artists* (1979), organised by Bloom with De Appel and later repeated more elaborately at Hallwalls in Buffalo as *Films Chosen by Artists*, the individual screening was replaced by an entire programme of artist-selected films.[8]

In 1984, Ulises Carrión organised *Lilia Prado Superstar*, again in collaboration with De Appel, for which he invited the Mexican actress Lilia Prado over to the Netherlands to attend a retrospective of her work. This 'festival' was shown in Amsterdam and a number of other Dutch cities. In the 1985 video *The LPS File*, Carrión presents a fictionalised account of the 'making of'.[9] Though we see Carrión get on a place and subsequent scenes that purport to be set in Mexico city, while Carrión is frantically trying to get hold of Prado and her films, all these scenes were shot in the Netherlands – including Amsterdam's botanical gardens, where David Garcia plays a man who explains to Carrión that for a star like Prado, there is little to be gained from travelling to an unglamorous place such as the Netherlands, devoid of style and of myth. Carrión stresses this transcultural aspect throughout *The LPS File*: Mexican larger-than life culture is contrasted with drab Dutch realism. What happens when you try to transplant a myth? This also connects with Carrión's evident interest in the queer connotations and appropriations

of technologies of glamour, along the lines of Warhol and General Idea. Though Carrión had to consider a Plan B in case Lilia Prado refused to collaborate, *The LPS File* strongly suggests that he never considered male actors. It was with an actress such as Prado and her pin-up like publicity shots that the production of gender could be shown with almost cartoonlike clarity – femininity becoming a set of signs to be manipulated and coated with surface lustre.

And then, most crucially in this context, there was Carrión's focus on organising as artwork; on screening as a way of performing film rather than on the screened film as such. In Max Bruinsma's reconstruction of a discussion with Raúl Marroquín and David Garcia, which was documented in the magazine Mediamatic in December 1985 and which supposedly took place two years before, Carrión asserts that 'The work of art is the entire process, the organization of a channel to present anything to the public in a certain context and not just that what people can actually see in a certain place. The work of art, in this case is the festival that we are planning, because it is the festival that addresses the public. The work of art isn't my tape, or yours, the actual work of art is the manifestation.'[10] The festival to which Carrión refers would later become *Talking Back to the Media*. However, his statements seem more applicable to his own *Lilia Prado Superstar*. Carrión contributed to TBTTM – with the video *Aristotle's Mistake* and with radio programmes – but he would not be one of the main organisers.

Whether the discussion took place in December 1983 or a few months later is immaterial. Sebastián López, for one, recalls intense conversations at Carrión's home with a close-knit circle of friends, affiliated with spaces like De Appel and TBA, in 1984; it is out of this network of contacts and conversations that TBTTM emerged.[11] In Bruinsma's rendering of this discussion, Marroquín vented his frustration at 'art-world art' and its mode of distribution, or rather its curtailment of circulation: 'It is important to see that we're not living in an industrial society anymore, we are living in an information society, and that this is affecting our work as artists too. The "art-establishment" is not prepared for that, they still look upon art much the same way they did in the nineteenth century. The media we use, the way we work are considered not kosher because a videotape isn't an art commodity!' Marroquín wanted a project to show 'that artists could certainly cope with the complex mass media apparatus. Wouldn't it be fantastic to gain entry to media and facilities that are otherwise virtually unattainable?'[12]

5 See Tanja Baudoin and Sven Lütticken, eds., *Louise Lawler: A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* (Amsterdam: If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, 2014).

6 Bloom screened *Le cercle rouge* at the Studio cinema in Groningen on 18 August 1977, and *The Big Sleep* on 13 October of that year in The Movies, Amsterdam, in collaboration with De Appel. The screening of *The Big Sleep* is documented by the videotape *The Big Sleep 2* (1977), which is however incomplete the running time of the tape: li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/barbara-bloom/the-big-sleep-2/2281. See also Sven Lütticken, 'A Movie and Other Pictures', in *Louise Lawler: A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*, 26.

7 On the basis of an interview with Barbara Bloom, Marjolein van de Ven discusses her 'detective' in *The Big Sleep* inserts in her paper 'The Unraveled Narrative of Barbara Bloom', written for the 2011 seminar, *Séances*, that I co-taught with Eric de Bruyn.

8 See the catalogues *12 Films Chosen by Artists/Een keuze van beeldende kunstenaars* (Amsterdam: De Appel, 1979) and *Picture This: Films Chosen by Artists*, ed. Steve Gallagher (Buffalo, NY: Hallwalls, 1987).

