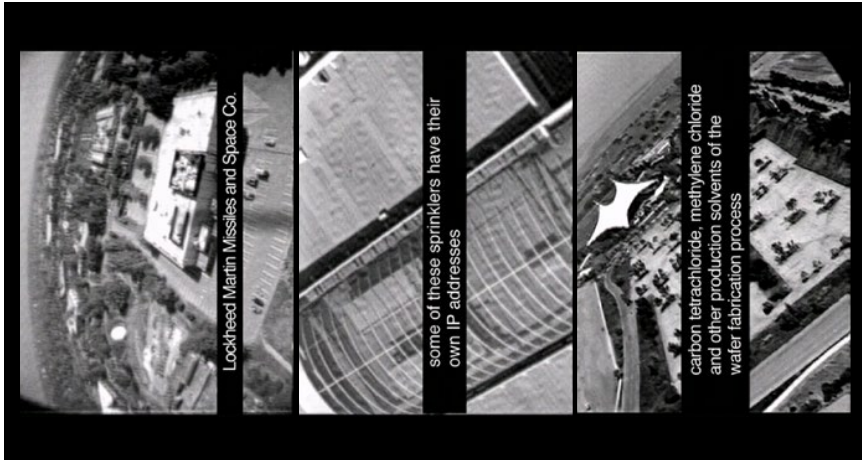


The Art
Happens
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IF COMMUNICATION IS COMMODITY, LET'S WEIRD: DISRUPTION & NET ART

BIT Plane (1997–1999) watched the watcher. Shot from an unmanned aircraft equipped with a camera, the project by artist/hacker/activist collective The Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT) collected grainy black and white images of Silicon Valley's corporate places of interest, like Page Mill Road in Palo Alto (home to Hewlett Packard and other businesses), documenting their carefully planned suburban office parks, streets, and dots of shrubbery. In order to protect their intellectual property from corporate espionage, the companies targeted by *BIT Plane* had strict policies regarding surveillance, barring



photography from their facilities. The small spy plane stealthily and illegally captured these hidden spaces from overhead, while also breaking sound and flight traffic ordinances.

Perhaps the concept of “disruption”—as a value and a tactic—is one means by which to consider BIT’s anti-corporate gesture as an artistic act. Disruption, as its commonly understood in technology and business, ushers in an innovation that creates new markets by overturning the status quo.¹ In the case of *BIT Plane*, the status quo was not challenged nor overturned; the aerial shots revealed little. The video only elaborated the goings on beneath the rectangular white rooftops by interspersing short facts about Silicon Valley in bold text, such as, “40% of global internet traffic originated or terminated in this area in 1996.”

The lackluster utility of these images disclosed the emerging tension between an informational paradigm oriented around data capture by computers

and more humanist vision-centered notions of representation.² However you name and date that paradigm, we see the dominance of a new form of decentralized, yet corporatized and militarized power, centered around the computer and the network.³ Internet art developed out of its rise, and its aesthetic experiments have provided an in-process negotiation that speaks to its truths.

The slippages of “disruptive” art practices like the flight of *BIT Plane* trick and trip vectors of power to relay the larger shifting grounds for representation under an informational paradigm. At the same time, they reflexively consider the critical gesture’s assumed capacity to always and unquestionably produce revolutionary new ideas. Quite simply, disruption involves a breakage, but the how and what of that fracture evolves in tandem with the growth of the internet as a market-driven mass media system.

