

This is interview between Jenny Marketou and Ricardo Domínguez took place in July, 2002 and it was inspired by the exhibition Open_Source_Art_Hack at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City from May 2 to June 30, 2002.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE ? *

The events of the recent history which followed 9/11 have changed the term of the debate about hacking, hacktivism and electronic disobedience leading often uncritically to a term of threat, criminality, cyberterrorism and bad things in the name of the public security. As we all know there are many kinds of "hacking" as it is the nature of hacking to be destructive and constructive as well as "to discover freely, to invent freely, to create and to produce freely", to quote McKenzie Wark.

Everyone can speculate that the internet did not live up its utopia as a new realm for free economy and "open source" unbound by governmental regulations, laws and legal restriction and corporate control. The latest project to come out of Washington legislative workshop is the Security Systems Standards and Certification Act (SSSCA) a bill under which it would be illegal to create, sell, distribute any device capable of storing, retrieving, processing, performing, transmitting, receiving or copying information in digital form unless they contained certified copy protection technology.

Artists, theorists, activists, hacktivists and artists collectives prior to all this have long been exploring through their works and actions various critical and crucial questions which pose the above proclaims. The artists in the exhibition Open_Source_Art_Hack which I organized with Steve Dietz at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, in New York, May 3 -June 30, 2002 are creatively pointing into the above debates about "public domain", "hacking" and "open source".

I feel compelled to mention that at the beginning of the exhibition Knowbotic Research the artists' collective from Zurich had become the target of the disturbing and constantly expanding forces of private parties which can exert control of the public domain. Their project "Minds of Concern" was forced to "pull the plug" of their website under the pressure of the museum's ISP who in turn depend upon higher-up ISPs to preserve their connections to the Internet.- who threatened to shut down the whole exhibition if KR does not stop the scanning of security systems (port scanning) to evaluate the vulnerability of a particular server to hacking attacks.

Ironically "Minds of Concern" was not the only project in the exhibition which ran into legal problems. The acclaimed artists collective Critical Art Ensemble and their performance Gen-Terra was postponed after the decision made by the

director and staff of the New Museum. They did not feel comfortable with the project on the grounds that it was illegal the release of a " transgenic organism" during the performance. CAE could only perform GenTerra in the museum once they jumped through a number of legal hoops. The tragedy is that both incidents address the political, sociological and creative sequences of a culture which is marked by the recent globalization, privatization and legal control which has resulted in the loss of a free public domain. Both incidents suggest that cultural institutions have not been able yet to balance artistic freedom for action with a dialogue between artists and museums which can actively engage internal critique from within the museum space.

Taking all the above into account the question that can be posed here is what kind of meaning and new media esthetics can be produced by the intersection of art, digital media and tactical politics nowadays? What is the future of the politics within net.art in the light of how mainstream institutions are more comfortable in supporting projects which are less tied to ideologies and content and more to the politics of software economy and data visualization?

RDom: The institutionalization of net.art vs. the institutionalization of network_art_activism are two different conditions contained by the same dominant trajectory of the cultural institutions desire to be digitally correct. They need to be digitally correct because they are seeking economic support from a large corporations like Microsoft etc., This means that artists become just another R&D group for these companies ? this type of techno-formalist work then becomes the aesthetic standard that the museums will show and gallery system will support. This circuit of presentation will disallow any form of work that is not driven by the code qua code eschatology of techno-formalism. One might also say the same for net.art that is part of the wave of database ontology as a frame. Very few artists or art groups working with code that is not bound to this drive are being shown or supported. Net.art must be digitally correct to receive sustained critical and economic support from cultural institutions at this time and even more so in the future.

Cultural institutions will only support network_art_activism that deals with suturing the digital divide or meets the demands of software economy. Works that disturb or critiques the frame of digital liberation or the essentialist belief in technology are restricted to documentation. Projects that re-route code to political content that cannot be answered or resolved by technology are not supported to the degree that digitally correct gestures are.

JM: Do you think " creative hacking" can intertwine within the mainstream visual culture successfully? And what could be the role of the institution vis-a-vis

the hacktivist artist? My argument here is what happens when the forces of the institution are confronted with radical, hacktivist net.art esthetics, when the emphasis is on direct action, transparency and agency? Or do you think that the museums and the commercial galleries are not any more interesting places for radical art practice? What are our options?

RDom: Also, as you pointed out above, another larger social dynamic which is occurring around the institutional encounter with even digitally correct network_art_activist project like the " Minds of Concern" ? are the pre and post 911 rhetoric of cyber-terrorism and cyber-crime that they are unable to see beyond. They fall easily before the digital hysteria of Empire and Terrorism just because they are using an ISP that did not support them ? rather than spending the time seeking out an ISP like THE THING that might have an understanding of the aesthetic and political questions involved in a work of this nature.

