Interview with Ricardo Dominguez

Conducted by Rachel Fabian and Hannah Goodwin

**Rachel Fabian (RF):** Our conference examined spatial practices of media access and/or trespass. Your work also seems to be on the one hand very invested in localized acts of disturbance, while at the same time it seeks to catalyze global networks of disturbance. How do you see the local/global dynamic as a necessary component of disturbance? What are the stakes for thinking about the spatial contingencies of activism online and offline, especially given your own views on disturbance as performance?

**Ricardo Dominguez (RD):** One of the main projects of Electronic Disturbance Theater and b.a.n.g. lab is the idea that neoliberalism(s) often function within the trajectory of the glocal—that is transnational corporations parachute their agendas, economies, stores, on a global level to the local level. Starbucks, McDonalds, they're like the cathedrals of old; they are centers of command and control on a glocal level. So the gestures that we have participated in might be named or located around what I would call the *lobal*, and the *lobal* isn't about trying to establish a field of homogeneity, say, like McDonalds’s golden arches, but more specifically to share a condition of the local to local, as a peer-to-peer gesture, on a global scale. This is perhaps not so much about materialization of the social-as-copy, but a conceptual
sharing of a politics of the question. For instance, we could look at the
Zapatistas as a global network that spreads a question about the nature of
what a local in response might be to the golden arches that neoliberalism(s)
drop on us and embed into the local space-time continuum. Each response is
different for each locality. The local response in San Diego, California to this
question is different than the one in Chiapas in terms of seeking alternative
forms of living beyond “capitalist realism(s).”

Then (and still today) we are faced with the glocal movements of
neoliberalism, so we had to imagine how we could, on a local level, respond
to, trespass, or access conflicts transpiring globally. So those involved in the
Zapatistas movement would say, “We share peer-to-peer the politics of the
question: ‘what are neoliberalism(s) doing where you are?’” But the response
or the tactics of both creative resistance or, for us, of disturbance, would be
different, because what happens in San Francisco, what happens in Chiapas,
or what happens in Mumbai has a material difference on the local level. So
localism(s) share the politics of the question of what one can access, what
one can trespass, disturb, and manifest as alternative conditions that oppose
glocal neoliberalism(s)’ answers to every question and problem. Along with the
Zapatistas and other activists, we contend that another world is possible
beyond the deep state of glocal neoliberalism(s), and we continue to ask,
“How can one disturb and shift the flows of capitalist realism in one’s
neighborhood?”

**RF:** The question of electronic disturbance comes up a lot in the statements you
just made, especially when you discuss the Zapatistas. Yet there are certainly
material differences that inflect the modes of electronic disturbance and exist
alongside utopian ideas about the certain unified action that hackings or
server shutdowns necessitate. In your view, how do material differences inflect
electronic disturbances? Are there ways in which these very disturbances seem
to work in some ways to erase material differences?

**RD:** I think that some technological interventions function around questions
of a utopia or a wired ideology—that you have the persistent architectures or
the emergence of a politics of augmented realities, or that connections on a
code level will assemble in a type of utopian society. I would say that
electronic disturbance and the gestures that we have participated in function
in an anti-utopian manner. We do certainly carry the utopian sensibility, but
at the same time we carry an anti-utopian sensibility, and we don't want to give up either end of the spectrum. So the anti-anti-utopian disposition seems much more sensible to the kind of disturbance that we want to perform at that scale. With Critical Art Ensemble in the 1980s, we often imagined that the interventions and the amplifications that would be established by electronic disturbances would fall between apocalypse and utopia. Often technology is presented in a certain rhetorical form, especially as it's introduced to the wider segments of society as either a utopian solution to whatever problem is at hand (i.e. “we're going to cure cancer with nanobombs”), or it's presented as apocalypse (i.e. “these nanites will destroy the world in two weeks and create green-goo syndrome at a galactic level”). So it seemed to us (Critical Art Ensemble) that electronic disturbance gestures would move to dislocate both apocalypse and utopia that were bound to the kind of zoology of technology, and that these gestures would disturb the technosocial space as it was presented to us at that moment.

