

**STAGING RESISTANCE ON THE INTERNET: AN INSIGHT TO THE WORK OF
ELECTRONIC DISTURBANCE THEATER**

by

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Abstract

The present Master's Thesis is motivated by a desire to contribute to the understanding of the work of Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT). EDT is a group of four American artists, activists and software designers who work collaboratively in the preparation and staging of online mass demonstrations or "gestures" against diverse targets, for socio-cultural and political reasons. Departing from the recognition that their work is a hybrid form that proposes a blend of cultural performance and activism online, and that it is mostly the second aspect that has been previously discussed in academic studies, the subject is tackled in this document predominantly from a theatrical perspective. Drawing on contemporary performance theories as well as on the concepts of theatricality and social drama I suggest that EDT's work is an innovative kind of online cultural performance (social dramas staged online) with overtly political and social goals where the proposed actions in fact intervene in real life issues. Throughout the study I also: 1) trace the changes in the conceptualization of theater that avant-garde artists encouraged during the twentieth century in order to highlight how EDT's project departs from and continues with a history of experimentation, transgression, and innovation; and 2) examine EDT's origins and conceptual proposal paying particular attention to the way EDT appropriates the Internet to stage cultural resistance, and to the way traditional theatre structures and elements are both used and reconfigured by this resistance practice. Finally, I propose online theatrivism as a defining term for EDT's work in an effort to highlight the three fundamental aspects it combines: performance, activism and digital technologies. Online theatrivism allows us to recognize the theatrical elements that help organize and enhance the online mass demonstrations. In addition, it reminds us that EDT's gestures are staged reality that recognizes itself as such, and thus entails a meta-commentary on activist behavior.

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Glossary

Avatar: The representation of oneself in a computer or internet. It can be a text construct, a two-dimensional icon, or a three dimensional model.

Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS): The overflow of the bandwidth or resources of one system (website, webserver) by several users at the same time, slowing it or preventing it to work properly.

Digital: As opposed to analog systems, a digital system is a data technology that uses discrete (discontinuous) values represented by high and low *states* known as bits. In computing, it refers to either code (programs) or data written in binary files.

DISA: The Defense Information Systems Agency is a United States Department of Defense combat support agency and with the goal of providing real-time information technology (IT) and communications support to the President, Vice President, Secretary of Defense, the Military Services, and the Combatant Commands.

Hacker: In popular usage and in the media, it most often refers to computer intruders or criminals, with associated pejorative connotations. In the computing community, the primary meaning is a complimentary description for a particularly brilliant programmer or technical expert.

Hostile Java applet: Software component that runs in the context of another program or website using the programming language Java with aggressive intentions.

HTML (Hypertext Mark-up Language): The largest and most used computer language for writing web pages.

IP adress (Internet Protocol address): Numerical identification that is assigned to devices participating in a computer network utilizing the Internet Protocol for communication between each other.

Java Script: Programming language primarily used to enable objects within other applications, mainly websites.

Listserv: A set of electronic email addresses for a group in which the sender can send one email and it will be received by a number of people.

MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Dimensions): Computer virtual world with multiple users at the same time that combines elements of role-playing, games, and online chat.

MOOs (Object-Oriented MUDs): MUD with programming capabilities that allow changes in the server, like new rooms and objects, and changing the way the interface operates.

Open Source culture: Free software movement, which aims to promote the user's right to access and modify the software.

Virtual Sit-in: Form of electronic civil disobedience fighting for civil rights using a distributed-denial-of-service attack.

World Wide Web: System of interlinked hypertext documents accessed via the internet.

Introduction

Recombination and Digitality [...] are the foundations of a new cosmology- a new way of understanding, ordering, valuing and performing in the world. While some cultural vectors have been faster to embrace the digital models than others, no area remains untouched.

(Critical Art Ensemble)

Digital technologies and mass media have been changing the way we live for more than 20 years. At present, hardly any discipline or human endeavor escapes from the revolution of the digital; the dominance of personal computers, sophisticated communication systems, and television is already having a broad effect on cultural and scientific paradigms worldwide. Artists and scientists alike have shown increasing enthusiasm and willingness to explore the new interactive and expressive possibilities of the newest technologies. Among the most astonishing and controversial outcomes of these explorations we find projects such as Second Life and Sterlac's post-human cyborg, just to mention a couple of examples. With the aim of finding, evaluating and sharing these kinds of projects, new festivals and institutions have also emerged. For instance, the Ars Electronica has become an international platform for digital art and media culture. Since its appearance in 1979, and particularly after its institutionalization in 1986, this annual festival in Linz, Austria, has appropriated the mission of seeking what is new in art and technology and making it visible for artists, scientists and the general public to know and discuss. A very interesting feature of this festival is that it is not only focused in art and technology, but changes in our societies due to the digital revolution are also considered. Thus, the scope of Ars Electronica emphasizes how social, scientific and artistic areas intermix in innovative works. As explained on its website, "attention is never focused exclusively on art, on technology or on society; instead, the effort is always made to reveal the multi-layered shifts and reciprocities taking place among them" ("History of Ars Electronica" 3). Interdisciplinary approaches such as this are quite new worldwide. It seems that an increase in human

creations which escape traditional classifications has brought about a necessary shift in regulating institutions' point of view. Ars Electronica, Transmediale, IMCexpo¹, among other festivals and symposiums, offer unclassifiable projects (artistic projects that cross established disciplinary boundaries) a space to be acknowledged by society and the art worlds. It was precisely in the 1998 Ars Electronica festival that the Electronic Disturbance Theater, a small group of innovators, found a suitable context to present their creative hybrid project: a merge of politics, digital technologies and cultural expression.

Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) is a four-member group of American artists, activists and software designers who work collaboratively in the preparation and staging of online “gestures” against diverse targets, for social and political reasons. For more than ten years, EDT has been engaged in the promotion and practice of Electronic Civil Disobedience in the form of electronic protests. The protests are constructed as social dramas where large numbers of participants are required to collaborate. As part of their project, EDT developed a software tool called Floodnet which enables the reloading of a web address several times per minute. If Floodnet is used against a particular website by a mass of users at the same time, the server is likely to slow down or even collapse. In 1998, Floodnet was used for the first time during a “dress rehearsal” virtual sit-in against Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo’s website and in solidarity with Chiapas’ Zapatistas. From that moment onwards EDT has continued staging demonstrations to call the attention of the media and general public to different causes around the world, with significant impact in some cases.

The strong emphasis that the EDT puts on the “theatricality” of their events (more explicitly in the first ones), as well as on the connections with an experimental political theatre² tradition has made me wonder: What is it that they do? Can this be a form of theater, of performance? Is it merely activism? Could it be both? What would this merge of activism and “theatre” mean for theatre art? Critical

¹ *Transmediale* is an annual international festival that takes place in Berlin. Its aim is to present “advanced artistic positions reflecting on the socio-cultural impact of new technologies. It seeks out artistic practices that not only respond to scientific or technical developments, but that try to shape the way in which we think about and experience these technologies”. See <<http://www.transmediale.de/en/about-main>>. In New York, *IMC Expo* emerged as “a hybrid tradeshow, artshow, and educational symposium”, with the aim of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among new media artists, engineers, programmers and designers. See <<http://www.imcexpo.net/>>

² With political theatre I refer to all theatre practices that are overtly political.

perspectives on the subject are still scarce. They are limited to a small number of articles and interviews, and brief mentions within studies on broader subjects. With a couple of exceptions, such as the text in which performance artist Coco Fusco specifically refers to EDT's work as "virtual theater", the tendency is to identify EDT's work as part of an emerging form of online activism, and therefore to analyze it from predominantly sociological and political perspectives. In this sense, EDT has been distinguished as one of the first exponents of "hacktivism" (Jordan & Taylor 2005; Ayers & McCaughey 2001).

