For A Community Hacktivism Of Art

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Because of the commercial mechanisms that rule cultural activity, avant-garde movements are cut off from potentially supportive groups that are already restricted by overall social conditions.
- *Guy Debord, June i957.*

It's time to create the pop stars of activism, the idoru (virtual idol in Japanese) of communication guerrilla, it's time to threaten and charm the masses by the ghosts coming from the net, to play the myth against the myth, to be more nihilist than infotainment.
- *etoy, Nettime, March 3, 1999.*

Hacking and Hacktivism

The Hacker movement sprung in 1961 with the first generations of American computer scientists, in particular the MIT *Tech Model Railroad Club*. Freshly equipped with the PDP-1 (the first small-sized commercial computer), [1] researchers used the machine to engage in new "work games" such as inventing programming languages or using specific jargons. In 1969 the launching of Arpanet (the forerunner of Internet) allowed various groups of hackers to interconnect and consolidate the bases of a then emerging community culture. [2]

A hacker is not only an individual with a perfect command of computer languages, he or she is also an ethically conscious individual (as opposed to the cracker) who adheres to the logic of shared culture (the *Open Source*) and of going beyond the arbitrary constraints imposed by authoritarian orders. At first steeped in communication mythologies such as the widespread global village, the first communities of hackers structured around the principles of free access based on mutual aid or exchange – the principles of the gift economy identified by Marcel Mauss and twentieth-century social anthropology. [3] As such, the most significant example might be the *GNU/Linux* operating system invented by Richard Stallman and Linus Torvalds, supported at the beginning by the volunteer investment of a community of subscribers. Developed and distributed on the Internet, the system remains to this day an object to be explored and perfected.

With the advent of telematics in the 1980s which quickly hinted at the structural future of states, the hacker phenomenon drew the attention of some militant groups and produced the hacktivist movement – or the meeting of militant and technological know-how.

The first products of this meeting go back to the creation of the *Chaos Computer Club* in 1984, [4] in Hamburg and, two years later, the installation of the international newsgroup *PeaceNet* which allowed several hacktivists to make contact and widen their means of action. The ccc became well-known with its protest pirating through the computer platforms of the German government as it was setting up cross-referencing systems to fight terrorism. The aim of these actions was thus to manifest a deep ideological disagreement but also to inform public opinion of the risks facing private life and individual freedom in the age of information.

With the arrival of the Internet at the beginning of the 1990s and its increasing omnipresence at all levels of society, the digital environment became an extended arena of the real. The economic and cultural issues now appearing on networks were so colossal and so well delimited that major financial interest groups

viewed any sign of obstacle to their growth and globalization policy with an unfavorable eye. [5] Systematic surveys of consumer habits, tracing of sites visited or cross-referencing of customer files with other databases – cyberspace has become a vast area of market control where Internauts are considered only from their profile as consumers.

Faced with the nomadization of power, any act of resistance must necessarily take place in cyberspace and no longer only in traditional physical spaces. [6] Several American hacktivist groups have understood this. Aside from theoretical ideas on "electronic civil disobedience" spread by the *Critical Art Ensemble* or the (R) *Tmark* society which does productive sabotage, [7] a more radical portion of hacktivism such as the *Electronic Disturbance Theater* organized in 1998 on-line protests and attacks against various Web servers of the Mexican government which was repressing Zapatist rebels. Furthermore, the subversive group *Cult of the Dead Cow* opened a public site giving free access to electronic resistance equipment. [8]

Hacktivists now represent a difficult force to control against politico-liberal and security hegemonies increasingly imposing themselves throughout electronic space. Unavoidably generating types of positioning which touch upon the very idea of community, new cultural codification systems operate in conjunction with the emergence of social bodies or "data bodies," and also generate other, more complex and fragmented assessments of the world. [9]

escore - estorm — tboys - tcode - atoy - ytoy - < etoy >

In Switzerland, in October 1994, seven artists of different nationalities and disciplines decided to abandon their individual identities and entrench themselves behind a single collective body named etoy. [10] Wishing to intervene within the symbolic equipment of the Web's economic and media world, etoy constituted itself as an anonymous society and made its domain name a registered trademark for experimental entertainment. On the Internet the ownership of a domain name has now become a major economic issue and also the cause of great violence on the part of capitalist groups invariably spreading their control over markets. In this, a domain name introduces another strategic mode of appropriating the world.

