

The genius of ubermorgen

"UBERMORGEN.COM's activities are featured worldwide, from Artforum, Flash Art, Domus, Wired Magazine, springerlin, to CNN, Fox, CBS, ABC, BBC, from the New York Times, Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, Le Monde, Daily Yomiuri, NZZ, El País, La Liberation, The Guardian, La Stampa, Shanghai Daily News, Leonardo – MIT Press, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Der Spiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, to all leading online publications and underground media: neural.it, Nettime, Hacktivist, Samisdag, alt.bin.kittenporn, etc."Source: Website UBERMORGEN.COM

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Attempting to approach UBERMORGEN.COM, I find there is something in the way. This something is etoy. It seems that I have to start with etoy, delve into the past to some extent, so that I can leave it behind and reach the present – or possibly even the future – of the "day after tomorrow", of "übermorgen".

It is superfluous to describe etoy's work in detail at this point. The young men with shaved heads and mirror sunglasses wearing orange bomber jackets are immediately present to many. Certain images of the boy band/artist group have been permanently engraved in the minds of their observers. But what did they actually do? What was their art about and what do they have to do with UBERMORGEN.COM? [1]

Although wearing uniforms is a simple strategy, it repeatedly yields unexpected effects – especially in the art world. The identical "test pilots of the net", as they called themselves in 1996, made every attempt to appear cool. They wanted to be aggressive macho performers, assholes, corrupt and corporate, not even inhibited about flirting with the label "fascist". They made every attempt to operate beyond the boundaries of good taste and political correctness, well aware or at least sensing that this marks an important source of success in the bourgeoisie art world. Was that the point, just provocation and attracting attention? Was that the group's message? Was that the product for the excited consumers?

One of the provocative messages was certainly that "the individual doesn't count". They did not want to be individuals, but exchangeable little artist-soldiers. And they did not want to be poor artists, but rich big shots, entrepreneurs, exploiters. Although these messages were somewhat contradictory, they were sufficiently unusual for the art world, yet they became even more confusing with the emergence of the mock battle with the toy corporation eToys. Had the ruffians accidentally become artist victims after all, who were to be beleaguered by a real corporation with real business interests? [2] At any rate, in a large-scale campaign, the Toywar, they provided an opportunity for people to express solidarity with them in this situation, to support them for the first time, and many good people did so in good faith. These – actually rather dubious – young guys were thus suddenly to wage a political war by proxy for us, to set the limits for a powerful corporation, David against Goliath. Had the wannabe faschos inadvertently become warriors for idealistic goals? Was that what they had perhaps been from the beginning and had merely disguised themselves well?

No, it was all a misunderstanding. The Toywar was nothing other than a pure marketing event – specifically for etoy itself. Not only the immaculate aesthetic staging and the brilliant media campaign were absolutely correct, but etoy also remained conceptually absolutely true to itself. Whether as artist group, collective, label or corporation, there had never been any other content than ruthless self-promotion. Even the massive "moral support" in the Toywar could not deter them from this radicalness. etoy's magnificent artistic achievement thus consisted, on the one hand, in the concept of consistently offering NO other content than itself, and on the other in the ability to create strategies for this that were both aesthetically and technically brilliant. Or as Reinhold Grether put it: "etoy's perversion consists of developing the value of a single icon, their name virtually represented as www.eto.com, in winding the spirals of economic, political, social and artistic attention further and further upward, thus reflecting the financial market's process of value creation in the excess of overwinding."^[3]

This is the past. Although etoy still exists, albeit with different people and a different orientation, I think it would not be false to call UBERMORGEN.COM the successor group that has emerged from this same spirit. It is not difficult to recognize many of etoy's strategies in UBERMORGEN.COM. And it is Hans Bernhard who conducted industrial espionage. Yet there is much of UBERMORGEN.COM that is different.

Let's go to the UBERMORGEN.COM homepage to find out more about them. Everything there is well organized and professionally presented. In addition to the complete list of all projects, texts, interviews and reviews, there is a press folder available for downloading in German or in English. Here someone intends to communicate effectively, ensure that no questions remain unanswered. UBERMORGEN.COM comprises an "artist duo", Lizvlx and Hans Bernhard, it says there. The portrait photos of the two have been smoothed and visibly manipulated; they show a man and a woman, two beautiful, perfect, somewhat futuristic-looking people. What they have in common is that they are "creative thinkers", "professional artists", who "travel the world" and "hold lectures at conferences and universities". Whereas Hans limits himself to being an artist, with a background in aesthetics and art history, Liz emphasizes her study of economics and commissioned work for companies as a designer and technician. This is an ideal artist pair marketing themselves here, using the best business jargon, unabashedly praising their work as a "hybrid gesamtkunstwerk" and calling it as a "brand" in the same breath. An initial irritation gradually arises. Are these artists just playing "business" by coopting a jargon like the Business Art of the 1980s? Or is the "professionalism" they claim actually pure cynicism in light of the commodity character of art in a soulless and corrupt art market? Or are artist minds at work here that have been brainwashed by neoliberal ideas, wanting nothing else but to eagerly join the ranks of those carrying their creativity to market? The search for the truth, for what is "genuine" about UBERMORGEN.COM" can begin.

