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Virtual Borders, Migrant Cyber-Tactics and Copyleft E-Changes
Aire Incondicional at the Shedhalle Gallery in Zürich, Switzerland

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Under the title "Emergence of Community Based and Migrant E-Strategies in Southern Europe" the Aire Incondicional show at the Shedhalle Gallery in Zürich, Switzerland provides a platform for a number of multi-media projects from politically active artists and community groups based in Spain, Portugal, France and Italy. By focusing on tactics of modern technology in interventionist activism, the exhibit leads a path towards the virtualizion of cultural and political borders, the deconstruction of globalization and the rebooting of the new media revolution. Spearheaded by Platoniq, a Barcelona based art/activist group and conceptualized by Susana Noguero and Olivier Schulbaum, the show also underscores methods to empower migrant communities and facilitate a dialogue on the concept of public space.

In line with their aim to bring activism directly to the people and facilitate local discussions on topics of worldwide interest, the opening week of the show included several workshops, demonstrations and discussion panels. Part of the exhibit even turned mobile when several individuals from the represented groups ventured on a mini tour to three fellow Swiss cities – Lugano, Geneva and Basel. In Geneva they joined with the Forde Gallery to present a cyber media laboratory for the exchange of information, freeware and e-changes while Basel saw a collaboration with the local group Plug.in.

Meanwhile back in Zurich, the exhibit boisterously comes to life with the help of repeated tape loops, video projections, mouse clicks and the steady whirring of CD burners. The site plan is purposefully arranged so that the individual project stations are side by side and often overlapping in the high-ceiling expansive gallery area. Physically there are very few barriers between each project, save for bare wooden structural dividers and tents. This floor plan is quite ideal in that it helps to familiarize and orientate the viewer physically with the theoretical concept of virtual space in constant flux. In this constructed public arena, the exhibit becomes something different for each visitor, depending on how he or she is prepared to interact and build connections with the work.

If anything, the divide between the projects are only loosely conceptual and thematic, as each presentation falls into one, two or all three central themes. "Free Entrance – Virtualizing Borders" characterizes projects that utilize the potential virtual space between physical and information boundaries to inform and represent migrant communities in Southern Europe. "Home(wire)less" highlights the use of modern communication technology – especially the Internet and wireless media – in redefining public space and fostering open discussions between artists and communities towards building up better social networks. "Drive in / Burn Out" enables and supports alternatives to copyright publishing through open networks and copy-paste technologies, bringing along blank CD's for data storage and information downloading is highly encouraged.

The concept of interacting with the exhibit, giving feedback and literally stuffing one's pockets with knowledge to carry and pass on is perhaps the most important element of the exhibit. To reiterate this theme physically and to make it easier for visiting patrons to collect their data, Paola Sinisterra offers for sale his Freewear design wearable blankets near the exhibit entrance. Each blanket is sewn with numerous pockets, to be stuffed and filled with CDs, pamphlets and other subversive materials. The inexpensive throws are also ideal for persons not yet acclimated to the harsh European winters, as they can just as easily be stuffed with newspapers to provide insulation.

At the nearby Drive-In/Burn-Out computer terminals, patrons can begin their take-away collection by downloading MP3s from web music labels, films from the Platoniq archive or choose from numerous "useless software" applications presented by the Alku project Imbecil. Providing this data openly direct

challenges the mainstream media industry to restructure or die. Home taping did not kill the music industry in the 1980's but copyleft publishing in the internet era is finally pushing for structural change.

The internet is also rapidly succeeding to redefine language and the written/spoken word, represented in the exhibit by two very different projects. Enrique Radigales through his Idealword project creates internet formatted sketch drawings with hidden text from such banal sources as read.me files and manuals. The words are only visible in the hypertext source file or by selecting and copy-pasting into a blank document. The goal is to "confuse the technical genre" and highlight the new forms of communication demanded by modern technology. Oh the other hand, Italian programmer Jaromil has dedicated himself to using this new language to provide innovative free software programs. Released under the name Rasta Software, some of his projects have included innovative dj and vee-jay software and a streaming ASCII text video program. Recently, together with a team of programmers from around the world, he has successfully development a bootable CD with a fully functioning Linux operating system.

