

## Types and Prospects of Radical Art

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'Types and Prospects of Radical Art', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 2, vol. 5, no. 1, 2003-4, pp. 189-201.

Down the length of a now passing era, a cluster of powerful theories insisted that the prospects for radical and effective political action had been definitively closed off. In a set of overlapping claims, it was claimed that the forces of simulation and assimilation were would swiftly commodify dissent, making it impossible to take a consistent position outside the capitalist system; or that History had settled at its terminus; or that the horrors of totalitarianism would forever deter those who would otherwise engage in grandiose plans to improve society; or in any case that humans, mere amalgams of impulses buffeted this way and that by desires and flows, could hardly be expected to improve themselves. All these claims appear more implausible today than in their prime. Yet in the art world, regularly an intellectual laggard, they are still insistently repeated.

If the gloss has come off those ideas, it is because competing grand narratives once again square up against each other across the global stage, because forms of political action that should have remain interred have been revived, bringing with new theoretical voices that hold up the previous orthodoxies to critical examination, and even lay emphasis on the critical character of agency and action (as against, say, identity).<sup>1</sup> So the aim of this essay is to look at various different tactics for politically committed art that operate within, across and outside the art world. I want to ask how effective such tactics can be; and especially to ask whether in the mainstream art world, there is room for a critical and radical practice that does anything other than sanction the neoliberal economic, social and cultural nexus. My examples will be a slide installation and book sequence by veteran US photographer-theorist Alan Sekula; some work made for the Zapatista 'Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism' in 1996; some photographs by Brazilian documentary photographer Sebastião Salgado; and lastly work made by net activists, particularly RTMark and Etoy.

It is no illusion that politically active work has had a hard time in the contemporary art world, given the increasing engagement of corporations with art institutions, and the

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<sup>1</sup> There are many such theories but a good place to start is Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London 2001.

symbiosis that has been established between elements of mass culture, for example fashion, and art. The result of this part-privatisation of the art world, that gained impetus especially from the 1980s, has been a saturation of art institutions with corporate values, the long decline through the 1980s and much of the 1990s of prominent politically radical art, the production of much art that overtly played with its commodity status, the rise of the artist-celebrity, and the mutual endorsement of celebrities by and in the art world.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary art is the self-conscious 'other' both of instrumental business, work and politics, and of the consoling, coherent, narrative mass culture that is its main tool of reconciliation. If autonomous contemporary art, protected by its archaic forms of patronage and market, is the supplement of the system of neoliberalism, perhaps critical content only serves to show that the system is capable of conscience, self-critique and by implication reform. Confined to and limited by the protected system of art, critique may only reinforce the system.

In looking at the work of Diane Arbus in her celebrated book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag argued that one role of contemporary art was to harden the viewer to the world, suppressing or at least reducing moral queasiness.<sup>3</sup> In the light of performances involving baby-eating (Zhu Yu), or snuff movies presented as art (Sergei Bugaev Afrika) or (fake) genetic experiments producing fluorescent rabbits (Eduardo Kac), such words seem prescient. In the on principle useless and inconsequential shuffling of signs that the art world produces, structurally radical art is perhaps merely one part of the spectrum. Perhaps the content of such sign-shuffling is less important than its overall operation, and the role it plays in dramatising, making spectacular, fantasising about and finally sanctioning the functional shuffling of signs, bodies, artefacts and genes in commerce.

If there are paths out of this dilemma, they must rely upon an analysis of the operation of the art world and its relation to neoliberalism; and I hope that each of the examples I give will demonstrate something not only about the possibility for making and displaying such art, but about its effectiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> See Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists and Corporate Sponsorships*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002, and Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, Verso, London 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1979, p. 40.



To start with a small and by his standards simple piece made by Allan Sekula in 2000 called *Waiting for Tear Gas (White Globe to Black)*, it is an intervention of a few dozen pictures that is shown in galleries as a slide sequence, and follows the texts in a book called *5 Days that Shook the World*.<sup>4</sup> The ‘5 Days’ are the demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation that took place in Seattle towards the end of 1999. In the book, the texts that frame these pictures—by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair—describe the aims, the tactics and the factions among the protesters, and the police’s heavy-handed (indeed, potentially lethal) response. Sekula himself, unusually, does not support the pictures with much text, arguing that in the face of such strangeness a ‘simple descriptive physiognomy was warranted’. Further:

I hoped to describe the attitudes of people waiting, unarmed, sometimes deliberately naked in the winter chill, for the gas and the rubber bullets and the concussion grenades. There were moments of civic solemnity, of urban anxiety, and of carnival.