While, many years of active education of the cultural institutions by artists working between art and politics during the 20th century have taking place around the critique and disruption of the architecture of museum/gallery and its policies of presentation they fail to grasp within network architecture. These same institutions have not been able to leap into the networks with that history of encounters transferring over. For instance a performance artist might receive more aesthetic and institutional support for chaining themselves to the outside doors of a Museums or gallery to block access to them as a political performance ? than a project like the Electronic Disturbance Theater's "Zapatistas Tribal Port Scan" (2000). Not that one is better performance than the other, but that the somatic architecture of networks is not as well understood by these cultural institutions.

One, can also say much the same about CAE's bio-political performances and institutional response to "Gene-Terra" as a legal question rather than an political aesthetic question. Something that the museum/gallery would not do in the case of bio-formalist art along the line of Kac's work. Formalism has been the main containment filter during the last half of the 20th century ? it will probably continue to do the same during next half of this century (if we all live that long) ? it is a very handy ideological tool.

The nature of a radical transparency and direct action aesthetics as hacktivist gestures will not receive support from these older traditional spaces ? until more projects like the one you have just done are done. Pedagogy is the primary event space right now for network_art_activism, rather than aesthetic or critical reflection within the institution.

But, even then, are these the spaces that we should seek support from? Most network_art_activism that was done during the 90's existed outside of the cultural institution and can continue to do so. But, if we do not pursue the artists right to present political art via code in the museum/gallery, we would lose one of the few spaces left that allows the possibility of presenting an important form of knowledge (art) that is not bound to science and technology to develop important social questions and ruptures.

JM: As Lawrence Lessig puts it " Free content is crucial to building and supporting new content .The raw material of Culture is Culture ". Recently contemporary policies and practices towards the digital commons have changed. How do you see the future of the creative " hack" with the ethics of "open source" intermixed with the superfluity economy of the internet could possibly account for maintaining the public domain rich and diverse ?

RDom: I am not sure only one way or one method can suture all of these elements together as a full spectrum response. A swarm response will probably offer us a better way to keep the public domain "rich and diverse" on-line and off-line. At one end of the spectrum we should have legal activism on a local, national, and international level; and on the other end continue to push "creative" hack crews to open more spaces, like "Freenet" or the "Peek-a-booty" browser by Cult of the Dead Cow. Tactical media projects should continue forward at pre-911 levels and speed that are not dependent on the "superfluity" of digital economies and distribute free and sharable content. At the same time the digital Agora must be pushed deeper into materiality of the social across the arcs of the world. The digital commons must become more aware of what is happening beyond code with globalization and codes relationship to its expansion.

Those artists who crisscross between these spaces must bring to the foreground issues that are supposed to have been erased by the digital delirium: race, gender and class. No matter how much the virtual mantra about race, gender and class no longer existing or being important is ? it is simply not true. We now face a "War On Terrorism" that is part of a global race war that is also being used to dismantle what ever small gains have been made towards democratic values around gender and class. The "Open Source" movement and related digital issues while instresting are not going to develop solutions to these more complex issues.

JM: Taking into account your past involvement with Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) how do you describe electronic civil disobedience as "disturbance" in the rhizomatic networks of power as CAE refers in their book ,The Electronic

Disturbance as the only viable avenue for oppositional artistic practice in our time of globalization? How has this altered your artistic production?

RDom: My artistic production has always been focused on developing “disturbance” spaces as material/immaterial gestures within of the “social imaginary” that can be amplified by ubiquitous technologies ? be it in traditional theater productions, performance art, net.art, or network_art_activism ? even the pre-digital work functioned as contestational trajectories. I do not sense a deep alteration in my work between my collaboration with CAE to EDT, but a continuation of the same work under different signs. Even in the case of projects with The THING, fakeshop.com, dollyoko, idrunners.net, Coco Fusco and the Zapatistas. Also, 98% of my work has been created via collaboration and networks, so that has not changed. I still view everything I do as a type of agit-prop theater, so that has not changed.

The function of “disturbance” for me is a hybrid between Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theater and the Situationist gesture. It allows for visceral and political poetics to carve out social spaces for mass and intimate protest that can now be polyspacial. As for the “disturbance” of rhizomatic power flows ? this can be done if one understands that the flows of Virtual Capital are still uni-directional, that it is always been a one-way flow: steal from the bottom and keep it all on top; take from the South and keep it in the North, IMF growing and Argentina dying, Chiapas asking for Democracy and NAFTA deleting Democracy. So rhizomatic power does not lurk in Virtual Capital as a rhizome but as naked neo-imperialism, rhizomatic power does flow from groups like the Zapatistas who have developed distributed abilities that are not uni-directional. The goal of EDT’s “disturbance” is to block Virtual Capitalism’s race towards weightlessness and the social consequences a totalized immaterial ethics creates.

JM: Critical Art Ensemble advocates the practice of what they call "Recombinant Theater". How does this practice intermixed with the powerful theater of resistance that Zapatismo created has expanded in the performative Electronic Disturbance Theater’s direct actions on line?

