

# Tactical media and DIY activism from the global point of view

The article aims to give an introductory view of the development of tactical media practices and specifically tactical media actions that took place in Estonia in the last decade, devoting separate treatment to particularities stemming from the local context: points where the phenomenon lagged or was interrupted compared to the rest of the world, as well as the commonalities.

## The global level

Tactical media have also been called the media of crisis, as the context in which they emerged is often linked with the crisis in the traditionally left-wing culture of opposition and the avant-garde in the West that accompanied the crumbling of the Eastern bloc, and the commercialization of the institutional art world.<sup>1</sup> The neoliberal hegemony of the 1990s – which is how it appeared at that time – had led to a situation where more critical thought had been stripped of a credible ideological basis from which to oppose globalizing capitalism. Due to Reaganomics<sup>2</sup>, the traditional islands of autonomy that cultural institutions had represented were also disappearing. At the same time, technological progress was opening up new horizons.

The term tactical media entered use in the latter half of the 1990s in circles dealing with net art and new media activism.<sup>3</sup> The idea of “tactics”

1 See e.g. Gene Ray, “Tactical Media and the End of the End of History”, 12 November 2006, <https://www.linksnet.de/artikel/20223> (3 March 2019); *The Interventionists. Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. Eds. Nato Thompson, Gregory Sholette. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2004.

2 Reaganomics was a raft of supply-side economic policies implemented under US President Ronald Reagan, which among other things reduced state subsidies for the public and cultural sector, leading cultural institutions to partner with private capital.

3 This manifesto released at the media art festival Next 5 Minutes in Amsterdam proclaimed that the revolution in household electronic had made cheap DIY media available to everyone and laid the groundwork for a new kind of opposition culture – tactical ethics and aesthetics. See David Garcia, Ceert Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media”, 1996, [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html) (3 March 2019).

comes from influential postmodernist intellectual Michel de Certeau's work *The Practice of Everyday Life*,<sup>4</sup> where it means autonomous action on a foreign power's territory, creative consumption, tricks and cunning for opposing a system that cannot be changed. Teachings about opposition in conditions of hegemony were exactly what more critically minded Western art and activist circles needed the most. Throw in the ever more available DIY media creation techniques and the expanses of the Internet, which were still being discovered and which state and other structures could not police with the control they exercised over physical space, and the situation no longer felt so inescapable.

The tactical media of the 2000s can be characterized, albeit in somewhat oversimplified form, as the application of hacker ethics to the real world. Initially, tactical media denoted internet activism first and foremost, digital intervention that "challenges the existing semiotic regime by replicating and redeploying it in a manner that offers participants in the projects a new way of seeing, understanding, and (in the best-case scenario) interacting with a given system".<sup>5</sup> By the turn of the millennium, however, the field of activity for the tactical media had expanded to all kinds of public space – be it virtual or physical. A number of important practices had themselves evolved fluidly out of virtual space: for instance, the groups Critical Art Ensemble or Yes Men started with online activism but continued on into the genre of physical actionism. Disruptive actions in public places and manipulations of the media became a widespread and effective tactical media combination. Neither medium nor message was important; the key thing was to create an event and thereby cause a discussion. Ideology was supplanted by the idea that any unsanctioned intervention in public space for the purpose of spectacle has meaning – even if the participants and organizers aren't aware of it.<sup>6</sup> Instead of the prescribed critical slogans, it was desired to give viewers tools that they could use to shape their own critical attitude.<sup>7</sup>

In the second half of the 2000s, a crisis in the media of crisis occurred, one that could be summed up as a question: what to do now that the tactical media is so successful that art museums and marketing companies are

4 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1984.

5 See e.g. *Critical Art Ensemble, Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*, New York: Autonomedia, 2000, pp. 7–8.

6 Georgiana Gore, "Flash Mob Dance and the Territorialisation of Urban Movement", *Anthropological Notebooks* 16, 3, 2010, p. 126.

7 Nato Thompson, "Trespassing", *The Interventionists. Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. Eds. Nato Thompson, Gregory Sholette. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2004, pp. 14–16.

interested in it?<sup>8</sup> Success can be a kiss of death just as much as failure, insofar as a large share of the most prominent tactical media practices have since ended their activity or at least taken a backseat. The tactical media arsenal has also now found use by different interest groups for very different purposes and has therefore become so self-evident that it is doubtful whether the term “tactical media” should even be used to denote practices or whether the term should be used more narrowly: as a cultural history category, as a movement that started in the late 1990s and stood out in the first decade of the new millennium.