9 See li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/ulises-carrion/the-lps-file/512.

10 Max Bruinsma, 'Talks on Talking Back', *Mediamatic Magazine* (December 1985), mediamatic.net/252561/en/talks-on-talking-back.

11 Brigitte Bélanger, 'Talking Back to the Media': Interview with Sebastián López, LIMA, 21 April 2014, li-ma.nl/site/news/talking-back-media-interview-sebastian-lopez.

12 Bruinsma, 'Talks on Talking Back'.

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In his TBTTM lecture, Hans Haacke used Hans Magnus Enzensberger's notion that the media constitute a consciousness industry, and argued that art and its institutions are an integral part of this consciousness industry, which has different power centres (e.g. art and the mass media), and that one segment can indeed 'talk back' to the other.[18] One wonders how many of those present made the connection with Enzensberger's neo-Benjaminian 1970 essay 'Constituents Towards a Theory of the Media' and its assertion that 'The new media are egalitarian in structure. Anyone can take part in them by a simple switching process.'[19] While the Marxism of Enzensberger's media theory was no longer en vogue, Marshall McLuhan was still a key reference for many involved in TBTTM, just as he had been for Nam June Paik, the Radical Software network and many others in the mid- to late 1960s.

Garcia and Marroquín placed TBTTM in a genealogy of artists using video to talk back to television directly. 'Artists' was defined rather strictly as visual artists. The more activist video collectives of the 1970s and 1980s were ignored, as were Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's use of video equipment for the production of critical television programmes (Six fois deux, 1976; France/tour/detour/deux/enfants, 1978). On the other hand, Richard Serra's Television Delivers People (1973) was shown, as was part of Dara Birnbaum's Damnation of Faust trilogy. Birnbaum's early works such as Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978) was clearly a key reference for the project. The artist discusses these pieces in a text in the TBTTM magazine that is accompanied by a photo of Technology/Transformation being shown not in a gallery, but on a monitor in the window of a hair salon.[20] Oddly, Birnbaum does not bring up a more direct precedent: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman having been shown on cable TV in New York, opposite the 'real' Wonder Woman on network TV. As Birnbaum put it elsewhere, this was an attempt to 'live out a more Benjaminian ideal of becoming producers, rather than spectators'.[21] Whether or not Marroquín or Garcia acknowledged this, Benjaminian and Enzensbergerian ideals of media consumers becoming producers profoundly informed TBTTM.

A more direct inspiration was the (post-)punk squatting scene, which included pirate radio and even pirate TV. In the 1980s, Amsterdam had a highly developed cable network that made a key component of TBTTM possible. In 1981–1982, a group of artists had 'broken into' Amsterdam cable under the name PKP (Maarten van der Ploeg, Peter Klashorst and Rogier van der Ploeg), which later became Rabotnik TV (see also the contribution by David Garcia and Chapter 4: Institutional and Other Platforms).[22]

This group had close ties to the squatted art center Aorta, which a few years later would house TBTTM's photo show. Occupying buildings and airtime: pirate radio and TV were an integral part of the squatting movement. However, with PKP/Rabotnik and its reports from art openings at Aorta, and then later with TBTTM, one can wonder whether this is not an extremely depoliticised version of the idea(l) of 'taking the means of production into one's own hands' and 'talking back.' By the time that TBTTM took place, piracy was no longer a necessity: in 1984, the open access cable channel SALTO had been created, and it is this that allowed for TBTTM's 'narrowcasts', whose audience was perhaps not so terribly different from gallery audiences after all: 'Narrowcasting instead of broadcasting [...]; If you channel your ideas in very specific ways you can still keep your identity as an artist. Via cable you can address yourself to very specific groups, to neighbourhoods, to art lovers.'[23]

Ulises Carrión's TV-Tonight-Video (1987) is the greatest video never produced for TBTTM. Made two years later, it can be seen as the artist's oblique reply to Marroquín. Over a montage of appropriated TV clips, Carrión claims that 'The problem with art was that it was a thing' and that it 'took centuries for art to become a sign.[24] This still seems to square with the post-Fluxus consensus that Carrión and Marroquín, makers of artist's books and magazines, shared: art had to go from being a fetish object to being act of communication. Carrión further notes that TV is 'a frame that makes everything equally real', and that 'if it's on TV its not art, it's real.' Video, by contrast, is different: the voice-over contrasts it with television, 'that unfortunate creature, devoid of freedom'.