According to Jordan and Taylor in *Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?*, hacktivism is a recently coined term which stands for what they judge to be "the first social movement of virtuality" (172). This social movement, they explain, is the product of the marriage of the spirit of the hack and the spirit of the protest in the context of digital, viral times (39). With "viral times" they refer to an atmosphere of vulnerability, uncertainty and ethical ambiguity that Western societies have experienced for a couple of decades now, due to constant threats that compromise social well being (i.e. terrorism, economic crisis, and viruses). Hacktivism comprises two major tendencies: digitally correct hacktivism and mass action hacktivism. The former is considered to be "the political application of hacking to the infrastructure of cyberspace (69)". A group like The Cult of the Dead Cow is a good example of this tendency, since their aim is to fight censorship and privatization of information on the Internet. As "digitally correct" online activists, their philosophy highlights and defends the human right to the free flow of information. EDT is considered a founding member of the second tendency, which is defined as a "combination of politics and inefficient technology"; as an attempt to defy the lack of physicality in online life, in favor of a collection of virtual bodies that are yet not present to each other (69). As of today, the most "obvious and emblematic" example of online mass hacktivism for Jordan and Taylor is the online protest conducted by a group called Electrohippies against an important conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999. This online protest was carried out at the same time as the street protests in Seattle; in both cases the main objective was to express disagreement with the negative effects of globalization and neoliberal policies. While a mass of people in the streets used their bodies to block the access to the conference site, the Electrohippies mobilized a mass of users who bombarded WTO's

networks with messages in order to blockade their flow of information. In many ways, this kind of attack mirrored virtual sit-ins such as the ones carried out by the EDT and the Italian Digital Coalition in previous years. The Electrohippies' attack was considered to be successful since, in a period of five days, thousands of people helped to slow down the conference networks, which even came to a halt on two occasions. Because of the magnitude of the protest, the authorities and the media paid special attention to it. The fact that this kind of action comes from a mass of computers operated by ordinary users rather than from any one central computer operated by a shrewd hacker is what makes it different and attractive as a political strategy (Jordan & Taylor 75). Mass action hacktivism as we can see is more about collective action and less about individual transgression of electronic "codes" as simple hacking is commonly known to be; it is an online action legitimized by popular support.

The offered interpretation of EDT's work as a form of hacktivism can be somehow misleading if we consider that EDT directly opposes in theory and practice the spirit of the hacker³. Although Jordan and Taylor's study is one of the most rigorous efforts so far to analyze emerging online activism, and it certainly offers very useful insights to the phenomena, their analysis falls short when it comes to elucidating the implications of merging artistic and activist goals. Moreover, while at some point of their analysis Jordan and Taylor do mention that EDT's actions involve performance in certain ways, and that this supposes a new kind of performative logic in activism, the "performative logic" is never really explored. As a result, the proposed category "mass action hacktivism" seems limited and perhaps even inappropriate to describe EDT's peculiar kind of work; especially because it does not pay enough attention to one of the group's fundamental proposed aspects: performance.

A very interesting question arises at this point: Why are we currently finding these kinds of hard-to-classify projects in Western culture⁴? It seems that hybrid cultural phenomena, such as EDT's social

³ In fact, the whole category "mass action hacktivism" seems contradictory. Hacktivism, as proposed by Jordan and Taylor points towards a fusion of the hacker community's knowledge and methods with resistant politics. However, they also point out that the main characteristics of mass action hacktivists are the use of inefficient technology and massive participation. These characteristics directly oppose the traditional way in which hackers operate. So, to consider them hacktivists supposes some kind of contradiction.

⁴ Because EDT's members are American and their actions are related to Western political struggles, I have limited this research to Western culture. Nevertheless, I must emphasize that the process of hybridization between the arts and digital technologies has also had an important role in Eastern cultures, especially in Japan and Korea.

dramas, are a form of evolution of both art and social sciences trying to adapt to a new socio-cultural context; a context dominated by new technologies and modeled by coexisting modern and postmodern paradigms. Disciplines are currently experiencing an urge to borrow knowledge and strategies from each other.

While the process of hybridization among disciplines, especially among the arts, is certainly not new, it seems to have accelerated at present times bringing together what could have been thought before to be incompatible worlds. As I attempt to explain in this study, moving from recognizable art forms and social phenomena to new hybrids where old boundaries disappear and where digital technologies play a fundamental role is not only a recent trend in Western culture, but, in some cases, a matter of survival. For politically engaged artists and activists, drastic changes in the configuration of societies during the past two decades are calling for drastic changes in their practices. Not being able to create new artistic forms or political strategies that explore the new possibilities brought about by digital technologies, and that cope with the challenges posed by an increasingly globalized world, would lead to fossilization.

I see EDT's case as worthy of analysis because their hybrid actions offer an interesting as well as disturbing answer to the current socio-cultural context and need to be studied in more depth. The limitation I see in Jordan and Taylor's analysis of EDT is my point of departure. As often declared by one of the group members, one of EDT's goals is to adapt and continue a history of social interventionist aesthetics that comes from the theater field into the virtual realm⁵. In other words, there is a clear attempt to explore the possibility of a new form of radical theatre online. My intention with this study is to complement and further develop the understanding of the work of EDT by analyzing it from a predominantly virtual theatrical perspective. Since the group draws goals, structures and techniques both from the fields of activism and the arts, especially theatre and performance art, I contend that EDT's gestures should be considered and analyzed not only as an innovative form of activism but also as a new form of cultural performance online.

⁵ See, for instance, Dominguez "Electronic Civil Disobedience" 661.

A central question in this study will be to examine the concept of theatre that EDT is using and to try and give a definition for what the group does. Of course, the first thing that needs to be highlighted is that their “gestures” do not fit in traditional Western definitions of theatre. For example, Eric Bentley’s famous formula “A impersonates B while C looks on” (150) does not apply here; neither Patrice Pavis’ idea that theatre art “always presents an action (or the mimetic representation of an action) through actors that incarnate or show characters for an audience gathered together to receive it at a time and place that may or may not be specified in advance” (407). Truth is, it would not be possible to understand why EDT members dared to call their practice “a form of theatre” without taking into account the most recent changes in theatre theories and practices. As Lizbeth Goodman observes in the introduction to the *Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, “the framework for understanding what is meant by the term ‘theatre’ has been extended over time to include non-theatre spaces, site specific performance work, live art, dance, and other time-based art forms including some element of the ‘performative’”(1). Theatre theorist Nike Imoru also corroborates this situation and points towards the relationship with a second term which circulates very often nowadays: “The boundaries of theatre have evolved so that increasingly one refers to ‘performance’, a term which is becoming synonymous with theatre per se (110)”. EDT’s concept of theatre is an extension of the traditional one. It is to be understood in terms of theatricality and performance theory.

According to Balme in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, theatricality can be defined as a “discursive” and “performative”⁶ practice by means of which theatre (as an institution and an aesthetic form) intersects with wider cultural contexts (90). Its frequent use in current discourse is related to an increasing awareness of the constructedness and mediatedness of so much human experience; “it is especially observable in the realm of politics, where all political activity seems to be staged-managed for television cameras” (90-91). The concept of performance is close to that of theatricality, but is far more reaching. Since the 1980s, and especially after the dissemination of the new theoretical perspectives offered by the anthropologist Victor Turner and the Theatre scholar Richard Schechner, “performance”

⁶ The term “performative” in Balme’s book is associated with that which is made manifest by a performer, its transitory, and relies on dramaturgy and staging to achieve completion (6).

has developed into a very wide concept frequently used to refer to “restored behavior” (Schechner “Performance Studies” 28). Departing from the recognition that no physical, verbal or virtual human action is ever done for the first time, that “all behavior consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviors (Schechner “Performance Studies” 35)”, the emerging field of Performance Studies uses “performance” as a theoretical tool to analyze several kinds of human activities --especially gatherings in public spaces, and not only theatre in its traditional sense.