Borrowing from business structural and hierarchic diagrams, transposing and manipulating various visual codes from the world of finance, the new economy and information industries, each original member of etoy Corporation found him or herself becoming an "agent" and donning a strictly standardized physical appearance, even akin to paramilitary aesthetics (uniform, sunglasses and shaven head): [11] "The uniforms are our way of expressing a digital feeling. etoy.agents are interchangeable elements of a digita[program. An old lady asked me yesterday if we come from another planet. I told her, no, we come from the Internet.... The webserver is the place of our existence, the body is not important, it must be uniformed. From the physical point of view, it does not matter who is who". [12]

The program which initialized the etoy project was the introduction on line of a Web interface allowing its establishment in digital space; with this operational communication platform, etoy could begin producing cultural added value by spreading its trademark across networks, like an artistic virus. The site is not only a "data showcase" for society but the nerve centre and lifestyle of the etoy community: "We have mentally emigrated to the Internet. The central nerve system is www.etoy.com. The seven members of etoy are spread all over Europe with usually not more than one physical meeting a year. [13]

The first etoy projects consisted of various actions carried out during raves or in galleries such as *Protected by etoy*, before moving to a media hijack stage ranging from a TV show where an etoy agent made a fleeting appearance, to the first major on-line hijack, *The Digital Hijack* in 1996 during which important Web research portals were hijacked, and the *Toywar* of 1999-2000, an unprecedented information conflict against the American toy retailer eToys Inc.

Through artistic events involving a critique of how information is circulated, etoy's art builds strong connections between art and economy, politics and anti-authority. Enraptured with the hacktivist culture, disrupting and swamping the flows transiting through the Internet, etoy's approach -thus describable as subversive or entropic - even warranted the opening of an FBI investigation: "We try to disturb conventional information channels and in that sense, etoy is a political group. But we do not have a political message. Our message is our lifestyle in our new `Heimat,' the Internet." [14]

Etoy's fiction is entirely grounded on a semantic and symbolic transposition of digital culture in the development of its story line, organic structure and the various transversal games therein. In acting upon the invisible infrastructures that drain so much financial, legal or cultural flows for example, etoy also intervenes directly into the different manifestations of authority. The virtual domination of the business world over the real remains extremely powerful and, in taking part in a certain type of on-line "entertainment," etoy subverts the merchandising of culture while denouncing the speculative transactions of the market. For example in projecting desire or fear, etoy stages in a ferociously critical manner the irrational behaviors of neo-liberalism and moreover proposes an imagination liberated from the industries of infotainment.

Guerrillas and Informational Hijacking

Between March 31 and July 31, 1996 etoy launched *The Digital Hijack* operation and infiltrated several major research engines (Alta Vista, Lycos, etc.) by introducing a number of designated keywords. With this action, etoy hijacked a million and a half "technological tourists" and denounced stereotypes, the hierarchic criteria and redistribution modes of the Web's referencing systems transformed for the occasion into a "digital stage."

But to this day the most typical event is the *Toywar*, held between November 1999 and February 18, 2000 when one major electronic commerce company (created in 1996) – eToys Inc. – attacked etoy because of the etymological proximity of their names. After successive refusals from etoy's shareholders concerning the repurchase of the trademark (registered in 1994), the sure-to-win eToys Inc. company entered into legal battle and following a November 29, 1999 decision from a court of justice, succeeded in imposing to etoy.com the suspension of its domain name, the closure of the site and a penalty of $10,000 a day for non-respect of the verdict.

Faced with the attack and connotation of the plaintiff's various accusations (terrorist activities, illegal operations on the financial market, violent and pornographic content), etoy decided to take reprisals by exploiting the incubation of its cultural viruses, creating an appeal interface – www.toywar.com – and levying a veritable army composed of approximately 2,000 activists, artists, lawyers, journalists and celebrities. [15]

On the battlefield, the etoy community created a informational shock wave by protesting worldwide against the assailant and spreading strategic information in the press, [16] on TV, the Web (with 250 resistance sites, some among them making available "etoy.soldiers," Netflooding programs, etc.) and some economic and legal networks. On December 12, 1999, (R)Tmark launched the *New Internet "Game" Designed to Destroy Etoys.com*, a "network game" whose aim was to harm, or even better, to destroy the enemy company.

At Christmas time, the toy retailer's Web server was so overwhelmed by the successive attacks of "etoy.soldiers" that being unable to take any orders, its turnover fell considerably. Exhausted by a formidable information and media confrontation, and with a NASDAQ quotation dropping from 67 to 15 dollars in two months, eToys Inc. finally announced its withdrawal from the game. [17] In March 2000 the soldiers and heroes received shares from the senior management of etoy and became co-owners of etoy Corporation.

Thus with *Toywar* and within a dual diagram, two economic notions and two different lifestyles were opposed: one stemming from an American market, consumer and expansionist culture, the other from a European, more participative culture.

Without the support of its community, etoy would probably not have been able to oppose such strong resistance to the legal deployment of eToys Inc. It is noteworthy to realize in passing that etoy ful[y exploited the hacker saying according to which a cyberarmy is first constituted through a name. And recently, the appearance on the Net of specific sociological attitudes, such as multiple identities or collective pseudonyms, has in fact resulted in a new organization of the functions of community by making it the means of producing mass phenomena and symbolic, often irrational referents. [18]

etoy: the popstar is the programmer is the lawyer is the architect is the manager is the designer is the system is the virus is etoy...