Video is free to be as long and short as you want. The videotape's freedom lies in its uniqueness; showing it is a 'singular ceremony', it is only alive when it is performed as part of a ceremony. 'Broadcasting the same tape on TV would cancel out its ceremonial quality.' Vis-à-vis the mass media, art is redeemed here not as thing but as secretive ritual. What, then, about narrowcasting, as a medium between broadcasting and a ceremonial videotape? If you can 'address yourself to very specific groups, to neighbourhoods, to art lovers', is this the dialectical sublation – or collapse – of the binary opposition posited by Carrión? How limited does the circulation of a sign have to be before it becomes an in-crowd ritual, and a myth in waiting?

18 Transcript of lecture by Hans Haacke at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, 23 November 1985. De Appel Archive, part of the Talking Back to the Media research document compiled by Brigitte Bélanger and Camie Castanje in 2013–2014 for LIMA and De Appel. While Haacke has elsewhere mentioned Enzensberger by name, here he merely employs the notion of the consciousness industry as a familiar term. For the 1962 essay introducing the term, see Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Einzelheiten I: Bewußtseins-Industrie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 7–17.

19 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', in New Left Review, no.64 (November/December 1970): 20.

20 Dara Birnbaum, 'Talking Back to the Media', in Talking Back to the Media magazine/catalogue, eds. Sabrina Kamstra, Raúl Marroquín and Rob Perrée (Amsterdam: Foundation 'Talking Back to the Media', 1985), 46–49.

21 Nicolás Guagnini, 'Cable TV's Failed Utopian Vision: An Interview with Dara Birnbaum', in Cabinet Magazine, no.9 (Winter 2002/2003), cabinetmagazine.org/issues/9/birnbaum.php.

22 Menno Grootveld, 'PKP-TV', in Het Staatsarchief, iisg.nl/staatsarchief/videocollecties/pkptv.php.

23 Bruinsma, 'Talks on Talking Back'.

24 Quotations from Ulises Carrión, TV-Tonight-Video (1987), li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/ulises-carrion/tv-tonight-video/513.

WORD AND IMAGE, CRITIQUE AND MYTH

In her TBTTM lecture, Barbara Kruger – whose posters were pasted all over Amsterdam during the manifestation – argued that while British art had been strongly informed by the journal *Screen* with its blend of Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and structuralism, US artists' relationship with images was not theoretically mediated in that way.[25] Victor Burgin, who had published in *Screen*, was represented in TBTTM not only with work in the photo exhibition but also with a theoretical essay in the magazine, 'Diderot, Barthes, Hieroglyph', whose title plays on Barthes' own 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' (1973).[26] Burgin takes up elements from that essay as well as from Barthes' text on film stills, 'The Third Meaning' (1970), to dissect the 'legible' Western tableau composition and oppose it to the Western fantasy of hieroglyph as a visual/ideogrammatic sign that communicates instantly.[27] Such an ideal of extra-discursive mode of communication may be 'projection into the field of material representational practices of fundamental psychological processes'.[28] Whereas the tableau is on the side of what Barthes termed the *studium* or obvious meaning, the hieroglyph is on the side of the *punctum*, of the obtuse meaning that jumps out at you.

These writings by Barthes are a counterpart to his own earlier work, from *Mythologies* to the mid-1960s, when he used the tools of Saussurian semiology to read not only texts but also images like the Citroen DS, a magazine cover of a saluting black French soldier, or a Panzani ad rife with signifiers of 'Italianness'.[29] Barthes' generalisation of Saussure's linguistic model and its application to the visual is reflected by Sebastián López in the TBTTM magazine when he argues that, 'behind the consumption and categorization of images, [television] profiles the imperialism of a reading system' and that '[in] our society, in which myths, rites and images have adopted the form of reason, I mean of speech, language is not only the model of meaning but also its basis. To say, then, talk, is not only to recognize this fact, its founding character, but also to point out both the right of the speaking subject and the position chosen in regard to the language to which he/she is, literally, Talking Back.'[30] The project's title indeed suggests a focus on speech acts and on linguistic interpellation, and on the critical appropriation of signs, in line with the Barthes of *Mythologies*; the project was marked by a tension between this 'early-Barthesian' tendency and a fascination for the 'later' Barthes who sided with the *punctum*, with the third meaning: those moments discourse breaks down and signs become – in Burgin's account – hieroglyphic and visual.

