

Incumbent upon Recombinant Hope

EDT's Strike a Site, Strike a Pose

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It is midnight in a night of specters. Both the new reign of Empire and the new immaterial and cooperative creativity of the multitude move in shadows [...]. Is it possible in this dark night to theorize positively and define a practice of the event?

—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000:386)

Sometimes hope acquires form: In September 1998, the U.S. Department of Defense launched a hostile applet against Electronic Disturbance Theater's FloodNet server. While it may seem odd, even presumptuous, to present the D.O.D.'s response as hope incarnate, I want to place this singular event within a makeshift context—the rest, as they say, becoming—“history”...where the expanding circumference of rememory spells the shape of a contemporary aesthetic and political experiment in the radical rearrangement of the technologically social's deck furniture: “the inherent civility of electronic disobedience [...the] distinction [...] between trespass with political intent and trespass with criminal intent” (CAE 2001:33), the paradoxical proposition of “utopianism after the end of utopia” (Jameson 1991), an individual/collective dialectic (upgraded to “the poetic”), a history of the future in a hybridized sentiment as hackneyed, but contagious, as *h-o-p-e*.

Despite the indispensability of Carmen Karasic, Brett Stalbaum, and Stefan Wray to Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) as a project, in public presentations, Ricardo Dominguez functions as the group's default drive. Trained as an actor, Dominguez enacts a principle from another group of which he was a member, Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE maintains the philosophy that when working in a collective, “each member's set of skills (must be) unique to the cell” (65). Consequently, Dominguez performs EDT, personalizing the history of the collective. For the time being, I will bracket a discussion of the significance of Dominguez's idiosyncratic narrative to focus more abstractly upon two strands of its composition—the influences of CAE and the Zapatista uprising (1994) on

EDT's formation. Put differently, in what follows, I will tell a story, motivated by a desire to find the knot of EDT's recombinant hope and "muttering spells, untie it" (Chiapas95 1995).

Of Prescience and Preparation

Between 1987 and 1995, Ricardo Dominguez participated in Critical Art Ensemble, a "cultural worker" collective, founded upon and utilizing "a dialectics of negation" (Dominguez 2002). CAE, according to Dominguez, represented a group of people,

bounded by antagonism toward [their] respective endeavors and forms of art [...] a filmmaker who hated above all things film, a photographer who hated above all things photography, a bookmaker who hated books above all things [...] a computer person who hated computers above all things, a poet who hated poetry above all things, and I [Dominguez...] an actor who hated theatre. (2001b)

A product of theoretical speculation and a 1980s decentering of selves (in the U.S.), CAE questioned both the location(s) of activism and of cultural production in an effort to (re)imagine aesthetic media in critical response to the new genetic economy, nanotechnology, and the (discursive) proliferation of identity and difference.

CAE's dissatisfaction with available aesthetic and activist imaginings moves from repertoire to archive (to borrow Diana Taylor's distinction [forthcoming]) in their volumes of writing. In *The Electronic Disturbance* (1994) and *Electronic Civil Disobedience* (1996), CAE repeatedly revisits questions of performative (aesthetic and beyond) agency as if these questions were loose teeth in the mouth of contemporary cultural production. Declaring the "streets in particular and public spaces in general are in ruins" (1994:24), "performance resources must go beyond the organic body, which at present acts as the master link in performative models of representation" (69), and "public art does not exist as there is no public space" (1996:40), CAE would appear to offer little visible hope in the face of "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson 1991). Locating hope in their work, however, has more to do with time than space (despite rumors to the contrary regarding postmodernism), i.e., beyond the will to culturally vaccinate, CAE's exercises in speculation posit hope in the dodging of a future tense, separate, but intimate with, power's liquescent present.¹ Hope in the oeuvre of CAE is "built upon guesswork [...] the wager [...], the ability to live with uncertainty, and the willingness to act despite the potential for unforeseen negative consequences" (1994:120). There is a nascent politics of the question, articulated in manifesto-like hypotheses concerning electronic civil disobedience ("the right to protest in cyberspace in the era of information capital" [2001:37]) and recombinant theatre ("interwoven performative environments through which participants may flow" [87]).