So, for instance, the notion of electronic disobedience that we established in the 1990s was focused on certain manifestations that were occurring with browser culture. When we were working on electronic disobedience, BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) as a platform didn't really mobilize the sensibility that we thought such disobedience necessitated, but the emergence of Mosaic and HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) enabled another way of thinking about how electronic civil disobedience could occur—by looking at the critical components of the code inherent in that environment, the browser. So this allowed us to move around the sort of hacker utopia of militarized apocalypse to a more lobal environment, one that engaged with a very transparent form of media, HTML, which had a possibility of engendering a critical use of the apparent functions of that new environment—the reload function, 404 pages, files not found. These functions were not produced by trying to hack the back end in some sort of secret cabal process; they were something you could cut, paste, and share. This enabled us, at the time, to establish how disturbance might occur within this new media field.

**RF:** So, in utilizing HTML, you were able to frame electronic disturbance in a remarkably user-friendly way—people with very little literacy of hacking protocols were able to flood sites and create disturbance. As an artist/activist who works in both online and offline spaces, how do you see disturbance operating within and across these spaces? How have critical understandings of
space influenced your projects and their investment in questions of visibility?

**RD:** When these developments occurred in the 1990s, we were not as bound to the sense, as many hackers were, that one needed a certain level of technological wherewithal to understand the back-end protocols that allowed one to change what Microsoft could do or would not do. With HTML, it was this instance of the lobal, of being able to share a critical condition where one could participate in establishing a close link between the technology and the rhetorical discourse that was at play to create an aesthetics of disturbance. So, one aspect of the aesthetics of disturbance was not only of making the invisible visible, which was often the case in hacking culture, but of making the invisible visible in terms of a politics beyond the question of code qua code, which tended to be the politics of hacking. At the same time, the use of HTML also disturbed the attachment to the visibility of public protest, contestation, and resistance in the streets. So the developments within 1990s browser culture allowed us to develop a form of disturbance that also engaged in the tradition of making the invisible visible (the tradition of hacking politics) and in the tradition of making the visible even more visible (the tradition of public protests and sit-ins). The politics of code and the politics of the street were able to intersect together in this very lobal gesture that was shareable and remixable.

I think the other element that was important for Electronic Disturbance Theater was that the kind of gesture that we were involved in made us visible and was engaged with this question of data bodies versus real bodies. We went against the grain of the history of anonymity that perhaps was inherent in some hacker cultures; we also went against the grain in harnessing the overwhelming power of collectivity and communal voice that was often part of mass protests in the street. In doing so, we intersected the aesthetic signature, the data body, with the real body. That is, as part of our gesture, we would say to the FBI or the DOD: “We are Ricardo Dominguez, Brett Stalbaum, Stefan Wray, and Carmin Karasic, we are manipulating the performance that is happening here, so if you have trouble with the invisible masses participating via this IP [Internet Protocol], we’re the contact nodes that make it visible—call us.” If activists were concerned about how an IP or HTML functioned, we had the ability make it visible to them just by saying “view source,” which would show who was actually participating, and we would explain, “Your IP is like an address, but we’ll take on the oneness of
that IP. We will stand for the data body for everyone participating in the gesture.”

So the disturbance again functioned to dislocate the force of the utopia/apocalypse, of visibility/invisibility, and there we created an interstitial space-time relationship between data bodies and real bodies. The other thing that the Zapatistas taught us was that the connection between data bodies, real bodies, and electronic disturbance was not so much about technological infrastructure or histories of ideological manifestation, but something much more rhythmic—the question of resonances. That there was a resonance between what was occurring with the Zapatistas in Chiapas and what was occurring in tactical media practices that emerged in the 1990s within browser and hacker cultures suggested the emergence of something not exactly locatable—something that possibly involved an intersection and play between affect and effect.