TBTTM occurred at a historical moment marked by debate over the triumph of (audio) visual media, especially television, and by debates about postmodernism, which Fredric Jameson considered to be marked by 'the logic of the simulacrum, with its transformation of older realities into television images'.[31] Jameson's use of the term 'simulacrum' is itself clearly indebted to Jean Baudrillard, whose fame was at its apogee in 1985, and his notions of simulacra and simulations were all over the art press.[32] Natural language may have given semiotics its model of meaning, but with digitisation on the horizon Baudrillard abstracted from the arbitrary linguistic sign to arrive at a notion of the code as pure coded difference – ultimately binary difference, zeros and ones.[33] With its insistence that the real has been killed off by simulation, and that all we have access to is the realm of the code, of sign value, Baudrillard's discourse had apocalyptic overtones; however, decontextualised snippets of his work were integrated into 'euphoric postmodernism', and Baudrillard was seen as legitimising an affirmative art that celebrated an endless precession of quotations and an embrace of the commodity and its designed sign value. Even the more critical projects, such as the New Museum exhibition *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object* (1986), were all but forced to contend with Baudrillard. Things got to the point where, also in 1985, the New York-based collective Group Material organized an exhibition titled *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)*, which attempted to show that critique and contestation were still possible; that not everything was reducible to the circulation of interchangeable signs. Such New York exhibitions have links to TBTTM: Louise Lawler, who has an artist's page in the TBTTM magazine, participated in both of them, and Barbara Bloom was represented in *Damaged Goods*.

In the TBTTM magazine, Barbara Bloom notes that in contrast to 'people who begin with the theoretical', she starts by asking herself: 'What do I see?'[34] Like Sherman, Bloom had worked with film stills: her photo series *25 Possible Film Scenes* included actual film stills and frame enlargements as well as other images. In the magazine, she notes her interest in 'freeze-framing life', 'reading meaning in details' and asserts that, 'everything simply consists of a concatenation of details, nothing more'. Bloom's autonomous trailer for a non-existent film, *The Diamond Lane*, was shown in the TBTTM film programme; discussing this piece, Bloom relates the story of a friend who criticised it and 'who spoke a cryptic, moral, super-Marxist language. Very moralistic.' Attempting to communicate with her friend, the artist 'kept giving very detailed descriptions from films. B. B.'s yellow bathrobe in Godard's *Contempt*. Descriptions like you get in fashion magazines. I described

25 Transcript of lecture by Barbara Kruger at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, 16 November 1985, De Appel Archive, part of the *Talking Back to the Media* research document.
26 Victor Burgin, 'Diderot, Barthes, Hieroglief', in *Talking Back to the Media*, 18–27. Craig Owens' aforementioned essay (note 1) manages to cram two Barthes references into its title, evoking not only 'The Death of the Author' but also 'From Work to Text'.
27 Published in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1970, Barthes' 'Le troisième sens' was published in English in *Artforum* in 1973, and in Dutch in *Raster*, no. 8, 1978.
28 Burgin, 'Diderot, Barthes, Hiëroglief', 24. For all contributions in the magazine, the texts are presented in Dutch and English, but the titles are only given in Dutch – the contents page does list English titles, which in Burgin's gives us 'Diderot, Barthes, Hieroglyphic' [sic].
29 The reference here is to *Mythologies* (1947) and to the article 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1964).
30 Sebastián López, 'Constructie De-constructie', in *Talking Back to the Media*, 7.

31 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 46.
32 In the Anglosphere, the main medium through which Baudrillard's thought was transmitted, in a fragmented and decontextualized form, was the volume *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e]), 1983. In the Netherlands, journals and magazines started publishing Baudrillard in translation in the early 1980s, and in 1982 he have a lecture at the University of Amsterdam, organized by Marga van Mechelen; Sebastián López was among the attendants.
33 See for instance Baudrillard, 'The Orders of Simulacra' in *Simulations*, 134–135.
34 Jan Simons, 'Het genot van het detail. Barbara Bloom over haar werk', in *Talking Back to the Media*, 40.

scenes in great detail. I isolated details and I gradually realised that that's exactly what I was also doing in the trailer.'35 If the semiotic fixation on language, on the symbolic, on coded meanings, can be reductive in its systemic logocentrism, it is not only moralising Marxists who might find Bloom's fetishisation of the imaginary and of imagery to be equally problematic – though at its best, Bloom's openness to details produces a 'third meaning', a Barthesian *punctum*.

