monologue about something or other for the NYU students. Their professor looks on, amused.

These layers of unreality are no accident of media and culture: they are, on Disney's part at least, intended to conceal. We can't hope to overwhelm this level of late-capitalist spectacle, but we can grab it, transform it, and reverse its purpose: we can use it to reveal. This may just be the old saw about theater being "the lie that tells the truth." It may be another example of the revolutionary borrowing from the oppressor for tactical and psychological reasons; Disney's greatest weapon is its agitprop (or, more appropriately, anestheprop), so that's what we use to fight it. Perhaps it's both.

Freed, we stumble out into the chilly fall afternoon, wondering what to do with ourselves. Most of us had set the day aside, expecting to languish in jail. Now we decide to sit in a great old Hell's Kitchen dive bar, its walls festooned with black-and-white photographs of jazz musicians, and discuss the day's events over beers. In a matter of months this bar will disappear forever, another casualty of the New Times Square.

And so the question remains: What is to be done? In a few weeks the Left will surprise everyone, including ourselves, by shutting down a WTO meeting. But even if our side were to "win" what does *that* mean? The idea of utopia strikes me as an antique, like a rusted art-deco souvenir from an old World's Fair. This is probably a good thing – for most of the twentieth century, utopia turned out to be just another boondoggle, like heaven was before that, or the S&P 500 is now: a justification for the horrible things that this ridiculous society makes us do to one another.

Among other things, Disney sells itself as a kind of utopia: utopia as the regulated, managed environment, ubiquitous and frozen in time. Everything one senses and experiences has been determined in advance and it all leads up to that climactic moment of purchase. We are trained almost from birth to forget the real world, the world that we can touch and smell, that contains risk, passion, complexity and interaction. In its place we are presented with the glistening, sugary parade of consumption. By using spectacle against itself, we pulled back the curtain on a bit of fake heaven on 42nd Street and 7th Avenue, and in doing so we created a real heaven. It was fleeting, seconds even, and for all I know I may have been the only one to have experienced it, but it was real. In that moment of giddy serenity, when Ron's sweet smile gave me the resolve I needed, when I sat breaking real rules with other people who were not being paid or coerced, when all of us stood up and, just for a moment, said no to the hypnotic

and formidable global corporate economy we wrote our own story. If that isn't utopia, what is?

This is the first publication of this essay.

ANDREW BOYD, "TRUTH IS A VIRUS: MEME WARFARE AND THE BILLIONAIRES FOR BUSH (OR GORE)"

In the following section activist Andrew Boyd explores a new and growing form of politics he calls "meme warfare." Memes are media viruses that spread throughout the population. Think of urban legends, fleeting fashions, and idiotic ad slogans that work their way into everyday conversations; these are memes. But memes can also be used as a culture of resistance. Looking at his own creation, Billionaires for Bush (or Gore), and other activist formations like Critical Mass, Earth Liberation Front, Women's Action Coalition, and Reclaim the Streets (cf. Jordan), Boyd describes a type of organization without offices or members, that is "united less by strict ideology or affiliation and more by a loose set of ideas and a certain way or style of enacting these ideas." These are political "organizations" that exist only insofar as they are an organized cultural idea; an idea that travels, virally, from group to group, is acted upon and then disappears. A supporter of meme warfare, Boyd is also a seasoned enough activist to raise questions about the efficacy of a politics that functions primarily as an ethereal cultural organism.

"Truth is a Virus." When I first saw this phrase, defiantly spray-painted on the walls of a suburban high-school, it thrilled me. So what if it was only a fantasy image in a Hollywood movie? [*Pump up the Volume*, the Christian Slater film about a pirate radio station.] It was infectious. As a political activist, it made immediate, intuitive sense; it became my mantra. I want to infect the body politic. I want to unleash a viral epidemic of truth. Eventually this desire, taking shape in fits and starts, became my calling, guiding my strange "career" in culture jamming and guerrilla media provocations. I soon came to see, however, that lies are also viruses. Lies and myth and kitsch and advertising jingles and corporate logos and mood rings and the idea that free trade is free – all of these are viruses. I came to think of the

matrix of hearts and minds and media as a vast theater of viral warfare. In his book *Media Virus!*, Douglas Rushkoff describes it like this:

> Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediascape. The "protein shell" of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style, or even a pop hero – as long as it can catch our attention. Any one of these media virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed. Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of *ideological* code – not genes but a conceptual equivalent we now call "memes." Like real genetic material, these memes infiltrate the way we do business, educate ourselves, interact with one another – even the way we perceive "reality."[1]

Rushkoff's exploration of "memes" fascinated me. But rather than viruses of clothing styles and pop heroes, I was interested in viruses of political ideas and action. For several years, as "Minister of Culture" for the social justice group United for a Fair Economy, I experimented with various media viruses, taking on issues of taxation, sweatshops, wage inequality, and corporate welfare. In the spring of 2000 we developed a very virulent strain: Billionaires for Bush (or Gore).

The Billionaires campaign was devised to educate the public about the twin evils of campaign finance corruption and economic inequality. With the pay gap between CEOs and workers at 475 to 1, both Democrats and Republicans renting themselves out to big money donors, and 97 percent of incumbents running for re-election being returned to Congress, these problems had reached crisis proportions by the 2000 presidential election. Our idea was to create a humorous, ironic media campaign that would spread like a virus via grassroots activists and the mainstream media.

In early May, I pulled together a team of talented volunteer designers, media producers, and veteran street theater activists. With support from UFE, we began to put the pieces of the campaign in place. We created a stylish logo by splicing together a donkey and elephant, and a "candidate" by digitally morphing photos of presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore into a single eerie image. Riffing off of slogans like "Free the Forbes 400," "Corporations are people too," "We're paying for America's free elections so you don't have to," and "We don't care who you vote for, we've already bought them," we created bumper stickers, buttons, a series

of posters, and a kick-ass website that eventually won more than a few awards (www.billionairesforbushorgore.com). We also created a set of more content-rich materials, including a political platform, a full campaign speech, a candidate product comparison chart, as well as a campaign-contribution-return-on-your-investment-analysis. We even made mock radio ads, pressed them onto CD and sent a hundred out to stations across the country. The satire was compact, funny, and politically on target. The look was slick and the message was unified across a whole range of media. It was quite a package. And we launched it all with a "Million Billionaire March" at the Republican and Democratic national conventions.

We designed the campaign to be participatory: a simple concept that was easy to execute yet allowed for rich elaboration. Through the website, activists could download all the materials they needed to do actions in their own communities. By June, wildcat chapters were springing up. In Denver a Billionaires squad barged into the Green Party convention and tried to buy off Ralph Nader, much to the delight of delegates and the media.

By the time we arrived in Philadelphia for the Republican convention in late July, we were already a minor sensation. Advance articles in *Time* magazine and major dailies, radio coverage, and Internet buzz had put us on the map. Our website was getting 100,000 hits a day (20,000 unique page views). Everybody was asking for our buttons and stickers and posters. Nearly a hundred Billionaires in full dress joined us in the streets, chanting, singing, burning money, smoking cigars. We also staged a "Vigil for Corporate Welfare" and auctioned off merchandising rights to the Liberty Bell (would it become the Taco Bell Liberty Bell or the Ma Bell Liberty Bell?) The media were all over us. FOX, MSNBC, CBS, CNN, BBC, radio, print, corporate, independent – it was a feeding-frenzy. An informal poll of photo-journalists voted us "favorite protest." We were certainly one of the more focused and cohesive. The Democratic convention in Los Angeles was more of the same. Folks there formed a very strong chapter, which included a marching band and a choir. My Billionaire character, Phil T. Rich, became a hit on the radio interview circuit and website traffic shot up to 200,000 hits per day.

