

Off the Beaten Track– Online

Trebor Scholz in conversation with artists Farida Heuck, Ralf Homann and Manuela Unverdorben (NO ONE IS ILLEGAL) and Fran Ilich (Borderhack).

The campaign No One Is Illegal was started in 1997 at Documenta X, one of the most important European art exhibitions taking place every 5 years in Kassel, Germany. In this context the campaign asked for new concepts of art activism off the beaten track of the traditional political movement. It was clear that the campaign could not replace the self-organization of refugees and migrants. The main task was to connect refugee groups with alternative internet providers, medical assistance, pop bands, antifascist groups, media activists and artists, and people without papers from other countries.

Held in Tijuana each August since the year 2000, Borderhack is a platform located at a very strategic geographic location: at the place where the so-called first world and third world, the United States and Mexico meet. The idea is to hack the border between the US and Mexico: physically, intellectually and technologically. It is a very symbolic event, which brings people from different disciplines and sometimes opposing perspectives together to discuss, exchange ideas and collaborate. This annual event serves as platform, which includes workshops, lectures, media art presentations, border interventions, and music.

TS: NO ONE IS ILLEGAL looks at the internet with its potential for concrete change. Web-based initiatives are set up to achieve real life mobility for "undesired populations" facing militarized borders. How do you bring events such as the border camps together with forceful actions online?

FH, RH, MU: When we started the campaign we set up first mailing lists, which we used to coordinate actions in Germany and all over Europe. Today this sounds normal but five years ago the German antiracist activists scene did not make use of computers to exchange information. The next step was the so called online manifestation against deportations by Lufthansa. We initiated 'virtual sit-ins' on the website of Lufthansa. More than 10.000 people got involved by visiting the website at the same time and thereby keeping others from doing e-business with the company. The aim of this action was to tarnish the e-commerce image of Lufthansa. One of the effects was extensive media coverage. During the border camps we used wireless LAN (local area network) technologies to update our web journal, which informed those

who wanted to participate in the camp, the press and media staff. For the Strasbourg camp we will use streaming media again to broadcast net radio, which then also local fm or am stations will put on-air. We will discuss the digital divide in a very practical way: How can we apply software that is used by artists in a way that subverts the digital divide? We strive for a critical, reflected position using the internet's potential for concrete change. TS: Borderhack and No One Is Illegal both use the internet to foster direct practical change. Fran, in the context of Borderhack you curated the online initiative 'Border Attachment.' Do you think that this web-based action or the ones NO ONE IS ILLEGAL had any but symbolic effect on the situation of illegalized migrants?

FH, RH, MU: It was much more than just a symbolic effect. We tarnished the image of Lufthansa and other airlines which deport refugees. This did not only function on a merely symbolic level, it had concrete results. One airline quitted the deportation business and the state had to switch to other airlines. On the one hand some refugees could not get deported due to these symbolic actions and on the other hand the Deportation-Class campaign received a lot of media coverage, a wide audience became aware of it. This is very valuable because the demands of refugees and migrants in Europe are not heard or are censored. Symbolic actions can be an attack on mainstream racism.

FI: At Borderhack we use the net for audio and video streaming and posting of information related to events. We use mailing lists to save time when organizing events. The Electronic Disturbance Theatre organized a virtual sit-in (Zapatista Floodnet) against the unofficial website of the border patrol inviting everybody to participate in it. I decided to curate an interdisciplinary exhibition (Borderhack Attachment), which could be easily shown at galleries and museums, and also be experienced by anyone with internet access. For this exhibition many musicians like DJ Spooky, Scanner, or EC8 composed tracks on the theme of the border and writers Mark Dery or Douglas Rushkoff contributed texts. Then there were more web-specific works like a videogame by Jodi and a web-narrative by Trebor Scholz. Also some photographers and video makers contributed material. There was also a special edition of Borderhack related texts in Wired News, edited by George Shirk, editor of Wired News. That helped us a lot to reach more people. But then, of course, Borderhack is not specific to the net, just as the border is not only net-based.

RH: Europe's borders have extended into the internet through the Schengen Information System (sis) and the Watson Project, which are used by the FBI to exchange police data. Do you think that there is a shift of territorial borderlines into the virtual?

FI: Yes, control indefinitely more data-based now. However, there are spaces and people who are, to an extent, immune and exempt from such systems because they do not have any records or sometimes not even IDs. Then there is the wall, which the USA constructed to divide itself from Mexico. It reaches under water even for a few meters. The US government sees Mexicans as wetbacks who will do the hard work—the people who can be stopped by straight physical means like walls and booby traps, which isn't exactly a compliment to the intelligence of Mexicans. There are new methods to cross the border illegally being developed even as we speak. Physically hacking our way into the US is one of the less sophisticated strategies. But then there are counterfeit papers and fake IDs, and many other methods that I cannot talk about here.

Farida Heuck, Ralf Homann and Manuela Unverdorben are artists living in Germany, working within the context of No One Illegal.

Fran Ilich is an independent curator and initiator of Borderhack! living in Mexico City.

Trebor Scholz is an interdisciplinary artist living in Brooklyn.

*Wanderkirchenasylis is based on the difficulty of prosecuting illegalized people who are residing on church property. NO ONE IS ILLEGAL / <http://www.contrast.org/borders/> FRAN ILICH / <http://www.de-lete.tv/borderhack/eng/> TREBOR SCHOLZ / <http://www.molodiez.org/> Les Sans Papiers / <http://www.bok.net/pajol/> Non One Is Illegal (Spanish) / <http://www.sindominio.net/ninguna/> Human Rights Server / http://www.humanrights.de/index_en.htm