On the back cover of the magazine, Bloom created a variation on a milk ad. Such ads were a staple of Dutch print media and television in the 1970s and 1980s, and most of these campaigns showed photos of the advertised product and the people enjoying it. Bloom picked up on a campaign apparently designed for youth magazines that was purely abstract, with horizontal bands in various colours containing buzzwords and youth slang, culminating in one such band at the bottom saying 'MELK' (Dutch for 'milk'). In Bloom's version, from top to bottom, we read the words 'SEMIOTICS', 'SOFTWARE', 'SEDUCTION', and finally, 'MELK'.36 Here this supposedly quintessentially natural product is suggestively presented as being reduced to coded difference, semiologised for the purposes of seduction. Here Bloom's starting point of 'What do I see?' has allowed her to home in precisely a visual turn in language and a linguistic turn in the visual. The ads are structured around words, but the words are not part of sentences; they are (randomly) colour-coded and seem to hover between what Vilém Flusser called 'line thought' (writing) and 'surface thought' (image).37

If everything is within 'the code', if all we have is coded surfaces and preprogrammed differences, then 'critical art', too, is bound to circulate as such within the realm of simulation. This totalising Baudrillardian verdict is precisely what critical postmodernism was up against, and what TBTTM was up against. Could 'talking back' make a difference? And *how* to talk back?38 Marroquín and Carrión, in particular, had been talking back in print and with video for years, and their approaches were marked by post-Fluxus whimsy and the use of fictions and mystifications. Marroquín's TBTTM video, *Alienation*, presents a sci-fi allegory about telepathy making speech obsolete – hinting, like Bloom, at a fundamental transformation of the media landscape. Carrión's TBTTM video, *Aristotle's Mistake*, continues his interest in gossip and mythmaking – as manifested in projects such as *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners* and *Lilia Prado Superstar* – with its frequently hilarious putdowns of Jackie O and camp glorification of Maria Callas. Here, spoken words seem to open up a third way besides either total revolution or complete incorporation into the code: a queering of signifiers.

In a somewhat more explicitly critical vein, David Garcia and Annie Wright's video *White Nights* is a poetico-political meditation on the colonisation of the mind of media myths by Hollywood narrative.39 The piece contains audio fragments from Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast, from *Rebel without a Cause* and *Casablanca*. We see a TV set and a woman, behind a gauze or mosquito net, who seems to exist in a dream state and mouths some of the appropriated dialogue. The somnambulic protagonist's discourse may not quite be a form of heroic talking back, but the piece itself appears to question precisely the conditions and limitations of such an activity, which may take subjective and micro-political as well as public and programmatic forms.

FAST FORWARD

The use of material from Hollywood productions put projects such as *White Nights* – like the use of footage from the 1960s *Batman* TV show in General Idea's TBTTM video, *Shut the Fuck Up* – was potentially at loggerheads with culture industry and the regime of intellectual property that underpins it. While appropriation and media artists chafed at the limitations of copyright, they mostly tried to fly under the radar (which was easier in the early to mid-1980s than it would later become), rather than mount a challenge; it would only be in the 1990s, with the rise of 'copyleft', hacktivism and Tactical Media that a real ideological and practical project against intellectual property as the basis for semiocapitalism would be developed.

Talking Back to the Media was an overdetermined and networked event, brought about by agents who did not agree on many things (perhaps on most things). Out of all the key players, David Garcia has perhaps most consistently sought to think through the promise and the limitations of TBTTM, and to continue the project within the (digital) media. This is not to downplay the importance of other post-TBTTM biographies, from Sebastián López's work with the Gate Foundation (1997–2005) to Saskia Bos' continuing work with De Appel (till 2006), or the institutional history of TBA and its successors from NIMk to LIMA. Raúl Marroquín's continuing involvement with local cable and web TV – De Hoeksteen Live!, since 1991 – attests to his commitment to some of the fundamental ideas of TBTTM.40 Yet for present purposes it is Garcia who provides the most compelling object lesson about the project's historical moment and subsequent attempts to move beyond its event horizon even while remaining informed by it.

35 Simons, 'Het genot van het detail', 43.
36 Barbara Bloom, back cover of *Talking Back to the Media* (68). In a later catalogue, the artist reproduces two posters from the *Melk: de witte motor* campaign on which she based her *détournement*: Barbara Bloom, *The Collections of Barbara Bloom* (New York/Göttingen: International Center for Photography/Steidl, 2007), 148.
37 Vilém Flusser, 'Line and Surface' (1973), in *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl, trans. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 21–34.

38 In the discussion reported by Bruinsma, Garcia states: 'the Americans have got an entirely different approach to dealing with the mass media than the Europeans. I always think that American and Canadian artists tend to be very literal about the media and present things much more as they are, without commentary and allow you to draw your own conclusions, while work of, for instance, Klaus vom Bruch, Lydia Schouten and of us have got this sort of metaphorical approach to the media. Now, wouldn't it be interesting, he added, to see the two different approaches together in a festival?' Bruinsma, 'Talks on Talking Back'.