As the campaign picked up, a hub-node structure arose. UFE became the organizational hub of an ad hoc network of Do-It-Yourself movement grouplets. In the weeks after the conventions, we'd get email and calls every day from people across the country, raving about the project and eager to start local Billionaires chapters. "Cheney is flying into town next week," a young student in Ashland, OR told me in a typical call. "I've gotten a bunch of folks together and we're going to meet him at the airport. The

local thrift store has already donated ten tuxedos." This student had first seen the Billionaires on a late-night mainstream news program. He then went to the "Be a Billionaire" section of our website, downloaded the slogans, posters, and sample press releases. The group chose satirical names for themselves, called to give us a heads-up, and went into action. While other participants first heard about the campaign through activist email networks or via word of mouth, penetration of corporate mass media was key to the Billionaires' success.

It took ingenious "viral design" to get our message through the corporate media's editorial filters and out into the datasphere at large. We built our virus by embedding a threatening idea inside a non-threatening form. The "protein shell" of our virus: "Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)." Our meme, or hidden ideological code: Big Money owns both candidates/parties; both candidates/parties are roughly the same. Elegantly encapsulating the core ideas of the campaign into a funny five-word concept made for a sleek and potent virus. This concision also served as an "inoculation" against distortion. Even the most fragmented and de-contextualized mention in the media tended to carry our name, and thus our message. If they also got our tag line, "Because Inequality is not Growing Fast Enough," then the message deepened. If they picked up modular parts of our shtick, then it deepened further. When they invited us on the air for lengthy radio interviews, we could eventually drop character and proceed with a straight up critique. The campaign had layers of code – concentric rings of more and more elaborate messaging. Each component was modular, compact, and self-contained. It could survive in a hostile, unpredictable media environment and like a fractal, still represent the campaign as a whole.

The Billionaires used irony's double edge – its capacity to simultaneously pose both a straight literal meaning and a subversive implied meaning – to neatly flip between the virus' outer shell and its inner code. In this way we could reach our two disparate audiences – corporate media and grassroots activists – at the same time. Activists immediately picked up on the various layers of irony. While the mainstream media could be seduced to "play along" with the literal, tongue-in-cheek meaning, letting the public decode the implied and subversive meanings for themselves.

Some of the most powerful media viruses – virtual reality, smart drugs, compassionate conservatism – are actually oxymorons. Activist viruses are no exception. Groups working to rein in excessive government subsidies, hand-outs, and tax-breaks to corporations hit on the phrase "corporate welfare." By meshing two seemingly incompatible notions into a new

concept, such a phrase demands thought: "Huh, corporations get welfare?" It creates its own unique conceptual slot in the minds of people who hear it. The phrase demands conscious attention, providing an opportunity for the virus to attach itself and inject its meme-code into the public mind.[2] The Billionaires virus made a similar demand: "Huh, billionaires are protesting? Huh, Bush *or* Gore?"

To be successful, a media virus need not be ironic or oxymoronic. It must, however, be mobile, easily replicable, and well suited to the particular vectors of the media ecosystem that it has to travel. The Billionaires virus was virulent partly because it was a carrier on the mega-virus of the Presidential campaign itself. It was designed to appeal to the media: it was timely, visual, funny, and accessible. It was familiar yet different: a new and provocative way to say what everybody already secretly thought. The virus attached easily to a range of physical and semantic "carriers" – logo, posters, slogans, fake radio ads, street actions, email, buzz, laughter, media story, etc. – and we introduced it into the media stream in a manner calculated to maximize its propagation. Content and humor were tightly meshed. Not only did the humor help carry the content (in the way that laughter makes it easier to bear the truth), but if the media wanted the humor (and they did), they had to take the content too. The materials were catchy and accessible and the action model was easy to DIY. Thus the meme "spread, replicated, and mutated."

Mutation was an issue, however. We, the virus designers, wanted participants to take the core idea and make it their own – to "run with it" – but we also wanted to control the degree and kinds of mutation. There was a deliberate effort to keep the core ideological code stable, while allowing wildcat chapters and interested DIYers to adapt the various code-carriers (as well as outer layers of code) to fit their own circumstances and creative inclinations.

"The task of an organizer," a movement veteran once told me, "is to set up structures so people can participate." In this sense, a meme might serve as a "virtual structure." In the Billionaires campaign, both virtual and real structures worked together to shape and steer the campaign. The hub was a meme arsenal, here we designed the core ideas and launched the call to action. Once things got rolling, several mechanisms helped us steer the campaign. One was the website. Another was the Million Billionaire March, which modeled the kinds of actions people could do in their home cities. Finally, it was the shtick and the materials themselves. Jokes were funny, content was thoroughly researched, graphic production values were high. People liked the package and were naturally drawn to stay on message.

With a strong central concept and tight message discipline across all the materials, the mutations that developed in the field generally tended to be extensions of, rather than departures from the basic framework. Most of the mutations were "tweaks," where people elaborated the main campaign by devising their own slogans, parody songs, or actions. Others were "clones." Here people came up with their own sister campaigns, such as Billionaires for Closed Debates which took on the monopolizing of the Presidential debates by the two major parties, and Billionaires for More Media Mergers which protested growing media concentration at the National Association of Broadcasters in San Francisco that fall. In most of these cases, even when the wildcat DIY actions got scrappy and somewhat tangential, the core idea came through, and the whole campaign was of a piece.

Of course, I'm not the only activist waging viral warfare. In recent years new kinds of cultural resistance and social movement formations have appeared that understand – if not consciously, then at least intuitively – that their terrain of struggle is a "viral space."[3] These formations – Woman's Action Coalition, Reclaim the Streets, Lesbian Avengers, Earth Liberation Front, Radical Cheerleaders, and Critical Mass, to name several – are often composed of loosely structured networks, don't have a single central organization with files, offices, members, etc., and often coalesce for a certain purpose or action and then dissolve. They are united less by strict ideology or affiliation and more by a loose set of ideas and a certain way or style of enacting these ideas. The cultural practices of these micro-movements spread virally, often via the Internet, but also via other media – both grassroots and corporate.

The Critical Mass bicycle rides are a good example. The format is simple, fun, and easy to replicate. On the last Friday of every month, bicycle activists and enthusiasts gather for a mass unpermitted ride through the city. With a combination of moxie and sheer numbers they take the streets. The rides are celebratory, self-organizing, and open to all. The ideological code – "bikes are traffic, deal with it" – is perfectly embodied by the action. Dubbed "organized coincidences," these rides arose in San Francisco in the late 1980s and quickly spread across the globe.

Viruses happen. Viruses are also made to happen. Some radical viruses (cultural formations such as Reclaim the Streets and Critical Mass) evolve more or less organically out of communities of resistance, while others (media campaigns such as the Billionaires) are more consciously designed and injected into the mediastream. In both cases there's an ideological code as well as a viral shell. In pop culture, we've seen how a viral shell can be made of almost anything – from an advertising jingle to a new technology.

For activist viruses, the viral shell is often a model of participatory action. For RTS the ideological code was a utopian demand to resist capital and liberate public space; the action model was a militant street carnival. It was the RTS action model that drove its viral explosion. People across the world grabbed onto the carnival, replicated it, and mutated it in their own way. As with Critical Mass, the RTS ideological code was elegantly embedded in the action itself. By doing the action, participants live the code themselves as well as deploy the code for others to reckon with. In the Billionaires campaign, the action model, though an important component, did not drive the campaign; it was more the sly and funny propaganda packaging of the ideological code.

Rushkoff speaks of a "viral syringe," an initial event that injects the virus into the datastream. For the Billionaires this was primarily accomplished through the Million Billionaire March. For the movement against sweatshops, it was the Kathie Lee Gifford scandal – the revelation that a popular female celebrity was having her personal line of designer clothing produced by young immigrant women working under sweatshop conditions. By craftily orchestrating the exposé and then riding the resulting scandal for all it was worth, activists mainlined sweatshops into the American psyche. However it is launched, a truly successful virus must eventually take on a life of its own, demonstrating self-sustaining and self-evolving properties. Either it must infect the code of mainstream discourse and permanently change the habits of mainstream institutions as the Kathie Lee sweatshop scandal did or it must create alternative ongoing institutions that carry and reproduce the living meme. In this sense RTS and Critical Mass are more successful memes than the Billionaires. The Billionaire campaign was time-delimited by the presidential campaign. RTS and Critical Mass were more universal and more fostering of community – a community that has sustained and spread the meme.