The means chosen were deliberately simple: a small 35mm camera, available light, and no digital correction of the colours cast by street lights. An old form of recording political activity, made anew in the unlooked-for circumstances in which that activity had revived. Sekula’s subjects wait, and the frozen moments of their waiting are sealed in the

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Cockburn/ Jeffrey St. Clair/ Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*, Verso, London 2000.

photographic frame, but while in so much diverse postmodern photographic work time seems frozen, for example in pictures which fix human subjects like laboratory specimens between glass slides, or fix only their activities as shoppers and consumers, the movement of time is strongly suggested here. Subjects and photographs alike look forward, in expectation and dread, and backwards for there is something archaic about both the demonstrations and these images, a feeling of history reasserting itself. What has reactivated time in such pictures? It is not the events of Seattle alone but the way they seem built into a wider system of change, as formerly fractious single-issue groups coalesce into a broad critique of the way things are.

The sequence starts with a white globe set against an office space, and ends with a black one in the same setting. It is a symbol of a change in perspective that takes in race, negation, the Third World, and the sudden and utter switch of perception that involvement in political action can bring about.

This work cuts against art-world conventions in being an overt piece of political propaganda, and in having a specific use that comments critically on art's apparent uselessness. While the fostering of ambiguity and the deferral of meaning is standard in works of art, and is constantly insisted upon in their interpretation, there is no doubt here about the meaning of the work or about Sekula's attitude to his subjects. The work is designed to serve the movement. Even the mechanism whereby the display of critical material rebounds to the honour of the institution that hosts it, the art world and finally the system as a whole is undercut because the critique the work contains is directed unambiguously against that system.



In one of its displays as a slide sequence, *Waiting for Tear Gas* was installed in the towering, Fascist-built Columbus Monument in Lisbon, the façade of which carries a massive cross which is also a sword, while up the sides crawl conquistadors bringing armed enlightenment to the Americas.

12 October 1992 was the day chosen for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing. The streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in colonial times the capital of Chiapas, filled with 20,000 Indigenous people, marching in ranks. When they reached the main square, they dragged the statue of the local conquistador, Diego de Mazariegos, from its pedestal, and hauled it through the town, a rope tied around its neck, just as the conquistador had treated their ancestors in those same streets, centuries ago. This was an act of political performance art, for local consumption, in which the distinction between participation and spectatorship was blurred.

This action heralded more concerted resistance by Indigenous people in Chiapas. In 1994, soldiers of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) which had been gathering support and resources in the mountains for a decade before it chose to act, took brief control of San Cristóbal and six other towns in the state. As is well known, the government has not been able to physically destroy the EZLN, as it would have liked, and as the World Bank urged, because of the wide support they enjoy throughout Mexican civil society, especially among strong community and workers' organisations, and also because of the delicacy of the Mexican economy and the nervousness of foreign investors. This is an example of globalisation giving a revolutionary movement increased leverage. In one Zapatista banner, Europe and Asia, personified as a woman, and trailing Australia in her wake, prance with the male spirit of the united Americas over the corpse of that deregulated, globalised and profit-seeking form of capitalism known as 'neoliberalism', gun and skull clutched in its dead hands.

In July and August 1996, the EZLN, as part of its attempt to build a civil society capable of reforming the state, and an international alliance to fight neoliberalism, ran an *Encuentro* in the areas they hold in the mountains and rainforest. This 'Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism' was an extraordinary event for a rebel group to organise, driven as it has been into remote country by the army, encircled and continually threatened. For a week, between three and four thousand visitors from five continents were fed, housed and provided for. Entire communities, working for months, had built accommodation, meeting halls and arenas, toilets and showers in five different locations, called 'Aguascalientes'.<sup>5</sup> Clean water and good food were provided by people who themselves often go hungry—or who subsist, malnourished, on corn,

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<sup>5</sup> The Aguascalientes were named after the location of the Mexican revolutionary convention of 1914.

tortillas and beans. There was electric lighting, laid on by the Mexican electricians' union, computers for the press, and playgrounds.



Zapatista Encuentro, Oventic. Photo: Julian Stallabrass

At the Aguascalientes I saw and photographed at Oventic and La Realidad, there was much visual art, paintings on walls and banners. Some of the paintings were made by or under the direction of single artists, others were evidently made collectively. All bore on central Zapatista concerns.