In Electronic Disturbance, which the Critical Art Ensemble wrote in the 1980s but which wasn’t published until 1994, we staked our claim, in the last chapter, on the question of time rather than space. We felt that resonance, in terms of contestational resistance or the micro-gestures of disturbance, was really about the amplification of time as opposed to space, since we found that space was something that activists of the street and hackers bound to code were too attached to. Obviously the gambles that we took in that particular text played themselves out differently, but I do think that the temporal question and the resonance that temporality has around the issues of disturbance are worth exploring even as we become aware of the importance of space, say, in relation to borders, in relation to nation-states and globalization.

RF: It seems that on multiple scales—both temporal and spatial—surveillance has entered the popular imaginary, and has demanded the attention of artists, activists, and scholars. As an artist/activist who has experienced institutional surveillance from the highest ranks of government (for example, the response from the US government to the Transborder Immigrant Tool), how have you used these acts of policing to promote further visibility for your projects? In your experience, is there a strategic way to use government surveillance and threats to expose the ideological underpinnings that distinguish terms of access from crimes of trespass?
RD: I would say that, in the 1980s, we saw our sisters and brothers in the 1960s and 1970s basically driven insane by the surveillance state. Many groups—the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, the Yellow Pearl—were all under extreme surveillance. They had no proof at first, but it became overwhelmingly self-evident due to COINTELPRO and many other actions that there indeed was a nation-state force seeking aggressively to keep track of them. So, in the 1980s there was a sense of accepting that “Yep, sure, they are surveilling us—so what? If they want to spend their time, their wealth, what have you, that’s, I suppose, too bad for them.”

ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was basically the on-the-ground training for much of my generation, where we tried to meld notions of media with notions of direct action to perform aggressive acts against the therapeutic state. I and other members of ACTUP/Tallahassee felt that our data bodies and real bodies had to manifest themselves in a radically transparent manner, without fear of what it might mean to be surveilled. Because often surveillance aggressively tried to bring you down because of your sexuality: “We’re going to out this person now because we now have a letter he sent to his lover, who was a male or female or whatever.” And thus, the individual was broken because of this knowledge getting out. Obviously, when you’re entering into queer spaces, where the issues of sexuality are at the forefront, that begins to shift some of the oneness of what is available to the surveillance state to break you. Again, there was this move toward a certain level of acceptance of surveillance, an acceptance that one could counter surveillance by disallowing it to aggregate around what the surveillance state imagined to be sites of personal trespass that on a social scale could be used against one or one’s community to disentangle it. I remember being the mediator for our local ACTUP/Tallahassee, and the very first question that we were trained to ask was, “Hello, welcome. If there are any undercover agents, please raise your hands, or FBI or journalists, you’re welcome to be here with us. Don’t be afraid to come out.”

I think I took a lot of that history with me when we started to assemble Electronic Disturbance Theater, in terms of our choice to engage in radical transparency. Some of the actions that happened during those years were the jam ECHELON actions. ECHELON was a well-known global surveillance system established by the NSA. Remember, I grew up in the 1970s, during the
Watergate scandal, the leaking of the Pentagon Papers, and, at the end of that period, the 1982 publication of James Bamford’s famous book The Puzzle Palace. We knew the NSA had the ECHELON system, so in the 1990s we asked: “How can we imagine ECHELON’s functions?” So we said, “Well, it probably picks up words and targets certain words: blow up, bomb, whatever.” So, for “Jam ECHELON Day” we asked all of the communities who were involved with us on a global scale to take fifty words and paste them on every email that they sent out. In theory, we would jam ECHELON because it would be tracing all of these systems. The outcome was that the UK and other countries began to question the US as to where the ECHELON bases or stations were located in Europe. We also started to develop with fakeshop.com, a Williamsburg net art group I worked with, fake cookies that you could enter into your system and say “I’m a grandmother from Dubuque who likes good shoes” and confuse the cookie system.