RDom: EDT’ performance involves a type of Electronic Civil Disobedience, we do not say that it is the only form of Electronic Civil Disobedience. Our gestures staged a simulation of Distributed Denial of Service as the outcome of mass agency and digital liminality. We move among net.hacking, net.activism, net.performance, net.art, and those who have no net.link at all. To me this intermixing of social zones is what CAE meant by “recombinant theater”. Remember that part of CAE’s analysis

Virtual Power was a counter-mapping of Fractal Politics that could be used by resistance groups to leverage the inertia and speed within each of the iterations spaces of Virtual Power: the military/entertainment complex, the CNN effect, NGOs, the streets and jungles to invent new dynamics for social interventions from the bottom-up. The “Zapatista FloodNet” and the “Zapatista Tribal Port Scan” are radical aesthetic data gestures that disturb the ontology of the networks without being bound to the networks ? because these gestures play on multiple social spaces in the same instant, or as after effects, or word of mouth (the most important form recombinant theater as aspect of Fractal Politics). We also did not ask any cultural institution if we could do these gestures.

Zapatismo understood within a few minutes of ripping into the electronic fabric in 1994 that the Fractal Politics of the web was different than that of the networks. That the networks were about flawless code for command and control, the web was built in abandoned spaces and symbolic efficacy, between data trash and discarded groups. Networks are about utilitarian rationality, the web is about an ontology of empathy; networks are strong teleology of infrastructure, the web creates a strong social imaginary that can re-route around lack of access. EDT’s performative matrix has come to understand digital Zapatismo as type of theatrical empathy that the web can offer network_art_activism.

JM: I am interested to find out what are your reasons for becoming "a cyberhacktivist" as well as a "data body" performer? What are you trying to do when the two extreme entities meet in your performances ?

RDom: I was interested in the performative matrix that occurs when these two extremes meet and that one can see that they are not extreme conditions. The performances collapses the space of difference between the real body and the electronic body, the hacker and the activist, the performer and the audience, individual agency and mass swarming as any good theater collapses the actor playing Hamlet and Hamlet the character. I wanted to create a gesture that allowed that which is most singular about social embodiment and that which most reflects our contemporary social imaginary of digital globalization melding as a social drama/trauma in the new/old Agora.

JM: Why do you think EDT activism has been absorbed by the mainstream cultural Institutions as an art?

RDom: EDT was product of net.art.networks and Zapatismo, 3 of the EDT's four core members are artists Brett Stalbaum, Carmin Karasic and myself? Stefan Wray is the exception. One of the primary nodes for the distribution of EDT's performance was within the social art frame and our site resides on an important art site on-line, The THING (<http://bbs.thing.net>). Also, remember even CAE has the "Art" as a link between "Critical" and "Ensemble". So the history of the EDT is deeply linked to gestures that have been reflected on in the past by cultural institutions. We are certainly not the first group of artists who have worked from a position of political reflection and certainly not the last. An art discourse does already exist that would allow our actions to be introjected into the museum/gallery system ? but again, EDT has only been absorbed as documentation and not as a hosted performance. It is the primary performative element that has not been absorbed.

We have had support for performances from spaces that are not as bound to the museum/gallery system, such as: Harvard Law School in June 2002 and Ars Electronica in 1998. But, even in the above cultural institutions the aesthetic and performative issues were an important part of the discussion ? and why we have not been as bound by the cyber-terrorism and cyber-crime that haunt other forms of creative "hacking".

JM: Finally do you think there is a new breed of Hacktivism and Electronic Disobedience out there which is waiting to break out of the old forms because they are no longer relevant?

RDom: As hacktivism gains more and more influence among traditional hackers and software developers ? you will start to see new ECD methods emerge. The dissemination of Hacktivism and tactical media among street activist and NGO's will let them network the streets even more than before. The encounters between both groups will allow hackers to mature politically and activist to understand digital networks further. These actions will continue to be extremely hyper-local with international webs of supports creating an important form of bottom-up globalization.

Ricardo Dominguez is co-director of THING Tank (bbs.thing.net), he also is a co-founder of The Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), the group that developed Virtual-Sit In technologies in 1998 in solidarity with the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. He is a former member of Critical Art Ensemble (1987 to 1995), the originators of the theory of Electronic Civil Disobedience). He recently presented a 12 hour streaming media net.performance with Coco Fusco, entitled "Dolores from 10h to 22h" from Finnish Museum of Contemporary Art,

Kiasma, in Helsinki (www.kiasma.fi/ars/dolores), 2002. His essays have appeared at Ctheory (www.ctheory.org) and in "Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas," (Routledge, 2000), edited by Coco Fusco. A recent interview with him appears in "Cultural Resistance Reader," (Verso, 2002). He edited EDT's forthcoming book "Hacktivism: network_art_activism", (Autonomedia Press, 2002).

***John Cage in 1957 asked this question when he was teaching at The New School of Social Research at the time and inspired his students " to go beyond theconventions of gesture painting " and " convey the energy of the process".**