Through this viewfinder, CAE's musings operate performatively in the vein of J.L. Austin's "etiolated" distinction between "performative" and "constative" utterances (1962). Like Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" ([1848] 1983), which has accrued cultural capital as a call-to-action, "a doing of things with words," CAE's writings make a different kind of sense after the appearance of EDT and other practitioners of Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD). Which is to say, as Stefan Wray has pointed out elsewhere, Critical Art Ensemble's reflections on electronic civil disobedience configured a "launch pad" for contemporary (read, post-1998) ECD practice (1998a and 1998b).

What goes unsaid is that, in the case of EDT, CAE's formulations for and of

recombinant theatre also played a role in the collective's ability to move theory into practice in relation to Zapatismo. In the spirit of extending the polemic(al), one could contend that this pair of theoretical "assemblages" (ECD and recombinant theatre) represent EDT's *in vitro* fertilization.

Apples Falling Upwards versus Hostile Applets

Perhaps Dominguez's narrative of his own relationship to the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, dangles as the listener's latchkey to understanding the significance of Zapatismo in, and to, EDT's formation. In public presentations, Dominguez chronicles this event as one of several life-altering experiences, which moved him toward founding and participating in EDT. If CAE presented hope only in the form of (im)possibility, only in some back-to-the-future "in between," the Zapatista movement propelled Dominguez beyond CAE's negative dialectics into another temporal dimension of the poetic, where hope exists in a world that various worlds cohabit. The extrasensory perception required to conceive worlds beyond/(within) the present's, selves beyond the Self's orbit, for Dominguez and others, signaled the advent of a politics independent of 1980s nay-saying, suggesting instead in its form and content the unlikely scenario that an apple "fall(ing) upwards" could be "the mystery whose solution has been proposed" (Zapatista communiqué 2002). Which, to reiterate the assessment of Coco Fusco, is NOT to reduce Dominguez or EDT's interest in Zapatismo to an "escapist identification with the Indian as romantic 'other'" (2001:70). Rather, certain elements of Zapatismo contributed to the blossoming of "a politics of the question" (Dominguez 2002), laying the groundwork for "intergalactic" connection so that naming these elements becomes tantamount to honoring the "origins" of EDT's *ars poetica*.

Arguably, Zapatismo's own table was set by a particularly Latin American question regarding the relationship between tradition and modernity/cosmopolitanism in cultural and social production (for a discussion of the opposition, see García Canclini 1995). In the instance of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), tradition manifests itself under the rubric of "the indigenous," whereas cosmopolitanism is figured as cyberspace. The analogy breaks down, however, under closer examination. Whereas the juxtaposition appears valid, the Zapatistas do not mimic some Latin American undertaking to approximate the center; instead, they decenter narratives of First World (nanotechnological) superiority by occupying the vanguard of electronic activism. Moreover, as Dominguez and others have noted, the Zapatistas broke rank with another Latin American "tradition" of Maoist/Leninist armed resistance the moment that they crossed the electronic border. In other words, the electronic outfits the Zapatistas with the ability to access a radically different version of hope than that which had been in political circulation, a "difficult kind of hope because it's not bound to a specific image of utopia, [...but] must be built without a precognition of what the endpoint will look like" (Dominguez 2002).

The possibility of imagining the possibility of not being able to imagine something (yet...) brings to mind classic (Kantian) definitions of the sublime (needless to say, with ample qualifications). Still, it seems that the "Zapatista sublime" merits the comparison if one likewise acknowledges its postmodern "aura," where a working definition of the postmodern might find sustenance in Dominguez's contention that "the postmodern [...] is a space in which one can theatricalize theory" (2002) (not necessarily akin to Lyotard's discussion of the postmodern sublime [1991]); and, where (further suspending critical disbelief to continue this flight of fantasy...) the sublime takes responsibility for its fractal sense of humor. Indeed, in deed, the theatrical/performative quality of Zapatismo—its blurring

of boundaries between the simulated, the magical, and the real, its attention to the spoken and written word—hones the movement’s ability to access (recombinant) hope as a strategy versus a tactic, (feather)lining and limning the enactment of theory as political practice.²

As Dominguez skips the story’s stone, Zapatismo offered him an “intimacy with his own invisibility,” a desire which previously he had been unable to name, the ectoplasm of a “global intimacy” that made manifest the “ultimate split between CAE and myself,” underscoring it as one of the relationship of theory to practice, where “for some communities, theory in and of itself is enough” (2002). The Zapatista movement, then, seen (albeit idiosyncratically, but in the context of EDT) as a *question to a question*, as representative of the embodiment of Dominguez and CAE’s “difference,” catalyzed the crystallization of a political and aesthetic project to facilitate an alterant performative matrix, a theatre of praxis, which calculates to conjure an improbable physics: The upward plummet of apples despite (stage right) hostile applets.