Because they coalesce around an idea and/or a mode of action, rather than an organization, movements based on memes tend to be "cheap, fast, and out of control" (to borrow a phrase often used to describe the life-like behaviors of complex systems and dense information networks).[4] Cheap and fast are generally good qualities for a grass-roots movement. Out of control is a mixed blessing: on the one hand, they tend to spread quickly; on the other hand, they sometimes die just as quickly. This was the case for the Women's Action Coalition, the dynamic feminist direct action group. At its height in 1993 WAC had 300 women coming to weekly meetings (in New York alone), a furious barrage of actions and press coverage, and copycat chapters around the world, but by 1995 it had folded. Meme-based

movements may generate passionate community and a white-hot intensity of action, but unless there's an ongoing mass ritual such as monthly Critical Mass rides or unless they develop some kind of organizational infrastructure they tend not to last.

Sometimes a meme-based movement hits upon just the right form of "non-organization" to keep itself going. This seems to be the case with the mysterious and controversial Earth Liberation Front. The ELF is an underground movement of autonomous groups who carry out economic sabotage to protect the environment. They have been linked to various acts of property destruction around the US, including $12 million in arson damage to a ski resort in Vail, Colorado, that was threatening endangered lynx habitat. A bookstore owner in Oregon (who is unconnected to any of the clandestine actions) acts as the legal spokesperson for the group. Seen through a viral lens, ELF might not be an organization at all, but more aptly described as "a meme with a press office." The various cells are turned on by the same idea, copy-cat each other's actions, and simply use the same name when they send in their communiqués. This form of meme-based "non-organization" seems to work for ELF: they are able to maintain security, encourage many separate independent actions, and still generate an influential media profile.

While ELF and other political activists have adapted viral structures to grow their resistance movements, media activists have pioneered a new form of hand-to-hand viral combat: culture jamming. Like the pranksters who creatively deface billboards, culture jammers hack into the genetic code of a corporate media virus and turn it against itself. One Uniroyal Tires ad showed a Latin American peasant under the slogan "He Knows Three English Words: Boy George, Uniroyal." With a ladder and deft use of spray paint, billboard bandits changed the three words to read "Yankee Go Home," and in so doing not only revealed the original corporate strategy but repurposed it to subversive ends.

Advertising imagery is the ultimate stealth virus. It has long been post- or pre-rational, operating by subconscious association, by veiled promise and threat, by mobilizing our longings and our dreamworld. Rational critique can't find a handle by which to challenge such a worldview. *Adbusters* magazine, the Vancouver-based anti-commercial glossy well known for its sly reworkings of corporate logos and ad campaigns, understands that culture jamming can stick where rational discourse slides off. In one of their classic "subvertisements" *Adbusters* took a Kool cigarettes logo, kept the exact color and typeface but changed the "K" to "F" and then placed it above a glossy shot of a young man half-coyly, half cluelessly smoking a

cigarette. Such a pastiched image operates much like a "meme vaccine," interrupting our consumer trance and redirecting our attention. Culture jamming fights virus with virus. Over the last decade it has itself become a virulent meme, spreading far and wide and encompassing a myriad of new sub-cultural forms.[5]

If culture jamming works as a "meme vaccine," the website www.posternation.org, begun by Wesleyan art students in the mid nineties and later handed over to United for a Fair Economy, was designed as a "viral engine." The principle, "Nationwide Saturation Postering," is deceptively simple. On selected action days (Tax Day, July 4, etc.) decentralized guerrilla street-postering teams simultaneously put up a similar set of posters all across the country. The website displays the posters in easy-to-download-and-print PDF format, and facilitates the setting up of teams. A core set of themed posters are provided (the first theme was "Tax the Rich," later themes included the Billionaires) and new posters can be added by participants so long as they fit the current theme. Not only does the message spread virally, but the project does as well: every poster includes the Posternation logo and website address and thus becomes a viral advertisement for the site and campaign as a whole. Once launched and nurtured past a certain point, the project becomes largely self-organizing and almost infinitely scalable. New structures such as posternation.org, that take advantage of the Internet and new viral styles of communication, should be a spur to activists to re-imagine what is possible.

All viruses are not created equal. Some spread faster, some last longer, some mutate into more and less resistant strains, some lie dormant for years and then explode, some get injected into the media body in massive $40 million Madison Avenue dosages, some travel its hidden pathways. Some happily co-exist, some compete, while some are carriers on others. The dense complexity of networks within the infosphere cause it to operate much like an ecosystem: a huge self-organizing interpenetrating organism, a system so large and complex that it is, in a sense, wild and "out of control," or at least can't be programmed or controlled from any one point or by any one entity. Viewing the overall media body as an ecology can help activists switch focus from the hard boundaries of commercial vs. non-commercial, mainstream vs. sidestream, and top-down vs. bottom-up to a more fluid and nuanced model.[6]

Up to this point, I have emphasized the importance of memes and suggested ways to integrate an operational understanding of memes into our strategies of movement building. But a movement must also exist physically and institutionally, not just virtually. It is not an either/or thing. It is a false

dichotomy to associate new/good with an ephemeral meme-based community of resistance and old/bad with a lumbering industrial-era beast of meetings and membership and ideology. There is a spectrum. Within any broad social movement – feminism, for example – there are groups that are more meme-based, such as the Women's Action Coalition and more institutionally-based such as the National Organization of Women, with its mass membership, multi-million dollar budget, and focus on policy and lobbying. Successful, long-term social movements will always include both types. These opposed tendencies are an expression of the eternal dialectic between movement building and organization building. Similar tensions existed between the go-with-the-meme-of-the-moment attitude of the loosely-affiliated Billionaires grass-roots base and United for a Fair Economy's mission which required building organizational muscle and clout in order to pursue a broad social justice agenda over the long haul. But while there was tension, there was also a great deal of synchronicity. UFE provided a campaign framework, funding, infrastructure, research capacity, media contacts, and mainstream legitimacy. The grass-roots injected energy, street smarts, and creative elaboration of the core ideas. The Billionaires campaign suggests a model for how hub and node can work together to invite open-ended DIY participation into creative actions and yet maintain artistic cohesion and a focused message.

Social movements cannot live by meme alone. Yet memes are clearly powerful – both analytically and operationally. A vital movement requires a hot and happening meme. The Declaration of Independence, the Communist Manifesto, sit-down strikes in the Thirties, campus building take-overs in the Sixties – arguably, these were all memes – no more or less, maybe, than the militant street carnival of the past decade. What is different in each case is the shape and flow of the specific media pathways these memes must travel and the culture with which they must connect. The contemporary movements profiled here and the techniques they have pioneered will hopefully be of service to those of us who believe that truth is a virus and whose aim is to subvert the corporate meme-machine with a sly guerrilla war of signs.

This is the first publication of this essay.

RICARDO DOMINGUEZ, "ELECTRONIC DISTURBANCE: AN INTERVIEW"

As more and more of our economic, political, and everyday communication moves online, electronic methods of protest are becoming more and more important. Ricardo Dominguez, co-founder of Electronic Disturbance Theater and co-creator of the popular webjamming tool FloodNet, understands this, and in the following interview elaborates on why this is so. What makes Dominguez's understanding of electronic activism so noteworthy is his insistence that EDT's activism be understood as theater. It sounds crazy but it makes sense. The web is merely the technological extension of a larger historical process: the growth of the mediated world, one of signs and symbols, meanings and understandings. This semiotic system, performed everyday, has real economic and political power – think of the stock market for instance. EDT actions function within this larger drama as a cultural counter-performance, an informational intervention: harnessing networks, clogging up websites, and generating hype (see sidebars). Dominguez's interview is a nice way to close this book, for not only does it point to the future of activism, but it reaches back to tell the life history and political education of an activist who uses culture in the service of politics in the present. And in the end there is another beginning. Dominguez finishes his story by spinning a new one: a fantastic tale to illustrate the sober truth that simple gestures and small cultural acts have the power to upset the most formidable of foes.