BIT’s disruptive art practice took shape along-

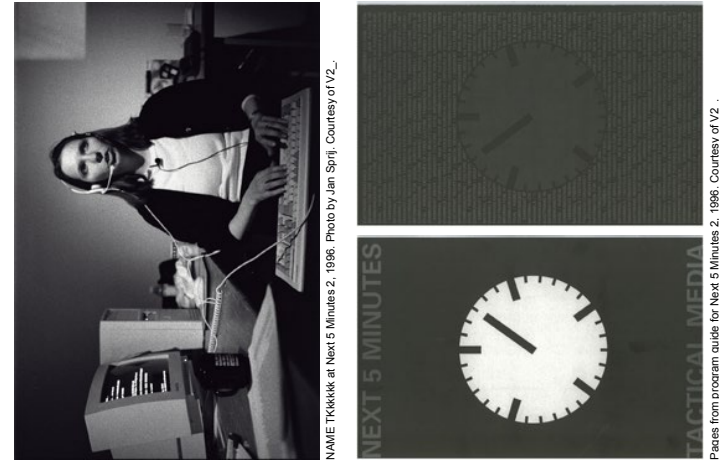
side the emergence of tactical media, an activist ethos that grew out of discussions on the mailing list Nettime and was later formalized through the essays “The ABC of Tactical Media” (1997) and “The DEF of Tactical Media” (1999) by Geert Lovink and David Garcia, published on the same platform. The Next 5 Minutes conferences organized in Amsterdam helped to create in-person exchanges around these practices. Inspired by theorist Michel de Certeau, Garcia and Lovink envisioned the tactical practitioner as a “rebellious user” who used the artifacts and texts of their media environment towards “an aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring.”⁴ Described as an anti-capitalist “qualified form of humanism,” the goal was to upturn power in temporary ways, through available means. Tactical media created openings by provocation, sometimes towards unknown ends.⁵

Tactical media reflected a broader artistic

engagement with the activist anti-globalization movements in the late 1990s. The increased interconnectedness provided by the internet opened up new avenues for protest against multinational corporations and their dominance. For instance, the Electronic Disturbance Theater, founded by Ricardo Dominguez, Carmin Karasic, Brett Stalbaum, and Stefan Wray in 1997, instigated theatrical actions that used collective action, software, and the internet to bolster a political message in poetic ways. Their piece *FloodNet* (1998) was a form of electronic civil disobedience carried out in solidarity with the Zapatista Movement and its struggle in Mexico. If a large volume of users simultaneously visited the *FloodNet* site, it activated a Java applet that would repetitively reload a target website. Users could also clog its error logs with messages of protest or gibberish, adding a poetic dimension to the action. This increased traffic would consequently slow or

staged a performative stunt that jabbed at authority while masquerading within the increasingly corporate space of the internet.

Published in 1999, Lovink and Garcia’s “The DEF of Tactical Media” (a follow up to “The ABC of Tactical Media”) takes stock of six years of tactical media, beginning with the first Next 5 Minutes conference in 1993. The concern was that art projects would merely replicate spectacle rather than instigate “real action,” when many within the scene hoped their work would yield a greater movement against global capitalism. In asking “if any meaningful politics can exist outside of the media sphere,”⁶ Lovink and Garcia identified a central conundrum. Tactical media projects, and other forms of culture jamming, presented a resistant stance to the communicative structures of the “globalized biopolitical machine” of what the theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri recognized as “Empire.”⁷ Alongside



shut down its target entirely. EDT used *FloodNet* in actions directed at the website for the then-Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, as well as the Pentagon and the Frankfurt Stock Exchange.

Other groups posed as multinational companies. The Yes Men (Mike Bonnano and Andy Bichbaum) spoofed the World Trade Organization through a knockoff website. Drawing its URL from the “General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs” that produced the World Trade Organization, *Gatt.org* (1999–2002) replicated the design and formatting of the WTO website exactly, replacing its text with official-sounding content that praised anti-democratic and greed-driven positions. The site launched in conjunction with the massive protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999, and generated much confusion, as visitors thought it was authored by the organization. The deception was so flawless that the Yes Men were invited to lecture on behalf of the WTO. With their project *Gatt.org*, the Yes Men

this debate, artists were becoming cognizant of the strictures of what Jodi Dean later identified as “communicative capitalism.”⁸ Namely, that *all messages are a commodity*, and thus our platforms are built to maintain constant data flows over the singularity of expression.⁹ This results in what Dean grimly describes as a “decline of symbolic efficiency.”¹⁰ The commodification of expression poses a problem for artists seeking to impart radical messages within the data flow. This dilemma only increased with the introduction of significant shifts such as faster bandwidth, smartphones, and social media, resulting in the need for artistic means of “disruption” to take on mutant forms.