It doesn’t take a leap of faith to recognize the antigravitational trace of Zapatismo in EDT’s efforts. EDT followed in the footsteps of the EZLN, respecting and mobilizing Internet communities. While maintaining a focus on the Zapatista movement—paradoxically, a nomadic site-specificity—EDT has realized the (potential) links between bottom-up struggles for social justice. This motivated the group’s concluding action on 31 December 1998, one minute after midnight: the release of a public version of the Zapatista Floodnet, the distribution of Disturbance Developer Kits (DDK), an alternative act of “globalization,” rhizomatic as the Sup’s soundbit postscript, “Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Isidro...” (Marcos 1995:214). Finally, EDT, like its Zapatista influence, sports a charismatic spokesperson: Ricardo Dominguez has been known to don a ski mask for his presentations, challenging “civil society [...] to take off its own mask” (86). As such, EDT conceptually juggles the Zapatista attention to anonymity and their own pledge to transparency, always revealing their names and actions. Furthermore, by chronicling a story—his own—Dominguez presents EDT’s trajectory as a bedeviled *bildungsroman*, spawned under the sign(s) of the assumption:

a simple gesture [...] like Dickens’s “I am born” in *David Copperfield* [...] create(s) the dramatic process of a linear Becoming of a certain “I,” an “I” that flows to disturb the anonymity of the electronic body [...] a mask that becomes itself as it tells of itself [...] only to become something else [...] to become a story of other masks. (2001a)

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Imagine an entry in some history book of the future, keeping in mind that to do so entails grafting an entry into the here and now. Call-and-response: *The Zapatista call of the 1996 Encuentro “to develop an intercontinental network for struggle and resistance” (Dominguez 2002) engendered a streaming network among digital Zapatista networks. Electronic Disturbance Theater grew out of the experiment of the “Rabinal Achi/Zapatista/Port Action by Dominguez and artist Ron Rocco (October 1996–March 1997), a collaborative streaming media performance that involved artnetweb.org and pseudo.com (in New York City) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In this cyberspace, Dominguez, Karasic, Stalbaum, and Wray met to create the Zapatista FloodNet as a response to the 1997 Acteal massacre of 45 women and children by Mexican paramilitary forces—EDT’s first action.*

EDT presented an electronic theatre of activism, an electronic activism of theatre which, regenerating vital questions about the role of the individual and the collective, both illumi-

nated the line-in-the-sand separating hacktivism and cyberterrorism, and raised theoretical eyebrows regarding such neologisms as “cyberborders” and the “digitally correct.”³ EDT’s work fell under the purview of the performative because it incorporated audience participation and because it resuscitated Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” interrogating contemporary normativized performatives (i.e., the “stages” of neoliberalism) while resowing the imperative, “Let your life be a counter to stop the machine” ([1848] 1983:396). Reaping a “hybrid civil disobedience” (Wray 1998) in its synesthetic synthesis of ECD and street actions, *Electronic Disturbance Theater* distilled a postmillennial attempt “to make our little bit of the garden grow” (Dominguez 2002), one cognizant of life’s loophole that “hope also must be planted and harvested” (Marcos 1995:46).

Notes

1. In an interview with Rebecca Schneider and Jon McKenzie, CAE itself has expressed, concerning the possibility of resistance and change, “There is only permanent cultural resistance; there is no endgame” (2000:139) and concerning “different time zones,” “We became more concerned with time than with space” (146).
2. For a discussion of Zapatismo as performance and/or magical realism, especially in the case of Subcommandante Marcos, see Gómez-Peña (1995), Olguín (2002), Taussig (1999), Vásquez Montalbán (1999), among others.
3. See Dorothy E. Denning’s testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives: “Both EDT and the Electrohippies view their operations as acts of civil disobedience analogous to street protests and physical sit-ins, not as acts of violence or terrorism. This is an important distinction” (2000). Mexico’s Ame La Paz challenged EDT’s virtual sit-ins on Mexican web sites, posing and patrolling the “cyberborders.” Hackers attending *Ars Electronica* (1998) accused EDT of being “digitally incorrect.”

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