Emiliano Zapata, the renowned fighter for peasant rights from whom the movement takes its name, was naturally a central presence. The 'reform' of a central legal element in Zapata's programme, the establishment of communal land tenure, was an important spur to the revolt. The face of Che Guevara is also often seen. Régis Debray has described the continuities between Che's struggle and that of the EZLN today, though they are not those slackly commented upon by the Western mass media, which dismissed (insofar as it was covered at all) the *Encuentro* as a politicised re-run of Woodstock, attempting to taint it with what they regard as the discredited spirit of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Education and books, for example, were central to both.

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<sup>6</sup> Régis Debray, 'A Guerrilla with a Difference', *New Left Review*, no. 218, July-August 1996, pp. 128-37.



But it is not the presence of a single martyr, or even a small pantheon, who accompanies the Zapatistas but a much more fundamental force:

The mountain told us to take up arms so that we would have a voice.

It told us to cover our faces so that we would have a face.

It told us to forget our names so that we could be named.

It told us to protect our past so we would have a future.

In the mountains, the dead live: our dead.

This passage was from the opening address to the *Encuentro*, read by Commandante Ana María to the delegates who gathered at night in the Oventic arena. Around us, thousands of Indigenous people listened, silent and still. We had been waiting there a long time for some special event to mark the opening of the *Encuentro*, which would be signalled, we had been told, by the extinguishing of the lights. We expected different things, some armed display of strength, perhaps, or the arrival of Marcos. Then the lights did vanish, and there was quiet for a time, while the moon came and went behind fast-moving clouds. Eventually, from far up the hillside on which the camp at Oventic was built, we heard the faint sounds of a band and could see pricks of light. A procession slowly approached and, as it finally arrived among us, we saw that it was simply hundreds of unarmed civilian men and women of all ages, veterans of the fighting in 1994. This was a

stage-managed piece of political education, much like the extraordinary march on Mexico City that was to follow.



Zapatista imagery is seen not only in the Aguascalientes but also in street graffiti in San Cristóbal, where it employs the same recurrent themes. Performances, demonstrations and images are the product of a culture, open to all, which does not gain distinction by elitist exclusion. That culture is fed by a functioning participatory democracy, in which issues are discussed until near-unanimity is reached.

Those swayed by the novelty of its organisation, its means and its openness sometimes describe the EZLN as a postmodern movement. It is a hasty analysis. The *Encuentro* was, after all, devoted to the defence of universal humanism and against a system which, while it tries to divide its enemies, gives them global common cause, cutting across distinctions of gender, race, nation and religion. The cause of the rebellion is the very un-postmodern matter of hunger, against legal 'reforms' that threaten to starve these people who refer to themselves as the 'Voice of Maize'. The *Encuentro* was meant to provide a forum for the exchange of views and experiences of neoliberalism. By bringing opponents of neoliberalism together, the *Encuentro* strengthened awareness of the problems and reinforced international connections between those looking for solutions. It was a process that condensed in the Seattle protests.

The common critique of the Zapatista movement characterises them as postmodern revolutionaries, more concerned with spectacle and propaganda than effect. They are 'virtual' revolutionaries, and devotees of the spectacle. However, in their goal of democratising Mexican society, some real progress has been made, driven by their very existence. The fall in 2000 of the PRI, Mexico's party of government for seventy years, the election of Pablo Salazar as governor of Chiapas the same year, and the dramatic

procession of the Zapatistas into Mexico City in 2001 to negotiate with the new government are indications of the partial success of their project. (This, despite the darker current political moment, which has seen them breaking off negotiations, and winding up the Aguascalientes.) These effects are as much to do with bodies and bullets as images and words. Yet their survival for so long, surrounded by government troops who have blockaded their communities and committed atrocities against indigenous people, hoping to provoke the rebels into open conflict, is partly due to the alliances the Zapatistas have fostered in Mexican civil society, but also to considerable international sympathy and support. The circulation of their culture—in Marcos's words, their own images, representations of them by extraordinary photographers such as Antonio Turok, and their education of Westerners by propagandist performance—has been central to that support.<sup>7</sup>



Antonio Turok, Subcommandante Marcos

The simplicity of much Zapatista imagery is determined by its use and the very limited access to formal education of its main audience. Yet, as it circulates in photographs, books and on the Web, it is seen by diverse viewers, and its archaic and direct qualities may take on different meanings. It may be read as a Benjaminian and utopian looking backwards to look forwards, in which the outmoded (humanism and the ideals of

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Turok, *Chiapas: El fin del silencio*, Aperture, New York 1998.

revolution) become a presentiment of the future when activated by political movement.<sup>8</sup> This culture is, of course, very far from that of the mainstream art world, and has no circulation there. It is indiscrete, egalitarian, collective, participatory, and democratic—but in opposing neoliberalism, it also offers an implicit reproach to the art world, the economy's consort.

