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Digital Resistance in Digital Cultures

An Interview with Steve Kurtz
by Martina Leeker

Steve Kurtz discusses a variety of forms of resistance to global capitalism, and examines their possibilities and shortcomings. Included are thoughts on occupation and street actions, digital interventions, and contestational biology.

Martina Leeker: Would you say that Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) is one of the “fathers” of interventions in digital cultures?

Steve Kurtz: CAE has been called that, and on one occasion, one of the “grandfathers” of interventionism in digital culture (and analog, too). I suppose there is some truth in this genealogy, but I don’t know if that is the most productive way to look at it. CAE was just positioned well historically. We emerged at a time when three important shifts were occurring, and we were standing in the location where they

all intersected. First, the political emphasis of the cultural avant-garde had all but collapsed. Metaphorically speaking, the new contract (that began forming in the late 60s and was mostly completed by the 70s) was that the financial classes would have complete control of this economy, and in return would allow complete free expression to artists to explore as they pleased—but political action was to be left out. Artists could make symphonies of noise, disrupt painterly convention, deconstruct theatrical narrative, or assault any other aesthetic convention of their choosing. By the early 90s, this contract was complete, and a clear split was evident in which those who refused to surrender their politics went in a new direction, ceased to care deeply about aesthetic convention, and focused instead on a cultural means of political disruption. This type of activity shared cultural DNA with the counterculture activist movement known as the Yippies (Youth International Party, formed in 1967),¹ the Haight-Ashbury-based guerrilla theater group the Diggers (1966), and the Situationists (1957)—and in a slightly more contemporary sense, the anonymous feminist collective the Guerrilla Girls (1985), the AIDS activist art collective Gran Fury (1988), and the AIDS activist video collective Testing the Limits (1987)—none of which were considered artists at the time by the cultural establishment. But there was a difference in the 1990s from what came previously, and that difference was due to the two other simultaneous shifts.

The second shift was the interdisciplinary turn. In the early 90s, students like myself who had reaped the benefits of the education struggles of the late 60s and early 70s were now coming into institutional positions. The borders between specializations were becoming increasingly fuzzy. Art as a specialization was no longer the only model for production, although it was still the dominant one. The borders could be

1 For all following groups or events the date of formation is mentioned.

pushed almost anywhere. At this time a new paradigm of art making was born, but for it not to be destroyed by the elder paradigm a third shift had to occur, and that was the mass deployment of digital software and hardware on a consumer level, as the graphical user interface (GUI), combined with the launch of the World Wide Web. This gave the followers of this new paradigm not only a medium to work with, but more importantly, a way for the like-minded to find each other on an international basis. With that ability, a critical mass could be established that made possible a politicized movement counter to the avant-garde. CAE was lucky enough to ride all these waves.

ML: What are interventions to you and what are they for?

SK: An intervention is a minoritarian action (usually tactical) that interrupts, redirects, or perhaps even transforms flows within a given territory. For CAE, interventions are deployed as a means to resist the many authoritarian tendencies of global capitalism.

Art critic, cultural theorist and activist Brian Holmes offers a very practical understanding of potential goals for cultural activists through a reading of Félix Guattari. The first goal is to create existential territories. To create spaces where a different type of affect is possible. Rather than the fear and anxiety produced by capitalism, these spaces lend themselves to joy, empathy, delirium, and solidarity. The international Reclaim the Streets movement (began in London in 1991) is a good example. A second goal is reached when a territory and the relations and behaviors within it are reframed, reinterpreted, or problematized. A pedagogical or consciousness-raising characteristic is a part of this type of action. This type of work was common among those in the feminist art movement in the US in the 1970s. A third possibility is the design, engineering, and deployment of tools useful for resistance. Most of the time this is done by making

already existing tools do what they were not designed to do by re-engineering them to function in service of resistance—like Graham Harwood’s social telephony operations (Harwood, Wright, and Yokokoji 2010). However, there are those who make their tools from the ground up. Tad Hirsch is an excellent example with his pre-Twitter protest organization tool, TXTmob (2004).² The recoding, subversion, or destabilization of signs and symbols is a fourth option. Most artists and designers seem to have a gift for this. CAE has worked in all of these areas in an attempt to reduce the intensity of the authoritarian tendencies of capital, and to establish an alternative biopolitics (Critical Art Ensemble 2002).