Thus there was an awareness of the way in which surveillance would function within the paradigm of data body/real body. Our response was to be transparent, to have the code available to anybody who wanted to look at it, and also to enunciate what we were going to do, how we were going to do it, why we were doing it, etc. This really became part of a larger aesthetics of disturbance that manipulated the operations of surveillance by encompassing the surveillance state as part of its performative matrix. It wasn’t that we were going to do something secretly because we didn’t want to be surveilled, but our gesture was to have the surveillance state participate in—to help amplify—the gesture of disturbance.

Within the surveillance state there is this kind of Roman empiricism of the law: “You are breaking this law;” (whatever law they say you are breaking) “because your technology is effectively functioning within the paradigm of the law that we have established, and we have now aggressively gathered your emails, gathered your photographs, and we see you stating that you are going to use this technological add-on . . . etc.” To which we would respond, as part of the gesture of disturbance, “Yes, welcome surveillance state to the performance. We understood how the technological empiricism of law, which you are seeking to establish against us, works. But the technological aspect is on your side, in terms of breaking the law of trespass. On our side, nothing is happening. There is no weight of empirical technology on our end. We are less than script kitties [the lowest level of hackers]. Nothing about anything
we do works. It does not function. So, you are all in this performative matrix that allows us to make visible the infrastructures of technology and the social structures of surveillance at play."

Part of the aesthetics is one in which the surveillance state and the hackers become confused—in what we in the Critical Art Ensemble in the 1980s called the "aesthetics of confusion." This then allowed us to have a different conversation with those entities on a different scale, and that scale would be the field of aesthetics of art production. Often you would have encounters where lawyers or FBI agents or others would say, "Are we part of the performance? Are we part of the artwork?" To which we would respond, "Yes, you are." I don't know if that allowed us then to create an affective, visceral response around the theater of code and the empiricism of utilitarianism-effective society that condition the state’s logics of surveillance and technology.

**RF:** Part of what was so interesting about your keynote talk was its historical inflection—as you said in the title of your talk, "Learning from the '1980s." It's clear though that scope of your thinking and practice as an artist/scholar has engaged with even older events and accounts of disobedience—for instance, in your references to Henry David Thoreau. You seem very skillfully to take on these really powerful phrases and concepts from foundational thinkers and rework them in a way that brings so much life and currency to them. Could you talk a little more about your engagement with, or perhaps strategic appropriation of, these concepts?

**RD:** My consideration of the specters of the past was in part a result of a contingent gathering of community in Tallahassee, Florida that really became attached to this idea of "utopian plagiarism." We felt that somehow the texts that were around us, whether they be university books or popular magazines, could be replayed in a way that really allowed us to see not only how they illuminate the present but also how they could allow us to imagine participating in the future. The remixing of Thoreau’s 1848 “On Civil Disobedience” via utopian plagiarism allowed us to consider issues of data bodies, to rethink the Mexican-American war in terms of the new types of war that were coming. In the 1960s there was pop art with Warhol and others taking comic books and other forms of popular culture and remixing them as art; also, there were the Situationists taking comic books and
popular culture and rethinking them, as well as the rise of Duchampian models of the ready-made. All of these cultural movements allowed us to then think of conceptual structures, from Lucretius’s notions of the swerve to Aeschylean notions of social drama as tragedy, as available structures for us to remix not only in terms of a contemporary but also in a post-contemporary sensibility. You could take “On Civil Disobedience” and just add “electronic,” and there we had something that allowed us to create a resonance and enliven what, say, Ronald Reagan wanted to claim as dead.

