

France is waking up

Security is becoming a topic of serious interest (*nobody would call him/herself "hacker" here. They say they are "interested in security", and there's a lot of people here interested in security...) Interview with Nathalie Magnan by Cornelia Sollfrank*

14 December 2003, Paris

C.S. Nathalie, you are one of the organizers of the Zelig3 conference where I gave a lecture/performance yesterday (13th of December, 2002). Before we go into detail about the conference, its agenda and outcome, I would like you to talk a bit about your background. I know you lived in the US for 11 years. What did you do there?

N.M.: I studied and worked at UC Santa Cruz and at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. I eventually connected with Paper Tiger TV and Deep Dish TV with whom I did several programs, such as “Donna Haraway Reads the National Geographic of Primates.” With Deedee Halleck I also co-edited “Gringo in Mañana Land”, an archival feature film about American representation of Latin America by North America. After returning to France, I showed the “Gulf Crisis Tapes” before the January 15th outbreak of the first Gulf War. There was a huge difference between U.S. media activism and French media activism.

C.S.: When did you return to France?

N.M.: I returned in fall 1990, when the Gulf War was still going on. I was shocked by the anti-war activities in France, the strategies for voicing dissent and French media analysis. For example, there was a huge anti-war demonstration in Paris in December 1990. I met a group of journalists, activists and artists there, and we started the project “Canal déchaîné”—a word play on the satirical newspaper called “Canard Enchaîné”. In this group people were thinking critically about how the media works, however, the group was dominated by boys. This was a shock for me since I was coming from “Dyke Central...” I had not worked in a strictly male environment for a long time. While I did work with them, I never felt totally comfortable.

I had just come from a university in the States that was well-equipped with e-mail and I simply wanted to get connected in France. You have to understand that the first e-mail arrived in France as late as in 1987. When I called my telecommunication company to order an e-mail account, they said it would cost 60 USD per e-mail... I didn't do it :-)

C.S.: How did you go on working then?

N.M.: I was making documentaries for an independent producer, teaching at the University Paris VIII. Later, I worked within a very “happening” department at the time — “les programmes courts” of Canal+ (it doesn't exist any more). With this group we did “La Nuit Gay” (The Gay Night), the program that put gays and lesbians on the French media map. I also worked to increase media access, pushing the idea of public access TV (which doesn't exist in France to this day). I experimented with the idea of public access later, setting up a very active feminist forum of discussion. It's a daily chronicle of women's issues created by all who are interested in women's issues and includes chat on women's concerns as well as developed essays on these topics.
<http://chiennesdegarde.org/forum2.php3>.

I was relieved when I learned about the first n5m (Next Five Minutes) conference for tactical

media in '93 in Amsterdam [www.n5m.org]. Compared to the dominant discourse in France, it was very refreshing! I was interested in the n5m conference because of their approach to tactical media. I completely embraced the idea of having art, culture, politics, and machines together infiltrating the dominant order, regardless of the machines, the media, and production levels.

The conference also brought geeks and hackers together with the TV people, and independent media makers. This made me feel totally at home. People acknowledged the gender issue, but it wasn't given much attention. I simply wanted to believe that the men in n5m were more aware than my French colleagues who were old lefties. In fact, there were women around me in Amsterdam, mostly Americans. Later, in 1995, when the nettime mailing list emerged, and internet access in France became possible, I subscribed immediately. And although I did not post much myself, the list was my breathing channel. I realized that there was another woman from France who posted interesting information about the situation in France on nettime, Christine Treguier. (She organized the whole security track for this Zelig conference). Through this list, I learned about other people in France who were interested in tactical media.

C.S.: Did this finding change your situation in France?

N.M.: Certainly, but the problem was that these few French people did not make a critical mass which is needed for a thinking group, for a confrontation, and a discussion.

Together with Patrice Riemens and Geert Lovink, we came up with the idea to start a French nettime list, which we did with Benoit Cristou, Boris Beaude and Philippe Riviere. In a short time we had 200 people on it, but as all lists it had its moments, still does. There are a lot of announcements. Announcements are ok, but if nobody invests extra time and energy in a mailing list, it simply doesn't function as a forum. We have new moderators now, Aris from Samizdat & Nicolas from constat (Belgium). The list moved to SAMIZDAT (www.Samizdat.net), a French portal for a lot of political and activist lists. It really started to pick up. It would be desirable to connect it also to Canada, African, the Pacific Islands and Asian countries where French is used.

C.S.: What is the current relationship between French independent media activities and the n5m/nettime activities? Is there an exchange going on?

N.M.: I think that the work that is being done in France is now easier to understand from the outside. There have always been some excellent people working here, but the structures to make the work visible were missing. Also, French people have started to circulate (travel) a bit more than they did previously. More French artists have started going to other festivals and conferences, and have started to network.