As artists reckoned with the growing efficiency and commercialization of the internet, Seth Price’s essay/artwork *Dispersion* (2002–ongoing) adeptly reviewed these changes, making the argument that artists should harness this dispersed mode of production, experimenting with forms that

travel across multiple platforms and contexts. The project modeled its own argument by existing as a consistently updated PDF hosted on the artist's website and circulated widely, bootlegged print zines, and sculptural objects. Within this context of "commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion" Price elaborates the network's role in shaping and authoring the cultural texts that circulate within it. He argues that artists are called on to package, reframe, and distribute the "unruly archive" of the internet and, by doing so, create new social contexts. Price offers a model of productive maneuvering within the flow, one that is less a breakage than a redirection.

Over the next ten years, the internet's power as a market for goods and data would be harnessed by increasingly centralized platforms. Starting a platform native to this context is one solution, a path the art collective DIS pursued when they launched

DIS Images (2013), a fully operating stock photography agency that sold images produced by artists for private and commercial use. In some cases, the images took on the sheen of commercial photography, such as crisply manicured scenes of hunky mermen posing with moving boxes, while others were more conceptual, like the hilariously wacky elevator pitches from Andrew Norman Wilson's "stock fantasy ventures" that offer investment opportunities for potential video productions.

Disruption became the holy grail for business, especially within Silicon Valley. In order to find new ideas that would render the status quo obsolete, trend forecasting emerged as a significant sector of the marketing industry. This also filtered into the art world, as exemplified by the trend forecasting company K-Hole, founded in 2010 by writers and artists Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Chris Sherron, Emily Segal, and Dena Yago. The group released

There's a tendency to interpret DIS and K-Hole as apolitical or complicit, when in fact they share some of the same strategies apparent in tactical media.¹² Quite simply: seize the moment and seize the means, and then see where it goes. If communication is commodity, let's weird. Warp the spectacle. As useful and (at times, brilliantly) insightful as this method can be, it still limits the horizon of possibility to what's at hand. Can one imagine another alternative?

Zach Blas's *Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #1: Constituting an Outside (Utopian Plagiarism)* (2015) understood the no exits theory, yet still dreamed of an outside. A video capture of a desktop performance, Blas copies and pastes excerpts from Paul Preciado's *Manifiesto Contrasexual*, Frederic Jameson's "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," J.K. Grimson Graham's *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, and Zapatista leader Subcomandante

but the space of imagination it opens up. The last sentence of Blas's plagiarized pastiche, channeling Subcomandante Marcos, states simply: "In our dreams we have seen another network, an honest network, a network decidedly more fair than the one in which we now live."

1 Economist Clayton M. Christensen first described this approach as "disruptive innovation" in *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press, 1997).

2 Computers are calculating machines built to capture data. As such, they present important epistemological and phenomenological queries in regards to past frameworks for representation. See: Fredrich Kittler, *Optical Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

3 Vilem Flusser, "A New Imagination," in *Writings*, trans. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

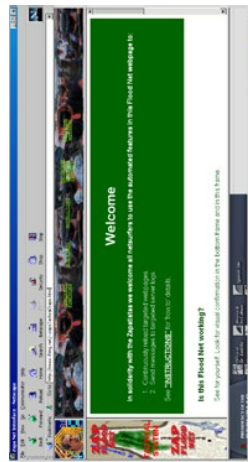
4 Brandon Hookway, *Pandemonium: The Rise of Predatorial Locales in the Postwar World* (Houston: Rice Univer-

5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 40.

6 Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics*, no. 1 (March 2005), 51.

7 See also Alan Liu's discussion of the "discourse network 2000" in "Transcendental Data: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of a New Encoded Discourse," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 2004).

8 Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 31.



