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If Protesters Can't Take to the Streets, They Can Go to the Mountain

By LISA GUERNSEY

EVERY year at about this time, world leaders gather at a Swiss resort for the World Economic Forum, an event that usually produces images of prime ministers giving speeches and, at times, protesters railing against them.

As this year's forum opens today, those who tune into the event may come away with another image: that of laser-beamed messages — of no more than 160 characters, each character about 15 yards high — scrolling up the snow-covered mountainside overlooking the resort, Davos.

The messages are part of Hello Mr. President, an Internet art project that is designed to collect the electronic musings of anyone, anywhere in the world, and project them out of the window of a nearby apartment and onto Bolgen Mountain.

People may send in their messages over the Internet, by visiting www.hellomrpresident.com. Or they can send them using the short-messaging system on their cell phones.

Johannes Gees, a Swiss artist, is leading the \$50,000 project, which is being sponsored by SwissInfo.org, an online portal for multilingual news.

"It's like demonstrating in remote mode," Mr. Gees said.

This is his second foray into Internet art. His first was an ever-growing quilt of images stitched together from photographs and



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The Internet art project Hello Mr. President plans to project protest messages onto the mountainside overlooking Davos, Switzerland, during the World Economic Forum.

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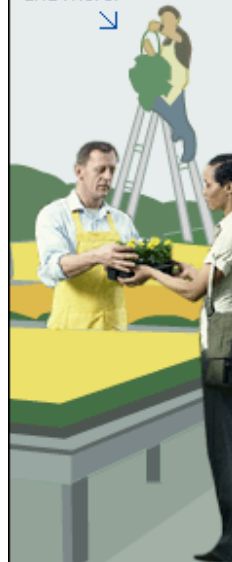
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With the Davos project, Mr. Gees said he was hoping to have some fun with technology and art while trying to open a less antagonistic channel of communication between protesters and world leaders.

Protests are expected in the wake of the upheaval last year during the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle. Last week, the State Department issued a notice discouraging Americans from visiting Davos until the world meeting has concluded.

It is not, Mr. Gees said, that he imagines that the problems of the world will be solved with this unusual communication medium.

"Definitely not," he said. "I'm not naïve."

But he added that he can imagine the project's conjuring a dialogue something like this: A worker in Mexico might hear about the project and decide to send a message from a local Internet cafe. About 10 seconds later, the words could be beamed onto the mountain's base. A corporate executive or Mexican official might see that message from the balcony of a nearby hotel and send a response using a cell phone.

For those who want to watch the laser show, a photograph of the mountainside will be updated continuously on the Web site until the forum ends on Jan. 29.

Messages must be sent in English, French, German, Italian or Spanish, Mr. Gees said, and will be reproduced in the language sent.

The team, he said, will try to post a wide range of political viewpoints but will exclude those that contain racist or profane language.

The messages will be shown from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. in Switzerland (or midafternoon in the United States).

Mr. Gees has also decided to accept messages only during those hours. That is the best way, he said, to ensure that the statements that come over the Internet are interesting and meaningful.

"I want people to think about what they are going to say," he said, "and not just sit at their computer and send something and then forget about it."

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