39 See Annie Wright introducing *White Nights* in the second TBTTM cable programme, 17 November 1985.

40 See hoeksteen.wordpress.com/about.

As Brian Holmes summarises the situation around the turn of the decade: 'The Eighties left Amsterdam with a fresh memory of street protest, a diverse network of self-institutionalized spaces and a keen awareness of civil-society struggles elsewhere in the world, particularly under the authoritarian regimes of the former East.'[41] Among the key 'grassroots organizations' mentioned by Holmes is not just MonteVideo, Time Based Arts and the hacker zine *Hack-Tic* (from which sprung the Internet provider XS4ALL in 1993), but also Paradiso – a music venue that was open to the kind of interdisciplinary and transversal cultural practice that De Appel, which adopted the white cube model, increasingly shied away from. The Galactic Hacker Party took place at Paradiso in 1989. Garcia, who was associated with Time Based Arts, was part of discussions about organising an event on the AIDS crisis together with Caroline Nevejan and Jan Dietvorst of Paradiso. This led to *The Seropositive Ball* in 1990 (see also the contribution of David Garcia).[42]

Garcia and the others were affected by the fact that friends were dying (Ulises Carrión in October 1989, Aart van Barneveld in November 1990), but also impressed by the activities of artist-activists in New York in particular, where video and cable played a central role and where 'AIDS–activist–artists had changed the identity politics of representation and therefore changed the semiotic landscape'.[43] The aids-related media activism that had developed after TBTTM, then, once again put New York on the agenda in Amsterdam. The ensuing dialogue, however, was at times fractious. Media artist and activist Gregg Bordowitz, who had been trained in the Whitney Independent Study programme in the *October*-affiliated spirit of critical postmodernism, turned out to be less than enamoured with what he saw as the Amsterdamers' fixation on technological infrastructure and the supposedly 'free exchange of information'; Garcia, meanwhile, maintains that Bordowitz hadn't realised that technological infrastructures were as critical as the politics of representation.[44]

After the end of the Soviet Union, the narrative of a nascent post-ideological era became highly pervasive in Dutch society, even or especially amongst many progressives. Projects that aimed to provide Internet access to the people – De Digitale Stad, or The Digital City, was founded in Amsterdam as a freenet initiative in 1994 by De Balie and the hacker zine *Hack-Tic*, which later founded the Internet provider XS4ALL – could be fit fairly effortlessly into neoliberal agendas.[45] There was certainly a euphoric moment in the mid-1990s, when this wider availability of the Internet led to visions of pirate utopias and to a belief in the inherently progressive nature of the new digital media; a belief not completely at odds with certain forms of Silicon Valley libertarianism.[46] In 'Amsterdam Global Village', it seemed that the only way was forward. The sense that 'cable in the Netherlands is not a luxury but a utility' may have imposed limits on Garcia et al.'s attempts to politicise the infrastructure. However, the Tactical Media movement of the 1990s attempted precisely to bring together infrastructure activism and the politics of representation.[47] This movement was associated with the Next 5 Minutes conferences, again at Paradiso, which also drew many participants from Berlin and from the German art and hacker scenes in general.[48] Originally, the focus was on tactical television, but the protagonists quickly embraced the net.[49] As formulated by Garcia and Geert Lovink, Tactical Media is basically Enzensberger as applied to 'cheap "do it yourself" media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the Internet)'.[50]

Fast forward to 2017: Donald Trump has won the US elections with considerable help from the online alt-right and its meme warfare. David Garcia co-curated an exhibition titled *As If: The Media Artist as Trickster*, which opened on the day of Trump's inauguration and combined historical Tactical Media activism such as the Yes Men and UBERMORGEN with recent projects such as Ian Alan Paul's *Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History*.[51] At a symposium accompanying the exhibition, the Dutch Tactical Media scene (including Geert Lovink) was clearly working its way through a trauma. What had happened? How could 'we' allow the fascists to appropriate our beloved Tactical Media, and deploy them so successfully? It is something of a historical irony that at the same time, a massive canonisation project of the Tactical Media project is underway, with an impressive website and a major MIT Press anthology by Eric Kluitenberg. In pointing this out, I do not mean to discredit this movement, or network; rather, I want to stress that we are only at the very beginning of assessing its historical role. In this, it is important to move beyond a certain alt-right/Pepe the Frog meme fixation that emerged in the wake of the Trump election, and the very narrative that 'Tactical Media has been appropriated by the fascists' has something self-aggrandising even in defeat. One has to be careful not to buy into 'meme magic' mythmaking, or to present Tactical Media as a set of neutral techniques that can be used both by leftists and by fascists. If meme magic and emancipatory demystification involve very different politics, then can we really say that Tactical Media has been 'coopted'?[52] Is this cooptation or simulation?