Sebastião Salgado has been much (and sometimes rightly) criticised for his nostalgia, sentiment, and the aestheticised presentation of passive victims. Even so, one of his projects stands as a productive model of political action in art. In his book, *Terra*, and the exhibitions which accompany it, Salgado recast the context, as well as the content, of his previous work. The book is dedicated to the cause of the Brazilian land-occupation movement, the Movimento sem Terra (MST), with which Salgado has long been involved.<sup>9</sup> The long section devoted to the movement in *Terra* documents the plight of the landless camped out along the highways, waiting to occupy land as the Brazilian constitution grants them the right to do, and the communities that they build when they have done so, especially their schools and crèches. Salgado also photographed one very unusual land invasion, of the Fazenda Giacometti in Paraná. Most MST invasions take place at night using trucks, but due to the vast area of this estate (200,000 acres) and the great numbers of people they had assembled to occupy (10,000 people), this dramatic invasion took place at dawn and on foot, following a long march through the night.<sup>10</sup> What normally must hide itself, against violent repression, was here expressed openly and spectacularly, and Salgado captured it in a set of extraordinary pictures.

Salgado also witnessed the massacre of peasants by police at Pará in 1995, and photographed the bodies, the wake, and the mourners. *Terra* recasts Salgado's earlier pictures of Brazil by building them into a definite narrative. Beginning with indigenous, still tribal inhabitants of the forest, then recapitulating his documentation of the 'workers of the land', including agricultural labourers and miners, and of drought and famine, then moving to the city, concentrating on migrants and the urban poor. This is the context for the final section which deals with the landless, and the MST who are seen as the solution to the problems of the hunger, exhaustion, the breakdown in social cohesion and the powerlessness of ordinary people shown in the previous sections.

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1999.

<sup>9</sup> See James Petras's account of the MST in this issue of the NLR: 'Latin America: The Resurgence of the Left', pp. 9-11. For Salgado's involvement with the MST, see the interview with Salgado, 'Man of the People', *Amateur Photographer*, vol. 189, no. 16, 19 April 1997, pp. 26-7.

<sup>10</sup> João Pedro Stedile, 'Landless Battalions: The Sem Terra Movement of Brazil', *New Left Review*, new series, no. 15, May-June 2002.



Salgado's work has always been committed to progressive social change in a general sense, but in *Terra* the function is far more explicit. This produces a qualitative change in the work: here is a set of photographs, which are certainly meant to be seen as art, placed at the service of a political movement. This was apparent not only in the pictures' content but in their production and display. They were not generally seen in conventional gallery displays as fine prints, but were exhibited as posters simultaneously in many venues, including churches and charity buildings. The production of the posters, in a large edition of 5,000 and sold for £10 each, was financed from Salgado's royalty for the book, and the money raised from their sale went to the MST. The venues, the quality of the poster reproductions, the likely audience of charity workers and political activists as well as art-lovers, indicate that this was not exactly, or not only, a fine art display. The pictures are also changed when the MST uses them independently; I first saw a few of them as photocopies stuck to the door of a meeting house at the EZLN's *Encuentro*. Since in those circumstances what was of overriding importance was the subject matter, there was nothing to say that they were the work of Salgado, or even of a single photographer.



In the pictures of MST settlements, Salgado is photographing people for whom hope has in a modest way materialized, though both subjects and photographer seem painfully aware of its fragility. Befitting activist photography, the focus has shifted from past to future. It may be that Salgado has pursued this interest a little too self-consciously in a sequence of photographs of children of the landless, most of them close-ups of very beautiful kids looking into the lens, who appear to have a melancholy knowledge of their likely fate well beyond their years. It is not that death has retreated; these portraits are brought into contrast with pictures of scenes following the massacre at Pará.<sup>11</sup> The pictures are at once fixed on present tragedy and warn of a future which may hold more of the same—repression, hunger, lives passing in hard and poorly rewarded labour—or which, through these people's actions, may just hold something better.

A leader of the MST, João Pedro Stedile, has said that Salgado's pictures had definite and positive effects for the movement (other than fund-raising). They helped to globalise awareness of the MST, and thus enabled it to foster links with other radical farmer's movements, for instance in India.<sup>12</sup> This is an art, then, which has had an appreciable political effect, though again at the price of being viewed with condescension by a large portion of the Western cultural elite.