### The local level

In the early 2000s, some ad agency professionals in Estonia experimented with tactical media techniques – the class of young creative professionals was among the first to have acquired sufficient knowledge and practical experience with liberal marketing models, allowing them to be pioneers in testing the limits of the new freedom.<sup>9</sup>

In 2002, posters with a face of a smiling woman and below, the Kohvirecords logo appeared on Tallinn’s more premium outdoor media spaces. As it was a company run by music buffs as a hobby, the question was how this sort of private label could afford such a big advertising campaign. It turned out that it couldn’t. The company that operated the outdoor media spaces was contractually bound to keep the spaces filled at all times, and since there weren’t any customers at a certain point, a decorative reddish-yellow wallpaper was affixed to the billboards. The people at Kohvirecords had a flash of inspiration: they called the ad agency pretending to be a journalist and found out that this was indeed just a placeholder. “We didn’t want to risk tampering with someone else’s ad.”<sup>10</sup> They proceeded to produce red-yellow posters with the Kohvirecords logo and under cover of night, they were fastened to the bottom edge of the smiling woman ads so that it looked seamless.

The media picked up on the action and the term “ad squatting” came up – the term was coined by one of the leaders of Kohvirecords, Villem Valme. The outdoor media company was somewhat irritated by the

8 See e.g. *Third Text* 22, 5, 2008. Special Issue “Whither Tactical Media?”.

9 A stylistically pure tactical media action that was exceptional in the Estonian context was an action carried out by Mari Sobolev (Kartau) in 1999, in the course of which a slogan with a text reading “Freedom of Speech” was unfurled before a live camera on commercial station TV1. The freedom of speech lasted 7 minutes before the producers turned the camera away.

10 From the writer’s interview, conducted by email, with one of the leaders of Kohvirecords, Villem Valme. In the possession of the author.

incident but after meeting the representatives from the record label, it was decided not to pursue court action and Kohvirecords promised not to do anything like that again.

The next such incident was in 2005, when the public space – both advertising space and non-advertising space – was inundated with mysterious posters and graffiti with an animal-shaped logo (later the hybrid creature was christened a rat-dog), with the letters NPNK underneath it. Word soon spread that it was a local squatter community that wanted to draw attention to their activity and get support from the city government. The NPNK website didn't include that much information, just a bunch of pictures of partying, faces concealed by animal masks. The municipal police announced that it had caught two of the illegal poster-pasters on security camera. The city government's representative, facing a flood of questions from the press, pledged readiness to discuss supporting the squatters if they made any clear demands or proposals.

A few days after the posters appeared, it emerged that it was in fact a marketing campaign for Hansabank, produced by the ad agency Tank, introducing a new bank card aimed at the youth segment. The counter-reaction was quite severe, a number of opinion pieces were published, most of which deemed use of fake-news marketing techniques inappropriate for a bank, and it even sparked small protests: some students "squatted" Hansabank's offices in return. Hansabank compensated the damage done through "littering the public space" and issued a public apology. The sincerity of the latter might be open to question, of course: the fine was already priced into the marketing budget, the campaign drew extraordinarily high media coverage and the launch of NPNK was selected as the marketing stunt of the year.<sup>11</sup>

The first example involved a small alternative record label and guerrilla marketing might seem quite apropos. But it is unusual for a market-leading bank to use the same technique – this must indicate a local practice where early capitalist anarchy and the subculturally mobile creative class typical of a small society meet: some of the same people were responsible for both actions.

The NPNK campaign remained an isolated case (rumour has it that the Swedish parent company was not terribly happy about it), and in the course of the so-called new normalization of society that took place in the 2000s, marketing rules and practices settled into place and large corporations have since eschewed any guerrilla campaigns.

11 Bestmarketing, "Aasta Turundustegu 2005 võitja selgunud", 6 March 2006, <http://www.bestmarketing.ee/uudised/2006/03/06/aasta-turundustegu-2005-voitja-selgunud> (3 March 2019).