UBERMORGEN.COM was founded in 1999 during the boom era of the Internet. Since the mid-1990s companies providing services particularly in conjunction with the Internet have been called "dotcom". The term is derived from the www-addresses of companies ending in ".com", and until 2000 it stood for an economic boom in the IT sector, for fast profits and mostly young millionaires. UBERMORGEN.COM made this whole bubble part of their name, part of their identity, and held onto this even after the bubble burst.

The first and to date largest and most spectacular project by UBERMORGEN.COM was the web site vote-auction.com. This platform, which they did not develop themselves but bought through the mediation of the associated artist group RTmark, might be called a fluke, a stroke of luck, but it is the first proof of UBERMORGEN.COM's innate instinct for filtering out

explosive social issues and locating the "vulnerable points" of media communication systems. The idea of the platform, which is both simple and stunning, was to auction off votes during the US American election campaign in 2000 (G. W. Bush vs. Al Gore). The highest bidder was to transfer blocks of votes to the candidates. A web site like this could have gone completely unnoticed, because in a purely functional sense it is a fake. Nevertheless, UBERMORGEN.COM managed to ignite the fuse and attract attention from the election authorities. What happened after that can only be called "hysterical". A wave of international press attention followed, the media skidded out of control, and the climax of the action, which had become a global phenomenon, consisted of a 27-minute long expert discussion on CNN, in which Hans Bernhard took part via telephone. Demonstrating a mastery of business jargon again, he spoke of a "pilot project" and that it was a matter of developing the forum for a perfect future market, a market in which capitalism and democracy could finally be conjoined, and which was by no means to remain limited to the USA. In the television studio there was general confusion about who was involved, an "Austrian holding company" was mentioned, and when an invited legal expert suggested that the whole thing might be a satire, a prank, insistence was quickly forthcoming that the manipulation of elections was no joking matter and that although the free market was certainly a good idea in many areas, this was clearly inappropriate for democratic elections. Looking back now at these perplexed journalists and experts concerned about their democracy, and in light of what actually happened during and after this election, one can only say that they themselves were the parody, a parody of the independence of mass media and even of democratic elections.

In light of the political explosiveness of this project, which even attracted the attention of international secret services, it is hard to believe UBERMORGEN.COM's protestations that they have no political intentions and are solely interested in formal and aesthetic playfulness and free experimentation. In comparison, their approach of regarding media, mass media and communication as formable material for building their immaterial sculptures in an open process is more comprehensible. They have continued this method in collaboration with other artists: the project *Google will eat itself* [4], carried out together with Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio, takes on the largest and most powerful search engine by turning one of its own most important features against it. Income is generated through Google using AdSense, which the group uses to buy stock in the corporation. Although GWEI assails the corporation solely at a symbolic level, it has not only provoked the corporation to react, it also reveals essential contradictions of immaterial economics: the involvement of every individual in abstract, global market mechanisms, the unpredictable dynamics of these markets, and their tendency to accumulation with simultaneous transience.

In their current project *Amazon Noir – the Big Book Crime*—and again in collaboration with Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio—they take on another giant: the American online mailorder company Amazon.com. Using download software developed by Paolo Cirio, the group attempts to exploit the function Search Inside the Book to read the entire contents of a book with the corresponding number of search queries and recompile the search results into a complete book that is in turn offered for downloading. By lifting and redistributing copyright-protected contents, UBERMORGEN.COM and their collaborators address the often contradictory application of copyright and the volatility of the concept of "intellectual property", which has not only developed into one of the most profitable industries, but also threatens to monopolize cultural assets. Following the question of democracy in the digital age and the demonstration of the concentration of power through search engines, now UBERMORGEN.COM focus again on a highly political topic, which is another indication of their awareness of power structures and how they are shifted by digital media and global communication networks. In their media actions, which often have the character of a

performance or happening, but which, unlike their historical predecessors, quite consciously use PR strategies to reach wider audiences, UBERMORGEN.COM usually succeed in provoking their counterparts to "play along". Brilliant and well placed press releases, which they regard as separate artworks, play an essential role in this.