Combining similar hacker tactics with architectural theory leads to the team known as Hackitectura. Their current endeavor is a software program called "Al-Jwarizmi" which aims to decentralize und broadening the multi-media structure of the Indymedia-Estrecho project. By building up a digital architecture database and a fluid territorial bridge the software aids the overall project's aim of opening and virtually transcending the geopolitical border between Europe and Africa at the Straits of Gibraltar. Housed in the same exhibit tent are three monitors simultaneously screening several documentary videos produced by Frontera Sur RRVT (The European Southern Border in Real, Remote and Virtual Time). Through their videos, the informal collective of artists and cultural activists hopes to draw attention to the plight of migrant workers entering Spain via the Straits of Gibraltar. In their opening night presentation, the group touched on some of the central issues surrounding this exploited class of laborers and reiterated that all of Europe is largely affected by the goings-on at this southernmost strip of Spanish coastline.

Like people crossing borders, information also longs to be to be free and whether legal or illegal it will find it's way into the public sphere. On simultaneously running televisions parallel to the burn stations, is a main crux of the exhibit – Jordi Mitjà's video documentaries of street vendors in Mexico's capital city preparing and selling pirate CDs. Produced in 2003, "Burners of Dreams, Economies and Rhythms" and "Viva Pirata" are filmed from a neutral standpoint, framing not just the vendors but the city and it's inhabitants as subject and actor in this black market exchange. In a city starkly polarized between the horribly rich and the abjectly poor, these "dream burners" have succeeded in hijacking the tools of new technology to overcome the barriers of poverty.

The Barcelona based collective Rotor appropriates the urban system in quite another fashion. In their hometown they provide constantly updated maps and adventure tourist tips for traversing Barcelona's construction sites. In doing so they reclaim the space for public use and comment on the shallowness of the city's ever growing tourist industry. Their action in Zürich translated into providing the means and the detailed instructions for building a raft from commandeered construction sites remnants – especially the very floatable and brightly colored plastic emergency barriers. During the workshop the group facilitated, the tactic of "turning the barrier" was successful enough to end with a jaunt on the lake.

The spirit of fun and activism also pervades the work of 0100101110101101.org. In their presentation for this exhibit the group displayed their 2003 Vienna culture jamming action. Posing as Nike employees they publicly announced the company's intention to rename historic Karlsplatz, "Nikeplatz." They set up and staffed an "Infobox" at the plaza and recorded the reactions of locals when they were told a giant sculpture of the Nike "swoosh" was planned there. Under the moniker "nikeground.com – rethinking space" the group invited the public to ponder the possibility that cultural icons are as marketable as a pair of sneakers.

The groups El Perro and Portugal based Zé Dos Bois offer their audiences similarly consumerist inspired replies to the issue of border crossing and migration. El Perro designed a Powerpoint-esque presentation

documenting the "Wayward Traveling Box" where they have recycled a product of the elite class – the wooden crates used to transport art pieces – and converted it into a means of transporting a person. The box comes complete with running water, light and ventilation and is guaranteed to keep the transported individual well hidden. Meanwhile Zé Dos Bois turn the prospect of border crossing into a game. Through their interventionist action "Transfer" they act as a first contact and welcoming committee for unhappy American citizens wishing to emigrate to Portugal for a more fulfilling life. At their computer terminal in the exhibit and through their website, bureaucratic like transfer requests forms are ready to be filled out and submitted for processing.

By supporting such simple artistic parodies Zé Dos Bois and El Perro succeed in upstaging institutional structures and shining a light on the ridiculous process of migration. One of the most lingering images of the exhibit is also the most simple – a poster from Zé Dos Bois' "Parole" project presents a newly designed map of Europe. Nothing has been altered except that the map has been turned upside-down, with Iceland now a south-eastern island and Portugal and Spain most northerly neighbors. This disturbing perspective shift makes it clear that borders are only theoretical constructs that just as easily can be turned on their head.

Aire Incondicional is on display at the Shedhalle, Rote Fabrik in Zürich, Switzerland from 14 February 2004 – 04 April 2004. The artists and groups featured are: 0100101110101101.org (Italy), Alku/Imbecil.net (Spain), Enrique Radigales/Idealword (Spain), Jaromil/Rastasoft (Italy), Rotor (Spain), Zé Dos Bois (Portugal), Hackitectura/Al-Jwarizmi (Spain, Morroco), El Perro (Spain), Jordi Mitjà (Spain) and Frontera Sur RRVT (Spain, Switzerland).

www.platoniq.net/aireincondicional.net