I also created a helpful book together with Annick Bureau, "Connexions: art, réseaux, média". The idea was to filter and translate material from international mailing-lists (nettime, syndicate, rhizome) but also Leonardo and texts that we considered to be part of the canon. This was helpful for people who have difficulties with English—and there is a lot of them. The book is our selected texts, but it covers material that seems necessary to be familiar with, in an international conference.

C.S.: Do you really think that France is/was isolated because of language?

N.M.: It's always overdetermined. Language is one reason, but also the French have a

tendency to consider themselves as the center of the world, universal, enlightened... Some workshops at Zelig were in English and people attended those. Younger people are more open to speaking English, and they understand the need to do so. The attitude that France is the intellectual center of the world is starting to disappear.

C.S.: Let's finally talk about the Zelig conference.

N.M.: The Zelig conference (it was the 3rd) is the French version of an international conference that strives to attract a variety of types of people working in technology, networks, activism, culture, and art. Art is not the strength of this conference, though.

C.S.: Can you roughly describe what kind of people took part, from what fields, and what was on the agenda?

N.M.: The organizers and participants were a mix of conscious technicians, political activists, and people who are interested in culture. The participating technicians are really deep into technology. They are access providers or hosts, and one could also add "hackers." Nobody would call him/herself "hacker" here. They would rather define themselves as "people being interested in security." There is a lot of people in France who are interested in "security"...[laughs]

C.S.: Why is the term "hacker" being avoided?

N.M.: I think it is a way to avoid the romantic image of the hacker and to stay away from the fear that people have of hackers, particularly in France since the elections. It is important to really do the work, the political work because there is such an urgency. For me, this large and varied group of people are all connected by their interest in resisting the commercial systems that limit our choices. We all want to maintain our own open channels that exist outside of the commercial system in case the commercial filtering becomes too heavy.

One of the outcomes of the first Zelig was ("gitoyen"). This was a collaborative structure in which resources such as bandwidth and competences were shared in order to provide non-commercial access to associations and groups of citizens.

C.S.: What was discussed during the conference?

N.M.: Basically, there were three main tracks—in addition to the basic exchange of technical know-how in workshops. The three main areas of focus were: "independent media," "security," and "cyberfeminism."

In the discussions about "independent media," different issues around "indy media" and the necessity of creating a media center were raised. Would it be more efficient to have one press center for one event? In the past each national indymedia site published different information on their site which seemed inefficient. If you wanted to obtain complete information, you would have to visit 70 different sites. Would it be helpful to put the machines in different locations so as to avoid what went on in Genua (police cracking down on lawyers' hard drives, among other things)? One idea was to divide the center for production and the center for distribution of information. We also discussed the filtering policies and problems of indymedia. Indymedia originates from the tradition of public access television, but it is a different medium, and therefore the filtering process must be different. Finally, there is the definite need for European independent media. There are a lot of things happening on the

European level but almost no media reporting on them. A more abstract discussion questioned the terms “information” and “communication” in general, and determined that these terms would need a re-evaluation.

C.S.: Could you now please report on the topic of “security?”

N.M.: You should really ask Christine... One part of the discussion revolved around technology and the use and types of cryptography, specifically the Palladium story. By using Palladium, Microsoft can spy on private pcs, check the installed software, and remotely destroy pirated software. This alone raises a lot of questions about security on the internet, as well as censorship. Tony Bunyan (from Statewatch) spoke of governments that are putting “unlawful” and unconstitutional laws into place since September 11. By using “international terrorism” as their reason for implementing these dangerous laws, many governments, together with media, create and propagate societal fear.

C.S.: Could you give an example of this?

N.M.: One simple example is the law that coordinates all the European police forces (implemented by European politicians), and Europol. Another law concerns data retention. Who should keep what record and for how long?

Hence at this year’s Zelig, there was a presentation on “no-log”, a system that guarantees the privacy of a user’s data through cryptography and without registration. What’s different from any other anonymizer is that this is being done precisely in response to the data retention laws, hence, they can and will not keep any log.

C.S.: Now we should finally talk about the “cyberfem” track?

N.M.: The open mic/fem demo done with the mailing list “faces” during ISEA two years ago definitively put things on the map here. During this year’s Zelig, the “cyberfem” discussion was part of the conference program (a first!) along with the technical workshops, discussions and presentations. We also had an open microphone session because I think it is important for women to get to know each other, and to find out about each other’s activities. The problem with the open-mic format is also its strength. Since you don’t select who speaks, you cannot avoid having, ummmmm, weaker work being presented. Many wonderful women came, and important new connections were made on a one-on-one basis. Afterwards we had a fiesta organized by Beatrice Rettig at EOF, an artist space, where we had an excellent line-up of women djs. It was a terrific program to have the open mic first, then the fiesta. On the practical front, we had two genderchangers workshops— one was about taking apart and putting together computer hardware, the other was about free software, especially linux.