ML: Is intervening a ritual?

SK: I would argue that the heart of a ritual, whatever it may be, is to establish continuity, an immortality of sorts. We may be gone, but the ritual continues. In this manner, we link to past and future generations, thus establishing ourselves as part of the continuity of life and culture. However, rituals in this sense are also delusional. The maintenance of precise repetitions in evolving societies is not possible. Take the family Christmas ritual in cultures so inclined: a precise set of activities cannot be maintained. New people come into the system and others depart, changing the balance of needs and desires and the manner in which they are expressed. Fashions of all types change, so no matter how much sameness and family continuity is desired, the ritual continues to mutate as the years go by. Another possibility is to leave the rituals with professionalized classes (usually

2 TXTmob, an open-source precursor to Twitter, was developed by Tad Hirsch and the Institute for Applied Autonomy. The aim was to enable group cell phone text messaging among activists at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Boston and the Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City. Thousands of people used it to share real-time information about protests and coordinate actions.

belonging to religious organizations). These institutions do provide more stability, but nonetheless eventually fail. Even the Latin mass has evolved. This is why conservatives and preservationists get so upset when a ritual changes in any way, no matter how perverse the ritual has become. The sense of continuity is lost. People can no longer take comfort in imagining that a person a thousand years ago was saying the same words and making the same gestures as a person performing the ritual today or a thousand years from now.

Interventionism does not care for continuity from the outset. That is precisely what it hopes to disrupt. So in a general sense, intervening is not a ritual. In a specific sense, we might tactically choose a ritual as a theatrical tool to produce an intervention, but it would be the end of the ritual within that context. We would have no need to perform it a second time. If the intervention were successful, there would be no need to repeat it, and if there were failure the ritual would have to be transformed into a new functionality or rejected as a mistake.

ML: What is the relation between interventions and transformations/re-organizations?

SK: Transformations are the best or worst outcomes of an intervention, or more likely, an aggregate of interventions. On a smaller scale, it can be a change in consciousness in terms of understanding or perception, or, on a larger scale, a change in policy, or a new form of social organization. Of course, interventions can go horribly wrong, as they are by necessity often grounded in speculation. Situations can turn from a threat of violence to actual violence, and control can transform into discipline.

ML: What is the difference between intervention, resistance, and critique?

110 SK: Resistance is the general category for any material or immaterial, active or passive manifestation that conflicts in some manner with the demands of the powers of domination. Interventions are a subcategory of resistance. Critique is a systematic analysis of an object or system that can be used to inform strategies or tactics of resistance.

ML: Do we need to think about or speculate on alternative forms of living, or about organizing society within interventions, or as interventions?

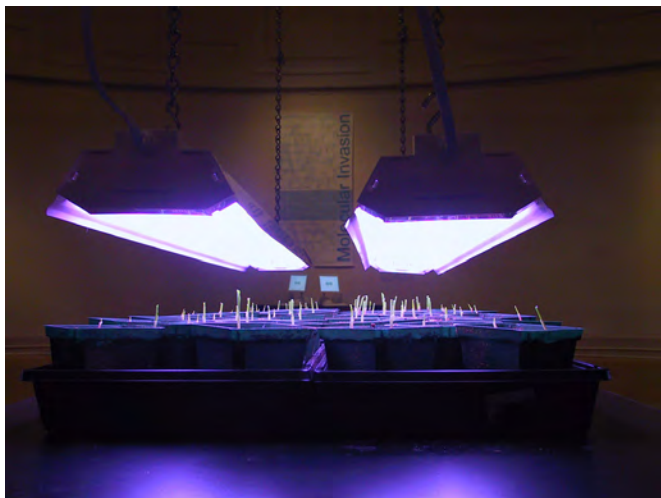
SK: Yes, as cultural activists, I believe that speculating on and experimenting with alternative forms of living are among the activities that we are called upon to do. If we could ever get this right, we would no longer need interventions. Organizing social formations as an intervention is among the experiments currently underway. The Occupy movement is an excellent example. Its very existence was an intervention in the social order, and became a public display of people trying to develop a new biopolitics—a new way of being together and sustaining one another in a peaceful, egalitarian manner. Occupy made a very compelling attempt to organize around the indefinite as a means to get to the emergent. The configuration had no leaders, demands, or goals—everything was left to an indefinite future. As this fuzzy network continued to exist, only that which emerged from this unscripted entanglement was accepted as meaningful (and perhaps only in that moment). Through the use of one of the oldest strategies of resistance, *occupation*, participants dumped the language of resistance of the past and let a potential “new” take form. Of course this action was incomprehensible to even the old authorities on resistance, and so there was no way it could be allowed to continue. Interesting questions in the wake of Occupy are: Should these experiments be done in public? And if done in secret, can the outcome be trusted?