I was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, 1959, May 2. Las Vegas was like living in three different worlds. One was the *Happy Days* world of the Mormons, where everyone was pure and nice and no one smoked, nobody drank and nobody even had coffee. The other world was the world of the Godfather, one of cool mobsters and occasional lawyers being blown up, and everything was legal: prostitution, gambling, everything else. And then the third world was the *X-Files* world. Ninety-eight percent of Nevada is owned by the government, some of the most secretive installations in the world are in Nevada. And right across the mountain, on the other side of Las Vegas is the nuclear test site. So I grew up, every Saturday at twelve o'clock in the afternoon, hearing the sirens go off and we would get up, run to the top of the Mint Hotel, and wait for the bombs to set off and the entire earth would turn into these waves.

In a certain sense my political consciousness came not so much from an exterior politicized context but more from a popular culture context. At the same time that these nuclear bombs were going off, I was watching Saturday

Electronic Civil Disobedience, Critical Art Ensemble

At one time the control of the street was a valued item. In 19th century Paris the streets were the conduits for the mobility of power, whether it was economic or military in nature. If the streets were blocked, and key political fortresses were occupied, the state became inert, and in some cases collapsed under its own weight. This method of resistance was still useful up through the 60s, yet since the end of the 19th century it has yielded diminishing returns, and has drifted from being a radical practice to a liberal one. This strategy is grounded in the fact that capital is centralized within cities, as capital has become increasingly decentralized, breaking through national boundaries and abandoning the cities, street action has become increasingly useless. Street activism has become an anachronism now that there is no longer any geographic or physical center of economic or political power.

. . .

CAE has said it before, and we will say it again: as far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital! Nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently run and maintain state institutions. For CD to have any meaningful effect, the resisters must appropriate something of value to the state. Once they have an object of value the resisters have a platform from which they may bargain for change.

. . .

The strategy and tactics of ECD should not be a mystery to any

activists. They are the same as tradi-
tional CD. ECD is a nonviolent
activity by its very nature, since
oppositional forces never physically
confront one another. As in CD, the
primary tactics in ECD are trespass
and blockage. Exits, entrances, con-
duits, and other key spaces must be
occupied by the contestational force
in order to bring pressure on legit-
imized institutions engaged in
unethical or criminal actions. Blockin
information conduits is analogous to
blocking physical locations; however,
electronic blockage can cause finan-
cial stress that physical blockage
cannot, and it can be used beyond
the local level. ECD is CD reinvigo-
rated. What CD once was, ECD is
now.

From *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, pamphlet, 1995, pp. 3 and 7

afternoon matinées about people with nuclear radiation turning into giant bugs or growing third eyes . . . and Blaxploitation films in North Las Vegas. Blaxploitation films were highly political: they were attacking the white man who was usually in power. For instance, I remember one of the important films for me was a film called *Three the Hard Way* with Jim Kelly, James Brown, and Fred Williamson, where they discover that there's these Nazi fascists in Florida who are developing a virus that will kill only black people. There was also science fiction films like *Soylent Green* where they discover that governments eat people, *THX1138* where the only value a human being has is the price of that individual and if you overrun that price then you are no longer of value. My political understanding of the world was both screenal and on the streets.

[Later] I heard of the work of the Living Theater. I saw Bread and Puppet Theater during the nuclear activist actions. So I began to comprehend that in film and in performance there was a way one could critique this kind of condition, that one could actually do something, and I decided to become an actor; I decided to become a classical actor. So I spent most of from 16 to 20 just traveling, doing Shakespeare around the country. All the while in the back of my head was floating Judith Malina and Julian Beck's treatise on the Living Theater.

In 1981 I decided that what I really needed to do was somehow educate myself deeper in a kind of critical theory, a discourse (of course I didn't have that language at that time). So I decided that I would go to school and get my MA in dramaturgy. And I ended up going to Tallahassee, Florida. And it was there that I started getting a deeper understanding of history and theory. I discovered that in the academic bunker there wasn't a lot of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary process. You were a dramaturge and you studied the classics of performance theory. You didn't go to sociology and read C. Wright Mills. You didn't go to philosophy and read Wittgenstein. It was just not done. And eventually, I was asked kindly to leave the academy since I wasn't doing what I was supposed to.

I said fine with that. I walked across the street and I got a job at Ruby Fruit books, a lesbian bookstore, the only lesbian bookstore in Tallahassee, Florida. And they were kind enough to make me their token male, if you will, and allowed me to order books. It was through this that I started finding alternative presses and some of the first Semiotext(e) Books: Virilo, Baudrillard. I was reading a lot of the radical lesbian feminists that were coming out at that time. Certainly queer theory was beginning to emerge as the high edge of a new form of embodying theory – and the theory would become not just a discourse but really play itself out.

And at that time in the 1980s there was a lot of cocaine in Florida. So you would end up going to a lot of cocaine parties. At these parties I started hearing people, "hey you should talk to so and so, 'cause they are talking in the same kind of yack that you are speaking" and you know, blah, blah, blah. And eventually through one of these cocaine parties, I ran into some of the people who would later become Critical Art Ensemble. One of them was a film maker who hated film, a poet who hated poetry, a photographer who hated photography, the first person I ever met who actually worked with a computer who hated technology, a bookmaker who hated books. I was an actor who hated acting. And we all had a fetish for cocaine and we also had a fetish for theory.

We developed this ritual where we would gather at Hope Kurtz's big glass table and she would put out lines and we would read Adorno, we would read all these great books and go "this is a great bit of critical theory; write that line down"; and then do another line of cocaine. That's all you had to do in Tallahassee. It wasn't like you had to worry about anything else happening in the world 'cause there was nothing happening, so you could read your Hegel and do lines. But what did happen was that we had a sense that something else could be created. That we could create a focus in this space

that we then defined as the cultural frontier. And that in the cultural frontier one could create a theoretical discourse, a practice which could be co-equal to the nexus, to New York, Chicago, LA, that could be just as vital and specific. But of course, it was very loose and not very lucid as of yet. And unfortunately, like many of these things, what did bring it into focus, what did bring it into practice, was a crisis. And the crisis that hit us was AIDS.

By 1986 and 1987, many of our good friends began to get sick. And, of course, like many at first we didn't know exactly what to do or how to play it out. But we began to hear that there were very good groups, especially Gran Fury up in New York, who had begun to initiate a directed aesthetic activist discourse and look. Gran Fury created Silence = Death, and the whole look of early ACT UP.

ACT UP really brought to the foreground the politics of the question vs. the politics of the answer. ACT UP was really calling for a single question to be answered: "Is there a cure?" It wasn't that we were saying that we were going to overthrow the state, that we were going to take over the world, or that we had answers. But we were asking the single question that was very difficult . . . to answer. Why wasn't there a cure? What was going on? What was the hold-up? So this very basic question started creating spaces.

ACT UP Tallahassee emerged as a real collective and we started working with ACT UP Miami and ACT UP Atlanta, doing coordinated actions with each other. Some of the first actions we did were what we called "butt-ins." Because Tallahassee is the Capital and of course the Governor's mansion was there, everybody was there. So we'd jump over the fence and pull down our pants. We'd have whatever comments we wanted [painted on our butts] and we'd slam our asses up against the window. Of course, these butt-ins would create these media gestures. I was an actor and a director so I created how actions would work.