Besides the guerrilla marketing stunts, a number of other DIY activism-related phenomena and concepts reached Estonia during the 2000s. In February 2008, Estonia's first silent disco was held in connection with the birthday of NO99 Theatre<sup>12</sup>. The roots of the phenomenon lie deep in resistance culture, in the desire to hold massive, unsanctioned protest raves in public spaces, where noise leakage would otherwise make it impossible. The theatre's silent disco, organized by the British entertainment company Silent Arena, was held in the theatre's interior, where there was no reason to wear earphones other than the exotic/novelty aspect. Later earphone discos held in Estonia have also been quite intimate occasions.

Local flash mobs<sup>13</sup> also date back to 2008. The first events got some media coverage but due to the low number of participants, they did not create bigger waves. A massive flash mob with 250 participants did take place that same year on Rakvere's central square as part of a student conference led by the student governments. Subsequent flash mobs were also mainly institutionally organized and held as part of European Youth Week or the Tallinn Flower Festival and the like. The spontaneity that characterized the original flash mob has not taken hold in the local context.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, 2008 also marked the import to Estonia of guerrilla gardening<sup>15</sup>. The term was mentioned for the first time in the local mainstream media when at the initiative of a journalist from *Eesti Ekspress* weekly, a couple planter boxes were added surreptitiously to a bus stop shelter in Lasnamäe part of Tallinn.<sup>16</sup> The non-profit Estonian Urban Lab took a more substantive approach to the city's gardening efforts: in April of

12 A silent disco is a gathering where the attendees listen to music from earphones. It is considered to have been invented by 1990s eco-activists who wanted to hold protest discos without impacting the environment negatively. The largest unlicensed gatherings took place in 2007 with about 4,000 participants in London's Victoria Underground station and lasted two hours before police tried to shut it down.

13 Flash mob is an event where a group of people do something unexpected at the same time – several hundred people might lie down in a shopping centre – and depart just as quickly. The first flash mob was organized by Bill Wasik in New York and about 200 people participated. Wasik himself saw flash mobs as apolitical and a way to create a temporary sense of community between people. The phenomenon quickly gained popularity around the world and began to be used for political and commercial purposes.

14 A comic example is an invitation from 2012 where a festival in Tallinn called on people to participate at a spontaneous flash mob. But the spontaneous event required pre-registration and participation in a rehearsal. Participants were also entered in a drawing for an iPad.

15 Guerrilla gardening is a phenomenon common in large cities that means growing plants on someone else's property – a median strip, rooftop, pot suspended from traffic light, etc. The seeds of guerrilla gardening can lie in aesthetics and politics (the desire to make the city environment more human-friendly and personal, the desire to draw attention to misuses of public space) or purely practical (growing vegetables).

16 Madis Jürgen, "Lasnamäel tegutses öösel salapärane aednik", *Eesti Ekspress*, 24 July 2008.

2008, a test vegetable garden was set up on the overhanging roof in front of the (now demolished) main building of the Estonian Academy of Arts (EAA) and, in June, the roof of the Polymer Culture Factory. Lectures and workshops on urban gardening were also held and a catalogue entitled *Edible City I*<sup>17</sup> was published, the case studies of which included the Soodevahe area of allotments in Tallinn. From this perspective, guerrilla gardening in the form of pot gardening in bedroom communities and makeshift dachas has long existed as a widespread practice in Estonia. Only since 2008 did it become seen as a civic initiative that was part of the modern urban lifestyle.

The end of the 2000s saw several art projects, held under the aegis of state-funded cultural institutions, which used the techniques from the tactical media arsenal. In 2009, Kristina Norman's golden soldier action called *After War* sparked discussion. In spring 2007, the cabinet had relocated a WW2-era monument from its location on Tõnismägi in the city centre to a military cemetery. The government's controversial decision led to riots and sowed tensions between the Estonian and Russian communities. On 9 May 2009, a golden replica of the Bronze Soldier re-appeared in the former location on Tõnismägi. Although the police removed the golden soldier in a matter of minutes, the event drew wide coverage and nationalists, war veterans, law enforcement bodies, the press and opinion leaders all tried to understand whether the action was cause for anyone to take offence and who that anyone might be.

After some time had passed, the press identified the action as part of Norman's project, which was to represent the country at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale. Regardless of the bad blood that it had brought back to the surface, the Ministry of Culture said there were no plans to stop the project.<sup>18</sup> As an epilogue to the *Golden Soldier* project, it could be noted that before Norman, a youth organization based in the Russian Federation, Nashi, also tried to exploit the symbolic conflict potential of the statue – members visited Estonia and stood in the former location of the statue dressed as the Bronze Soldier. Probably due to the fact that there was less ambiguity regarding the intended meaning of the action, this did not result in discussion of a level comparable to the Golden Soldier.