From this recent perspective, theatre (in its traditional sense) is considered to be only one kind of cultural performance among a broad spectrum of possibilities which include: performance art, dance, sports, play, ritual, circus, political demonstrations, lectures and other kinds of public activities which share the characteristic of being structured behaviors that attempt to “show doing”. In contrast with other disciplines, Performance Studies opposes the establishment of any single system of knowledge (Schechner “Performance Studies” 22). Instead, it draws perspectives from different disciplines (i.e. theater studies, media and cultural studies, anthropology, sociology) playing with the possibilities and the benefits of mixing fields of knowledge. This approach also acknowledges the current blurriness of boundaries between different cultural performance genres and categories of social life. Because it willingly resists fixed definitions and even recognizes itself as a contested approach, performance is also an imprecise term that needs to be redefined in each specific context. Schechner warns that perhaps any human action could be studied “as” performance or restored behavior, but one must be careful not to generalize. Not everything “is” performance. What performance is depends on its specific social context, use, and its relation to a tradition or cultural conventions (“Performance Studies” 38).

Departing from the theoretical lens provided by this approach, the pages that follow will suggest that what the Electronic Disturbance Theatre is proposing is an innovative kind of online cultural performance with overtly political and social goals where the proposed actions in fact intervene in real life issues. These actions are performances because they are consciously structured behavior and are staged to be perceived by an audience. More specifically, we will see how EDT’ proposal involves a certain degree of theatricality in the sense that it departs from Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theatre, the Situationists

Gestures and Turner's concept of social drama to construct and stage gestures of cultural resistance on the ubiquitous space that the Internet offers nowadays. According to Jon Mckenzie, performance and cultural theorists define "cultural performance" in relation to its functions which are: "1) social and self-reflection through the dramatization or embodiment of symbolic forms, 2) the presentation of alternative arrangements, and 3) the possibility of conservation and/or transformation" (31). My notion of cultural performance coincides with this definition.

Bearing in mind these issues, the three main objectives of the study are: First, to identify the changes that have been taking place in the practice of theatre (particularly its experimental and overtly political branch) since the early decades of the twentieth century, that have been leading to the possible understanding of theatre as cultural performance (in its current broadest sense), and of cultural performance as direct activism; second, to offer an examination of EDT's work, particularly looking at the way it uses the Internet as a stage, and to the way it reconfigures the traditional elements of theatre mixing them up with performance art⁷ and direct activist goals, thus, encouraging a new idea of what overtly political theatrical events can be in this era; and third, to propose a definition for their hybrid work. In relation with these goals, the leading questions I will be addressing are: What changes in the conceptualization of theatre have been brought about by different avant-garde artistic practices in the twentieth century? How are theatre and performance art practitioners facing the digital context? What is it that EDT does? What concept of theatre is the group proposing? How are traditional theatrical elements reconfigured with this kind of online practice? What are its political and social functions? What are the implications of understanding EDT's work as a merge of cultural performance and activism? Is it efficacious? How has it been received?

⁷ "Performance art" is one of the terms that in the late 1960s was chosen to refer to those "live" experimental spectacles that had the aim of disrupting the traditional conventions of theatre and the other arts in order to achieve freedom from disciplinary, institutional and economical constraints. Although this "genre" defies precise definition, some distinctive characteristics can be: The performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor in the traditional theatre; the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative, they attempt to break barriers between art and life, between performer and spectator; and they are usually meant to be uncollectable. See: Gunter Berghaus *Avant-Garde Performance. Live Events and Electronic Technologies*, 2005; and Jane Turner ed. *The Grove Dictionary of Art: From Expressionism to Post-Modernism*, 2000, 295.

Finally, a caveat must be made. Although my purpose in this study is to analyze EDT predominantly from a theatrical perspective, it must not be forgotten at any time that their work is not simply an experimental form of cultural performance. What is most interesting, disturbing and indeed controversial is precisely its hybridity, the way 3 fields –cultural performance, activism and digital technologies-- overlap in the same practice. Consequently, I will often be looking at all the aspects at the same time. As I said before, in the few studies where EDT is examined, more attention has been paid to their activist goals than to the group’s proposed concept of online theatre. The present study is an effort, then, to further explore what has been overlooked, and to raise some questions which, hopefully, will encourage further investigation on the subject.

Chapter Outlines

In addition to this introduction, the study includes three chapters followed by a conclusion. The first chapter brings about *Practices, Concepts, Issues* concerning avant-garde political theater and performance art practice in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. From the manifestos of the futurists to the hybrid practices of Gomez-Peña, it is possible to identify many voices of important practitioners continuously claiming that political theater needs to become something more and even something else in order to be more efficacious: less Aristotelian, text-centered and hierarchical, more practical, actual, pedagogical, participatory, engaged, electronic, global, more ‘real’. These claims have often materialized in practices that have expanded the idea of what theatre can and should be to cope with the challenges of specific historical and social contexts. With its project, EDT inserts itself in this history of remodeling political theatre concept and practice. In this chapter I explain how the Digital Age is posing new challenges as well as providing new tools and spaces that can not be ignored by contemporary artists and activists. Among other things, the Internet has become a possible staging space for resistant practices. This is the space EDT explores.

Chapter two is meant to give a general panorama of what EDT does and why. In the first three sections, I trace the project’s origins by explaining its connections with the theories proposed by the

Critical Art Ensemble and the will to support the Zapatista movement. I also provide a description of how the first performances went in 1998, followed by a commented summary of EDT's conceptual proposal. A brief discussion on EDT's concept of theatre serves as an introduction to the next chapter, while an outline of the staged gestures after 1998 and a discussion on EDT's limited political efficacy completes the general view that is intended in this part.

Chapter three offers a critical examination of EDT's proposed concept of theatre. Put in very simple terms, EDT's actions are a sort of cultural performance because their goal is "showing doing" political actions in a way that is creative and expressive. To better understand their proposed theatrical way of "showing doing", the chapter is divided in sections that analyze and search for possible connections and disconnections with traditional theatre elements: dramatic structure, author/director, stage, performer, audience. The examination shows that both traditional theatre as well as performance art concepts are used, fused and reconfigured by the practice of staging social dramas on the internet. Reception issues and impact are also considered in this chapter.

To conclude, I discuss how the popular concept hacktivism, which has been frequently used to describe the gestures, does not seem to be appropriate. For this reason I offer a defining term for the hybrid genre that the EDT is suggesting: Online theatrivism. The term includes the three perspectives involved in the project and seems more pertinent. Boundaries among disciplines and established categories of social life are blurring. Perhaps there will be a time when we won't be able to recognize the blurred boundaries of different disciplines in hybrid products at all. Ultimately this study shows how online theatrivism is leading towards that moment.

Chapter One: Practices, Concepts, Issues

The Necessity of Political Theater to Become Something More and Something Else

For almost a century, the role of theatre within Western society has been precarious. Theatre has been pushed from the center of the cultural field to the margins, first by film, then by the new media. As a positive outcome of this largely accepted crisis, Richard Drain points out that its practitioners have become more actively engaged in questioning its whole purpose and offering new proposals:

[...]Theatre has sought fresh ways to engage with society. It has fought to be more than entertainment for the privileged, or escapism for the many. Those at the cutting edge have used it as a form of intervention, whose function is to challenge preconceptions. (XV)

Since the early decades of the twentieth century it is possible to trace important changes in theatre's conception and practice, particularly in its overtly political branch. Throughout the years, several political theatre practitioners and theorists have come to the conclusion that theatre needs to become something more and even something else in order to become an effective medium to catalyze positive change in society. This is evident in the new working methods and radical perspectives they have proposed to face the challenge. In this section I offer a brief historical review of various claims and proposals made throughout the twentieth century for new kinds of political theatre. The proposals are often considered from the broader scope of the history of the relationships between art and society. Most of these proposals challenge the idea of art as something independent from its social context.

