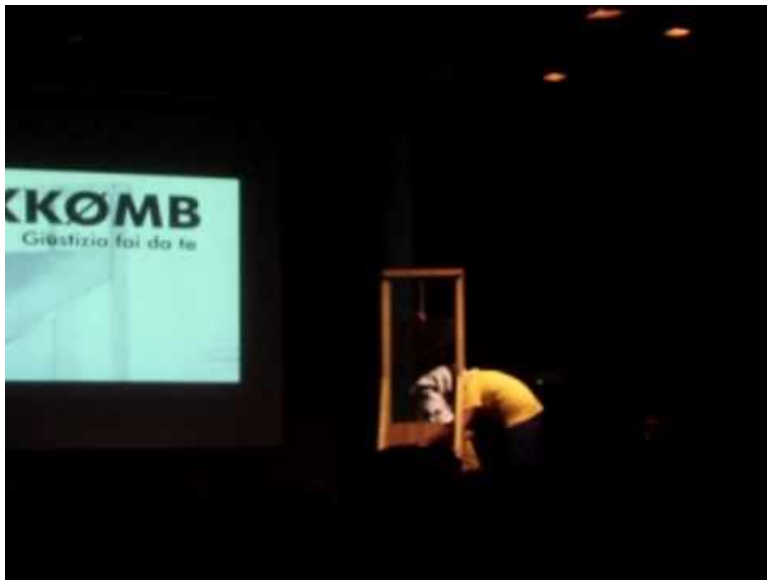
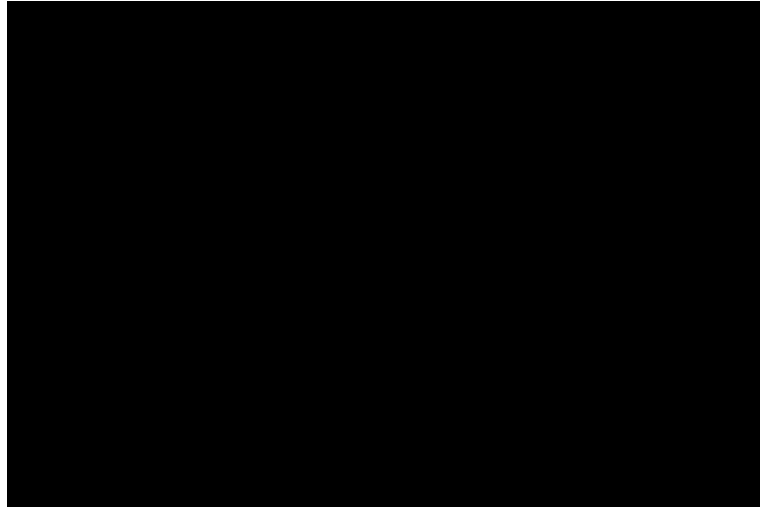


Hack the city Bani Brusadin

An IKEA store on a Friday afternoon in February 2010. A small team of workers in corporate yellow and blue overalls swiftly unloads a long package from a funky looking van (that promptly moves off the scene) and heads to the main downstairs entrance, surrounded by an incessant flow of customers. Another small team watches from a distance, behaving as normal customers. Once in the designated area, in a matter of minutes the first team sets up the brand new product: a cheap, mountable guillotine for do-it-yourself justice! And at a mere 99 € it looks like a great bargain, indeed.



SØKKØMB is the name of the fake product, which had been conceived and designed by a ad-hoc collective called Falegnameria Sociale (Social Carpentry) and among them the artist group [locose](#). SØKKØMB is actually not a fake at all, as proves this other video (from minute 2'20"):