An even more ambitious media event was a NO99 Theatre project, the *United Estonia*, a fictitious political party, in spring 2010. On 24

17 *Sõдав linn I*. Ed. Sander Tint. Tallinn: Linnalabor, 2009/2010, see also [http://issuu.com/linnalabor/docs/soodav\\_linn](http://issuu.com/linnalabor/docs/soodav_linn) (3 March 2019).

18 Erik Rand, "Kuldsõduri" projekti külmutamine pole ministeeriumis päevakorras", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 13 May 2009.

March 2010, the creation of a new party was announced in the NO99 Theatre, followed by a multifaceted election campaign. The stunt staged by Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper quickly blossomed into a media hysteria; even experienced politicians appeared nervous and there was serious talk about a new populist political force that might spin off from the theatre. Almost every other day saw the publication of opinions and essays inspired by the actions, utterances or cryptic omissions of the NO99 Theatre troupe. The project culminated in the “congress” held on 7 May at Saku Arena, where the actors, with participation of the audience, ran through scripts that can be considered classic election manipulation scenarios and over four hours, the question of forming an actual party was in the air, before the performance ended and the audience was declared free to go.

Both of these major projects used techniques characteristic of the tactical media, using the lexicon of hegemony for critiquing the same power, and employing scandal for the purposes of inciting discussion. Both raised important problems and received acclaim from the theatre critics, public and government. Still, we should not overlook the questionable aspects that arose in connection with the tactical media itself becoming part of the institutional system: whether and to what extent the projects held under the aegis of official institutions were capable of preserving the independence they needed for a critical position and to what extent they in fact legitimized the status quo.<sup>19</sup> In one way or another, these were projects that are milestones in local art and theatrical history. This is the reason that I will not discuss them further here – the events have been documented and analysed sufficiently elsewhere.

Perhaps the aesthetics and ethics of the tactical media have been best expressed in actions that draw attention to the politics of public space, and the colliding state, community and private interests therein. It is all the more important that the daily media in the transition and post-transition era Estonia has for the most part not managed to cover public space topics to the necessary degree and that the issue has been come up mainly in respect to scandals.<sup>20</sup> The following examples are actions that for a brief period managed to spark discussion about public space and, by that means, social order in general.

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19 Kirsten Forkert, “Tactical Media and Art Institutions. Some Questions”, *Third Text* 22, 5, 2008. Special Issue “Whither Tactical Media?”.

20 Maarja Lõhmus, “Arhitektuur avaliku arutluse teemana”, *Maja* 4, 2007.

On 25 March 2004, an action led by EAA teachers Kristjan Mändmaa, Serge Rompza and Anders Hofgaard, *Now/Here*, was held.<sup>21</sup> A group of youths filed on to the Freedom Clock square, holding signs and banners. Various protests had been held before in front of the City Government, but this event differed from the usual in that the signs held by the protesters were blank. The law, it should be said, required that demonstrations be registered beforehand. As no permit had been filed for, several police patrols and city officials appeared to determine whether this was an unlawful demonstration. But the authorities didn't know what to make of it – it was clear there was no permit but it was unclear whether it even was a demonstration.

The messages were blank and the participants claimed they weren't protesting against anything. The police had no cause for active intervention but they remained nearby just in case. The white posters and yellow police vests caught the eye of the bystanders and little by little, journalists and news crews appeared. The non-demonstrators repeated to the reporters that they weren't protesting against anything. Kristjan Mändmaa finally explained to the cameras that it was a project that explored ways of occupying information space using economical and untraditional methods. The idea for the action sprang from the EAA Faculty of Design workshop "Means of Promotion", which over two weeks studied strategies for using the mainstream media to get one's message out.<sup>22</sup>

The workshop leaders were most interested in causing a media reaction, with the issues of public space and public order being a suitable means. The students' demonstration was covered on TV news, and by the evening of the same day, participants were invited on to a talk show on TV3 and dailies ran photo spreads. The workshop fulfilled its goal and proved that it was possible to manipulate the mass media even using limited means. It can be speculated that perhaps the action would have had potential to create an even more substantive discussion about the politics of public space had the organizers not revealed their cards so quickly. Afterwards, the press ran stories that focused, based on the model set by the organizers of the action, on the possibility and ways of hijacking media space,<sup>23</sup> but did not treat the issues concerning management or use of public space.