One of the elements that began to occur during these street actions is things like fax jams. We would fax jam the National Institute of Health Fax, you know, What is AZT? How many people has AZT cured? So to me it predates what electronic civil disobedience could be; doing these fax jams was electronic civil disobedience. Probably one of the most important elements was what we called phone zapping. There was a large food conglomerate in the South called Publix. Probably around '90 they decided that the best way to deal with the AIDS hysteria was to stop selling condoms. How this worked in their minds, we didn't know, but we certainly knew it was wrong. So what we did with this triumvirate of ACT UP Atlanta, ACT UP Tallahassee, and ACT UP Florida was this phone tree of 24 hour action, 7 days a week where, like, I was supposed to call at 10:59, 11:59, 1:59 and say "Look, I shop in your store, I am happy to shop in your store, but I no longer want to shop in your store if I can't buy my condoms in your store." And I would call. It wasn't a kind of aggressive "we're going to take you down." It was "look, we're a shopper, we live in the community, blah blah blah." After two weeks of this they called us in, and said yes we are going to start selling condoms in the stores. We said, "Great, now we want the condoms up front because we don't want to go all the way to the back." And you know there was a kind of simple leverage of a very simple tool bringing this strong conglomerate into a more enlightened position.

But one of the things we also began to notice by 1990 was that even though our actions were more highly organized, more specific, more directed and much clearer in terms of all the information we had, they weren't getting the same kind of media that the early actions, say 1989 or 1988, were getting. And this was a turning point, at least for Critical Art Ensemble. We began to ask, what is it that we are doing wrong? Is there something we can do?

And we took to heart the William Gibson metaphor of cyberspace being a mass hallucination. And that power had now shifted into cyberspace. So we began to re-read *Neuromancer*. And in chapter three of *Neuromancer*, there is a section where Case, the hacker, and Molly Millions, the cyborg-woman, need to break into this bunker of information but they can't. They need the help of a third group that is mentioned, I think only three times, and that is the Panther Moderns. And what the Panther Moderns are is a highly self-conscious terrorist group that work in developing types of mass hallucinations. So, if you imagine that cyberspace is already a master central hallucination, they were creating other hallucinations on top of that. And what happens is that these screenal hallucinations blind power to what is actually occurring. And this allows Case and Molly Millions to enter the information bunker and get whatever it is that they were looking for. So, we began to think perhaps what needs to happen is Panther Moderns need to emerge, an activist electronic community . . . And we began to write and elucidate what later would be published in 1994 and 1995 as *The Electronic Disturbance* and *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*.

But as in all things, by 1991, there was a sense of a divide in Critical Art Ensemble between theory and practice. One was that we should focus on theory; that we should continue our critique and focus now on biotechnology and nanotechnology. You could already see signs that this would be the next kind of front to be dealt with. And certainly I agreed, but I also felt that sometimes theory, because we thought of it, is now over. As

Foucault says: if it can be talked about it must now be dead. I thought that there was a need for theory to hit the ground, to hit the street. It had to be put into practice. So I decided that I should focus on placing it in action. I didn't really know how to do this, not having any training in code or computers. I had worked now for a decade in a lesbian bookstore with books, which is a good training for some things but not very good training for what I was expecting to do.

I heard that in New York City some artists had begun to build infrastructures . . . one of them was The Thing, started in 1991, by Wolfgang Staelhe, a painter and conceptual artist . . . So, I sold all the millions of books I had gathered during my ten years. I bought a little yellow Ford Fiesta for $200 that was guaranteed to get me to New York City before breaking down. I took the fifty books that I thought would be most important in developing the practice of electronic civil disobedience . . . And I drove as quickly as I could from Tallahassee, Florida. I went to where the BBS Thing.net was and I introduced myself to Wolfgang. I was only there maybe about twenty minutes. I came back out. They had broken into my car. They had taken all my clothes; they had taken all my books. So in a certain sense, I felt that New York was telling me how I needed to survive. And that is I had to become a thief.

And having been enamored of Genet, I felt that being a book thief, since that's what I knew, well that's the way I would live. And I started stealing very expensive Verso books and Lyotard's wallbook on Duchamp, $350, and I would sell them at Mercer Books. But in the mornings, I would study code at The Thing. The pedagogical method at The Thing is: There's a computer, there's books, good luck. Nobody was going to help me. It was all very do-it-yourself. And it was there that I really began to understand how these networks were created. And I would always introduce the concept of electronic civil disobedience. People would just shake their head, "Well, that's interesting Ricardo. We don't know what that is."

And again what occurred was a crisis. In 1994, one minute after midnight, the Zapatistas emerged out of the jungle. They took over the state of Chiapas, calling for autonomy for the indigenous communities there. I had come stumbling home from the Tunnel. I think I was tripping on E or something. I couldn't sleep. I checked my e-mail . . . And one of the first things I got was the Declaration of the Lacandona. To me it really began the practice and formalizing of electronic civil disobedience. And the next day as I was stumbling out, I always went to the Odessa [restaurant] to get something to eat, I saw a little post-it note at ABC No Rio [community/cultural center] saying: "If anybody has heard anything about the Zapatistas,

let's meet tonight." And that night we met in the basement of ABC No Rio. It was a cold, dank, winter basement, full of big rats in those days. And basically the New York Committee for Democracy in Mexico was born. We instantly started doing civil disobedience, like hunger strikes, over at the Mexican Consulate.

We had predicted in Critical Art Ensemble's *Electronic Civil Disobedience* that two things would be very difficult to accomplish: (1) that hackers would ever be politicized and (2) that activists would ever be technologized in terms of thinking of electronic culture as a useful leverage. And one of the things that I discovered – even though the Zapatistas became known as the avant garde of the information wars, just by using e-mail – was when we would do actions or marches or hunger strikes, it wasn't: "Let's do electronic civil disobedience." The activists would look at you and go, "That's interesting, but we don't actually know what you mean by that. We're gonna go do a march." . . . When I went to [the hacker zine] *2600*, I said, "Well, let's . . ." and they said, "Well, no. That's a stupid idea. Go away." But one of the few areas that was open, that didn't just disregard me, was the net-art community. They said, "We'll we don't know what it is but if you can do it, go ahead." So between these two blocks there was this kind of open space.

At the same time in 1994, Cecilia Rodriguez in El Paso [Texas] had been chosen as the legal representative of the Zapatistas. So we kept trying to call her. We couldn't get a hold of her because she herself wasn't prepared. She woke up one morning and found she was the legal representative. I think she didn't have a phone at the time 'cause she was too poor . . . [But] we also started to see the gleaming of this decentralized network which would later be called the International Network of Struggle and Resistance or the Intergalactic Network of Struggle and Resistance. You started seeing the blooming of hundreds of Zapatista sites all over the world. Harry Cleaver at the University of Texas, Austin, started, by 1995, the Zapatista listserv. Remember that the Zapatistas had only basically twelve days of fighting. In a certain sense the Internet radicalized them. Suddenly, they discovered they no longer had to be this kind of a modernist guerilla movement that followed, you know, "death in arms." Instead they created this kind of information guerilla movement.

Again it was through a series of crises that the electronic media really started bringing itself to the foreground. Probably the most important of these early gestures was the Chase Manhattan memo in 1996. It was an internal investment memo to be sent out only to the Chase Manhattan Investment Community but somehow it leaked out to the Zapatista community. Basically it stated that even though the Zapatistas had no direct

influence on the value of the peso, they did create a certain psychological depression on the investor community. Therefore, Chase called for the elimination of the Zapatista communities with extreme prejudice. A few days later, the first major offensive by Zedillo's Mexican military since 1994 was initiated. You could see a direct connection between this memo and the offensive action.

Well because we had this memo we started doing posters of it. We did actions at Chase Manhattan. We sent it to the *New York Times*. We just spammed the entire world. Within three days the offensive stropped. And I remember Commandante Ramona [of the Zapatistas] saying that an electronic force field had been created. And this electronic force field had created not only a protective device but had actually leveraged the possibility of bringing the worldwide community to Chiapas. That forced the Mexican government by 1996 to meet the Zapatistas face to face to create the San Andreas Accords.

