

reSource Chat with CiTiZEN KiNO (Dr. Podinski, XLterrestrials)

Paolo Podrescu aka Podinski is a community organism, writer, vj/dj/xj and co-founder of the XLterrestrials, an arts + praxis laboratory. Currently he produces and performs CiTiZEN KiNO events, a hybrid of cinema, theater and digital culture to encourage new forms of Media Self-Defense in today's climate of Big Data and the overwatched.

r: Can you start telling us a bit about the history and the background of Citizen Kino?

P: I have a background in music, theatre, film, and media. I was somebody who couldn't really decide which direction I wanted to go, but sort of enough clarity that I wanted to avoid normal and non-creative jobs whenever possible. Early-on I focused on music. The immediacy of expression appealed to me, and that shifted a bit into soundtracking and sound designs for theatre and all sorts of arts and media projects from there. And now they seem to all be coming together for some nice tactical or hacktactical uses. [...] I had different phases in Berlin. The theatre interest was a pretty unexpected one, because my previous exposure to it was really the most dismal entertainment forms. High-school and college theatres were so much like Waiting for Guffman (creators of Spinal Tap). But from my early days in Berlin I discovered scenes that had really strong and strange experimental languages – Robert Wilson, Heiner Goebbels, La Fura dels Baus, and two very crazy Kreuzberg groups inspired by that alien Artaud (Hundert Fleck and Jean- Marie Boivin's Theatre Artaud) and bands that were doing whole scenario events like The Residents were inspiring me – and I wanted to do music for things like that. And I formed a couple of my own briefly-lived performance projects: Erotica Asphyxia and Children's Tails. And [...] when I went back to San Francisco from here in the nineties, there was by comparison really a tiny experimental theatre scene in California. Performing arts often went into media making, tv, film, entertainment. Eventually I did connect with some incredible

things there – like 848 Divisadero, George Coates, Modus Ensemble and SITI Co. (some of whom were colleagues of Wilson), and a 2nd or 3rd generation of Butoh, which was taking off in San Francisco at that time. But then my attention – and one could say the times – were grabbed by more direct communications, activism and interventions like Indymedia, and that was a huge influence and transformation, and also the pirate radio scene, because I was still working a lot communicating with music. [...] And now even though I kind of left theatre for a long time, it's definitely coming back into play, because I'm constantly wrestling with this urge to escape the digital culture, net worlds, and make more tangible, embodied and confrontational things. Physically, mentally, spiritually... there are tools there to de-colonise oneself, and possibly one's community. And that's what I'm trying to mix into Citizen Kino.

r: When did you start the Citizen Kino?

P: About two years ago. But there were seeds of it that existed in XLterrestrials work, which is all about looking for whatever media make sense to respond to situations. This was always about arts and practice concepts, and culture jamming, which is just the name and shape of the fight before hacking became the necessary form. Citizen Kino is our latest thing, a good tactic I think, for now, to reclaim cinema spaces for something more engaged.

r: You write that the XLterrestrials are taking cinema to the next level. Who are the XLterrestrials, and in which way do they relate to Citizen Kino?

P: Citizen Kino has a lot to do with, let's say, hijacking points of view, even before the content hits the screen. And this goes back to before I was involved in Indymedia. I was on a trip to Florida dealing with an illness in the family, and at that time there was a NASA mission happening there, the Cassini Mission, a space probe that was precisely timed to catch Saturn's orbit. And some information got leaked from NASA about how dangerous this particular mission was, because it was the largest amount of plutonium ever on board a rocket launch. So if it [had] exploded on the launch pad at Cape Kennedy, or [blown] up in the atmosphere, this plutonium would have been released into the atmosphere, and it does not take much for that to be an extremely problematic environmental disaster. So one of the bits leaked was NASA's rather pathetic evacuation plan in case of an accident, which involved almost all of central Florida, and it would be the biggest evacuation ever. [...] A physicist in New York, Michio Kaku, you may have heard of either speaking a lot about the Fukushima disaster lately or his very popular book(s) speculating on future technology and explaining complex physics with nice anecdotal bits. Anyway, together with Karl Grossman they were writing about nuclear missions in the nineties, which had been going on, but this was big and would set the course for their ongoing collaborations with the Dept of Energy and the nuclear industry. And at that time I came up with this idea to do a zine called XLterrestrials. [...] It was as if we, the public, were being treated like extras in a military industrial complex agenda or film where you're just needed