41 Brian Holmes, 'Tactical Television: Movement Media in the Nineties', regardingspectatorship.net, regardingspectatorship.net/tactical-television-movement-media-in-the-nineties.
42 See Caroline Nevejan, *Presence and the Design of Trust*, PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2007, 145, nevejan.org/presence 234-182.
43 Nevejan, *Presence and the Design of Trust*, 145.
44 'This is what Gregg Bordowitz said to us more than a decade ago: "The way the conference is organized is based on a utopian notion of a free exchange of information, instituted through technology; a use of technology that is unquestioned, uncriticised, unproblematised; the notion that a universal space can be established through phone links, faxes and modems. If there is one thing that is established through the kind of work we do is that there have never been such things as universal categories, principles or experiences. In future I would like to see conferences which reflected the interest of the people with the most at stake, in which there was some acceptance of difference that isn't evened out or erased through some notion of free exchange through some neutral means that remain unquestioned. To me this destroys community and collectivity." David Garcia quoting Gregg Bordowitz in Andreas Broeckmann, 'The GHI of Tactical Media', in *Tactical Media Files*, 28 May 2011, tacticalmediafiles.net/articles/3486/The-GHI-of-Tactical-Media jsessionid=74704656162E8028EFC10716DD00EA7D.

45 See Caroline Nevejan and Alexander Badenoch, 'How Amsterdam Invented the Internet: European Networks of Significance, 1980–1995', in *Hacking Europe: From Computer Cultures to Demoscenes*, eds. Gerard Alberts and Ruth Oldenziel (London: Springer, 2014) 189–217.
46 To be sure, the more critical elements in this scene developed a critique of cyber-libertarism; as Brian Holmes puts it, 'the nettime list (founded by Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz) was decisively oriented by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's attack on the cyber-libertarian rhetoric of Silicon Valley, which they dubbed "the Californian Ideology."' Holmes, 'Tactical Television: Movement Media in the Nineties'.
47 Garcia sees an increasing shift since the 1980s from the politics of representation to infrastructural activism; see Bartholomew and Bergs, 'Tactics of Mischief', 94.
48 The German connection can also be seen in Geert Lovink's co-founding of the nettime mailing list with Pit Schultz.
49 See also Holmes, 'Tactical Television: Movement Media in the Nineties'.
50 David Garcia and Geert Lovink, 'The ABC of Tactical Media', on nettime.org, 16 May 1997, nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l 9705/msg00096.html.
51 Bartholomew and Bergs, 'Tactics of Mischief', 92–93.
52 Bartholomew and Bergs, 'Tactics of Mischief', 92.

In 2018, a pro-Trump conspiracy theory/scene calling itself QAnon emerged, which was rife with prophetic predictions about a coming reckoning against the Deep State, the Clintons etc.[53] Florian Cramer pointed out that its name might be an appropriation of the magnificent 1999 novel Q, written as part of the 'Luther Blissett Project' – a sprawling scene of people using that heteronym for all kinds of media pranks – by a group of Italians who would later become Wu Ming. Wu Ming agreed with Cramer that 'QAnon's psy-op reminds very much of our old "playbook", and the metaconspiracy seems to draw from the LBP's set of references [...] It may have started as some sort of, er, "fan fiction" inspired by our novel, and then quickly became something else.'[54] If anything, this Q/QAnon narrative brings out the more sophomoric 1990s side of the whole Luther Blissett Project, from which Wu Ming have otherwise largely emancipated themselves. In *White Nights*, Garcia and Wright already referenced a historical hoax that showed the disruptive potential of media (Welles' *War of the Worlds*), and *As If*'s emphasis on activist media art deploying forms of fiction and fictional forms in a post-truth context was highly apposite. Nonetheless, we see a kind of self-aggrandising defeatism in some of today's soul-searching.

Talking Back to the Media and certain events and practices in its aftermath are questionable in the best possible sense: *fragwürdig*, worthy of being questioned. It is of the essence that historical canonisation does not prevent us from doing just that. How do contemporary media and memes rearticulate and develop the points raised by TBTTM? What kinds of scripts underpin the production of images? How do charged words and visual tropes create and maintain nationalist and racist myths? How do the infrastructural and the superstructural– Peter Thiel and Donald Trump – exacerbate it other? How to 'talk back' to fascist myths? Can one appropriate the enemy's weapons, or are different tactics required? How to shape alternative imaginary and emancipatory narratives?