21 Interview with Kristjan Mändmaa, Serge Rompza and Anders Hofgaard. In the possession of the author.

22 For more on the workshop "Means of Promotion", see <http://nodeberlin.com/archive/means-of-promotion> (3 March 2019).

23 See e.g. Johannes Saar, "Parasiidid Ecsti meedias", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 25 March 2004.



There would have been fodder for this type of discussion, as shown by the fact that a large part of the online comments saw the developments as a protest against spatial policy.<sup>24</sup>

On 4 November 2005, an action by architecture students at the EAA was held, called *Fake Zebra*.<sup>25</sup> A zebra crossing had appeared between the Tallinna Kaubamaja department store and the main building of the academy<sup>26</sup> on Laikmaa Street. Crossing had previously been prohibited there – the pedestrian tunnel was some 100 metres away – but as the segment of road separated a number of key destinations, many people hurrying to school or work always jaywalked. Pedestrians thus embraced the new crossing right away and drivers also yielded to pedestrians all day.<sup>27</sup> The new traffic feature lasted until mid-day, when a former traffic official noticed the crossing.<sup>28</sup> It turned out that there was nothing official about the crossing, and the way it had been drawn also proved non-standard. In addition, there was a blue spray-painted text at both ends, reading “This is not a crossing”. The Transport Department filed a police report on the installation of the unauthorized traffic management feature and ordered its removal. The police opened misdemeanour proceedings. A check of the police and Falck’s security cameras identified three young men as the culprits. They had drawn the stripes on the asphalt at around 3am. The police alleged they could be “art students engaged in a prank or an experiment”.<sup>29</sup>

That was more or less what it was – the three individuals caught on camera were studying architecture at the EAA. The background for the action was the faculty’s critical attitude toward the city planners’ prevalent orientation toward the transport sector and commercial interests, which had resulted in Viru Square being scrapped in favour of a commercial centre, and directing pedestrian traffic underground. The idea was hatched in the Faculty of Architecture in the course of discussion and term projects and the project masterminds viewed the action as a proposition for changing the traffic patterns. The students paid for the paint themselves (prize money for a photo depicting the fake crossing and sent in to *Eesti*

24 As the demonstration with blank posters took place by the recently established Freedom Clock, many net commentators saw it as a protest against the city fathers’ policy of putting up pointless monuments.

25 Interview with two architects who took part in the action, Raul Kaivo and Toomas Adrikorn.

26 At the time, it was located at Tartu mnt 1.

27 “Politsei otsib libasebra autoreid”, *Delfi*, 7 November 2005.

28 Küllike Rooväli, “Politsei otsib kesklinna joonitud libasebra autoreid”, *Postimees*, 7 November 2005.

29 Ibid.

*Ekspress*'s "Flash!" heading defrayed part of the costs). The stripes were painted on the asphalt at night when there was no car traffic. As a last-minute addition, the disclaimers "This is not a crossing" were added.

The crossing action led to more substantive discussion on urban space and urban planning in professional circles, and the mainstream media limited itself to covering the felonious aspects. A more varied interpretation and search for meaning took place in the newspaper comments: the zebra was seen as a critique of urban planning or just a good joke. There were even more imaginative approaches. For example, the text at the ends of crossing was compared to Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe". The police launched proceedings but no charges were brought. The academy's administrators took a positive view of the action, recommending only that the organizers act tactfully. At the end of the year, the academy's rector awarded the action of the year to the stunt.

As an epilogue, half a year later in May 2006, visual elements of a crossing appeared on the elevator shafts of the pedestrian tunnel under the Laikmaa/Gonsiori intersection. The markings stood for former pedestrian crossing points that had been relocated underground due to the redesign of the crossing. The director of Tallinn's traffic service compared the case to the zebra action, saying that the police hadn't been able to apprehend those behind the last deed, either.<sup>30</sup> To my knowledge, these actions were not related to each other. A new detailed plan has since been approved by Tallinn City Government, calling for the intersection to become a pedestrian area, with automobile traffic relocated underground. Ironically, the EAA has now itself moved away.