in the background. In German it's a 'Statist', which is funny, like being 'just a statistic'. Like playing these voiceless parts in their [potential] B-movie disasters, and no concern for our safety. The zine didn't fly, but years later with some collaborations in San Francisco with a really great graphic designer/artist Asaf Zulah, it became a blog format. It was also the time that Indymedia was getting stagnant, and we were looking for radical new ways to do media... beyond the web too. So Citizen Kino is an extension of that. There's an ongoing position or point of view, often playing with an alien perspective. If you are from another planet, and you are looking at the earth, human beings and how they are wrecking and destroying things, what would an alien say? And would they intervene? You know, social science fiction and some non-fiction mixed in.

r: So you are tying all this up to present a political point of view?

P: A lot of it has been kind of deconstructing or critique of digital culture, because I've gotten extremely annoyed with this virtual migration, everything getting sucked into this cybernetic and mass communication agenda. I never really did, but let's say I no longer believe the hype that it's empowering us as individuals. Increasingly it appears to be empowering the corporations and the State on a vastly different scale. Not that it can't be flipped on its head, and used in an evolutionary way, but that seems more and more less likely in the current political and economic crisis. So a lot of the shows have been to deconstruct the [corporate+consumer made] Technotopia, but I won't stick

to this, because it's not healthy, and not enough of a win doing, this anti-thing. I'm trying to find ways to turn the corner, make the approach more constructive, pushing alternatives, seeking territories that can be won!

r: Is the archive you use at the Kino coming from your personal research?

P: Well, I have gotten in the (terrible) habit, after working with a documentary collective in San Francisco [...], of just constantly collecting media materials, clips, etc. And the research process, though not fully fleshed-out, is designed to be assisted by the public. Crowdsourced. A theme gets posted online and people suggest or alert us to clips that might be related. Right now, it's mostly friends and media-maker colleagues sending me links. And there's a not fully realised thing to have each programme's resources up on the site, so that it's an open source thing to be performed by others with our outlined theme and curated clips as a reference point for live-navigated cinema in other cities / venues.

r: You said that the Citizen Kino already existed in San Francisco...

P: Yes, and it comes out of experiences with various media collectives in San Francisco. VAN, Whispered Media, Indybay, Cellspace Media Lab, etc, and including extraordinary perspectives working with the Electronic Frontier Foundation! In 2003 as the Iraq war was launched, a group of us went on a short tour with a documentary film called *We Interrupt This Empire* about how the resistance to war took shape in San Francisco. We presented at *Next 5 Minutes* in Amsterdam – a fantastic convergence point for tactical media creators from everywhere, and I realised – for myself – it's those Q&A moments following a screening that I appreciate the most, much more than making and sharing the media to 'glotz'. So now with Citizen Kino, I try to make an event where the Q&A is the most important part. And where we search for the A's together or even just finding the right questions!

r: You also invite some speakers to debate with you. Do you select them yourselves or collectively?

P: It is meant to be a collective production, but I'm still building a team for it in Berlin which is now finally starting to take shape... And yes we sometimes have guests, Fran Ilich, Topsy Qur'et, Telekommunisten, Anne Roth, and featured filmmakers like James T.Hong and Yin-Ju Chen, Sylvia Schedelbauer, Jossie Malis, Andre Werner, Lara Lee are some examples. I had done a couple of versions before it was ever called Citizen Kino. At that beginning it was called XLterrestrials present *The Transmigration of Cinema*, referring to a kind of spiritual transcending, where one form dies, and a new one arrives. A little like *Body Snatchers* (laughs), though maybe inverted, we were coming to replace the drones. And it was riffing off of P. K. Dick's incredibly influential *Valis* trilogy work. We did a nice 'leftcoast' tour, and was especially satisfying to finally invade the propaganda capital – Los Angeles.

r: Do you think that Berlin offers more opportunities to develop a project like this? What is your position as a cultural producer in the city, speaking about opportunities and also difficulties?

