

Irrational's Finest, or The Art of Movement Through Space

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Hardly a day goes by without some news item about the discovery of a carefully concealed crop of genetically modified maize, about liquid explosives in airplanes and bombs inside suitcases on trains, about calls for blanket video surveillance, about the global spread of avian 'flu. We wonder when the virus will reach our own part of the world, have long begun to feel the pinch of economic cutbacks in Germany, to notice the effects of climate change, and cannot help but think: Life's harder than it used to be.

That was something which irrational, founded in the post-Thatcher Britain of 1996, knew ten years ago already. Unerringly ever since, the group has formulated themes and proposed idiosyncratic solutions. These are now presented, for the first time comprehensively, in the exhibition *The Wonderful World of irrational.org*. The irrational platform includes companies pressing for access to new technologies to be defined as a human right (Technologies To The People) or pleading for a "better life" with a "human interface" (Mejor Vida Corporation). Alongside mailing lists such as *American Express* and *7-11*, irrational houses the Cultural Terrorist Agency, which infiltrates contemporary forms of performative ideology and rhetoric by creating a new London borough and declaring a by-election there, or by marketing a "genetically modified anti-Capitalist superweed" whose built-in resistance to the broad-spectrum herbicides of Monsanto represents a threat to the profitable deployment of GM grain types. As well as criticizing the irresponsible dissemination of genetically manipulated organisms, irrational also considers specific action to be taken in the case of a global influenza pandemic. Increasingly precarious conditions of employment were countered with slogans like "Temps of the World Unite – Turning Shit into Gold" (even if, seven years back, the word "precariat" had not yet been coined), or with proposals for the free usage of public transport or universal access to student ID cards. Altogether, movement – irrationalists overcome fences and walls with the simplest of means (home-made nets, for instance) and scaling techniques, cross borders without going through the official channels. It is invariably a matter of experiencing space differently: for instance, while engaged in communal tree climbing during the annual *International Tree Climbing Day* held under the motto "Liberate the Horizontal", or in the three-contestant *World Downhill Skate Championships* staged in Bristol, UK.



It was not least in this capacity of travel enterprise of a different kind that irrational adopted the logo of the International Air Transport Association IATA¹ (founded in Havana in 1945): a stylized winged globe symbolizing global communication and global traffic. The appendage "irrational" turns the logo into a seal of quality for a special art of movement through space.

Six international net and media artists are loosely grouped around the irrational.org server founded by the British net artist Heath Bunting in 1996. Many of the participants importantly influenced the early net art of the mid-1990s: Daniel Garcia Andújar/Technologies To The People (Valencia/E), Rachel Baker (London/GB), Kayle Brandon (Bristol/GB), Heath Bunting (Bristol/GB), Minerva Cuevas/Mejor Vida Corporation (Mexico City/MEX), and Marcus Valentine (Bristol/GB).

With dry humour and minimalist aesthetics, irrational commentated the internet hype emergent as of the mid-1990s, and launched its own pseudo start-ups to match the burgeoning New Market euphoria

¹ The International Air Transport Association, <http://www.iata.de/>

that set in around 1996/97. Art on the net was direct, without the need for – or safety of – a mediating space or instance. This immediacy was reflected during that period by frequent skirmishes with unsmiling patent attorneys threatening irational with legal action for using company names like 7-ELEVEN, American Express, Sainsburys and Tesco. Documented in detail in the exhibition, these disputes were only a prelude to the present-day litigation surrounding copyright, intellectual property, and trademarks (most recently, FIFA's jealous protection of the World Cup™ trademark in 2006). The world's first net artist to announce his "retirement", Heath Bunting stopped working exclusively with the net in 1997. His activities increasingly returned to public space (of which the internet, of course, is now a vital component). If in the "net phase" irational activities were devoted to questioning virtual borders, today the members experiment with questioning and overcoming the borders – economic, political, social – defined in real space, which they make more porous in often highly entertaining fashion.

The output of irational in the period 1996–2006 covers a broad spectrum of pertinent sociopolitical issues. From an early date, the group negotiated themes like the growing sense of in/security in an increasingly technology-based world, questions of surveillance and data collection (via "irational" questionnaires, for instance, or re-purposed customer cards), branding and trademark protection, workplace insecurity, as well as DIY cultures, media, and economies. With the shift of focus from the net to physical space, moreover, the work of irational immediately, singularly and paradigmatically displayed something that is now increasingly evident in contemporary media art: an interest not so much in the actual media and technologies as in current spaces complexly interconnected by these technologies and shot through with media-based networks.