On 15 May 2006, a parking lot picnic took place on Freedom Square in Tallinn.<sup>31</sup> For years, the Prussakov Cycling Association had done battle to make Tallinn's city centre more pedestrian and cyclist friendly. The association saw the car park on Freedom Square as the biggest eyesore and misuse of space: one of the most important public squares in the city was basically closed to pedestrians. As the theme of Tallinn Day on 15 May was "Green City", the cycling association decided to occupy the parking lot.<sup>32</sup> On that day, the city government was hosting a number of European mayors who were planning to walk from the city government building across the square and through the Old Town to Kadriorg.

30 Piret Peensoo, "Kaubamaja ristmikule ilmusid grafitina vöötrajamärgid", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 17 May 2006.

31 Interview with action leaders Marten Kaevats and Erko Valk.

32 For the text of the email call to action, see "Vabaduse parkla Vabaduse väljakuks", 11 May 2006, <http://mcelistrepp.wordpress.com/2006/05/11/vabaduse-parkla-vabaduse-valjakuks> (3 March 2019).

Early on the morning that day, a few dozen people entered the car park on Freedom Square, carrying picnic baskets. As they refused to leave the parking spaces, the Falck security guard called the police. A unit arrived but the occupiers showed them their parking tickets. After talking to a few of the picnickers in the squad car, there was still no indication of any offence, the police allowed them to return to the parking lot. For a second, there was a possibility of the impasse ending quickly. One of the participants wrote "Freedom Parking Lot" on a big white scarf. That would constitute a slogan and make the action classifiable as a demonstration – and since there was no permit, it would be an unlawful assembly. To make sure, the police officers took the picnicker and his scarf across the street into the city government building. The city government official said that scarves with text were not prohibited and so the police left the parking lot people alone, while taking up positions at a distance.

The situation escalated around noon when a larger stream of cars looked for a way in to the lot. Conflicts emerged between the participants and drivers. The police kept a distance but the journalists did not. Finally, one of the upset drivers attacked a TV3 cameraman who was filming him, which generated plenty of colourful footage for the nightly news and resulted in the press siding with the picnickers.<sup>33</sup> Around 2pm, Falck decided to close the parking lot, and the picnic continued, with the mayors expected to arrive. They did not – the VIPs had been transported in special buses via a big detour around Freedom Square. The picnic wound up around 5pm.<sup>34</sup>

In the days that followed, a number of editorials and op eds were published on the topic, where in addition to the issues of Freedom Square and city parks, the question about the rules governing demonstrations arose – in connection with a the fairly incidental case of the scarf.<sup>35</sup> The city government took a wait and see attitude in its comments, but deemed it necessary to note that they were not the ones who called the police. No official proceedings were opened by Falck or any other authority. In 2008, the parking lot was moved to an underground location and Freedom Square became car-free.

On 2–3 March 2008, the action *Little Freedom Cross* took place.<sup>36</sup> In autumn 2007, a nationwide competition for the War of Independence

33 See e.g. "Protest Vabaduse platsil tipnes kaklusega", *Delfi*, 15 May 2006.

34 Veronika Valk, "Park(la) meeleavaldus", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 19 May 2006.

35 See e.g. "Juhtkiri: Mäss Vabaduse parklas", *Eesti Päevaleht*, 16 May 2006; "Noored protestisid lilled, jalgrataste ja piknikuga parkla vastu", *Postimees*, 16 May 2006.

36 Interview with the leaders of the little monument action Argo Kerb and Rasmus Kask.

monument was announced. Although the chosen design drew strong criticism from cultural circles, the government decided to go ahead with the plan to erect the monument by 28 August 2008.<sup>37</sup> The first digging had started and the future monument location on Harjumägi at the edge of Freedom Square had been cordoned off. On the first Sunday of March 2008, the victory monument was standing in its place. It was much smaller than planned and made not of Czech glass but cardboard and plastic film tacked to a wood frame, but otherwise resembled the official monument. One could read on the monument that it was “erected without populism”, and it was executed on a scale of 1:8 and cost 700 kroons (45 euros).

The little monument drew interest from passersby, press photographers took pictures of the prematurely arrived freedom but it proved harder to get captions. None of the official institutions dealing with the War of Independence monument took credit and the idea that perhaps it was an economized option or stopgap solution was also quashed. At the same time, none of the officials could tell the journalists whether the DIY monument was something that should be condemned or not. Although officially and publicly, the installation on Harju Hill was not denounced, it was gone by the following morning. The fate of the little monument remained wreathed in mystery, no institution wanted to take responsibility for destroying the War of Independence monument, and the municipal police and police denied a role: finally word filtered down official channels that the little monument had been taken away by a waste hauling company doing maintenance in the square.

