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"We promise to maintain exploitive social relationships.."

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Electronic Civil Disobedience, Simulation, and the Public Sphere

What counts in the long run is the “use” one makes of a theory.... We must start from existing practices in order to retrace the fundamental flaws.

– Felix Guattari, *Why Marxism and Freudianism*
No Longer Disturb Anyone

In 1994, when Critical Art Ensemble first introduced the idea and a possible model of electronic civil disobedience (ECD) as another option for digital resistance, the collective had no way of knowing what elements would be the most practical, nor did it know what elements would require additional explanation. After nearly five years of field testing of ECD by various groups and individuals, its information gaps have become a little more obvious and can finally be addressed. Of particular concern in this essay is the recent turn of events that has pro-

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duced an ECD model that opts for public spectacle over clandestine policy subversion, and that emphasizes simulated action over direct action. CAE contends that these are unfortunate currents in the general research on ECD. CAE still believes that ECD is an underground activity that should be kept out of the public/popular sphere (as in the hacker tradition) and the eye of the media, and that simulationist tactics as they are currently being used by resistant forces are only modestly effective if not counterproductive.

Civil Disobedience in the Public Sphere

Those familiar with CAE's modeling of ECD* know that it was an inversion of the model of civil disobedience (CD). Rather than attempting to create a mass movement of public objectors, CAE suggested a decentralized flow of particularized micro-organizations (cells) that would produce multiple currents and trajectories to slow the velocity of capitalist political economy. This suggestion never sat well with more traditional activists, and recently even Mark Dery (in both *Mute* and *World Art*) criticized the model because there would be conflicting goals and activities among the cells. To the contrary, CAE still holds that conflicts arising from the diversity of the cells would function as a strength rather than as a weakness; this diversity would produce a dialogue between a variety of becomings that would resist bureaucratic structure as well as pro-

*For more information: All CAE books, including *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, are available from Autonomedia (NYC) or they can be downloaded free of charge at <<http://www.critical-art.net>>. German (Passagen Verlag), French (l'Éclat), and Italian (Castelvecchi) translations are also available; unfortunately they are not available on-line, so contact CAE for more information.

vide a space for happy accidents and breakthrough invention. If resistant culture has learned anything over the past 150 years, it's that "the people united" is a falsehood; this concept only constructs new exclusionist platforms by creating bureaucratic monoliths and semiotic regimes that cannot represent or act on behalf of the diverse desires and needs of individuals within complex and hybridizing social segments.

The second key inversion of the model of CD was to aim directly for policy shift, rather than trying to accomplish this task indirectly through media manipulation. CAE's position is still that the direct approach is the most effective. The indirect approach of media manipulation using a spectacle of disobedience designed to muster public sympathy and support is a losing proposition. The 1960s are over, and there is no corporate or government agency that is not fully prepared to do battle in the media. This is simply a practical matter of capital expenditure. Since mass media allegiance is skewed toward the status quo, since the airwaves and press are owned by corporate entities, and since capitalist structures have huge budgets allotted for public relations, there is no way that activist groups can outdo them. A sound bite here and there simply cannot subvert any policy-making process or sway public opinion when all the rest of the mass media is sending the opposite message. Any subversive opinion is lost in the media barrage, if not turned to its opposition's advantage through spin.

There was a time when CD and media manipulation combined were successful in disrupting and shifting authoritarian semiotic regimes. The civil rights movement is an excellent example. The

movement's participants understood that the Civil War was still being fought on an ideological level, and hence one social/political/geographic region could be turned against another. The northern and western regions of the U.S. had advanced not only in terms of industry, but also in their methods of public (and particularly minority) control. The Civil War had eliminated the retrograde political economy of the south, but had failed to shift its ideological structure (a far more difficult element to change), and hence had not altered its symbolic mechanisms of control. All the civil rights movement needed to do was to call attention to this failure, and the fully modern northern regions would force the south to comply with an ideological position that would be more compatible with the socioeconomic needs of advanced capital. The images produced through acts of civil disobedience succeeded in provoking outrage at the retro-ideology of the south and rekindled the state of war between the regions. Student volunteers, community organizers, and eventually federal police agencies and the military (mobilized by the executive office) became allies and fought for the movement.

At the same time, the civil rights leaders were not naive about this matter. They knew that the only racist policies that would change were those not held by the north and that racism was not going to disappear; it would only be transformed into a more subtle form of endocolonization, as opposed to its then current status as an explicit set of segregationist norms. Indeed, the general understanding of African Americans—that there was a hard boundary beyond which policy would shift no further—was key in the rapid decline of the civil rights movement and in the high-octane fueling of the black

power movement. Unfortunately, the latter fared no better with its media campaign, because it lacked the infrastructure to support its own material needs.