This review of political theatre is important to understand EDT's work as part of a process of remodeling theatre theory and practice according to the demands of changing contexts and times. My intention, then, is to highlight the continuous aim of avant-gardist artists to challenge established practices and ideologies with experimental forms and alternative ideas which have been creating new understandings of what theatre is and what its role can be in human societies at different moments in time.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, major changes in the conception of art, culture and their function in Western societies took place. This was part of a larger series of changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the new ways of thinking encouraged by the ideas of Karl Marx, Freud, Darwin, Nietzsche, among other intellectuals. Moving away from the positivism and rationalism of Enlightenment, the Realist tradition in art was challenged by modernist artists and radically opposed by those at the avant-garde who started to experiment with new forms of expression. Two positions dominated the scene in the first decades of the twentieth century; one concerned with exploring artistic creativity so that art would rise above and alienated life praxis; the other, a left wing position focused on denouncing class struggle and injustice. These positions were not necessarily opposed to each other (as we can see with Brecht's theatre, for example), and their concerns persisted and evolved in the second half of the century.

Early twentieth century innovators such as the Futurists, Surrealists, Piscator, the Workers' Theatre Movement, and Brecht were among the first ones to raise their voices to advocate for a different kind of political theatre that would go beyond any past, conventional or superficial expectations. As Brecht stated, theatre had the mission to respond to a new epoch:

In setting up new artistic principles and working out new methods of representation we must start with the demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and the possibility of remodeling society loom ahead. ("Alienation Effects" 116)

Even when the proposals, methodologies and ideologies of these early innovators were different, they agreed on: 1) observing that audiences urgently needed to become active participants in the theatrical events, and 2) trying to put an end to the dominant ideology and structures of bourgeois theatre. In one way or another, they were all concerned with leading to social and cultural transformations through their practices.

The Futurists, for instance, considered it a priority to make direct contact with the audience. Their goal was to confound expectations by creating a disorienting experience based on improvisation, "body-madness", a variety of visual and sound stimuli –(multimedia)–, and dynamicity (Marinetti, Settimelli & Corra 19-22). They emphasized the necessary destruction of the fourth wall convention (i.e, the imaginary

wall that separates the fiction from the audience), and the concrete –immediate-- experience over representation. Their performances were often carried out as an artistic and politic battle against the passiveness they perceived in the audiences (Krasner 110-111).

In Germany, Piscator wanted to create a new form of “sociological drama” that would “bring the spectator into the theater, not as a fictitious concept but as a living force” (Piscator 104). However, he did not have the typical-upper class spectator in mind; his aim was to engage the proletarians in real life issues. To achieve this purpose he proposed a form of documentary theatre which incorporated film and other technological resources. In addition to the socially aware subject matter, he thought that new means were important “to cover up the deficiencies of dramatists’ products” (103). For him, just as for the Futurists, “[...] a change in the function of the theatre was inconceivable without bringing the stage equipment technically up to date” (103). In this sense, he acknowledged the importance of the relationship not only between theatre and society but also between theatre and current technologies. Like Piscator, the Workers’ Theatre Movement followed a Marxist ideology. But, in contrast to Piscator’s technological approach, they developed the “agit-prop⁸ style”. To reach wide masses of workers, they believed theatre should become an open platform rather than an elaborate stage; class struggle was to be portrayed in simple, dramatic terms, and worker audiences were meant to feel that the players were part of them. Moreover, to disseminate its ideas, this “property-less theatre” had to go to where the audience was and not vice versa (“Workers’ Theatre Movement” 109). Thus, the Workers’ Theatre Movement abandoned the conventional theatre building and started exploring alternative spaces such as factories or even the streets. The Workers’ Theatre Movement, Piscator and Brecht all shared the idea that social context should be the real protagonist in theatre. It was Brecht, however, who fully developed the theory of the “epic theatre” in the 1930s. By introducing a narrative on stage, this Marxist German director tried to make sure that his audience had to deal with more than one point of view. He thought that if spectators were not allowed to establish an uncritical identification with a central figure in a play, they would become actively engaged in constructing a deeper understanding of the situation. Creating a distance

⁸ “Agitational Propaganda” in the sense the Communist Party of the Soviet Union used it; that is, without the negative connotations it acquired afterwards.

between spectator and characters and thus, making evident theatre's artifices was called the "alienating effect". After Brecht, this technique has been widely used by new generations of theatre practitioners as a tool to create a space for reflection. Like Piscator and the Futurists, Brecht was also interested in incorporating the latest technologies in his stage. He was quick to recognize the increasing cultural relevance of film and the possible positive exchanges that could come and go between the two art forms (Brecht "The film, the Novel and the Epic Theatre" 48-50).

Even when these Marxist proposals agreed on identifying the necessity of political theater to become something more, not all of them went as far as actually turning it into something else. In fact, the more radical claims of the historical avant-gardes had to wait until the second half of the twentieth century to further develop. Changes in the configuration of Western societies after the Second World War produced a new twist in modern thought and culture. As we know, late capitalism eventually became the predominant economic structure in an increasingly Americanized world. In addition, new technologies made possible new forms of entertainment and communication such as television and more sophisticated forms of film, which more rapidly than ever displaced the stage. By the mid 1950s, the experiments of the historical avant-gardes had grown in popularity and were being assimilated by the mainstream. Despite the claims against the culture industry and the conceptualization of avant-garde art as a site of social critique that the Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno encouraged, the term "avant-garde art" started to be trivially used for marketing purposes.

Same as everything else, "avant-garde theatre" was inevitably acquiring a commodity status fostered by strongly capitalist environments in postindustrial societies. To escape from this situation, some artists started creating uncollectable and unpredictable art experiments. "Happenings", as Allan Kaprow called them in 1959, proposed a countermeasure to the habit of treating theater performances and art in general as an object or a product. These were unrepeatable events. Instead of staging a dramatic text, happenings were about creating open-ended, life-like actions where performers were not representing fictional characters, and where spectators were encouraged to help create the experience of a unique

⁹ See Bertold Brecht. "Alienation Effects on Chinese Acting: The A-Effect" in *Twentieth-Century Theatre: a Sourcebook*. Richard Drain ed. NY/London: Routledge, 1995, 114-116.

reality (Berghaus 87). Happenings took an important step towards an expansion of the traditional concept of theatre. More than ever, other art techniques were welcome to intermix in the creation of “live” events which frequently took place in alternative spaces. In the decades that followed, this kind of artistic events continued to develop and turned into what is known as performance art; a kind of art that, according to Krapow’s proposal, resists categorizations and that intends to open dialogues with life, not art itself. By the 1970s, the term “performance art” became the umbrella for works that otherwise resisted categorization (Schechner “Performance Studies” 39-40).

The 1960s and 70s were effervescent times; many artists were highly concerned about the hegemony of certain orthodox discourses in culture, particularly the ones regarding gender, sexual orientation, race and class. Influenced by post-structuralist and deconstructionist ideas, those in the avant-garde realized that if theatre really wanted to bring the possibility of change to society, then it had to transgress not only some traditional conventions but its very foundations. For this reason, the most experimental forms of theatre, performance art and street theatre, started to gain a greater following. For example, in the U.S., theatre collectives such as the Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet, The Open Theatre and the Performance Group proposed an appropriation of the streets in order to make theatre more accessible to everyone. They encouraged a type of “guerrilla theatre” that used materials from popular theatre to bring political messages to broader audiences (Carlson 118). With the aim of deconstructing patriarchal paradigms, postmodern feminist artists proposed singular kinds of body-centered performance. They did not use their bodies to represent a character as in traditional plays, but rather to reveal themselves in the first person and as a site of social inscription (Berghaus 138). Thus, their concept of performance became closer to that of ritual; it focused on highly intimate, transformational experiences. From a less performer-centered approach, the Brazilian Augusto Boal proposed a “Theatre of the Oppressed”. This director was against the bourgeois concept of finished spectacle. Inspired by a reconsideration of Marxist ideas as well as by Paulo Freire’s theory on pedagogy, his experiments were an attempt to liberate the spectator from the finished vision of the world that theatre had been imposing on the oppressed classes (Boal 96). His method towards an “invisible theatre” consisted of the presentation of

scenes in environments other than theatres, and involved witnesses, not spectators. Actors would introduce a pre-rehearsed conflict in a public space, not letting anyone know they were actors, and then improvise according to the reactions of the witnesses or “spect-actors”. Theatre in this sense was converted into an empowering place and a pedagogical tool at the same time. Participants were set up to find themselves immersed in “real life” situations of oppression and to offer their own solutions. In Boal’s words:

It is necessary to emphasize that the invisible theatre is not the same thing as a ‘happening’ or the so-called ‘guerrilla theatre’. In the latter, we are clearly talking about theatre, and therefore, the wall that separates actors from spectators immediately arises, reducing the spectator to impotence [...] In the invisible theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished [...] the impact produced by this free theatre is much more powerful and longer lasting. (Boal 89)

When Boal explains that invisible theatre is not “theatre” but “free theatre,” what seems to be an explicit contradiction, is in fact a proposal to move away from the traditional definition of the art and accept his own notion; it is a declaration that time has come for theatre to be understood as something else.