The idea to put up a temporary little freedom monument came from a Tallinn University student who wanted to add a dose of the absurd into the monument saga. The participants paid out of pocket for materials, with a couple architecture students brought on to help, the details were produced and the little monument was up by morning. Since there was active discussion about the War of Independence monument before and after the “little freedom monument”, it is hard to assess how much the specific action affected public discussion. The people behind the little monument are not aware of any proceedings opened by law enforcement over the stunt.

Discussions on the topic of public space were incited that same year by the so-called Freedom Posters, which were also the example of street poster art that offered the most fodder for discussion.<sup>38</sup> On

37 Due to technical difficulties, the actual War of Independence monument was postponed, and it was opened on 23 June 2009.

38 Street poster art is the practice of publicly posting graphics that do not serve a purpose of advertisement or inducement and have but an artistic aim.

the night of 13–14 March 2008, A1 format posters bearing a big title “Freedom” appeared in Tallinn city centre, with the following message: “We’re announcing a competition to find the best solution”. Most of the surface of the poster was left empty so that passersby could sketch their own visions of freedom there. The posters were pasted to fences and walls of houses and official advertising space, sometimes on top of other posters and ads. The posters were mostly taken down within the following week.

At first it was supposed in the media that it was an advertising campaign where the “actual message would appear a couple weeks or a month later.<sup>39</sup> According to the head of a media company interviewed by *SL Õhtuleht*, it could be the handiwork of “some semi-underground ad agency”. As there was still much discussion about the War of Independence monument, the *SL Õhtuleht* journalist suspected “anti-monument campaigners” and turned to some of the creative unions that had criticized the monument design, but they didn’t know anything.<sup>40</sup> The purpose and content of the poster remained unclear initially. The idea that Freedom Posters might be an independent work and not an advertisement for anything did not come up in the press.

No ad solution à la NPNK appeared. Instead, most posters were taken down in the days that followed. Tallinn Centre District considered it to be littering public space, and pursuant to the city’s rules on public order, they issued homeowners and managers of advertising space injunctions to clean these spaces. The Tallinn municipal police also launched misdemeanour proceedings.

The scofflaw heralds of freedom turned out to be a group of fine arts students at the EAA, who wanted to advance discussion related to the War of Independence monument<sup>41</sup> right at the heart of the events, in the public space. The action was funded by the EAA student government, 900 posters were printed at Polymer letterpress print shop and later the poster action was submitted as a term project in the seminar “Problems of Contemporary Art”. Although the poster action drew quite a bit of attention in the mass media and architecture and art circles, the participants decided to keep a low profile because of the municipal police’s investigation. The posters – sans names of the artists – were published/displayed in

39 Allar Viivik, “Tallinna ilmus kummaline vabadust kuulutatav reklaam”, *SL Õhtuleht*, 14 March 2008.

40 Ibid.

41 Although the War of Independence monument competition was announced in 2006, the terms Freedom Monument was often popularly used.

industry magazines and art exhibitions, including the 2009 Kumu exhibition *State of Affairs*.<sup>42</sup>

Although the removal of the posters and opening of the police investigation were not formally political censorship – the inconvenient posters were officially treated as littering – the loss of freedom, even more unexpected than the unexpected dawn of freedom, met with quite harsh criticism. The removal undoubtedly actualized the posters and added meaningfulness and drama to the action. It also changed the way in which meaning was ascribed to the action: the initial association with the War of Independence monument yielded to more general public space interpretations. A number of commentators saw the removal of the posters as behaviour typical of a police state,<sup>43</sup> and there was much discussion in internet comment sections about public space and the collision of private and public interests.

Other street poster art campaigns have been held in Estonia – of ones in the 2000s, the empty ad space campaign (1 May 2008, courtesy of largely the same people who were behind the Freedom Posters) can be mentioned, as well as the political posters produced as the EAA graphic art students' term project (2010, supervisor Fideelia-Signe Roots). They did not cause the reaction comparable to the Freedom Posters, however.

### Global features

Tactical media reached Estonia in parallel to the tactical media crisis, finding use in both grass-roots level micropolitics and actions that amounted to hybrids of tactical media and advertising or institutional culture.