Electronic Disturbance Theater, *FloodNet*, 1998. Screenshot of archived web page from April 10, 1998 action. Newscape Communicator 4.8, 2016. http://archive.nhsome.org/anthology/floodnetaprill10v2/zaps_tacticalzaps.html.



Seth Price, Reena Spaulings *Fine Art*, 2004. Installation view, merch table. Courtesy of the artist.

their site in 2010. Even the term "disruption" could become a DIS-ism, as illustrated by their original mission statement:

DIS is a dissection of fashion, art, and commerce which seeks to dissolve conventions, distort realities, disturb ideologies, dismember the establishment, and disrupt the dismal dissemination of fashion discourse that's been distinctly distributed in order to display the disenfranchised as disposable. All is open to discussion. There is no final word.¹¹

The ludic experimentation with language illustrates their critical position. It was not quite the montage of "packaging, producing, reframing" suggested by Price in *Dispersion*, but the creation of a rapid and complex *exaggeration* of the present. The point wasn't to root the project in a specific project of revolutionary overhaul, although surely that's well and good, but to dramatize the sheer absurdity of capitalism. This took many forms, one of which was

publicly accessible PDF reports on consumer behavior and corporate strategies in order to touch on greater cultural truths. More thoughtful and intellectual than a standard marketing agency's trend dump, K-Hole floated between the art and marketing world, working with companies while organizing events in museums like MoMA PS1 and the New Museum. Perhaps their best-known missive, *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom* (2013, in collaboration with Box 1824), codified the fad "normcore" or an unassuming fashion that blended in with its surroundings. Far beyond this tidbit, the PDF dramatizes the limited conception of "freedom" as only a freedom of choice, asking how these decisions and experiences were created to produce new markets (termed "Mass Indie"), and the agency of consumer. In some ways, K-Hole found a way to filter the insights of critical thought into the framework of the marketing industry, thus reaching a far broader audience.



Josh Kline, from *How Much is that Intern in the Window?*, *DIS Images*, 2013. Courtesy of DIS.



Andrew Norman Wilson, *SONIE*, 2019–2016. Still from audiovisual series. Image courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson.

Marcos's *Our Weapon* to the soundtrack of Le Tigre's "Get Off the Internet." Within the text, he then finds and replaces every instance of "capitalism," "capital," and "capitalist" with "internet," and "anti" and "non" with "contra." Through this simple word replacement, Blas suggests that the internet as we know it is indistinguishable from capitalism itself.

The explicit tie Blas makes between the internet and capitalism highlights a fact that underscores many of the examples discussed here. Namely that artistic, anti-corporate gestures in a networked context, from tactical media on, struggle with replicating "the spectacle" or commercially operative context in which they exist. This conundrum was already articulated in "The DEF of Tactical Media," and it can be glimpsed in *BIT Plane*. Disruptive art practices consistently fail to bring about their hoped-for effects. Yet, hope remains. Perhaps it exists not in the direct effects of the confrontation,

9 school of Architecture, 1999).

10 Numerous scholars have designated and analyzed an informational paradigm. See: James Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010); Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

11 Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics in the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

12 Geert Lovink and David Garcia, "The ABC of Tactical Media" on *Nettime*, May 16, 1997, accessed August 30, 2018, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9705/msg00096.html>.

13 Rita Riley, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

14 Geert Lovink and David Garcia, "The DEF of Tactical Media" on *Nettime* February 22, 1999, accessed August 30, 2018, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9902/msg00104.html>.

15 DIS, "About," *DIS Magazine*, March 23, 2010, accessed August 10, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100323034804/http://dismagazine.com:80/about/>.

16 The unfavorable reviews of the DIS-curated 9th Berlin Biennale reflect the notion that DIS hold a stance that merely reinforces capitalist forces. See Jason Farago, "Welcome to the LOLhouse: how Berlin's Biennale became a slick, sarcastic joke," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2016, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/13/berlin-biennale-exhibition-review-new-york-fashion-collective-dis-art-or-tesa-edmondson-the-present-in-drag-9th-berlin-biennale/>.