Happenings, guerrilla theatre, feminist body art performances and the Theatre of the Oppressed are just some examples of many different practices that reveal a continuous quest to remodel the theory and practice of political theatre. My intention here is not to describe every single case but to provide some evidence of the major transformations that theatre, particularly its overtly political and experimental branch, has been undergoing since the beginning of the twentieth century. As we have seen, these transformations involve: reconsidering the role of the actors and their bodies, moving away from the hegemony of the dramatic text, destroying the fourth wall convention, encouraging the audience to be critical, participative and even collaborative, staging in alternative and public spaces, and, often preferring “real life” material over fictional stories.

All these transformations have been often considered essential for the efficacy of performances and have been pushing the art form to an edge where, in many cases, it has become something else. In fact, since the 1970s performance art started to be considered an art form on its own, often defined in opposition to traditional theatre. The absolute separation of performance art from theatre, however, has

often been problematic because of the mutual and undeniable influence that one practice has had over the other. In the 1980s, with the proliferation of media-oriented work which fitted more easily the proscenium stage, it became particularly difficult to establish a clear boundary between performance art and experimental theatre (J.Turner 301). The boundaries are even blurrier on the virtual realm where our perception of reality, as I shall explain, is being drastically shaken.

In 1999, Philip Auslander published a controversial book in which he addresses a key question for theatre and the more general scope of performance studies: What is live performance in a culture dominated by mass media? Following Herbert Blaus' assertion that the dominance of the media has deeply affected theatre¹⁰, Auslander argues that when competing in the marketplace, what is currently considered as "live performance" has a disadvantageous position with respect to mediatized forms. Furthermore, when assessing the future of traditional forms of live performance he arrives to the following conclusion:

The resulting assessment of the situation of live performance in a culture dominated by mass media has not made me optimistic about its current and future cultural prestige, as understood in traditional terms. It has also enabled me to see, however, that those terms may no longer be the most useful ones. (Auslander 4)

The lack of optimism that Auslander manifests derives from his recognition that only "the digitally fit"¹¹ are surviving in this epoch. His last phrase refers to the fact that traditional live performance has undergone the necessity of becoming in many cases something else –that is a crossbreed with the media– and in that sense, that theory should move away from traditional categorizations as well.

¹⁰ See Herbert Blau. *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance*. NY/London: Routledge, 1992, 76.

¹¹ I am borrowing this phrase from performance artist Gómez-Peña who has also noted the inescapable dominance that digital technologies currently exert in the world ("The New Global Culture" 9).

Performance in the Digital Age

The rise of the Digital Age has made the necessity of political theatre to become something else even more acute. While in the late 1970s artistic experiments with video, cameras, computers and other advanced technologies were still very expensive, and thus scarce, by the 1990s this situation had completely changed. Since the 1980s, the world has experienced profound changes due to the emergence of digital technologies. Their increasing accessibility for the general public as well as the free flux of information and knowledge that they enable has started to modify industry-based societies. Economic and cultural power in an increasingly globalized world has come to depend a great deal on the ability to manipulate information and distribute it worldwide. At present, digital television, computers, the Internet, digital cameras, webcams, iphones, and many other technologies have become an inextricable part of millions of people's lives.

How have theatre practitioners at the avant-garde responded to this digital context? It is possible to recognize at least two major tendencies: the tradition seeking and the forward-looking.¹² These tendencies present different and, sometimes, competing visions of what theatre should be in contemporary societies. While both acknowledge the necessity of remodeling traditional theatre, they have offered different responses to the Digital Age.

On the one hand, tradition seekers had been interested in going back to the basics of body expression, to the roots of performance, in order to produce a universal theatrical language that all human beings can understand and share. Technological media, of course, is left aside, as it seems an unnecessary excess or even a deadly, oppressing force that has to be resisted. Grotowski's and Barba's works remain very influential in this respect.

On the other hand, those who are looking forward consider that the future is inevitably related to the newest technologies, and thus have embraced them and made them a fundamental part of their

¹² In his article "Five Avant-gardes or None", Richard Schechner identifies a total of five avant-gardes that overlap. For the purpose of my argument I have chosen to highlight these two, which I consider the most significant ones. See: Richard Schechner. "Five Avant-gardes or None" in *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts eds. NY: Routledge, 1997, pp. 308-326.

practices. As Dixon has pointed out in his recent study on *Digital Performance*¹³, this second perspective has led to the emergence of new dramatic forms and performance genres on the Internet and on interactive stages (1). At present, it is possible to identify at least 4 major areas of experimentation with computer technologies¹⁴: 1) the first area has to do with the notion of human *cyborg*. Performance artists Sterlac and Marcel.lí Antúnez Roca, for instance, explore and celebrate the imminent conjunction of the body with technology by expanding their own bodies with robot prosthetics or by letting them be controlled by electronic impulses that are computer-generated. From a less enthusiastic and more suspicious perspective, Guillermo Gómez-Peña also tackles the subject by staging satires of cyborg identities. How are digital technologies affecting human and machinic identities? Is the human body already obsolete? These are two important questions raised by these practices. 2) Perhaps the most popular area is *Multimedia Theatre*. Although Piscator, Brecht and other artists were already incorporating projection screens, videos and other available (analog) technologies to their stages in the early decades of the 20th century, in recent years this practice has become much more sophisticated (thanks to digital technologies) and inextricable from cultural performances. Recent experiments have opened the possibility of new spatial environments and visual complexity. Robert Lepage's compelling use of multiple screens and manipulated images in his plays is one of the most praised examples of multimedia theatre. Another interesting possibility has been offered by director George Coates who has explored in most of his performances the creation of virtual scenographies with media projections. In *20/20 Blake*, for example, actors would immerse in 3D recreations of William Blake's paintings, demonstrating that the virtual can complement the material bodies on stage in an enriching way. 3) Those concerned with *telematics* make use of the Internet and videoconference programs to enable long distance collaborative performances. One of their main interests is to explore electronic contact rather than physical between performers in different

¹³ Dixon uses the term *Digital Performance* in a broad sense to include "all performance works where computers play a *key* role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms" (3).

¹⁴ See Gunter Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance. Live Events and Electronic Technologies*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Steve Dietz, "Ten Dreams of Technology" *Leonardo* 35.5 (2002): 509–522; Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*. Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2007; Amy Petersen, *Theatre in a Media Culture: production, performance and perception since 1970*. Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co., 2007; Andrea Zapp ed. *networked narrative environments as imaginary spaces of being*. UK: Manchester Metropolitan University/Miriad, 2004.

locations as well as between performers and online audiences. For John Reaves and Cheryl Faver, co-directors of the Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre, the new media can make possible a new “world theatre¹⁵”. The liberation of distance and time constraints has captivated the attention of many artists who see in collaborative performances an ideal opportunity for intercultural exchange. With these experiments the traditional conception of “presence” as physical proximity is seriously challenged. Yet, technological limitations such as communication bandwidth and lack of resources are still a problematic issue. 4) While multimedia theatre and telematics usually involve a conjunction of “live” performance and mediated performance, the fourth area focuses on *online performance*. Experiments in this area use the Internet as a stage and explore the possibility of theatre in cyberspace from different perspectives. For example, Adriane Jenik with her “Desktop Theatre” and The Hamnet Players have proposed the creation of participatory performance art forums. They have performed their own versions of classic plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Hamlet* in public chatrooms where chatters become the audience and sometimes even characters. Differently, Steve Dixon and Gómez-Peña have tried performing for online audiences whose suggestions are incorporated to the performance while it is happening. The vulnerability of the performer who becomes a sort of puppet is currently one of their major concerns. Electronic Disturbance Theatre can also be considered part of this area of experimentation. Its principal interest however, is exploring the possibilities of theatre as online direct activism. Taking performance to the virtual realm and using it to carry on a direct political intervention does not only involve bringing traditional conceptualizations of theatre to the edge, but certainly crossing all of them. Thus, with EDT’s practice the avant-gardist tendency to push political theatre to become something else can be said to reach a climax.