And, of course, we need to keep transformational pressure on institutions that have an impact on how we live as well. While visiting here at DCRL, I was fortunate enough to work with Johannes Paul Raether.³ He has taken up a narrative that seemed to have stopped progressing in the early 80s (to a large degree because of the AIDS crisis), and that is revolutionizing the family away from its cookie-cutter heteronormalized form. Throughout the 70s and into the 80s, radicals believed that the gay liberation movement could act as a vanguard toward a new way of conceptualizing and configuring the family (and for that matter, sexuality). When the AIDS crisis struck, and LGBTQIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Questioning)⁴ people were suffering on a daily basis because of the consequences of not being permitted to participate in family relations recognized by law, the political agenda changed. It moved toward marriage equality and assimilation. For the radicals this was not OK, but assimilation is what happened. Johannes is back struggling against assimilation and is asking for radical new forms, and is doing so through those formations suggested by reproductive technology, but with the difference that he horizontalizes the usual hierarchy of mothers. I find it quite inspiring that through the queering process Johannes has managed to turn a very dark technology into one of utopian possibility. The more of this work that is done, the better.

ML: What is the difference between CAE's *Molecular Invasion* (2002–04) [fig. 1, 2]—a biochemical targeting of a recombinant gene in order to destroy the plant—and plant conservation as in CAE's *New Alliances* (2011–12) [fig. 3, 4], planting an endangered flower that has legal protection under the law in

3 For his projects with queering avatars, see <http://www.johannespaul-raether.net/>.

4 An umbrella term used for anyone whose sexual identity, gender identity, and/or gender expression is not considered "standard."



[Fig. 1] Critical Art Ensemble and Claire Pentecost, *Molecular Invasion*, 2002–04. Installation view at the Hemicycle Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Source: critical-art.net).



[Fig. 2] Critical Art Ensemble and Claire Pentecost, *Molecular Invasion*, 2002–04. Dying Roundup Ready plants (Source: critical-art.net).



[Fig. 3] Critical Art Ensemble in collaboration with Parco Arte Vivente and workshop participants, *New Alliances*, 2011–12. Transplanting the endangered species Cupid's Dart in a contested public space (Source: critical-art.net).



[Fig. 4] Critical Art Ensemble in collaboration with Parco Arte Vivente and workshop participants, *New Alliances*, 2011–12. Completed transplantation (Source: critical-art.net).

common urban spaces in order to prevent unwanted development in those spaces?

SK: For CAE, initiatives like these are all a part of developing contestational biology. We are trying to perform resistance through the frame of science and ecological studies as opposed to the frames given by cultural practices, humanities, and social sciences. The two projects that you are contrasting show the wide spectrum of possibilities of how science can be used. As we know, science is neither value-free nor politically neutral; we are calling attention to this position by making this fact very visible.

ML: CAE does a lot of work with biotechnology. Do you consider these projects to be digital interventions?

SK: Yes, on two levels. The simple and literal one is that key pieces of hardware and software are digital. Without such advancements, molecular biology would be at a near standstill. The more important level is that genetics, molecular biology, and synthetic biology developed along a parallel course with computer science and engineering. This parallel development is due to a shared set of analytic metaphors.