As a means of media manipulation, CD worked in the case of the civil rights movement because the historical dynamic of capitalism acted as the foundation for its success. History was still heterogeneous and the normative manifestation of capitalist ideology was still a striated space at both the national and international levels. But what do we do now, having reached the point where visible, diversified ideologies in the West no longer exist, and history is nothing more than a homogeneous construct that continuously replays capitalist victories? From where will public outrage originate? What army, government, corporation, or any other power base will support the disempowered when exploitive endocolonial relationships are precisely what allow these agencies to flourish? This is why CAE has argued for direct confrontation, by using financial leverage obtained through blocking privatized information (since this form of information is the gold of late capital). Appropriating media gains nothing in undermining an authoritarian semiotic regime because no power base benefits from listening to an alternative message; however, appropriating profit through blocking information sends a clear message to any chosen capitalist institutions—for them, it may be cheaper to change policy than to defend militarily a semiotic regime under pressure. Accomplishing this task is possible in the virtual realm, and it takes only the most modest of investments to act (compared to forming an army); however, for such resistance to endure requires clandestine activity.

Currently, the one weak exception to rejecting (E)CD as a means to manipulate mass media is in cases where history and ideology have not been homogenized. These tend to be situations in which a resistance movement is in conflict with a dominant power that is still viewed by pancapitalism as being in some form different from itself. For instance, the democracy movement in China used CD and media manipulation with a degree of success. Outrage was generated; however, rigid national boundaries kept it from manifesting in any way useful for the movement other than the granting of asylum by western countries for those who had to flee the Chinese authorities, and in generating a modest amount of diplomatic pressure on China. Even in this best-case scenario (and in a way very similar to what occurred during the civil rights movement), while the ideological order of pancapitalism was offended, the western economic order perceived China to have more similarities than differences, and hence little was done by the “outraged” west to support the democracy movement or to materially undermine the Chinese infrastructure.

ECD and Simulation**

Very early on in the development of electronic media, Orson Welles demonstrated (perhaps accidentally) that simulation has material effects. The simulation of a news broadcast reporting that aliens had invaded earth had the effect of causing a minor panic among those caught in the hall of mirrors that emerged out of the implosion of fiction and

**CAE would like to thank Heath Bunting for his valuable contribution to CAE's development of a simulationist model of subversion.

nonfiction created by the broadcast. Only varying degrees of plausibility existed as to the truth of the story. Simultaneously, all information was true and all information was false in that historic moment of an erupting hyperreal. We have seen a replay of this narrative in the 1990s with regard to resistant electronic culture, but with some peculiar differences.

In an addendum written in 1995 for *ECD and Other Unpopular Ideas*, CAE noted that there was growing paranoia among U.S. security agencies about controlling the electronic resistance. Oddly enough, these agencies scared themselves with their own constructions of electronic criminality. It was much like Welles being scared of his own broadcast. In that comic moment, CAE ironically suggested that ECD was successful without ever having been tried, and that merely announcing that some form of digital resistance could occur could have the effect of creating a panic in security agencies to such a degree that their primary focus would become locked in the hyperreality of criminal constructions and virtual catastrophe. This is a comment that CAE wishes it had never made, as some activists have come to take it seriously and are trying to act on it, primarily by using the Web to produce hyperreal activist threats to fan the flames of corporate-state paranoia. Again, this is a media battle that will be lost. State panic and paranoia will be transformed through mass media into public paranoia, which in turn will only reinforce state power. In the U.S., the voting public consistently supports harsher sentencing for “criminals,” more jails, and more police, and it is this hyperreal paranoia that gets law-and-order politicians the votes needed to turn these directives into legislation.

How many times must we see this happen? From McCarthyism to Reagan's fear of the Evil Empire to the War on Drugs, the result in each case has been more funds for military, security, and disciplinary agencies (fully mandated by an already fearful and paranoid voting public), and this in turn tightens the endocolonial belt. Considering that the U.S. is currently involved in the rapid creation and expansion of security agencies devoted to policing electronic criminality (and since these agencies make no distinction between politically motivated action and criminality for profit), it seems misguided to give power vectors increased means for raising public support for this military growth, as well as a basis for increased national and international legislation regarding political management of new electronic media.