A propos of current discussions on how artists should respond to this epoch, Gómez-Peña’s work and ideas are noteworthy because they have raised important questions regarding performance practice as activism in what he considers a digital and “global culture.” For Gómez-Peña, art now is necessarily a hybrid form –“cross-racial polylinguistic, multicontextual”, and a space for social intervention. Since the 1980s he has been engaged in the creation of performance art in collaboration with artists from different

¹⁵ See “About the Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre” at < <http://www.gertstein.org/index.html> >

disciplines and in culturally pluralistic spaces (“The Border as Performance Laboratory” 351). For him, the interdisciplinary approach is necessary to cope with the problems and challenges deriving from a global culture, particularly those taking place in the border between the US and Mexico where he works. About the foundation of the Poyesis Genetica Performance Troupe he comments:

The sense of belonging to a larger cause had almost totally broken down in the 80s, especially between the art worlds. And the perspective of an interdisciplinary group of artists from the US and Mexico working together to create binational dialogue was not just a romantic but an extremely necessary idea. (352)

Moving away from an apolitical –postmodern, for some scholars– position, the idea that art should be committed to a social cause rises again with this troupe. Gómez-Peña’s performances involve a continuous transgression of all kind of borders: political, artistic, ethnic, disciplinary, real/virtual. This transgression is meant to emphasize how borders frequently create absurd and unfair distinctions among people, disciplines, and territories. It is also meant to articulate the dangers and changes of the times. In this sense, one of the main characteristics of Gómez-Peña’s performances is the critique of the “dark side of globalization”. For him, the dark side lies in the fact that First World countries have control over digital technologies so, even when it is true that some inhabitants of the Third World are able to access these technologies, they cannot be but passive consumers, the perennially oppressed (“The New Global Culture” 9). Nevertheless, in a world where “only the digitally fit will survive”, Gómez-Peña proposes a kind of collaborative art that incorporates the newest technologies both to criticize the false utopia they claim to bring, and as an acknowledgement that performances can also benefit --by expanding its possibilities-- from the marriage –with the good side.

As I mentioned before, some artists have been exploring the new “space” that digital technologies have made possible: cyberspace. Given its virtual nature, this space poses many challenges and remains a site of controversy. It also offers many interesting opportunities for politically engaged artists who recognize it as a public space, as a stage from which to resist. In order to understand the challenges and possibilities that the virtual medium encompasses both for cultural performance and politics, the following

section provides an introduction to the recent concepts of cyberspace and the Internet as well as to the leading debates on their relevance for contemporary Western-ized societies. Above all, I will focus on the proposed ideas of the Internet as a public space and as a theatre, which as we will see, are essential to understand EDT's online performances.

Performance and Politics in Cyberspace

The term cyberspace is very popular nowadays. It appeared for the first time in Gibson's science fiction novel *Neuromancer* (1984) where it referred to a "consensual hallucination" experienced by ordinary people in relation to "constellations of data" abstractly represented in their minds (Gibson 51). In the late 1980s and during the 90s the term was appropriated by lobbyists, hackers, professionals in telecommunications, computer scientists, culture theorists and academic scholars from a wide range of disciplines. As Lance Strate noted in 1999, a fundamental issue of the term is that, as it became popular, it adopted a plurality of meanings which make its definition an extremely difficult endeavor. In his article, Strate prefers to talk about "cyberspaces" and warns us about the importance of recognizing the plurality of meanings that the term denotes, in order to avoid misunderstandings. He also emphasizes that cyberspaces call into question our common-sense assumptions about the phenomenon of space and, therefore, that we need to look at it from a different angle in order to accept it as a "space" (406-407). In this sense, he points towards an emerging paradigm which is precisely linked to the political, economical, social and cultural changes that the digital revolution or the information revolution –as it is also called– has brought about. As Manuel Castells has noted, the new paradigm involves: "a new dominant social structure, the network society; a new economy, the informational/global economy; and a new culture, the culture of real virtuality" (336).

The definition of cyberspace that I will be addressing here comes from David Bell, a cyberculture theorist, and can be summed up as follows: cyberspace is a metaphor for an imaginary space that exists in, on and between computational and digital devices (1-2). I like this definition because it gives a clear idea of what the term generally means, and also because it includes the paradox that lies at the center of current

discussions on the subject: an imaginary space that nevertheless exists. Cyberspace occupies a hybrid position between what we conventionally consider the real and the unreal; unreal in the sense that it is electronic and immaterial, and real in the sense that it has become part of our everyday activities, part of our lives. One of the major challenges for theorists today is precisely to explain in what ways our concepts of time, space, social interaction, art, identity and subjectivity are being modified by this hybrid space. Is it true that we have become cyborgs, that we are no longer just humans but post-humans? What happens to the human body online? Do the things happening in cyberspace have an impact on “real” life? How is social interaction different in a chatroom and *vis-à-vis* in a coffee shop? Can we live in cyberspace? What kind of artistic practices does cyberspace enable? Can theatre happen in cyberspace?

At this point I must highlight that when I talk about cyberspace as an alternative space, I do not mean to say that it is a hopeful alternative to the everyday social environments as some scholars have optimistically suggested¹⁶. I specifically refer to it as an alternative *staging* space (different from the conventional theatre stage or the streets) that is an option precisely because it is one of the many everyday social environments in which many people currently interact. Of course, this means that cyberspace, like any other social environment, is not free from the control and regulations that political and economic realities impose. Large corporations, software and hardware producers, governmental institutions, among other centers of power, most of the times have the last word on what we can or can not do with the new technologies in the new millennium. I find pertinent to introduce the concept of the Internet here, because it is also used to refer to that symbolic space created by electronic technologies, but with a narrower meaning which refers to the global network of interconnected computers. Since I will be focusing on computers and networks, I will be mostly using this second term instead of cyberspace.

The Internet as a new social space has caused a lot of controversy from many perspectives including the political and the artistic. From the political perspective, it has been noted that in the last few decades many activists have been incorporating digital technologies –the Internet in particular-- as an important part of their tactical repertoire. For example, it is now possible to find online petitions which are

¹⁶ The best known example is Sherry Turkle’s book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995) where she discusses in a very optimistic tone how cyberspace offers the possibility to rethink and reconfigure both identity and community.

electronically signed, organizations that recruit and operate in cyberspace, and Websites that offer citizens access to unregulated free information and software devices. While the use of available technologies in confrontational actions is definitively not new in the field of activism, thinking of the Internet only as new support for traditional tactics seems rather limited. The Internet is more than a tool because it involves the possibility of a new social space. In this sense, Martha MacCaughey and Michael D. Ayers suggest that the whole concept of activism is being reconfigured by online practices that raise new questions about political organizing and social change (1-3).