But the magic figure of ten was not the only reason to link this exhibition with the jubilee celebrations of Hartware MedienKunstVerein, since the budding association also played a part (and fun it was) in bringing together two irational protagonists. In 1996, Daniel G. Andújar spent six months as a grant-holder in Künstlerhaus Dortmund, during which time he met Iris Dressler and Hans Christ. The result was intensive cooperation with Hartware on a number of subsequent occasions. 1996 was also the year in which Daniel G. Andújar took part in a Hamburg exhibition – *discord. sabotage of realities*² – during which he met the fellow exhibitor Heath Bunting.³ Both irational and the Hartware Projekte association were founded later that year.

The four participants in the *The Wonderful World of irational.org* project – the initiators Susanne Ackers, Francis Hunger and myself, together with Jacob Lillemose, who was soon enlisted as co-curator – were quick to realize that the diverse activities of irational required a varied range of presentation formats. We addressed this diversity by supplementing the exhibition, co-curated by Jacob Lillemose and myself, with the irational Action Weekend staged by Francis Hunger in mid-September, as well as the publication *The Hartware Guide to irational.org*.

And now to the exhibition, the medium with which we consciously chose to work – a statement that would be superfluous if the subject of the exhibition were not net art. Over the past ten years there has been much discussion (if no agreement, so far) as to whether net art can be exhibited at all, and, if so, how. One need only recall the hapless office situations set up in exhibitions like the documenta X (1997) or the staged internet café ambience of shows like *net_condition* at ZKM (2000–01). Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz recently put irational itself on show as a huge chalked mural plus an online computer in Banff, Canada. We chose the opposite strategy, and decided to "take offline" the 57 chosen works, instead developing in dialogue with the artists individual concepts appropriate to the exhibition space of the PHOENIX Halle. It was a matter of establishing immediacy in the exhibition

² *un-frieden. sabotage von wirklichkeiten – discord.sabotage of realities*, Kunstverein and Kunsthau Hamburg, 1996, curated by Inke Arns and Ute Vorkoeper, see <http://www.projects.v2.nl/~arns/Archiv/Discord/>. In regard to the participation of Technologies To The People, see also Inke Arns: Technologies to the People® - Our Sponsor, or: How we got the attention of both Apple (TM) and the left German art critique. In: Technologies to the People®. *Annual Report 2000* [i.e. Daniel Garcia Andujar], Alicante 2001, <http://www.projects.v2.nl/~arns/Texts/tp.html>

³ Heath Bunting was featured with the *Vulnerability* project, which is also presented in *The Wonderful World of irational.org*.

context, sometimes without regard to original medium such as the internet. And the show might be reproached for doing precisely that: for putting back inside an “institutional” mediating space the net art which always took pride in its direct reference to the recipient, and for robbing the works – by declaring them to be “art”, something never explicit on the net – of part of their ambivalence. The view we take is that even – and perhaps especially – net art needs a clear-cut space of mediation (wholly regardless of the fact that the idea of art without mediation is a utopian vision). Via its medium – the internet – net art could have reached a potentially global, potentially vast, audience. Only it has not done so. Net art has reached a small, specialized audience and sometimes baffled unsuspecting surfers. Because we think it would be a pity simply to leave these inventive projects to the net, we opted for this form of implementation.

In this sense, the exhibition is not about net art, either. One might go one step further, and assert that irational itself was never net art. The themes addressed by the group extend far beyond the borders of their medium. All of the projects take a very shrewd approach to topical themes. Whether these themes are handled and implemented on the net or offline is of secondary importance. To this degree, the exhibition attempts to bundle the conceptual red threads of irational into roughly half a dozen thematic areas: language as property, alternative forms of economies, overcoming borders, questioning security technologies and biotechnology and genetic engineering, the transmission of knowledge in participative projects, as well as the enabling of new spatial experiences. Indeed, more: the art of movement through (augmented) space is a theme of almost all the projects. And it has always been a question of expanding the subject’s possibilities of action – in the sense of a tactic of individual empowerment. Irational formulates a politics and a poetics of spatial disobedience. So use the services offered by your favourite travel agency, and fly irational!