One fundamental scientific principle of the cosmos is that order comes from chaos, which comes from order. Digital engineering challenged the universality of this contention by showing that order comes from order (replication). Even science has had to contend with the advancement of the digital paradigm on a cosmological level. True, the elder sciences of physics and chemistry have held tenaciously to their analogic version of the cosmos, but the youthful discipline of biology, in a sublime moment of Oedipal revolution, has rejected the analogic model of its elders as being useless to its pursuits. Central to this discussion is the discovery of DNA. By the 1940s, it was already known that heredity is controlled by genes; that genes are located on chromosomes found in cell nuclei; and that genes are

produced by DNA. However, DNA was not really understood in terms of its full function and potential. It was not until Crick and Watson were able to imagine the structure of DNA that its true potential was realized. According to human genome scientist Maynard Olson, Crick and Watson's discovery was meaningful because it occurred within the atmosphere of a formalized digital paradigm. They intuitively understood that DNA was not analogic (order from chaos), but instead digital (order from order). This type of modeling made possible the biological understanding of the production of life. Information replication in the body is analogous to digital copying on a computer. Information is stored as DNA (in a base-4 format, rather than in a base-2 format as used by computers), and replicates itself when cells divide. Now that this piece of information is understood, humans can intervene in the once autonomous molecular systems of reproduction. This organic frontier now has no borders because the basics of DNA become intelligible when one analyzes them using the digital model of information storage, recognition, retrieval, and replication. Digital humans, animals, food, and medicine are now in the marketplace.

ML: How do you see the relationship between information and communication technology (ICT) and biotechnology?

SK: ICT has been a revolution of scale. This technology has exploded over the past three decades, and has made things possible that were only vague possibilities to those in power only a half century ago, including the total surveillance state, posthuman financial exchanges (like high-speed trading), and a true global economy. While international trade may have existed for centuries, the national economies were fairly separate. Now, a problem in one trading partner's economy is a problem for all partners. The interdependence is quite profound. Another way I could put it is that Paul Virilio's global accident is now possible. In the West, the roots

of the globalization project go back to the Roman Empire, so in terms of globalization and its spectacle, it is really more of the same, only now on a heretofore unimaginable scale and with a digital paradigm. As we have discussed, I believe biotech to be a part of this same paradigm, but it is truly new and revolutionary. ICT has been enveloping us for many decades in the West, and its goal has primarily been to inscribe bodies with capitalist imperatives and to maintain order through mediation. CAE always thought that while we cannot escape the spectacle, our bodies, consciousness, and the organic inner world could maintain a semi-autonomous position. Now there is nowhere capital cannot reach. We are witnessing the beginning of a massive redesign of the organic order—to one that better suits the needs of capitalism—whether of its creatures (for functional or decorative purpose), or its plants and crops, or, to a growing extent, the human body. With new reproductive technologies, the potential for a new, voluntary form of eugenics becomes possible. This would not consist simply of selection for health or physical “normality,” but of potential predispositions that would make a person more competitive and compliant in the marketplace. In this postnatural world, the exterior forces of the social and economic spheres can link to predispositions programmed into humans. Temperament can be managed, and desire directed.

ML: Do you see digital models coming to dominate politics as well?

SK: That is a very difficult question to sort through at this point in history. My belief is that in the West, the tendency is toward the digital, especially in the US. I say this not because the US is so forward thinking, but because the way that its political system is designed transforms so much of politics into marketing. Marketing and mass communications are dominated by the digital. Throw in click-politics, and it becomes hard to deny the power of the digital in the political

sphere. However, turmoil over recent elections in the Western world may indicate that embodied politics may not be a total anachronism in digital cultures.