It may seem that a huge gulf lies between the archaic analogue objects, photographic prints or posters, book reproductions that we have discussed so far, let alone hand-painted walls and banners, and the weightless, distributable and perfectly reproducible elements of the Internet, yet both may be used in opposition to the quiescent art world.

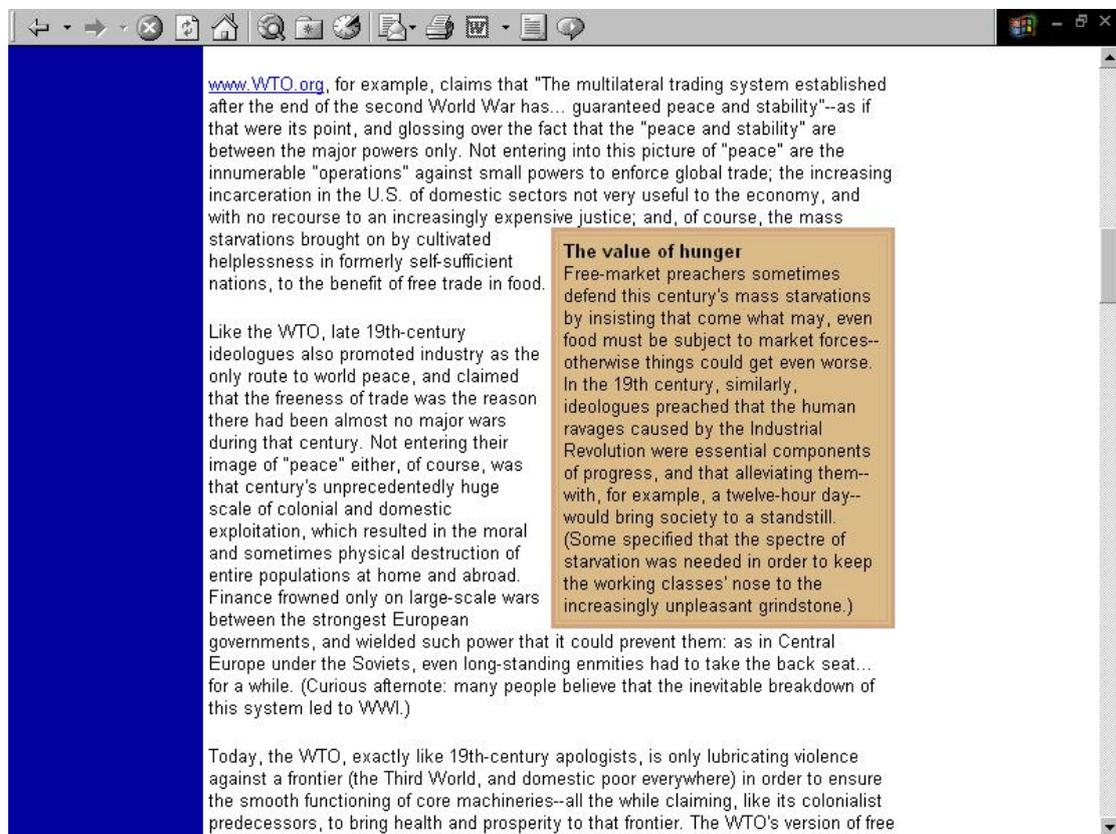
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<sup>11</sup> Sebastião Salgado, *Terra: Struggle of the Landless*, Phaidon Press, London 1997, pp. 65, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Stedile, op cit.

To some surprise, online anti-corporate activists and pranksters RTMark—notorious for sponsoring, among many subversive acts, the swapping of voice boxes between GI Joe and Barbie dolls in toy shops—were selected for the prestigious US Whitney Biennale in 2000. Like other participating artists, they were sent a package containing invitations to the event, including a letter implying that they were now part of the US art-world elite and would have the opportunity at the opening to schmooze with the top curators, collectors, dealers and art administrators. Rather than go along, RTMark sold the invitations through the auction site eBay.<sup>13</sup> They received \$4000, which went into their project fund.