But not only the concept of activism is being reconsidered among scholars; the notions of community, identity and democratic space, which are strongly related to it, are also being redefined in relation to the characteristics of the virtual realm and the new paradigms of the Digital Age. One of the most recurrent questions is whether the Internet can do more than enable a fast exchange of information between users, that is to say, if it can be a space for dialogue and deliberation among (global) citizens, a space to exercise democracy¹⁷. The answers to this question have been diverse. They range from an enthusiastic “yes” to a radical “no”, with occasional nuances “maybe, but...” Mark Poster, for instance, observes that the Internet promotes both the decentralization of discourse and the possibility of free identity construction. In the chatrooms and in other Internet spaces people are being able to recreate themselves, to form communities, and to carry on projects that escape institutional regulations (i.e. sharing and reproducing any kind of information). These are positive aspects which are leading to a “democratization” of the constitution of the subject, and might as well be understood as the foundations for new kinds of political associations (190-192). While Poster accepts that there are some asymmetries in the MOOs and MUDs¹⁸ which can lead to inequalities among users, he still argues that race, class, and gender hierarchies diminish in cyberspace (195). The kind of optimistic interpretation offered by Poster and shared by other scholars has been harshly criticized by a second group of intellectuals who refuse to understand the new technologies as a “panacea.” Kevin Robins, for example, argues that the idea of cyberspace as a pacific and democratic place where people can reinvent themselves at will is utopist and

¹⁷ See “Introduction” to the collected essays on *Democracy and the New Media* edited by Jenkins and Thorburn, pp. 1-13.

¹⁸ See Glossary.

childish. Cyberspace, he notes, is not bringing the possibility of a better future because it is also subject to the control and regulations of those institutions and corporations that promote it or produce its material components (202). Similarly, in the introduction to *Democracy in the Digital Age*, Anthony Wilhelm criticizes the idea that emerging information and communications technologies will solve, by their very nature, implacable social and political problems. For him, this “overly optimistic” viewpoint –which he relates to the Futurists-- leads to unacceptable misunderstandings because it prevents us from recognizing the negative effects that this technologies are having in our societies. In his own words:

[...] rather than being the antidote to democratic ills, as present-day futurists believe, new information and communications technologies, as currently designed and used, pose formidable obstacles to achieving a more just and humane social order in the digital age. (6)

In a recent article entitled “Expanding Dialogue: Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy,” James Bohman, offers a third perspective on the same subject. For him, the Internet constitutes a new sort of public sphere –different but at the same time related to the habermasian concept¹⁹– with both positive characteristics and negative effects. Among the positive features he mentions: its speed (to enable users the information exchange), its scale, its ability to facilitate resistance to centralized control as a network of networks, and its ability to enable a cosmopolitan dialogue. Among the negative effects he highlights the anonymity of the user²⁰ and the “digital divide” created by economic differences among and within countries which only allow some people to have access to cutting edge technologies (139-140). Bohman’s position is valuable in the sense that he is neither overly optimistic about the democratic potential of the Internet, nor a technophobic. Instead he holds a balanced critical view where he defends the idea that the Internet offers the possibility of a new public sphere that can have democratic significance but only if its agents make it so. In other words, political action, and therefore, social change cannot come from the intrinsic characteristics of the Internet –meaning domination and

¹⁹ The public sphere according to the German theorist Jurgen Habermas is a social public space that emerged in the early 19th century in some European countries where the bourgeoisies were able to discuss and decide on political issues that affected their communities. This public space positively mediated between the state and private individuals (Crossley & Roberts 1-6).

²⁰ Since the interaction is not face to face, specific physical traits such as gender, skin color can not be seen. While Poster reads this as the possibility of liberation of fixed identities, a different perspective is that it facilitates a process of homogenization; people become data, an IP address.

oppression do not magically disappear in this space in spite of its decentralizing nature,- but from the way it is used and occupied by people around the world (132). Following this logic, the key question on the relationship between the Internet and democracy would be: how are people occupying the Internet at present?

As any user can tell, the Internet is used today in a variety of ways: to communicate, to purchase, to chat, to play, to sell, to meet people, to perform, to do business. Carrying out political actions online is certainly not at the top of the list and indeed communicating, buying and selling make the top 5. Most scholars point out that the Internet is growing to be a predominantly commercial space²¹. Nonetheless, it has also been noted that several groups of online activists and artists have emerged here and there, offering attractive and occasionally effective paths, if not for democracy in its traditional conception, at least for resistance practices. It is in this sense that the “maybe, but...” seems to be a suitable answer to the first question regarding the possibility of the Internet to be a space for dialogue and deliberation among global citizens. Among other groups, EDT has been considered a part of a new generation of activists and artists that are appropriating the Internet for their resistance purposes.

Moving on to the artistic perspectives on the Internet, it is quite interesting that the idea of understanding the Internet as a theatre (as *the seeing place* following the etymological definition of the word) is gaining popularity among the academic and artistic communities. When talking about the relationship between theatre and new media, one of the most cited books is Brenda Laurel’s *Computers as Theatre*. In this book, Laurels brings to attention the importance that theatrical models can have when designing computer interfaces and programs given an important similarity between the two media: they are both concerned with the creation of imaginary worlds. In *Virtual Theatres*, Gabriella Giannachi shows a similar approximation to the subject when she states that “the medium of virtuality itself acts as a theatre, a viewing point of the real”. Her opinion is that most virtual art forms can claim a certain degree of theatricality; and, because of this, there is not one kind of virtual theatre but many (151). A key characteristic of virtual theatres would be their paradoxical ability to be both real and a simulation of the

²¹ See for example, “Introduction” by Michael Ayers and McCaughey in *Cyberactivism. Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, p. 1.

real. This means that real things happen within them but also, because of its virtuality, they can be used as a space to rehearse the “real”. According to Giannachi it is this paradoxical nature that makes them “such an important site for both life and art (151)”. For EDT’s gestures, this characteristic is essential to understand how their actions are not violent in a traditional sense (they do not put at risk the physical body), and yet have an effect on real life issues.

Talking about his “Adventures in Cyber-theatre,” Steve Dixon seems to agree with the idea that one might claim all interactive art in the name of theatre. While trying to establish what he considers a fact about cyberspace he says:

Once the computer becomes an agent of performative action and creation, there is a distinct blurring of what we formerly termed, for example, communication, scriptwriting, acting, visual art, science, design, theatre, video and performance art. Finite distinctions apply less and less or as John Reaves argues, they collapse all together [...]. (“Adventures in Cyber-theatre” 101)

While in the physical reality it is easy to distinguish a painting from a clay sculpture, a photograph, or a living human statue, the task becomes extremely difficult when these same objects become an image on the screen. Since theatre has been considered an art that usually requires the collaboration of other arts, for many scholars it seems reasonable now to consider emerging online hybrid artistic practices (fusions of different art forms and digital skills) a sort of theatre. In addition, Dixon also points towards the recognition of the Internet as a theatre when he comments that: “The World Wide Web is a site of therapeutic catharsis-overload, and it constitutes the largest theater in the world, offering everyone fifteen megabytes of fame (“Adventures in Cyber-theatre” 102).” As it is today, not only professional artists are using computer networks to produce virtual theatre, but also ordinary users who role play in the MOOs or chatrooms, or stage themselves in their blogs or websites on the World Wide Web (102). Webcams and avatars are now accessible tools for many people to play and even rehearse different identities.

While the idea of understanding the Internet as a theatre has many adepts, there seems to be no agreement on whether theatre as an art form can take place online or not. In fact some scholars and artists argue that there is no such thing as online theatre²². The main reason they have to think this way is that they regard direct physical contact, “live presence”, as an essential characteristic of the art form. Without the liveness that comes from that contact, theatre is not considered to be possible. Liveness in contemporary theatre is currently one of the most controversial issues among scholars. As I shall discuss in Chapter 3, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre has a defined position to this respect. Expanding on the concepts of the Internet as a theatre and of virtual theatres as hybrid spaces that make possible simulated actions with a ‘real’ effect on humans and societies, EDT is proposing a kind of online cultural performances that appropriate the Internet stage to develop technologically updated *live* gestures. Unlike other experiments of online performers, they do not intend to represent a script on a chat room or improvise on stage according to the reactions of an online audience. Instead, their performances are highly politicized and are meant to engage the audience in manifestations that support human right causes. In this sense, they challenge all possible preconceptions of what theatre art is while encouraging recognition that “theatre” can mean something else in the Digital era.