Basically the Zapatistas had shown that you can upload the singularity of the community and decentralize it. Chiapas globalized, it pushed itself around the world. It did end runs around the dominant media, the major media filters. We didn't need the *New York Times*. We didn't need these other spaces to allow the Zapatistas to speak to the world. And they did it without electricity; they did it without computers; they did it without all the things that we have now. To become the dominant information force was truly amazing . . . It was bare bones. Somebody writes a note. They hand it to somebody who rides a horse. The guy on the horse gives it somebody on a truck on a dirt road that takes it to San Cristobal, who then probably goes to the church or someplace, then uploads it to *La Jornada* [a left-leaning Mexican newspaper]. I mean it's a long arduous process, nobody's uploading on their wireless Palm 7. To me, these were direct signs of electronic civil disobedience. And I felt that something more could be accomplished in terms of direct action.

Through The Thing I began a pedagogical spamming of the networks that I was in contact with. I spoke to them about Zapatismo, about what was going on in Chiapas. I used these kinds of platforms to aggregate knowledge about the Zapatistas. And it was through this kind of networking, basically, I felt I was fulfilling the call that had been made through the Zapatista Encuentro to create this intercontinental network of struggle and resistance.

Encuentro means encounter. What the Zapatistas started doing as early as 1995 was inviting the world to come to Chiapas to gather. And where one would gather, they would create these tables. There's like the table of music, the table of propaganda, there was a network table, and you could join any

of these tables and you would share information that you bring to that table. And there was usually one Zapatista at the table who was silent and kind of took in the information and then took it back to the command and the autonomous communities. And then there would be some response. Out of the network there was a response of: build the networks. Start gathering.

The other thing that the Zapatistas did was a very open gesture in which anyone or anything could participate in the Zapatismo in any manner they could. It could be a poem; it could be direct action on the street. There wasn't a specific Zapatista mode: you have to do this or you are not a Zapatista. So again, it was an open gesture and you use whatever tools you have at hand to create that gesture. Obviously the networks were what I had at hand. Unbeknownst to me . . . I had created the ground for what would be the direct non-violent use of the Internet, pushing it away from the paradigm of just communication and documentation. And again it happened because of a crisis. That's probably one of the most important things of all activism. It always comes from something horrible.

On December 22, 1997, the Acteal Massacre occurred in which forty-five women and children were killed by paramilitary troops trained and armed by the Mexican Military. From what we understand, the police were only about 500 feet away. A lot of rage and anger occurred in the Zapatista movement. I felt that something more needed to be done than send more e-mails and do more actions. I just wanted to shut them all down. Basically we were all so angry. So I just started spamming everybody. "It's time for direct action: on the streets and online."

After I sent out this e-mail, I received an e-mail from a group in Italy called the Anonymous Digital Coalition. They said, "Ricardo, Why don't we do this? Why don't we go to a specific URL of the Mexican Government and by taking the refresh and reload button that exists on every public browser, we just for an hour, reload over and over and over." Basically, in theory, blocking the site: creating a disturbance. I thought: "This is *fantastico*, let's go do it." I spammed everybody I knew. A few seconds later I received an e-mail from Carmin Karasic [a software engineer] up at MIT. She said, "Ricardo, I have read some of your documents on electronic monuments. What are the names of the Acteal dead? I would like to make an electronic monument." I thought that was a beautiful idea. A few beeps later, I got an e-mail from Brett Stalbaum, a net artist and teacher from San Jose, California – the Cadre Institute – who said, "Ricardo, I think what I can do is write a small Java script which will take into account how many people participate and reload for us so we don't have to hurt our little finger reloading." I said, "*Fantastico*, let's do that." But, he said, "Ricardo, I'm

not a good designer. I don't want to do the skin." And I said: "Brett, let me introduce you to Carmin. Carmin, let me introduce you to Brett. Why don't you guys make an electronic monument to the Zapatistas that is active." And I let them go. At the same time Stefan Wray, then a doctoral student at New York University, wanted to do his dissertation on electronic civil disobedience theory and practice, and wanted to know if I would help him and participate in this development. At the time, I was developing a listserv for The Thing called Information Wars. So I said, "help me be co-moderator and I'll help you," and he said sure.

Stefan and I, Carmin and Brett, began to work together. The Zapatista FloodNet system emerged as a tool. And at that time we decided to become a theater. I thought it was very important to continue the performative gesture. Unbeknownst to me, I didn't know how useful a tactic it would be. We decided that we would do a performance/action twice a month – all of 1998. We would only do these actions in solidarity with the Zapatistas and we would only do them for a year. The main goal would be to spread information about the Zapatistas, secondly, to push the theory of electronic civil disobedience.

We did our first action. Some 14,800 people participated around the world. Many people said President Zedillo's website responded, "I can't fulfill your request," which to us was victory. One of the things that the Zapatista FloodNet does is it uploads the names of the dead into the server. And it also asks the server questions, this whole politics of the question, in a literal way. The Zapatista FloodNet system would ask, "Is there justice on this system?" And the system responds, "Justice is not found on this server." "Is there democracy on this server?" "Democracy is not found on this server." "Is Anna Hernandez, one of the Acteal dead, found on this server?" And this is called 404, a traditional function of the Internet that lets you know that what you are looking for doesn't exist on that server. And so by this small gesture, we create a disturbance because it takes up CPU. It takes up space. In the same way that bodies would take up space, say in real life, these kind of questions, this kind of reloading takes up the space.

The next day we were in the *New York Times*. And this started a new media level of discussion.

Then Ars Electronica in Austria – that's a big new media festival that's existed now for I guess twenty-five years – decided that their theme that year was going to be "information war" and they invited Electronic Disturbance Theater to do a presentation. We took this as an opportunity to do a really big action. We had only done virtual sit-ins against President Zedillo specifically. And we decided to do an action against the Pentagon that had

just sold twenty-five Hueys [helicopters] to the Mexican army; the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, because we understood that they wanted to buy uranium rights in Chiapas (which is part of the whole NAFTA agreement, the right for companies to own land and buy land in Chiapas); and then President Zedillo's website per usual.

On September 9, 1998, the morning of the performance, I received a phone call. I was getting a lot of journalists, so I thought it was a journalist. They said, "Is this Ricardo Dominguez?" I said, "Yes." "Of the Electronic Disturbance Theater?" I said, "Yes." Then in very clear Mexican Spanish, they said, "We know who you are. We know where you are at. Do not go downstairs. We know where your family is. Do not do this performance. This is not a game. You understand." And they hung up. I said, "Wow, what a way to wake up." But I'm an addict. I need my cup of coffee. I'm gonna go downstairs. And, of course, I went downstairs. I told the cops. I told the festival. More spams . . . And that's one of the things about information war which is to out-hype the hype, which is a very important strategy . . . Instead of being, "Oh my god, the police have called"; it's "Excellent! The police have called!" Let everybody know.

The performance was supposed to start at twelve o'clock in the afternoon, Linz time, Austria. As Stefan and I were about to load up the link to the action, a group of hackers gathered around us, called Heart – Corazon – a Dutch hacker group. And they said, "Ricardo, Stefan, if you guys do this, we'll shut you down. What you are doing is wrong, pure evil, unacceptable network abuse. We will take you down." And in a sense, it was my first contact with what I call the Digitally Correct Community that believes that bandwidth is above all things, above human rights. The only thing the citizen can do is stand on the side, put up their signs, but never step out onto the superhighway. That is *Verboten*. And this is certainly something that civil rights people do in the real world: step out onto the street, so we felt we were doing much of the same sort of thing, and we said, "Well, I wish we could have had this dialog earlier . . . But the performance is going to start." So we went "Click," and the performance started.