Whether simulationist tactics could be used in a more compelling way is difficult to say. Since the CIA and the FBI have been using these tactics for decades, it is easy to locate examples that could be inverted. One of the classics is the CIA's toppling of the Arbenz government in Guatemala in order to support United Fruit, protect oil interests, and undermine a democracy with such leftist leanings that it legitimized the communist party within the U.S. sphere of influence! To be sure, the CIA built its operational infrastructure well by using economic sabotage to create unrest, but the final act was one of electronic subversion. The CIA simulated field radio broadcasts of antigovernment troop movements around the capital. Upon intercepting these broadcasts, the Guatemalan government became convinced that a large rebel army had been mustered and was preparing for an attack. To the contrary, the public was overwhelmingly support-

ive of the government, and only a modest rebel faction existed. Unfortunately, government officials panicked and the government fell in disarray.

The FBI used a similar means of subversion by employing hyperreal communications in its attack on the Black Panthers. Much like the CIA's intervention in Guatemala, the FBI's infowar had a strong infrastructure. The Bureau had infiltrated the Black Panther Party (BPP) and was close to the high command, so it knew the nature of (and the players in) the party's internal struggles. It had also successfully used local law enforcement to harass chapters across the U.S. The party's treasury was perpetually depleted due to the persistent arrests of members by police, who intentionally abused their power in order to drain party funds by forcing the membership to continually post bail for those detained. Given these conditions, paranoia was the order of the day for the Black Panthers, and when the schism between the San Francisco and the New York chapters erupted, the FBI saw a perfect opportunity to implode the party. As a result of a simple letter-writing campaign that fanned the flames of mistrust between east and west leadership, the party collapsed amid its own internal fighting. (The FBI's campaign consisted of the creation and delivery of documents that criticized specific leaders and their party policies; these documents were made to look as if they originated from internal party opposition.)

This method could be inverted and turned against authoritarian agencies. The infighting that already occurs within and between government and corporate institutions makes them self-subsidizing targets. The military and economic infrastructure that was necessary for the operations in the examples

given here is not necessary for ECD operations, since the internal warfare is already occurring (given capital's tendency toward predation, fear and paranoia are a part of everyday life experience for those deep within power vectors, and hence no expenditure is necessary to create them, as was necessary with the BPP). Certainly, carefully written and directed letter(s)/e-mail messages could have an implosive effect (although it's doubtful that a full collapse would ensue); however, the lessons learned from these classic cases of simulationist tactics have to be understood and applied. First and most obvious, this form of resistance would be covert. Second, reliable insider intelligence would need to be acquired. This is the most problematic area in this kind of tactical maneuvering, although it is not impossible to find solutions. For simulationist tactics of resistance to be successfully employed, methods and means of research, intelligence gathering, and informant recruitment have to be developed. (CAE is willing to bet that the next breakthrough paper on resistance will address this very problem of amateur intelligence generation.) Until that occurs, subjective-subversive action will be pretty ineffectual. At present, those not involved in a fully developed covert approach can only act tactically in regard to the strategic principles of an institution rather than to specific situations and relationships. Obviously enough, a tactical response to a strategic initiative makes no sense. In all probability such action will not have the desired effect, and will only alert the agency being hit to prepare for potential external pressures.

We must also remember that simulationist infowar is only a destructive tactic—it is a way to cause institutional implosion, and has very little produc-

tive value in terms of policy reconstruction. To continue with the example of racism, agencies that have institutionalized racist policies (and that includes pretty much every institution in the pancapitalist regime) will not be changed by an infowar of institutional attrition. The semiotic regime of racist policies will continue untouched in other institutions that are interrelated through the shared privilege acquired by maintaining such policies. CAE still insists that productively challenging institutions will not occur through nihilistic gestures, but instead through forcing changes in the semiotic regime on an institutional basis while leaving the material infrastructure intact for reinscription.

The Problem of Containment

Marshalling the materially destructive tendencies of hyperreality has other problematic consequences when these destruction codes are released into the spectacle. Most notable is the problem of containment. If an authoritarian agency believes itself to be under attack, or under the threat of attack (deferred virtual catastrophe), and it is in the public limelight because of this, it will lash out in a less than predictable way. It may act in a manner that is injurious to itself, but it is just as likely that it will act in a way that could endanger unsuspecting elements of the public sphere. Introducing the public into the formula forces the threatened agency to face one major consequence: In order to keep up with the speed of the infosphere, it must act quickly. Hesitation, even to allow time for reasonable analysis and reflection, is not an option. In the current marketplace of public relations, success and failure have imploded, and all actions, when represented