Such remixing was the result of a very playful, perhaps unorthodox academically, but extremely carnivalesque gathering of individuals enjoying themselves on a Friday night just cutting and pasting different words. It was also a way not to be shut down by our lack of understanding of proper historical timelines. I think most young scholars or artists might say, “Huh, Heidegger’s ‘being in time’ and ‘Dasein’—who can understand that?” Well, we didn't feel we had to understand it completely, but we felt that it seemed to indicate something that could be remixed in an interesting way. So it was a way to make ourselves unafraid, fearless, to create an exquisite corpse sensibility that enabled us to extract concepts and events from the past and inject them into the future using what was a fairly standard aesthetic model at that time. We utilized this aesthetic model to take popular culture and intermix it to see what sort of lures could manifest themselves for us as artists and to discover vocabularies that had potential for a post-contemporary gesture. One of our questions in the 1980s was, “Well, you’re stuck in the postmodern labyrinth. Baudrillard says ‘everything is hypersimulation, everything is about no exit.’ So, how do we exit out of this? Do we take Foucault’s spoon to get out of the panopticon, or what have you?” So utopian plagiarism allowed us to understand our aesthetic and critical disposition strategically without feeling the weight of history as a burden and without feeling anxious about not understanding it.

**Hannah Goodwin:** Since we last spoke in April 2013, several events have drawn attention to the politics of surveillance and disturbance in the US, most prominently the Eric Snowden controversy. I wonder if that’s brought any renewed attention to your projects, or how you would contextualize your own experience with the FBI in terms of what’s going on now. Have your projects have taken any new turns as a result?
RD: I’ve certainly been getting a lot of requests to speak to the link between hacktivism and leakism in terms of how they are different or similar. I do think that perhaps there is a forgotten history of leaks being very much part of the way we’ve been able to establish the process of making things visible. Again, I think it’s important to go back to the COINTELPRO papers and to the Pentagon Papers as two core moments similar to what is happening now. So I do think of leaks, at this level, as being part of the larger spectrum of hacktivism. Perhaps not hacking, which I think is a very different and technological condition, but hacktivism, if I were to use that term as a kind of unfolding of information that allows us to pinpoint, in general, something that is happening through the revelation of redacted information. I don’t know that in our work as artists we make as deep of a connection to these histories of leakings as hacktivism, but a certain drift connects them that we might call electronic disturbance.

I would say that there probably is a slight aesthetic difference—if one is to view Snowden and Chelsea Manning as functioning within a type of social aesthetics—in that Electronic Disturbance Theater and b.a.n.g. lab in their projects have always attempted to make visible what is not part of the discourse and infrastructure of corporate, governmental, or social spaces of command and control. Our gestures (the practice of jamming, the use of 404 pages, etc.) made it so that when people went to the Mexican Government website or the DOD website they discovered was what was missing as opposed to what had been redacted. “Justice is missing from the database of the Mexican Government,” “Democracy is missing at the DOD.”

So, while leaker aesthetics is about bringing attention to what is redacted (that is, what is in the system but is disallowed from being publicly accessed), our disturbances were about accessing that which the system just does not have—it has not even taken time to redact democracy (or justice or what have you); it just doesn’t really exist in the system. If one looks at it in terms of the social aesthetic, I would say that the difference between our history and Snowden/Manning and the Pentagon Papers and COINTELPRO lies in the aesthetic differences between the redacted gesture and what is “not found.” Which is scary at both ends. But I would say these are the aesthetic differences I would note in terms of thinking about leakism’s redacted culture versus the “not found” cultures that b.a.n.g. lab and Electronic Disturbance Theater engages with.
RF: And it seems as though the criminalization of leakers falls more readily under legal statutes and other policies guarding against security breaches, whereas the history of electronic disturbance evades those categories.