New media art had quite a prominent position in 1990s Estonia, as it does now. Yet in the second half of the 2000s, interventions in public space and media seemed to start anew from a blank slate. The new interventions were by a different cast, the next generation, who lacked a deeper connection to the new media activism of the 1990s. For that reason, contemporary disruptive artistic practices in Estonia did not undergo a smooth development from net activism to interventions that encompassed public space, as was the case in the countries further West. Instead, Estonian activists in the 2000s took inspiration from global trends. The techniques sourced from DIY activism – silent discos, flash mobs and more – were

42 Art scholar Ants Juske considered the posters displayed at Kumu to be the work of Marko Mäetamm, but he was in error. Ants Juske, "Ja kuidas siis asjad tegelikult on?", *Esti Päevaleht*, 1 June 2009.

43 See e.g. Katrin Kivimaa, "Vabaduse plakat ja gaasitoru", *Kunst.ee* 4, 2008.

imported to Estonia largely as a finished product, stripped of the original critical context or anarchist spirit of experimentation. The toolbox originating from resistance culture, which had been tested out, refined, and made user-friendly and entertainment-oriented by the 2000s, found use for pragmatic purposes: mobs were used for event marketing, guerrilla gardening was intended above all to supplement the diet of urbanites.<sup>44</sup>

There were a number of original and socially more ambitious actions that used the techniques of tactical media. In the case of such interventions, the limited functioning of grass-roots level self-organizational mechanisms (and the alternative economics accompanying the above) could clearly be seen. Despite a few exceptions (like the activities of the Prussakov Cycling Association), interventionist actions were predominantly patronized by state institutions – state-funded theatre performances, biennial projects or academic workshops and academic projects.

This state of things is far from being self-evident (and is not characteristic of the entire post-socialist bloc).<sup>45</sup> Thus, we might speculate a bit on the reasons that activism-based tactical media practices reached Estonia after a lag time and with interruptions. As mentioned in the beginning of this piece, the reasons cited for the rise of tactical media in the West in the 1990s were the crisis in left-wing political thought that followed the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and cutbacks in state cultural policy, and also the new universality of digital technology and internet communication. Estonia at the turn of the millennium would appear to be an exemplary case in meeting these requirements – small government and free-market policies, the “tiger leap” to get the country wired and digital technology hype.

The fact that is perhaps usually overlooked in tactical media studies is that besides the abovementioned conditions, tactical media requires a developed civil society: capability of self-organizing on the grass-roots level, community activism and institutions powered by the enthusiasm of their participants. That is the landscape of ideas for which Estonia, a society that valued individual achievement above all, did not have and could not have had support. Collectivism was associated with the previous failed social order, free-market production practices were still new to many, and it took time to acquire a more critical or playful analytical eye for them (which, to oversimplify a bit, came at the same time as the recession in the late 2000s).

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44 As noted by the Urban Lab working group: “The manifestos [...] of the phyto-partisans have yet to be written.” See *Sõдав linn I*, p. 100.

45 For example, Belarus saw a number of socially resonant DIY interventions in the 2000s.

Furthermore, disillusionment with the institutional art world plays a major role in the origin story of public disruptive art practices – Friedmanite ideology made Western art institutions increasingly dependent on private capital in the 1980s and 1990s. This in turn led many more critically minded and socially conscious artists to move away from market-driven galleries and YBA-type star art and seek out new, untraditional forms of collaboration between art, technology and activism, orienting their activity outside the galleries, to the public space and mass media. In Estonia as well, state investments into culture decreased dramatically in the 1990s, but it can't be said that the dependence on private capital damaged the reputation of Estonian art institutions – on the contrary: capital from philanthropist George Soros with his global reach saved the local art world from complete structural collapse and largely under Soros's funds, the scene reoriented to Western art discourse.

The young, radical and salient art of the 1990s sprang from the union between the institutional art world and global capitalism. The negative side of the revolution, led from top down by this conglomerate (albeit an enlightened one), was the fact that there wasn't much room for growth left for self-initiatives, which in the longer run could have set out sustainable alternatives to the dominant art discourse or created a springboard for more experimental and hybrid practices. Only at the end of the 2000s did the voice of self-initiated project spaces, studios and culture factories begin to be heard on the local art field, and no doubt it is not coincidence that the most outstanding and programmatic Estonian art actions powered by tactical media techniques date from precisely this period.

*This text was written in 2012, and supplemented and revised in 2018.*