About three hours into the action, we noticed that these Java applets were appearing in the browser. About twenty-five of them, little coffee cups going, ach! ach! ach! ach! ach! The browser would crash. We start the action again and they go, ach! ach! ach! ach! ach!, almost like a little machine gun. The browser would crash. If you can imagine the FloodNet is a little wheel, a little hamster wheel, the more people come, the faster it goes. What these applets were doing were like little sticks. And more sticks crash the browser. So we started getting e-mail from around the world,

"Virtual Sit-In at the WTO," Electrohippies

Date sent: Mon, 22 Nov 1999 11:20:20 +0000
From: ehippies@tesco.net
To: hacktivism@tao.ca
Subject: 'Virtual sit-in' to coincide with WTO Conference
Send Reply To: hacktivism@tao.ca
[:hacktivism:]

####### URGENT #######

Please forward this to everyone you know!

'VIRTUAL SIT-IN' AT A LEADING WEBSITE PLANNED TO COINCIDE WITH THE WTO'S SEATTLE CONFERENCE

For details of how to take part visit the NEW 'electrohippies' website at: http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp.ehippies/

TARGET WILL BE REVEALED AT 00.01 GMT, 30/11/99

A new website has started up to promote 'virtual activism' in the UK and Europe. The site is all about taking action, and undertaking civil disobedience, using the core of modern society – its electronic information and communications infrastructure. Why? Because technology enables a lot of the destruction that takes places in the world, but like most technology it is not innately bad – it's just the people who are in charge of it. Technology also allows people to have anonymity because their communications and planning are kept remote from the public arena.

activists saying, "I'm joining your action and you guys have broken my browser," all this sort of stuff and we're going down. Hackers! They said they'd take us down, they've taken us down.

So we're trying to inform people. Putting stuff on web pages. Finally we get an e-mail from Wired.com, that goes, "Gentleman, I suppose you've noticed that your action is not going very well. Do you know why? We do. It's the Pentagon." Holy shit. The Pentagon. We never thought of the Pentagon. We went in view source and indeed in the pages where we were doing the sit-in were imbedded hostile Java applets. So, suddenly, of course, the hype: They've broken the Posse Comitatus law of 1878. They're attacking a civilian server in New York City, The Thing. The next day we were in the *New York Times* again.

Electronic Disturbance Theater [has always valued] transparency. We were not digitally correct, that is, we didn't use hacker methods. We were not anonymous. We didn't encrypt any of our messages. We never hid what we were going to do, when we were going to do it, how we were going to do it. So again, this made the hackers very annoyed. Because the FloodNet system is not very high level code. It's not very efficient. It doesn't crash the server. We take millions of people. It disturbs it . . . And this doesn't make hackers happy.

The reason that we use disturbance is because it's not subversion, it's not destruction. It would be very easy then for the dot.mils, the dot.govs, the dot.coms to say this is cyber terrorism, this is cyber crime. Because the way they define those paradigms is through the hacker paradigm: It has to be anonymous. It has to be very efficient. It has to be at a high level. And it actually has to work. It's very difficult to explain to the hacker that: No, we don't want it to work. We always get e-mails from these high level systems saying, "hey, I really like what you are doing, if you could just do this to the code and that, it will slam everything down." And we go, "No, we like it the way it is." It's not efficient. It doesn't function the way it should. It just

blocks bandwidth. It's like a lot of people getting onto the digital highway. It's not cutting the highway or breaking it into two.

And the reason that we are looking for disturbance is because we wanted to create electronic civil disobedience that followed a non-violent direct action gesture. It was direct action because it took a great many people to create the disturbance. I couldn't do a VR-Sit In by myself, you couldn't sit by yourself with a FloodNet system and do anything. It would take a lot of people to do any sort of disturbance. And this to us was very important. And this is why we called the gesture "swarming" because it takes a swarm to actually implement a disturbance.

Many groups started asking, "Could you guys do an action for this or for that?" But we only did actions for the Zapatistas. So the other thing that we wanted to do was create [the FloodNet] in a way that would be open source, so that the code would be available . . . [later] creating what we called a Disturbance Developers Kit. We uploaded the Disturbance Developers Kit at one minute after midnight in celebration of the sixth year of the Zapatista uprising. And twenty minutes after we uploaded it here at Fakeshop.com, here in Williamsburg, Queer Nation did an action, a virtual sit-in, against GODHATESFAGS.com in Canada. A week later, the International Animal Liberation network did two actions against pharmaceuticals in Switzerland that went quite well. And then soon after that anti-arms activists in the UK did actions against arms dealer websites in the UK.

Electronic Disturbance Theater hoped that by sending out the code, other cells, other groups would begin to emerge, not necessarily following all the rules that we had set up. And sure enough we began to see cells emerge, like the Electronic Hippies who started developing the major actions against the World Trade Organization. We started connecting with other net activist groups like RTMark who helped us really create the hype. The Federation of Random Action in

What we're out to do is change all that by extending the philosophy of activism and direct action into the 'virtual' world of electronic information exchange and communications. Of course, in the scale of things we can't hope to be more effective than an annoying mosquito. But we can let them know that they can't use technology as a veil to obscure the public's concern about the future of the plant

IN SUPPORT OF THE GLOBAL ACTION TO MARK THE WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION'S SEATTLE CONFERENCE, WE WILL BE PROVIDING AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO TAKE PART IN AN ON-LINE 'VIRTUAL SIT-IN'

At midnight, Greenwich Mean Time, on the 30th November, the 'action page' will be loaded with information on how you can register your protest against the WTO's Seattle conference The page will operate for seven days.

We hope that during this period you will access this page as often as possible and take part in the sit-in There will be precise details posted on November 30th. There will also be files to download in order to set up mirror-sites on your own server in order to spread the capacity of the sit-in. If you would like to receive the files direct by email on November the 30th, along with all the information on how to run the site from where ever you are in the world, then send a request to ehippies@tesco.net

We hope that you enjoy participating in this event.

Once again, the address of the site is: http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/-ehippies/

END

from the electrohippies – ehippies@tesco.net
Visit the Electronic Activism and Civil Disobedience website: http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/-ehippies/
[:hacktivism:]
[:for unsubscribe instructions or list info consult the FAQ:]
[:http://hacktivism.tao.ca/:]

From an ehippies e-communiqué, November 22, 1999, www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/ehippies

France started their own cell. They're the ones who did the Oxy Oil actions in solidarity with U'wa Indians in Columbia. And because we were in the UK and all these other places traveling around, we got a chance to talk to Reclaim the Streets and the Direct Action Network.

And you started seeing in 1999 the networks, not only coagulating, but spilling out into the streets. Again, electronic civil disobedience is only a tool. It's only one level. And if you can leverage the data bodies with the real bodies on the streets, you can have this kind of aggregated direct action like the WTO in Seattle, Washington. Certainly Critical Art Ensemble, during its early writings, in a very harsh rhetorical gesture said, "The streets are dead, because information has gone elsewhere." In a certain sense, what we wanted to do was to kind of slap activists around. And so they go, what do you mean the streets are dead? But certainly the Electronic Disturbance Theater never felt this way. We always felt that it was a hybrid. Sometimes we have gotten e-mail from people who are blind, from people who are stuck at home for various reasons, people who have to work and they have to support their kids or they are too far away, they are in South Korea. They couldn't be in Seattle but in their hearts they wanted to be there. Here was the gesture that they could add to those databodies. Say that you only get 500 people at an action. Electronically, perhaps you could add another 12,000 from around the world. So all of a sudden what is considered a small local action becomes a larger global action. And that means to me that you can leverage small actions into global actions. And I think that's an important element to all of this.

And by the year 2000, there was a gathering of hackers at DefCon in Las Vegas. They actually had sessions on electronic civil disobedience and hactivism. And no longer were they snide or ironic, they were quite serious. They were listening. Here we had presentations on Thoreau's "On Civil Disobedience" and looking at 1848 as a manual for hactivism. And again,

the next week members of *2600* hit the streets in Philadelphia against the Republican National Convention and ended up being in jail. So here was a very good sign of crossover.