P: After a period in San Francisco, I was really hungry again for the sophistication of dialogue, critical theory that was happening around media in Berlin. I was more likely to find my audience for this deconstructing, or now hacking cinema, whereas if I continued to do it in San Francisco, I would have to think more in entertainment formulas. However, there is a paradox about that, because while there is a great audience to present this in Berlin, I'm now urgently feeling a need to go against the grain of that cool, detached academic communication. So there's both an activist element and a show aspect becoming the driving force. And I'm keen on developing it as a tour thing, so that it can stand on its own economic legs, and without institutional grant strings, bureaucracies, festival circuits, etc.

r: Where? Still in Germany or somewhere else?

P: Pretty much anywhere we get invited! And I would like to explore German speaking areas beyond Berlin more. But you know, it's North

America that is really in need of immediate treatments! (laughs)

r: You also mentioned before that you were a bit fed up with digital culture. How do you see the importance of a network that can join politically and artistically independent spaces that are working with art, activism and digital culture? Do you think it is something important and needed, or should there be another perspective to invent?

P: If I understood that right, I do think the tools are extremely useful to get communities organised, to find collaborators, to inform, to structure new methods, to mobilise and to trigger actions, but I'm concerned when it gets sucked into a tech-for-tech sake mode, where there's just a kind of communications overload, creating a kind of paralysis. And when there's too little exporting into real world, or outer-world situations. One reason Citizen Kino went and re-appropriated an older media (physical) space is to extract ourselves a bit from the endless technological tweaking and banter, to create more friction outside of that game and industry, to look for alternate pathways.

r: Do you think something like that is missing in Berlin, in a broader sense?

P: Bringing scenes together often only happens in festival contexts, and I don't think it could ever happen enough. So this is what happened at the reSource event *Trial Crack*, it brought all those different artist[s], mediums and art organisations together to speak with one another and that can multiply its potentials, expand the languages.

r: It would be really important, if you could give me feedback of that event.

P: I really liked the gathering of the people. I felt like there was all this added potential, though maybe we were just getting warmed up to find collaborations. And I was kind of itching to say 'Hey, we really need to get together as a community, to unify, to be in solidarity, to come up with some plans'. Like coming together at a convergence centre (like at a G8 thing) and deciding right there, like in a 'Town Hall' kind of meeting, to really come together

on what we are going to do about a specific problem or towards a specific goal. At *Trial Crack*, not everybody was on the same page of the problems, or potentials, and I accept that. People are often just on their own wanting to figure out how to survive as an artist, express their angles, tell their tales, which is important, or how their organisation is going to survive, find funding, etc. – those are all crucial things for each of us. Many are in a stable or privileged place to just continue to explore what arts might be fun or inspire them. But I see us, and these times, more from the perspective of a collective organism trying to defend itself against what I perceive is going to be a very difficult period in Berlin, and in the chaos of a global crisis brought on by failing operating systems. On the local scale: rents are on the rise, gentrification is blowing up in our faces, similar to San Francisco's dot com phase which was devastating for arts and culture and diversity. People know that all this creativity is here in Berlin, and they will try to capture its value. And on the global scale: I could be wrong, but it truly looks like shit's about to hit the fan, like we've never seen before.

r: For the next meeting we are organising in August would you like to propose something to put in the agenda, like topics that we could discuss? I'm wondering if that Town Hall meeting format could work for something like a reSource meeting.