Peggy Pierrot organized the public conversation between Milica from “Zeena ne delu” (Serbia), and Laurence from “constant” in Brussels. This discussion confronted two different experiments with women working with new technologies coming from very different perspectives, but crossing at several points. What I liked about both was their critical approach to technology. There were interested not just in training women, but also in raising a critical consciousness about the use of technology. And then we had the star from Hamburg... [ironic]

C.S.: Who was that?

N.M.: She said she was not an anarchist, but a cyberfeminist, and she did a wonderful job in local recruitment.

C.S.: What did she talk about?

N.M.: She talked about “The tactical use of terms” in general, and then applied her theory by applying it to Cyberfeminism. The whole talk is on our website.

Very often the audience feels provoked and reacts aggressively when it comes to gender issues, for different reasons. Some people associate clichés about feminism also with cyberfeminism, others get angry exactly when those clichés, and stereotyped rhetoric is being questioned. But she is very good in handling all kind of strange dynamics, and has a lot of experience with it-she does not get angry any more. She presented the lecture in a performative way which was nice. There were four people reading the lecture in French; herself, myself, and two boys who had helped to translate her talk into French. It was very cute when the boys read parts saying “my experience as a cyberfeminist” etc. It became a statement about roles and language. It also brought translators, who usually do work unnoticed in the background, to the foreground.

This issue is not really a critical part of cyberfeminism, but related to it. I must mention the “yesmen” presentation. It was good to have them in the program. They provided feedback on the use of technology for political activism, tactical politics, and masquerade as a form of subversion. All of these are commonly shared interests with cyberfeminists. They also announced the difficulties The Thing was having.

C.S.: Back to Zelig. Could you tell me what the outcome of the conference was?

N.M.: One important result was the wonderful visibility cyberfeminists had at such a meeting. These meetings are usually 99% boys. In my humble opinion, the cyberfeminist discussion was a total success. It informed everyone that there women using technology, that they want it, they can do it, and they are conscious about what they're doing. It was the first time-since I returned from the US-that it was not a struggle for me to claim that presence in a boy's group.

We managed to print a paper before the conference. This is always a good propaganda tool. The web site has most of the intervention in French, English, some Italian, and Spanish (www.zelig.org).

C.S.: What I am interested in now, is to go back a bit in time. What is the history behind or before Zelig.

N.M.: Zelig is closely related to a site called ‘Samizdat’, which collates a variety of French mailing lists that address political issues. This site also hosts Multitudes, an academic publication in French, which is affiliated with Hard-Negri's thinking.

Two years ago, “mini-reseau” was prominent. They are responsible for coding and developing SPIP: a very popular French open publishing software, soon to come up in different languages.

The first Zelig conference facilitated the first physical meeting of this diverse group of people. It occurred after a very important event that shook the entire non-commercial internet in France. One of the most prominent hosts of non-commercial sites “altern”, was attacked

(see <http://www.comite-altern.sgdg.org/>), and had been many times before. This particular time, they almost got him. One of the sites he hosted contained an image of a nude, 20 year-old woman. She is now a semi-star.

By making this available, Altern was making the statement that “technicians are not judges; they are not responsible for ethical judgement, technicians are technicians”. The implication is that if commercial technicians start to make ethical judgments, they will cut access as soon as a “problem” arises. Altern insisted that a judge should make such decisions, not a technician. This is not to say that technicians have brains and can develop politically pertinent projects (such as no-log), but that is another issue.

At this time there was only one non-merchant server in France—a terrible situation indeed. In response to this, Valentin Lacambre (director of Altern), donated all of his software in order to create a server to “lautre,” a cooperative. Everybody was very shaken because we realized Altern could have been closed. All this simply because an opportunist wanted to make money. This story happened three or four years ago and made everybody think carefully about the law.

C.S.: Was it before the first Zelig conference?

N.M.: Yes.

C.S. You have also mentioned a project that some of the French people do in Africa...

N.M.: Yes. It's AlternC. AlternC consists of software for housing and server management. It's easy to use and easy to install and is based on free software only. AlternC is free software itself. Hence Globenet (one of the organisers of Zelig) is developing relations with Sub-Saharan Africa in order provide access to and control of their information. This would allow them to stop needing to transmit via occidental countries such as the USA.

<http://www.globenet.org/i34>

C.S.: You say that the situation in France has changed. What do you think French people would or could contribute to an international network of media activists like the upcoming n5m conference?

N.M.: Definitely, alternC, spip, no-log, experiences with independent media, security watch, European legislation, and certainly cyberfems.

We are at a point now where the whole issue of surveillance, control and the merging of different databases is quite frightening. We should start connecting with artists and activists from different countries and discuss our positions on these topics in order to be able to resist. This is especially important because there will be European laws around these issues. I don't think it should be left only to official politicians and lawyers to settle these issues. There should definitely be a broader discussion. In that sense, it might be a good thing to have some French people participating at n5m.

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