This text comes out of a research master's seminar, Imagining the Image, *which I taught at the Vrije Universiteit in the spring semester of 2017, in collaboration with LIMA and De Appel. Special thanks to Sanneke Huisman at LIMA, Nell Donkers at De Appel, to Saskia Bos, David Garcia and Raúl Marroquín, and the participating students.*

53 On QAnon, see for instance Michael Barkun, 'Failed Prophecies Won't Stop Trump's True Believers', in *Foreign Policy*, 8 November 2018 foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/08/failed-prophecies-wont-stop-trumps-true-believers.

54 'On #QAnon: The full text of our Buzzfeed Interview' (interview with Ryan Broderick), 6 August 2018, wumingfoundation.tumblr.com/post/176695298570/on-qanon-the-full-text-of-our-buzzfeed-interview.

Ulises Carrión MX, 1941–NL, 1989
The LPS File
1985, film still

Lilia Prado Superstar and the film *The LPS File* is a project by Ulises Carrión. It focusses on the Golden Age of Mexican cinema in the early 1950s, and Lilia Prado, a Mexican actress, dancer, sex symbol and movie star from that time. In the summer of 1984, movies were presented in five different places in the Netherlands, including Gilberto Martinez Solares' *Rumba caliente*, Luis Buñuel's *Subida al cielo* (with Lilia Prado) and Tito Davison's *Las tres alegres comadres*, all from 1952, as well as an older interview with Lila Prado from 1950. In addition to bringing a tribute to the culture of his native country, Carrión's project is also in line with his other work that focusses on cultural exchange and mythologisation by the media and in which he views his activities as ready-mades, as he himself remains virtually invisible as an artist. *The LPS File* from 1985 simulates Carrión's search in Mexico, while the film was shot in the Netherlands.

Framer Framed, **Amsterdam NL**
As If: the Media Artist as Trickster
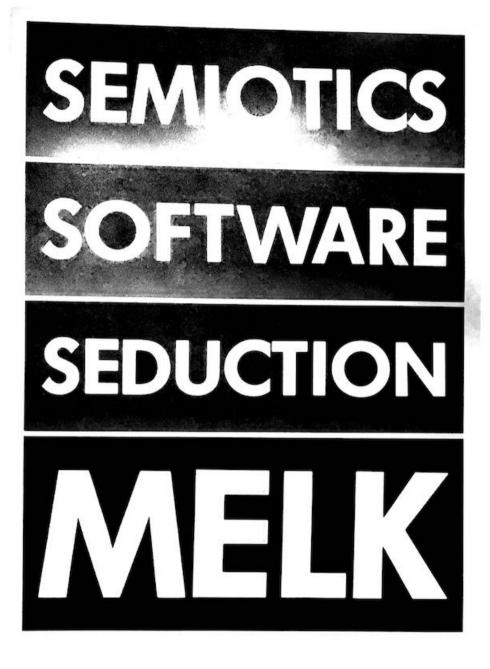2017, exhibition

Installation view with UBERMORGEN of [V]*ote-Auction*'s 27 min. on CNN '*Burden of Proof*', 2000 (left) and Ian Alan Paul, The Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History, 2012. The exhibition *As If: The Media Artist as Trickster* focused on politically inspired media art that uses deception in all its forms. It showed the media artist as trickster using a variety of hoaxes, hacks and ruses to reveal the hidden workings of power structures and the possibility of alternative futures. *As If* desired to address the radical shift in the boundary between fiction and reality in public discourse in a world increasingly governed by 'post-truth' politics. Curated by David Garcia and Annet Dekker, in collaboration with Ian Alan Paul. Source: framerframed.nl

SEMIOTICS
SOFTWARE
SEDUCTION
MELK

Barbara Bloom US, 1951
SEMIOTICS SOFTWARE SEDUCTION MELK
1985, Back cover *Talking Back to
the Media* magazine

MELK, Dutch for milk, is the only Dutch
word in this 'advertisement'. It is the
advertised product, but of a queer
campaign, in which the product is only
named and not enjoyed, as with the
normal way of making advertisements.
It was published on the back cover
of *Talking Back to the Media* magazine.

De Hoeksteen Live!
Ron Miltenburg interviews Philip Glass
1999, broadcast

This interview with composer Philip Glass
was live broadcasted from the American
Hotel, Amsterdam. De Hoeksteen
Live! is an interactive live talkshow from
Amsterdam on culture, politics, media
and economics, broadcasted on SALTO.
De Hoeksteen Live! is initiated by Raúl
Marroquín in 1991, who has produced
it ever since.