P: [...] The last couple of Citizen Kinos, I started getting into critiquing "gamification", an industry strategy to suck you into its platforms, and into the machines. I showed a really funny clip about Facebook's designs to hook you on collecting friends, and ways of getting you returning to its site as often as possible. Then I was trying to turn that idea upside down, and came up with this term of "Gardenification". One of my next Citizen Kinos will focus on a filmmaker Ella von der Heide, who made a documentary on community gardens and seed exchange, and this radical land-use resistance. It's called "Eine andere Welt ist pflanzbar!". So upside-down or left-side up artistic endeavours, in the sense that our creativity can be utilised towards expanding public and collective resources,

rather than succumbing to various corporate- capture agendas. In a Town Hall format, one could put a variety of radical 'art gardening' ideas on the table. It's not about gardening in the literal sense, although it could entail that, since growing our own food is definitely an important art of rejecting the corporate enclosures, but there are infinite other ideas that will perhaps resonate more with the arts and tech minds, which seem to be the base of this new reSource network. Here's an example of what I'm thinking: Here at Pfeiffer Café, they recently got one of these legal threats, where they got fined for some WLAN/Copyright B.S., because somebody downloaded something. The café had to pay up (though there are ways to fight it), and it's not a social construct which supports intelligent community use of new technologies, rather it's a perfect example of how rules are made by vested interest, those who wish to divide and conquer, profit and leech. If the community comes together in solidarity and responds, we can create ways to route around such bullshit. Those who are technically engaged with these issues will know there's community solutions like the pioneering Freifunk.net, which can provide net access with what's known as a VPN tunnel (anonymity of IP addresses). I won't go into detail on all that. But in terms of art projects, what if we as a community proposed to make an installation at Pfeiffer, or Heinrichplatz, which illuminates this struggle, and our options in the matter. There's no shortage of these scenarios because today we are aggressively colonised by corporate agendas and consumer culture, at almost every turn. And it's killing us. The art world can be an important tool or weapon in transforming society into something far more intelligent. To remix the situationist Raoul Vaneigem a bit here, tactical community arts can be our means to upgrade everyday life!

r: So in this way you also see the network that starts within the reSource empowering itself into more autonomous projects?

P: Things could happen under the umbrella of the reSource. That's for participants to decide. But yes, I can imagine maybe smaller offspring groups might be willing to take far more risks.

As transmediale has the eye and ear of many cutting-edge artists around the world, it has the ability to communicate on a wide-scale, and also to lure people into experimenting with some paradigm-shifting models. I think it's a really crucial time for festivals to think more about how to facilitate such local gardenification processes, seeding autonomy, rather than getting too caught up in the half-life of showtime.

r: What would be a difference with an outsourcing model? There is always the risk of "outsourcing" when speaking about various individuals or groups facilitated by a more institutionalised festival...

P: Maybe it's a kind of in-sourcing, because it is bringing together artists who are living here, coming to these meetings, and wanting to participate in upgrading the local resources, and maybe the strength lies in the fact that they aren't just building one-off festival experiments, but ongoing, long-term community evolutions.

r: Would you like to give us a statement about the cultural scene in Berlin, that we could bring to the next meeting? And would you like to tell us also questions to bring into the meeting for the other participants?

P: This city is an ideal place to experiment with new arts and practice models, in developing a network and initiatives which cut radical new paths to go against the grain of art as mere displays, endless beta testing, art as showcases, show time, and party flavours, theoretical dances, art as something outside our daily lives, desires and environments. But let's be real, this will require some heavy provocation, some serious cooperation, and dedicated community-driven countercurrents, even a little alien intervention, because anyone whose been kicking it here for awhile knows that the art world – whether in Berlin or Bochum - is in the habit of floating the transient spectacle bubbles. So who's ready to provoke the artists and ask: Are we ready to make our move to the next level? Because the old games aren't going to help us with the challenges we are now facing. And what serious artist would stand for their city to sink under the weight of tired tricks, predatory business

downgrades, dream thieves and mind-numbing takeovers?!