That said, we have to be careful not to stay in our digital bubble. We see the result of doing so from media theorists and tech developers quite frequently. They can forget that most of the world does not have relationships with Facebook, apps, surveillance, or ubiquitous computing, and that forgetfulness leads to ridiculous assertions like “The Egyptian revolution was a digital revolution.” Such nonsense. Sure, there may have been some young people with digital skills who were using digital platforms to get their message out, but I do not believe that was representative of the overall event. I wasn’t there, so I can’t speak from experience, but we can look at the basic statistics. The poverty rate in Egypt is over 50% and extreme poverty is 28%. Then there is another substantial sector of the population (unfortunately, it is hard to find a reliable statistic) that is getting by day to day, but that is it. This is not a situation for robust sales and deployment of digital media. Not to mention that the literacy rate is extremely low (26% are completely illiterate). Digital communication is by no means the dominant form there. The narrative of the Egyptian revolution as a digital revolution is a publicity stunt that is a white-washing of corporations like Google, Facebook, and Twitter as progressive, and as delivering revolutionary products that change the world in a utopian manner. Yet we now know with certainty after the Manning and Snowden revelations how much the digital revolution has contributed to current global dystopian tendencies.

ML: Has the utopian moment passed for digital cultures and if yes, what does this mean for interventions in these cultures?

SK: Oh yes, if there ever was one to begin with. Perhaps the moment was there when the culture was limited to scientists

exchanging data over the Internet, but as soon as it became a technical system assimilated into capitalist political economy, the party was over. For example, one of the most common promises that accompanies any new technology is that it will reduce labor time, with the implication that there will be more leisure time. Of course, the opposite happens, whether the new technology is a steam engine or a computer. Production rates are increased and labor is intensified. With digital technology and its propensity for miniaturization, workers were struck twice in that they were either given or had to buy their own (!) tools of labor (cell phone and laptop) that transformed them into permanent work platforms. Digital workers are always on call and ready to work. And if that weren't enough, these same tools evolved into the means for governments and businesses to keep individuals under surveillance at all times.

I know there are those individuals who claim surveillance is fine; privacy is dead—all well and good. If corporations are storing, analyzing, buying, and selling our metadata, it is only so they can better understand our needs and desires so they might serve us better. And if the government is storing and analyzing our metadata, it's only because they need it to keep the nation secure and orderly. Of course, these ideas are all nonsense. Governments are using this technology to expand their disciplinary apparatus to be used in a manner beyond that of neutralizing criminality, while corporations are looking for a way to construct in us a desire for their goods and services. Surveillance makes such goals possible, and the deeper they get into our lives, the more we become managed and controlled. And let's not forget what a profitable commodity information is.

The truly aggravating part of all this is that it didn't have to be this way. We could live in a metadata-free society. The knowledge about how to do it is there, but it won't be done because liberty like that is completely unacceptable to

capitalism. Even the universities are complicit. Having spent 35 years of my life as an educator, I watched critical thinking be slowly exorcized from the university and replaced with neoliberal business strategies, and nowhere has that had a worse impact than in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The culture of STEM is a problem-solving one. The unfortunate part of this method is that it is contained within a bubble of wealth, in conjunction with a very specialized point of view. In practice, this manifests as total focus on the problem and its solution, with no thought about the consequence of any solution once it is out in the world and subject to corporate and state policy. Most of the dystopic consequences of digital technology are tragedies in engineering. I realize that powerful outside forces are in play—but still, there are elements within STEM that technocrats do control, and therefore should do something about, like introducing more critical thinking, ethics, and sociological and historical analysis.

So yes, the utopian moment is gone. It can still exist for individuals, but a systemic change would require a reconstruction of the digital infrastructure, or at the very least a radical revision of software. Choices have been made (and not democratically), a lot of bad engineering has happened, and we are too far down the road to start over.

ML: What is CAE working on next?

SK: Necropolitics and ecological struggle, but that is a topic for another interview.

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- [Fig. 1] Critical Art Ensemble. *Molecular Invasion*. 2002. Source: <http://critical-art.net/?p=1>.
- [Fig. 2] Critical Art Ensemble. *Molecular Invasion*. 2002. Source: <http://critical-art.net/?p=1>.
- [Fig. 3] Parco Arte Vivente. *New Alliances*. 2012. Source: <http://critical-art.net/?p=162>.
- [Fig. 4] Parco Arte Vivente. *New Alliances*. 2012. Source: <http://critical-art.net/?p=162>.