While the Internet is certainly a new issue for art today, it is easy to understand the necessity for certain artists to use hacktivist counter-culture models. On one hand, it reacts to the need to control the programming language – a *sine qua non* condition to act ever so slightly upon the informational environment – and on the other, to an anti-authority positioning vis-a-vis a symbolic order on which Western societies have been built for centuries. After all, cyberspace is nothing else but the extension of the logic of the military industrial complex initiated after World War Two, and this probably explains the situationist, minimalist and counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s revival wave found in certain online artistic practices. [19]

At a time when a new distribution of economic, political and social values is emerging, etoy asserts itself based upon cultural acts that are opposed to a vampirization of art and culture by liberal economy. Thus joining the continuum of artists working on economy or business (Jeff Koons interpreting the relationships between artist and market, playing the "art dealer" while facing legal disputes; Fabrice Hybert creating in 1994 the Unlimited Responsibility company to foster exchanges and accompany the production of some of his projects), etoy is more the expression of a fundamental critique through the irrationality and mythology of business. In this, its attachment to the gift proposes other economic diagrams and a cultural plus-value on our exchange systems, the function of community and, by extension, the collective unconscious of our societies. If one of Minimalism's messages was the industrialization of artistic production, etoy art could very well be part of a form of hacktivism fighting against merchandising.

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NOTES
[1] PDP-1: Programmed Data Processor – model 1. Ultimately and until the end of the 1970s, the Pop-10 will become the true preferred machine of hackers.
[2] Steve Levy, *Hackers*, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984. Also consult Eric Raymond's page, *How to Become a Hacker?*: <http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/faqs/hacker-howto.html>.
[3] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by W.D. Halls, foreword by Mary Douglas, London/New York: Routledge, 1990.
[4] <http://www.ccc.de>.
[5] "The construction of meaning is not part of Shannon's program. The notion of communication is cut from that of culture. As noted by specialist James W. Carey, this communicational tropism refers back to a particular representation of American society: 'The concept of culture is a weak and evanescent notion within social thinking.' This meaning of 'communication' will soon travel across the world." A. Mattelard, "Comment est né le mythe d'Internet?," *Le Monde diplomatique — Archéologie de la société. de l'information*, August 2000, p. 26.

[6] "One essential characteristic that sets late capitalism apart from other political and economic forms is its mode of representing power: What was once a sedentary concrete mass has now become a nomadic electronic flow. Before computerized information management, the heart of institutional command and control was easy to locate. In fact, the conspicuous appearance of the halls of power was used by regimes to maintain their hegemony." *Critical Art Ensemble, Electronic Civil Disturbance and Other Unpopular Ideas*. The book can be downloaded on line: <http://www.critical-art.net>.

[7] <http://www.critical-art.net/> and <http://www.rtmark.com>.

[8] <http://www.Hacktivism.org>.

[9] "According to Stefan Wray (a member of the Electronic Disturbance Theater), activists must become aware that politics is a theater and must learn to play: 'We are manipulating the media sphere, we are creating hype, we are cultural jamming, we are simulating threats and action... we are actors! This is political theater! A glorification and transformation of the fake into the real, at least in people's mind.— Luther Blissett, "The XYZ of Net Activism," *Nettime*, March 3. 1999.

[10] On October 26 and 27, 1994, the agents and "board members" decided the research process of CI (Competitive Intelligence) by chat. From a first program, *Term Shooter* producing random names based upon aesthetic parameters, the name etoy was chosen amongst 2,000 proposals.

[11] This seems to refer to the dress code of certain techno groups of the 1980s (Front 242 for instance) who appeared on stage wearing "(a)paramilitary" uniforms.

[12] "Interview with etoy" by Reinhard Puntigam for *Ars Journal*, 1996: <http://www.aec.at/www-ars/journal/db/ 4sept/etoy/>.

[13] *Ibid*.

[14] *Ibid*.

[15] *Toywar* was supported by various organizations such as (R)Tmark, The Thing New York, detritus.net, illegal art, plagiarist.org, namespace, negativeland, evolution control committee, styro2000, boombox.net.

[16] Nearly 300 articles were published in the international press: <http://dmoz.org/Society/Activism/Media Activism/Culture_Jamming/etoy/>.

[17] In December 2000, the press announced the bankruptcy of eToys Inc.

[18] See the project by the collective pseudonym Luther Blisset: <http://www.lutherblisset.net/intro.html>.

[19] See Elvan Zabunyan's "Cela s'appelle résistance," in *Trans_actions, ou les nouveaux commerces de l'art*, catalogue, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2000, pp. 15-23.