well, reside in the sphere of hyperreal success and victory. The only useful distinction to be made is between action and inaction. Inaction is the sign of weakness and ineptitude. Caught in this high-velocity vector, a threatened agency will take action that will be explosive (not implosive). Scapegoats will be designated, and action detrimental to these individuals or populations will follow (the perfect macrocosm of this sequence of events is U.S. foreign policy and the actions taken on its behalf). In other words, once this sequence of destruction was initiated by threat (whether virtual or actual), the often uncontrolled forces that would be released could not be contained or redirected by the resistant force. This inability to contain the explosion links this model (in effect only) to terrorism. Not that the activists are initiating terrorist practice, since no one dies in hyperreality, but the effect of this practice can have the same consequence as terrorism, in that state and corporate power vectors will haphazardly return fire with weapons that have destructive material (and even mortal) consequences.

What is odd is that such action would not be taken out of a concern for infrastructure, but for the semiotic regime and the entity's public image in hyperreality. However, when the public is taken out of this formula, the sequence changes dramatically. The agency under pressure would not have to act quickly. It could have time to investigate and therefore be able to deliver a more surgical strike, because the sign of weakness (the public perception of inaction) would not be damaging its intended public representation. In this worst-case scenario for the activists, the response would be far more directed, and hence the consequences

would tend to fall on those who actually took the risk of initiating the action. If the agency were unaware that it was under subversion and an implosion occurred, the public would not be notified or feel the direct consequences (although indirect ones such as unemployment are probable). In either case, there would be no violent explosive spinoff of shrapnel that could land anywhere in the landscape of resistance. In other words, containment would be actualized. What is of additional interest is that the agency under pressure would subsidize containment activity. No agency wants to publicize that it is in financial trouble, that its security has been breached, etc., and hence it would contain itself. However, if the public is introduced into the formula, then the likelihood of containment evaporates and the consequences become less than civil. For this reason CAE continues to believe that all useful models of ECD (or for that matter, nearly all political as opposed to consciousness raising and pedagogical actions***) within the current political conditions have in common covert action and an abhorrence of mass media as a theater of action.

***A pedagogical situation/action gives participants the opportunity to escape some form of taken-for-granted authority. In this moment of liberation, they can think about alternative possibilities in relation to the specific or general issue addressed. This kind of work is the domain of politicized cultural action. However, such action is only pedagogical, not political. It prepares the consciousness of individuals for new possibilities, and in the best cases, moves them to political action. Activity inspired by pedagogical situations, however, is political action. By political action, CAE means the temporary or permanent redistribution or reconfiguration of power relationships (material or semiotic). We would also like to note that the distinction between these categories should not be assumed to be totalizing, but rather represents a general tendency in the typology of activist action.

Writing the Discourse on ECD

Given the desire to keep the mass media out of the discourse on ECD, CAE thought it wise to close with a few suggestions on how to speak semipublicly about what should only be discussed among trusted companions. This is an old problem, so fortunately there are some precedents—most notably the Frankfurt School. Its strategy was to write in the most dense, arcane style imaginable so that only initiates into the fold could decipher it; in this way the discourse stayed out of the public sphere where it did not become a resource for market cooptation. Happily, we do not have to go to such lengths. The writing can be clear and accessible, but it should be made to resist the eye of the media. Fortunately this is easy to do. All that is necessary is to make it “bad copy.” This is why CAE speaks in terms of general models and hypotheticals (and never about specific actions). Not only would we not want to make specifics public for obvious reasons, but generalities (models) are not very interesting to the grand majority of the popular media audience. Models are bookish and slow, and in the fast-paced image barrage of popular spectacle, they are simply boring.

CAE also suggests looking to historical analogues for examples of tactical actions, particularly ones that were activated by authoritarian power vectors. None of the popular media is particularly interested in more talk about “olden times,” nor are they interested in past atrocities (except for those perpetrated by Nazis). Discussion of such topics leaves the media with nothing interesting to bring to the public. This strategy goes back to issues of constellations, detournement, appropriation, etc. Use what

is already available, give the media vultures nothing, and the only option for cooptation left is cannibalism (hence the proliferation of retro). Now clearly, it's too late to stop media cooptation of ECD. It has already been sold for fifteen minutes of fame, and is fueling a new round of cyberhype, but e-activists can bring a halt to this current media event by supplying nothing more. We can also be thankful that ECD and other forms of electronic resistance that have now been dematerialized into the hyperreal buzz of "hacktivism" are just more cyberfads that will rapidly fade on the technohorizon, leaving the committed to continue with business as usual.