In addition to their confusion-causing media-hacking, which they prefer to call "digital actionism" to purposely distance themselves from politically motivated "hacktivism", UBERMORGEN.COM have also realized a considerable number of conceptual, installative and interventionist projects. These include, for example, the Injunction Generator, software controlled through a web interface to send masses of injunctions, which can result in the worst cases in the closure of web sites. Normally used against disagreeable web sites, which actually or allegedly violate existing laws (usually copyright or trademark laws), this possibility is extensively abused, for example by law firms that generate their own profits with injunctions. The Injunction Generator can certainly be seen as an ironic commentary on this abuse of the law. Other generators, also presented as installations, interactively generate bank statements (Bankstatement Generator) or prescriptions for psycho-pharmaceuticals (PsychOS Generator). Nazi Line, a collaboration with Christoph Schlingensiefel, and etxtreme.ru, a hack of the Ars Electronica jury in 1999, suggest political associations again. Whereas the former offered neo-nazis an opportunity to leave the scene by taking part in a theater production, with etxtreme.ru a fake press release sent out in a mass mailing claimed that the award of the Golden Nica art prize to the free operating system Linux was due to an intervention from Microsoft, one of the main sponsors of the Ars Electronica.

Combined in all of these actions and projects, to varying degrees, are random combinatorics inspired by Dada, strategic marketing, political satire, subversive communication and technical experimentation, resulting in complex structures, the absurdity of which is only surpassed by a hansbernhardblog, in which UBERMORGEN.COM satirizes the Web 2.0-based confession compulsion by listing in detail which substances Hans Bernhard consumes every day to obscure who or what is at work here.

Whereas with the digital and interventionist projects a malicious mixing of facts and fiction often leads to the development of an inextricable scenario, UBERMORGEN.COM arouses further astonishment with a "product line" – as they call it in another over-affirmation of marketing rhetoric. This product line makes use of cultural viruses of a completely different kind: their paintings and sculptures. There have been exhibitions of UBERMORGEN.COM in museums and galleries [5], where not a single computer was to be seen, no indication of digital communication networks. What was shown there were wall paintings, hand-painted pixel paintings, meticulously prepared prints on canvas or sculptures arranged out of material such as paper, wood, etc. One series from this complex of works are the Seals, large-format prints on canvas. These involve representations of various actions condensed into icons. Completely computer generated, capable of any number of reproductions, these certifications of the genuineness and intactness of documents allude to the intention of UBERMORGEN.COM. Although they play with concepts like "replica", "representation", "authenticity" and "aura", it is doubtful that UBERMORGEN.COM actually intend to create transformations of their hacking strategies in material objects. Once again they fool their audience, seek to seduce them. The iconoclasts, as which they have established themselves, have fun cultivating their "image" as "professional artists" – which presumably includes supplying a physical and thus salable product, preferably a "picture". Aside from the astonishment that the "media hackers" garner in this way, there is also a remarkable side-effect: the combination of "old and new code" actually paves the way to the art market. Their explicit will to art and their flirt with conformism always follow a double strategy of

revealing the mechanisms of the art system and becoming a part of it at the same time – as a thorn in its side. Their incredible achievement consists of creating the image of "hackers" and "rebels" through their actions and simultaneously claiming that they want to be nothing other than commercial artists. This permanent contortion of reality and appearance into ever new spirals provides their audience with the lasting pleasure of never knowing what UBERMORGEN.COM is "really" about.

The genius of übermorgen masks itself with corporate design. The various alternating people, the more or less unambiguous subjectivities that it consists of remain – entirely in keeping with the requirements of late capitalism – flexible, emerging and vanishing under and into the networks of global communication, appearing on the mass media surfaces, posing as rebels, as a happy family, as hard-headed strategists, as successful entrepreneurs – or mad artists, depending on which promises the greatest success. Their strategies of forming worlds are not exhausted in the virtual; they are materialized in weighty sculptures or real court injunctions or in traditional paintings. As a child of mass culture, this genius forges its way into the sacred temples of high culture. In the White Cube as the final destination of all desire, true life is simulated in the false, and the erosion can begin – the sabotage of the system, of which it is itself a part. The question of who is taken over by whom remains unanswered. This genius unites itself in the contradictions of tomorrow. The questions it raises are the answers it gives.

Number of times UBERMORGEN.COM is named: 27

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[1] The following considerations refer to the original etoy group before their division in 1999. One part of the group continued to work under the same name after 1999.

[2] Documentation of Toywar: <http://toywar.eto.com>

[3] <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/5/5768/1.html>

[4] www.gwei.org

[5] ART FID [F]originals – Authentizität als konsensuelle Halluzination, HMKV Dortmund, 2006; "(f)originals. Authenticity as Consensual Hallucination", Overgaden, Copenhagen, 2006.