What occurred in 1999 was not only Seattle and all these kind of hybrid actions but something else: 1999 was the year of e-commerce. Well at the end of the year, in December, E-Toys.com [an on-line toy store] decided to aggressively attack the net art group E-Toy (without an s) .com that had been around since 1994 [demanding that the art group give up their domain name]. What occurred then was basically a swarming effect: you had Fakeshop.com, RTMark, Electronic Disturbance Theater, The Thing, many networks gathering in defense. And we decided to do several different tactics all at the same time. One was a psychological operation which I think is something very useful for activists, because psychological operations have always been used *against* activists. We started infiltrating the trading boards of E-Toys.com. And letting people know, "Do you know what these guys are doing? Isn't that bad? Do you really want to support this?" And we started working on this theory that we are going to destroy E-Toys.com. Their value was at seventy-two dollars per share and we would bring it down to zero by the end of December.

And then we decided to do a Twelve Days of Christmas virtual sit-in. And of course, by now we were tactical media gurus. We had mirrors everywhere. And we started the action. On the second day, E-Toys (officially) said "No, nothing's happening" – but they decided to shut down The Thing.net, using their money and power as they had done with everything else. They called Verio, our router. You have to remember that (even though it's a bad metaphor it can still be useful) the Internet is the Wild West. If you can imagine that you and your machine are you and your horse. And your ISP is your local town with your local sheriff. You know folks there. And you got your virus scanner on your side. Once you leave your local town, you're out in the cultural frontier. There's mail tribes, banditos, but more importantly, there's railroad barons. In this case, router barons, and the router barons control everything. So what happened was E-Toys called our router and said, I don't know, "These guys are bugging us, shut 'em down." So the next morning I woke up, there was no Rdom. There was no Thing. There was no EDT, there was no RTMark, there was no Toyswars.com – cause everybody was at The Thing.

So finally we got a hold of them and they said, "Take down Rdom" – which is my site – "and we'll let The Thing back up." Of course, we were smart, we had mirrors everywhere so the action wasn't stopped. New scripts were created based on the FloodNet script, very interesting scripts,

like non-linear scripts that would shop at E-Toys and then drop the shopping before they went through the order and then restart again. And of course, what did we do? We hyped it up. We were on CNN that night. And you saw the share go down, down, down, down, down. So by January 15, E-Toys.com relented. They gave E-Toy back their domain name. They paid for all the court costs.

If you disturb the Pentagon, it doesn't really disturb the power; it doesn't really stop the tanks. If you shut down the police site, it doesn't really shut down the cops 'cause they are on the streets. But if you are a virtual company that only exists online, it's an extremely powerful tool. So, if you get more companies that only exist online, electronic civil disobedience will not only be just *a* leveraging tool but *the* tool.

It's still very elitist, 98 percent of the world is not online. In a certain sense the networks themselves are this hot attracter that you create media hype with, and that's its use now. But perhaps someday, as more people go online, then maybe these actions will create a tradition, create the codes so people won't have to reinvent what to do. We've learned from Gandhi certain gestures for the street that are now ingrained in us. What do we do? We march, we sit. But we can also create other protocols that will be understood just as simply, a certain notion of electronic civil disobedience.

. . .

One day El Subcommandante and The Ocean, also known as The Sea (he has been with the Zapatistas since the beginning); and Don Dorito, the most famous beetle bug in all of Chiapas and the world were walking into a small autonomous community. And they ran into a little boy who was going around going, "beep, beep, beep, *todas a la Zapatour*, beep, beep, beep." And he bangs into Subcommandante Marcos' boots. And El Sub looked down and said, "Hey Pedrito, what are you doing there?" And he says, "Well, I'm picking up all the men and women who are going to the *consulta* on March 21." And the Old Nose looks down and says, "Well Pedrito, that's not a truck. That's a stone." And so Pedrito looks up at the Old Nose and says, "You know, that's what's wrong with you Zapatistas, you have *no* imagination." And beep, beep, beep, beep, he takes off.

And Subcommandante Marcos turns to The Ocean and to Don Dorito, the beetle and says, "Yes, that is a problem. The Zapatistas have no imagination." And Don Dorito says, "Yes, I've always told you they've had no imagination." They continue marching into the community and the elders are gathered, choosing the man and the woman who are going to go to the *consulta* the 21st. And suddenly above them a huge commander type plane, blue and yellow, from the Mexican Army Rainbow Task Force starts

roaring above them. Also from the other side, a Huey from the Mexican Air Force starts making its death-like whirl and the sound is just deafening. It doesn't disturb the community. The elders just raise their voices and continue the dialogue.

But Pedrito stops in the middle of the town and looks up, very annoyed, "*Ya basta*, enough is enough. I am going to move those planes." He goes into his home. Just the speed of how fast Pedrito moves astounds El Subcommandante. Zoom, he comes back out and in his hands: a stick. And he says, "You watch now." And he lifts the stick in the air and he starts going, "Zoom, Zoom, Zoom." Suddenly, the commander type plane makes a half turn and heads back to its base. The Huey slides away to the edge of the village. The sound disappears. Pedrito, very happy with the outcome, throws down his stick, picks up his rock, I mean his truck, and, "beep, beep, beep" off he goes.

Of course, El Subcommandante, being who he is, walks over, very carefully, and picks up the stick. He gives it a thorough scientific viewing, its length, its weight, its texture, finally he turns to The Ocean and says, "It's a stick." The Ocean looks at him and says, "Yes, a stick." Subcommandante puts it in his pocket and Don Dorito and The Ocean and he continue to march out of the village. As they're at the edge of the village, they run into Commandante Tacho, who's heading the other way and he says, "Hey, Old Nose, what have you got in your pocket there." Commandante pulls out the stick.

And The Ocean turns to Commandante Tacho and says, "Mayan technology." El Commandante notices that the Huey is above him and trying to remember what Pedrito did. He lifts the stick above his head. He goes, "Zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom." Suddenly, the helicopter turns into a useless tin vulture. The sky opens. The sun is bright. And the clouds become like marzipan. End of story.

So Mayan technology, what Pedrito's stick represents, is the simple gesture, almost invisible. There was this action the Zapatistas did on January 3, 2000, where suddenly you read in the newspapers "Zapatista Air Force Attacks the Army." Now nobody even knew the Zapatistas had an air force, much less knew how to fly. But if you read the story what the Zapatista women did is they took multi-colored paper, they folded it into airplanes with messages: paper airplanes. And as the sun came up they started throwing them over the barricades and of course the soldiers are shooting at these paper airplanes. And there you have a simple gesture which to me reflects this Mayan technology.

The FloodNet repeating that little simple gesture becomes Mayan

technology; that one can create a gesture that is both magical, unique, poetic, but that can change and transform the very nature of power. It can, as we speak now, melt the armies of the PRI dictatorship. Just this morning, Salazar, the new governor of Chiapas, representing a multi-party in power, declared the Zapatistas not rebels but freedom fighters, declared them to be people of honor.[1]

Ricardo Dominguez interviewed by Ben Shepard and Stephen Duncombe at the L Café in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, December 9, 2000.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 For a detailed description and analysis of this and other actions of Reclaim the Streets/New York City see Stephen Duncombe, "Stepping off the Sidewalk: Reclaim the Streets/New York City," in *From ACT UP to the WTO*, Ron Hayduk and Ben Shepard (eds.), London and New York: Verso, 2002.

2 It turns out that I wasn't the only one impressed by the power of culture. As I was in the process of completing this manuscript I was forwarded a US Federal Bureau of Investigation report on the "Threat of Terrorism to the United States," dated May 10, 2001, that identified Reclaim the Streets by name as a potential terrorist threat.

3 The phrase "haven in a heartless world" is Christopher Lasch's adaptation of Marx's reference to religion as "the heart of a heartless world."

4 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.

5 I've also been told that "We Are Family" was used as the theme song for the perennial underdog and all-black Pittsburgh Pirates at the 1979 World Series.

1 CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Christopher Hill, "Levellers and True Levellers" from *The World Turned Upside Down*

1 G.H. Sabine (ed.), *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1941, pp. 316–17.