SØKKØMB is one of the most successful cases of small-scale experiments produced occasionally for [The Influencers festival](#), that I founded together with [Eva and Franco Mattes](#) in 2004, a small festival devoted to a wide area of practical and theoretical knowledge that we label as non-conventional art, communication guerrilla and radical entertainment, and that spans from technological tinkering (with a cause) to political pranks and artistic hoaxes, up to symbolic battles and other explorations in contemporary public sphere. In the last 10 years over 70 amazing projects have been invited to represent a growing experimental scene of artists, counter-technologists, visionaries, and trouble-makers: for instance the [Church of Stop Shopping](#), a post-religious church led by Reverend Billy; identity thieves (or better said: identity “improvers”) like [The Yes Men](#); hoax legends such as [Joey Skaggs](#) or [Alan Abel](#); the thrilling and incredibly fun subversion of daily life of the [Cacophony Society](#); the large scale prank made by [Cesky Sen](#); the hidden geographies explored by [Trevor Paglen](#), who tracked barely legal, top-secret US army missions, and made pictures of the traces they left behind; [Paolo Cirio](#)’s ingenuous operations of reverse and social engineering; [Aram Bartholl](#)’s playful distortions of consumer technologies and their interfaces; the exploitation of legal voids by Santi Cirugeda’s [Urban Recipes](#); weird bicycle [gangs](#); and even [Twitter trolls](#), among [many, many others](#).

The Influencers quickly became very popular in Barcelona as a temporary home for people less interested in the artificial barriers raised by academic disciplines than the contaminations, cross-dressing and identity play incited by digital cultures and that permeated quickly among grassroots actors interested in restoring an authentic public sphere through creative work, no matter under which label. And in fact that is probably the key of the whole thing: removing the thick frame around what we do, occasionally pretending it to be something else, fool some people, surprise the rest.

The Influencers festival is in fact just an excuse to talk about the role of imagination,

media, and - why not? - art in a networked society traversed by often contradictory vectors of change. And to start dealing with the complexity of such a vast and complex field I suggest to adopt the gaze of the hacker: the passionate explorer of how things work, the fixer, the experimenter, the trickster. The history of computer makers and system hackers is actually a long history of individual inventions fueled by collective collaboration and vice versa, where repetitive investigations might suddenly give birth to sophisticated exploits or unexpected rollercoasters through the information “highways”. Evan Roth gives a nice, succinct explanation of how hacker attitude and cultures has a lot to do with making things and art:



Whilst the history of hackers reminds us of code, machines, and obscure jargon what we are dealing with here is something that goes well beyond the realm of technology alone: the evolution of popular means of self-expression through popular technologies, which at the same time became peripherals of complex technologically driven and socially mediated apparatuses.

Of course, the idea of taking hackers’ culture as a source of inspiration for something that is not immediately linked the development of computer systems is not new: at the beginning of this century, drawing from the [original spirit](#) of hacker’s [ethical](#) imperatives, [Pekka Himanen](#) described a fully-fledged, ideal work ethic of the information society and [McKenzie Wark](#) metonymically expanded hackerdom, turning it into the very key to understand how the relation between individuals, immaterial labor and cognitive capital dramatically changed in contemporary society (and Wark’s “A Hacker Manifesto” should indeed be read as a calling to arms against exploitation in the information age).

Of course talking about hacker culture or even hacker ethic as a monolithic construction is in itself a bold simplification, as Gabriella Coleman often [points out](#). Yet, there is something in this synthetic approach to the anthropology, ethics and aesthetics of hacker practice that might serve to suggest ways of understanding, and possibly change, the way we inhabit ...the city!

Many would suggest that cities as we know them today are often the result of some human dream gone awfully wrong: pollution, dysfunctional economies, over-population, hierarchical control over access and resources, uneven distribution of wealth are frequent, no matter how “smart” your city is. Still, cities are a place where we are trying to make life together possible, for good or ill. This means that the city is not relevant as a geographic entity: what really counts is what we are making with it, and in particular, how we are trying to turn life in a common physical space into a real, pulsating public sphere.

But what has the hacker’s ethic to do with that?