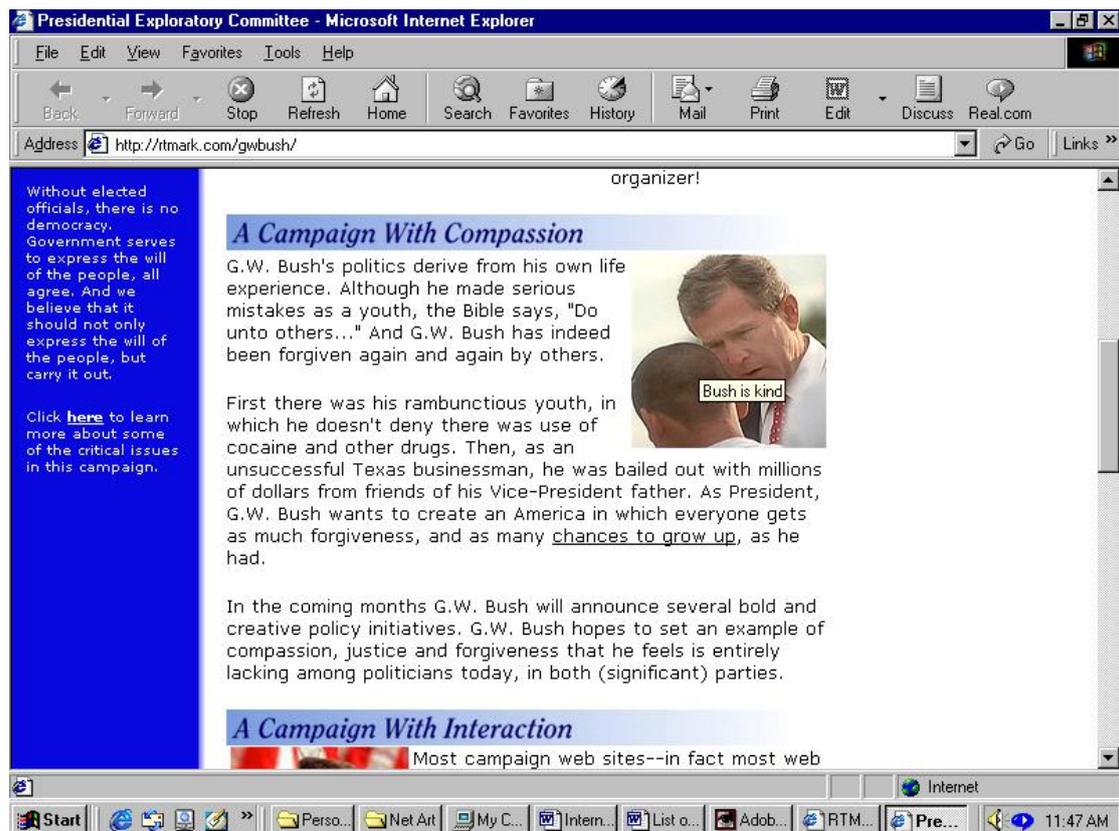
RTMark was founded as a corporation, a clearing house to aid subversive acts, online of off, and protects itself with corporate law. Just as copyleft and the free software agreements invented by Richard Stallman are hacked versions of copyright law, RTMark is a hacked corporation.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>13</sup> See RTMark's announcement posted on nettime, 9 March 2000.

<sup>14</sup> For information the founding site of the free software movement, go to <http://www.gnu.org/home.html>

While much of their activity is merely organised on the Net, RTMark also make online interventions, particularly spoof sites which mirror those of official organisations but load the pages with radical content. RTMark's WTO pages (using the old name of the organisation, GATT, for the site) imparted frank information about the management of global trade to maintain the system of exploitation.<sup>15</sup> They did the same in a very funny site devoted to George W. Bush which was uploaded during the presidential election of 2001, and have renewed the effort for the current campaign.<sup>16</sup> Both the GATT and Bush sites have faced threats of legal action, and in November 2001 the WTO pressured the server hosting the GATT site to remove it from the Web. Going to gatt.org now takes the user to a copy of the official WTO site.



RTMark demonstrate one model of radical politics and cultural activism coming into synthesis. They pursue political ends through cultural means, and this form of cultural propaganda is also found in the actions of anti-capitalist street protesters, who unite actions comparable to performance, environmental and installation art with practical acts of subversion.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.rtmark.com/gatt.html>

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.rtmark.com/bush.html>

<sup>17</sup> An example is Reclaim the Streets. See Aufheben, 'The Politics of Anti-Road Struggle and the Struggles

Such activism is underpinned by a theoretical model describing the character of corporations and the mass media. Based on Michel de Certeau's book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which explored popular, radical misuses of mass culture, and developed by a number of Net theorists, particularly David Garcia and Geert Lovink, the practice of 'tactical media' stresses mobility in the face of fast-moving technological and social change.<sup>18</sup> Action taken to alter them must take account of their mobile nature, and must respond to the minutiae of the current situation. The issue is put clearly by RTMARK:

...the flexibility of corporate power, its lack of a center, comes at a price: it has no brain. It may be as tenacious as a virus, but it also has the intelligence of one: mechanical, soulless, minuscule.<sup>19</sup>