RD: I do think you’re correct. That is, again, the surveillance state, the nation state, global neoliberalism(s), both in atavistic and savage manners, are using Roman law and the weight of the politics of empiricism (as well as the weight of redaction) as a way to really create a global chill in terms of what we can understand and request about the world around us. A kind of atmospheric dronology exists, in which one shouldn’t speak or link to this or that, whereas what we did was disturb the possibility of the law and its empirical weight from entering into direct action against us—the aesthetic condition of our projects created a very different performative matrix. The state had to enter into our performance and participate in it on a level that was unexpected, in that they were pursuing technical questions but then had to pursue poetic questions. For instance, the FBI had to sit around and say, “Well, we like this poem better than that poem,” and then had to tell us why. And this is not really what they wanted to do or spend their time doing because it disturbs the conversation.

The other element, I think, just to finish off, is when people look at the work of Electronic Disturbance Theater 1.0 and 2.0, they often fetishize the term “electronic,” they often fetishize the term “disturbance,” but they always pay little or no attention to the term “theater.” And I think “theater” is the key, the code switch, to reading the other two terms. Whether you’re the FBI, the DOD, activists, hackers, young scholars, “theater” becomes a blind spot. So I would say: look at that term in relation to the two other terms that are often more highly weighted in the new media field. Certainly I would say “performative matrix” is attached to this term. Alright, I think that is enough from me. Thank you guys for having me, and good luck! Remember: don’t link to me! ;-)

Ricardo Dominguez is a co-founder of The Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), a group who developed Virtual-Sit-In technologies in 1998 in solidarity with the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. His recent
Electronic Disturbance Theater project with Brett Stabaum, Micha Cardenas, Amy Sara Carroll and Elle Mehrman, the “Transborder Immigrant Tool” (a GPS cellphone safety net tool for crossing the Mexico/US border was the winner of “Transnational Communities Award” (2008), this award was funded by Cultural Contact, Endowment for Culture Mexico–US and handed out by the US Embassy in Mexico, also funded by CALIT2 and two Transborder Awards from the UCSD Center for the Humanities. “Transborder Immigrant Tool” was exhibited at 2010 California Biennial (OCMA), Toronto Free Gallery, Canada (2010), and a number of other venues, the project was also under investigation by the U.S. Congress in 2009/10, and was also reviewed by Glenn Beck in 2010 as a gesture that potentially “dissolved” the US border with its poetry.

Ricardo Dominguez is an Associate Professor at UCSD in the Visual Arts Department, a Hellman Fellow, and Principal/Principle Investigator at CALIT2 (http://bang.calit2.net). He also co-founder of Particle Group, with artists Diane Ludin, Nina Waisman, Amy Sara Carroll, an art project about nano-toxicology entitled “Particles of Interest: Tales of the Matter Market” that has been presented in Berlin (2007), the San Diego Museum of Art (2008), Oi Futuro, and FILE festivals in Brazil (2008), CAL NanoSystems Institute, UCLA (2009), Medialab-Prado, Madrid (2009), Nanosferica, NYU (2010), SOMA, and Mexico City, D.F (2012). Ricardo also just opened the Performative Nano-Robotics Lab (PNR Lab) at UCSD’s new Structural and Materials Engineering (SME) research center and he is also the co-curator of “Drones at Home” a year long exhibition at Gallery@CALIT2 (http://gallery.calit2.net).

Rachel Fabian is a graduate student in the Department of Film and Media Studies at UC Santa Barbara. She received her BA in English and Film and Television Studies from the University of Vermont in 2011. Her research interests include feminist approaches to the study of transnational and collective filmmaking practices. She is co-organizer of the 2013 Media Fields Conference: Access/Trespass and editor of the Media Fields Journal Special Conference Issue: Access/Trespass. In addition, she is an editorial assistant for Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies.

Hannah Goodwin is a PhD student in the Film and Media Studies Department at UCSB. She is a member of the Media Fields Collective and
works as an editorial assistant for *Camera Obscura*. Her work deals with European film theory and conceptualizations of space and time in the context of changing discourses in science, and particularly within popular astronomy. Her research has also engaged with questions of race and gender in relation to postwar Austrian film and the mediatization of current right-wing movements in Europe.