Something happened in the last 4 or 5 years. A wave of massive, grassroots protests shook the world, starting from North Africa in 2010 and quickly spreading [since 2011 on](#) over Europe, North America, Asia and the Internet. In Spain, the “15M” movement radically changed the political scenario and social movements, advocacy groups and citizen associations almost organically converged into a brand new type of party, ready to participate in formal electoral campaigns. Their vocabulary - and often as well as their practice - was different and phrases like “Occupy the vote” or “[Hacking](#) the power” started to be used in meetings and assemblies and (not without debate) they have also been fueling the spirit of those [electoral experiments](#) that are now shaking local and national politics from the ground up.

“Hacking the city” in this case would be used in the more literal sense possible: understand the rules of the system that runs the city - be it through studying its code or by reverse engineering power structure - and get access to it! Then you will be able to get out of power those who had retained it since the 80s during the so-called “transition” from dictatorship to democracy. “Hack the city” of course means making the code of the system free and its sources open, so that nobody will be able to privatize it any more. The new city will be necessarily run through a collective, cooperative effort and thus will hopefully become a more communal and functional space.

Yet, besides the intellectual challenge and the technical determination, in the original idea of hacker ethic we find something else too: the pleasure of transgression plus the politics (and fun) of performing and then sharing a compelling story. In fact - and here’s where the The Influencers come back into the picture - you cannot easily take neither controversy nor storytelling or imagination out of the hack-the-city equation.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, non-conventional art and creative activist projects take their chances with challenging the symbolic power of a system that claims to have

already defined all options for action. No matter what the scale of the system is: sometimes they face the power and opacity of the State; sometimes they push the boundary of what is acceptable in a supposedly public space. Sometimes the challenge is just on the symbolic field and is about the efficacy and consequences of an image. Sometimes artists and activists fight head on against toxic propaganda narratives, sometimes they live in the networks, making visible what slick interfaces or “social” platforms had made invisible.

But what if we see the city itself is a medium? A medium that provides interconnections between partial and often marginalized public spheres, where several debates and even symbolic fights are ready to emerge, reopening conversations that the establishment or commercial media just shut down (or at most are just mimicking with grotesque effects). This vision of urban space would provide a slightly more compelling image of the city than just the idea of using its squares as a stage for standard theatrical play or its walls as screens, like the more decorative types of contemporary “street art” seem to imply.

As a medium, the city is a complex device where many voices talk at the same time and of course not with the same intensity, nor through the same channels. In fact, the interconnection of social spheres, physical space, power relations and technological devices make the city look like a complex stack of layers. Benjamin Bratton describes the Internet and the computing technologies that inhabit our lives as [a “stack”](#) of technologies, whose [dark side](#) is so relevant that in fact defines the real meaning of the whole stack. Zooming in into Bratton’s conceptual map, we might be able to understand the city itself as a specific configuration within the Stack, where a constant war is waged over symbolic and material resources and whose purpose is to reestablish the urban space as a truly open public sphere.

The city would be then an interconnection of different layers, material and symbolic in equal parts:

- ● the hardware, that is the material and immaterial infrastructure;
- ● the software running over and through the hardware: this would be the set of formal instructions and informal procedures that make life in the city possible and viable;
- ● the "user sessions" would be time-based behaviors based on specific access rules, usually different by type of citizen, type of activity, etc.;
- ● on top of the previous layers (or maybe silently running right above them) we find the abstract layers that we could define provisionally as the structures of property, management, and the actual flow of money;
- ● but there are even more abstract layers, which unlike the previous ones are mostly delocalized: in analogy with networks and computers vocabulary, this

layer would be made of vast amounts of user-generated and things-generated data, in connection with a supposedly non-localized data cloud.

This definition of the city stack as a portion of a global stack can certainly be improved, but even in this over-simplified version, it provides a vision of possible entry points where grassroots activists and artists can hack into: each of those layers can be studied, mapped, occupied and transformed. Material changes can be made, dynamics can be subverted, previously unheard conversations can take place, new stories and even new epics could circulate through the city stack. As long as personal and collective freedom is at stake, this plan of action will become immediately irresistible and at that point, it will not really matter whether the aim will be bringing about new cooperative peer-to-peer practices to actually run the city or making weird artistic experiments and decolonize imagination. Or both.