Since it reacts to attack by mutation, the argument goes, a sustained series of minor assaults, each tailored to the new scenario brought about by their predecessors, can drive real change. It is ironic that this view of corporate power buys into the conservative view of the market and its creatures as natural forces. In fact, corporations remain highly structured and hierarchical entities with geographical bases (generally in global cities), and are far from being indifferent to vertical organisation. Corporate and state powers are perfectly capable of acting in concert, of long-term forward planning, and of systematic destruction of their opponents. Indeed, the entire neoliberal and postmodern turn is proof of that.<sup>20</sup> Tactical media are an important element in the struggle against neoliberalism, and they may indeed bring about small increments of change but, as activists have been realising with ever greater force, they must at some point come together in wider strategic projects.

Even so, the effectiveness of tactical action was shown in the direct confrontation between the art site etoy and massive online toy-seller, eToys, in which RTMark took part, over a disputed site name. Etoys, worried that prospective toy-buyers were going to the art site by mistake, drove the etoy site off the net with legal action. In response, etoy ran a fund-raising and propaganda campaign from an unnamed (numbered) site, showing toy businessmen and etoy artists on parade. Meanwhile, RTMark launched a vocal propaganda campaign, including a spoof of the eToys site, which set out to do no less

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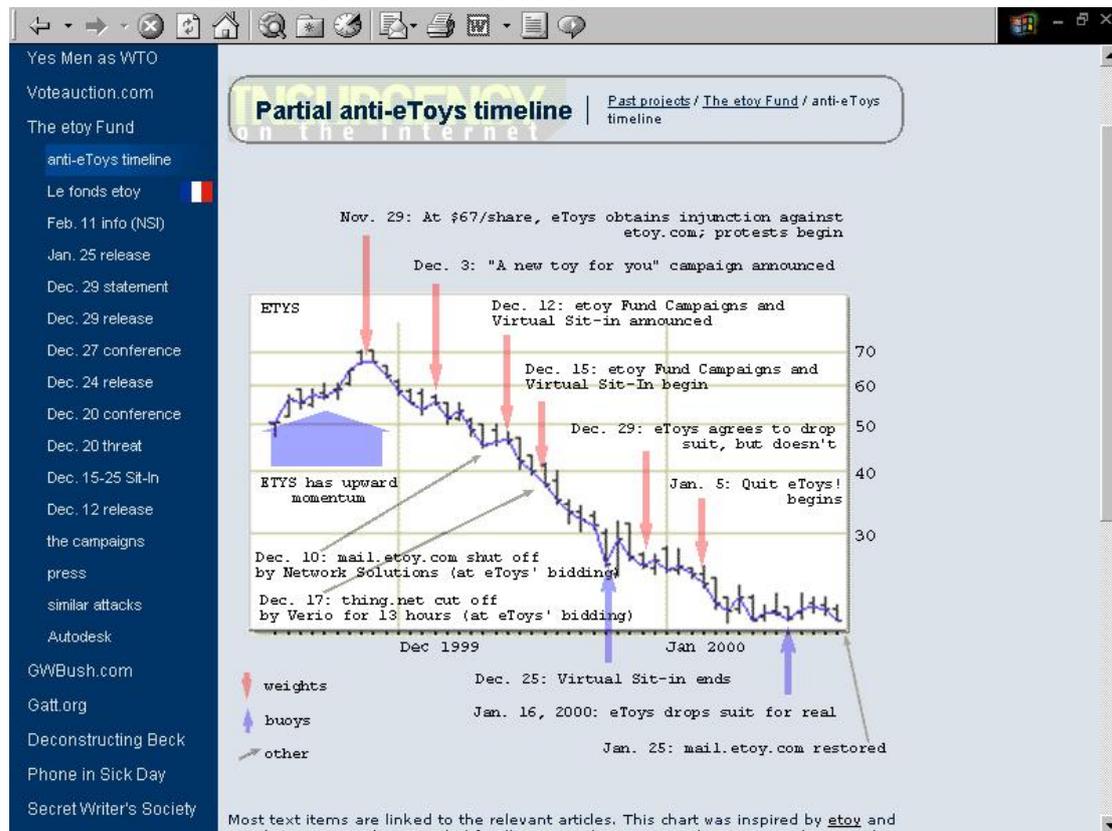
of Anti-Road Politics: The Case of the No M11 Link Road Campaign', in George McKay, ed., *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso, London, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of tactical media, see Josephine Berry, "'Another Orwellian Misnomer?'" Tactical Art in Virtual Space', *Inventory*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2000, pp. 58-83; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984; David Garcia and Geert Lovink, 'The ABC of Tactical Media', nettime posting, 16 May 1997.

<sup>19</sup> RTMARK, 'Sabotage and the New World Order', in Stocker/ Schöpf, p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Noam Chomsky has written much about the sustained, massively funded corporate propaganda efforts to change the political climate. See, for instance, his book *World Orders, Old and New*, Pluto Press, London, 1994, ch. 2.

than destroy the toy company. The threat might have seemed foolish, but RTMark and their online supporters knew what they were about.



Among the tools used against eToys was a program called Floodnet, designed by Brett Stalbaum.<sup>21</sup> Floodnet, as its name suggests, overloads a site with calls to load its pages, and also returns pointed error messages. For instance, in an attack in support of the Zapatista rebels on the Mexican government's official site, Floodnet returned the message 'human\_rights not found on this server'. If an attack is to be successful, many people must launch Floodnet against the targeted site at the same time. Stalbaum, at least, is clear that Floodnet, in addition to being a tool of political protest, is also a work of art—a 'collaborative, activist and conceptual art work of the net'.<sup>22</sup>

This 'cyber-squatting' attack hobbled the eToys site on at least some of the crucial days before Christmas, preventing online ordering. Worse, eToys could no longer rely on the figures logging the number of customers to its site, which were important in fixing its share price. It is hard to prove that the activists' assault on eToys was solely or largely responsible for the deep decline in the company's worth. What can be said is that the

<sup>21</sup> For Stalbaum's account of Floodnet, see <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/ZapTactFlood.html>

<sup>22</sup> Stalbaum, op. cit.

decline began when the protests did, and that the shares lost 70 per cent of their value. Unsurprisingly, eToys dropped its case, and agreed to pay etoy's costs.

This dispute over the naming of a site leads into the wider issue of the implications of the emergence of a collaborative, participatory and unownable culture. From the mid 1990s, with rise of web browser, the dematerialisation of the art work, and especially its weightless distribution over digital networks, has threatened the protected system of the arts. What is the market to make of a work that is reproducible with perfect accuracy, which can simultaneously exist on thousands of servers and millions of computers, and which can be cannibalised or modified by users? How can one buy, sell or own such a portion of data? This is a situation, central to Marxist theory, in which modernisation of the means of production comes into conflict with the relations of production. In digital art, the use of the most up-to-date technological means to make and distribute work comes into conflict with the craft-based practice, patronage and exclusivity of the art world.

This form of art is indicative of a wider development: that out of a renewed and virulent species of capitalism, at the point of its apparent triumph, there condensed from fragmented single-issue politics, a coherent movement of opposition.<sup>23</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that this is no accident, for co-operative values emerge from the very change of the primary economies towards data processing, on which neoliberalism is founded. The networks have their own ethos which 'seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism'.<sup>24</sup> The free software movement provides a clear example of such collective and unremunerated work in action. As productive and reproductive technologies were synthesised in the digital world, astonished artists were handed a route back to social and political engagement, side-stepping art institutions (which, as we have seen, were thoroughly imbued with the corporate ethos), and promptly raising once more the spectre of the avant-garde.

Technological and political change has made political activism in contemporary art viable once more, even if diverse conservative voices continue to insist that all such attempts must fail. Radical art must press upon the contradictions inherent in the role and place of contemporary art within the system of neoliberalism. There are a number of tactics open to it:

- Overt oppositional content and use (Sekula)

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<sup>23</sup> For a guide to this new politics, see Emma Bircham/ John Charlton, eds., *Anti-Capitalism: A Guide to the Movement*, Bookmarks Publications, London 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 294.

- Founding a participatory, collective cultural production apart from the usual art world circuits (some Internet art, the Zapatistas, and the anti-globalisation movements themselves)
- Putting itself at the explicit service of radical movements (Salgado, RTMark), and thus surrendering art's linked autonomy and uselessness
- Challenging the protected status of the art economy (much online art)

In all of this, there is a giving up of art's apparently non-instrumental status (in any case, a matter of bad faith, since such art serves the neoliberal system structurally and quite often the state or corporations directly). Among the opening remarks of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno has this to say about artistic freedom: '...absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole.' Until that wider unfreedom is effaced, the particular freedoms of art run through the fingers like sand. While they may open a utopian window onto a less instrumental world, they also serve as effective pretexts for oppression. To break with the autonomy of free art is to remove one of the masks of neoliberalism. Or to put it the other way around, if free trade is to be abandoned as a model for global development, so must be its supplement, free art.