In the course of this chapter we have seen how overtly political theatre practitioners at the avant-garde have continuously searched for new ways to effect social change. Most of them have recognized the necessity of transgressing the conventions inherited from 19th century bourgeois theatre and therefore have proposed ways to turn their art into something else. In a gradual process of reconfiguration of the concept of theatre according to the challenges posed by specific contexts, the fourth wall, the dramatic text, the theatre building, the clear separation between actors and audience, and the assumed barrier between art and life, have been transgressed and often abandoned. Even the term “theater” has been challenged by the more encompassing category “performance”. Political performance innovators of the digital age add to these series of reconfigurations the use of the Internet as a stage. For EDT, online theatre is a hybrid form

²² For a more detailed discussion on the different positions that artists have taken regarding online theatre, see Chapter 20 “‘Theatre’ in Cyberspace” in *Digital Performance* by Steve Dixon, 483-512.

in which political performance and social intervention become fused in just one virtual production. For an account on how and why EDT is using the Internet just turn the page (or scroll down) to the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Electronic Disturbance Theater's Origins and Conceptual Proposal

EDT and the Critical Art Ensemble

The Electronic Disturbance Theater was founded by four experts in different fields: Ricardo Dominguez, a theater practitioner and theorist; Stephen Wray, a Communication and Culture scholar; Carmin Karasic, a graphic and interface designer; and Brett Stalbaum a computer programmer. A shared interest in art and activism as well as a need to borrow ideas and expertise from each others' fields led these artists to work on a collaborative project which has turned out to be an attractive mixed creation. We know from their website at thething.net that FloodNet (the software tool that enables the reloading of a web address several times per minute) was mainly designed by Stalbaum and Karasic; that Stephen Wray has been working in the development of a theory on electronic civil disobedience; and that Ricardo Dominguez usually takes the role of "director" or facilitator of the online performances. Thus, in spite of the lexical differences in their specializations, these artists have successfully managed to work in an interdisciplinary endeavor.

Before starting the EDT project, Dominguez was a member of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), "a collective of five artists from various specializations dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics, and critical theory²³". This is an important piece of information because CAE's perspectives on digitality, activism, and recombination in many ways triggered EDT's proposed concepts of theater and activism. Because of the intermixture of disciplines and the emphasis on a performed "electronic disturbance", EDT's practice has actually been considered one of the possible forms that the theoretical construct "recombinant theater" can adopt when coming to life²⁴. While I consider it inappropriate to make a direct connection between CAE's theory and EDT's practice without warning about their significant differences, it is true that the former's notions are important to understand EDT's work. CAE's proposition for contemporary political theater is that it should be a space for

²³ See <<http://www.critical-art.net/>>

²⁴ See Amy Carroll's article "Incumbent upon Recombinant Hope: EDT's Strike a Site, Strike a Pose". *The Drama Review* 47.2 (2003): 146.

participants to actively engage in a critical dialogue on a given issue and where temporary public relations can emerge. Quoting their definition, “recombinant theater consists of interwoven performative environments through which participants may flow” (“Recombinant Theatre” 157). The kind of performative environments CAE has in mind when talking about “flow” are street theater and happening-like events where a theatre of everyday life is possible. Close to this concept would be Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and the Situationist gestures²⁵. The difference with Boal or the Situationists is that CAE incorporates to its theory the concepts of digitality and recombination; both understood as part of a new paradigm where interdisciplinarity is valued over specialization and where digitality is valued for its rhizomatic form of distributing power. The concept of “flow” refers to Guattari and Deleuzes’ idea of being able to act without the constraints of totalizing discourses and the hierarchical structures deriving from them²⁶. As it is conceived by CAE, recombinant theatre and other forms of cultural resistance in the digital age, ultimately look towards the decline of an authoritarian culture. With this view in mind, interdisciplinary projects which place themselves in “liminal²⁷” zones should be applauded and sustained; together with the creation of performative environments and new forms of online activism, they are the way to appeal to social transformations in this epoch (“Recombinant Theatre” 152-157). In 1995, Dominguez left CAE and started developing his own projects often as an answer to the claims of the collective. The origins of EDT, as I will further explain, are specially related to CAE’s claim for interdisciplinarity and online activism.

²⁵ The Situationist International was established in 1957 by a group of international revolutionaries. According to Sadie Plant, “Many aspects of its theory can be found in Marxist thought and the tradition of avant-garde artistic agitation which includes movements like Dada and surrealism. But the movement also stands in a less distinct line of pleasure-seeking libertarianism, popular resistance, and autonomous struggle, and its revolutionary stance owes a great deal to this diffuse tradition of unorthodox rebellion. With its beginnings in an artistic milieu, the SI finally developed a more overtly political position from which its members gave full expression to their hostility to every aspect of existing society (1)”.

²⁶ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

²⁷ From limen, Latin for threshold.

EDT's Origins: The Necessity to Resist Online

The year 1994 is my point of departure since it was a significant period for left wing activist theory and practice in at least two ways. First, it was the year of publication of *The Electronic Disturbance*, the first book by the Critical Art Ensemble where the necessity of online activism is brought to attention. Second, and most importantly, it was the year of the uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico; an event that challenged preconceptions about how a revolution is to be conducted in this epoch.

In *The Electronic Disturbance* and its complement *Electronic Civil Disobedience* (1995) to electronic books by the Critical Art Ensemble, the collective reflects on the situation of activism in the Digital Age. Power, they state, has become nomadic rather than sedentary, and this supposes new challenges for resistance (*"The Electronic Disturbance"* 25). Before the development of the Internet, power was concentrated in specific physical spaces such as buildings or factories. However, this is no longer the case since the management of many institutions and corporations has moved into cyberspace where it becomes invisible. Traditional non-violent activist practices such as Civil Disobedience, then, turn out to be ineffective because as CAE explains:

Even though the monuments of power still stand, visibly present in stable locations, the agency that maintains power is neither visible nor stable. Power no longer permanently resides in these monuments, and command and control now move about as desired. If mechanisms of control are challenged in one spatial location, they simply move to another location. As a result, CD groups are prevented from establishing a theater of operations by which they can actually disrupt a given institution. (*"Electronic Civil Disobedience"* 9)

Given this assessment of the situation, CAE argues that activism should now consist of electronic disturbances that can actually resist the nomadic authority that locates itself in the virtual realm. While trespassing and blockage, the two main strategies of non-violent resistance proved to be useful in the 1960s, they are not longer the most effective ways to proceed:

[...] as far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital! Nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently run and maintain state institutions. For CD to have any meaningful effect, the resisters must appropriate something of value to the state. Once they have an object of value, the resisters have a platform from which they may bargain for (or perhaps demand change). (*“Electronic Civil Disobedience”* 11)

And the objects of value at present are information and communication. In this sense, CAE proposes that the best means to disrupt any institution, whether military, corporate or governmental is to block information access. The successful creation of a communication gap is very likely to make an institution collapse (12).

In summary, what CAE saw in the last decade of the twentieth century as the only possible solution to ineffective activism, was to learn the skills of hackers (or make alliances with them which seemed less likely to happen) and act online. The sum of individual efforts of activist-hackers, in theory, would eventually create a major collapse in the system. While CAE made a theoretical point about the key relevance they thought that new technologies would have for anti-authoritarian activism, the Zapatista movement that started in 1994 gave practical evidence of this relevance in a different way.

In January 1994, thousands of Mexican peasants from the southern part of the country took up arms in order to rebel against the government because of the poverty and social injustice that affected their communities. Led by the “Subcomandante Marcos”, they occupied some towns in the province of Chiapas and declared they wanted to create national consciousness about their situation. Not coincidentally, the rebellion took place at the same time that the North American Free Trade Agreement was beginning to take effect. In this sense, they also wanted to express their disagreement with the new neoliberal policies that the Mexican government was adopting. For the Mexican peasants, these new policies would only bring more poverty to their communities since they did not have the means to compete in the free market.

As Maria Garrido and Alexander Halavais note, what made this social struggle unique from a historical perspective were the political strategies adopted by the Zapatistas. The Internet, for instance,

was extensively used since the beginning of the rebellion as a tool for global mobilization (166). The Zapatistas not only made their claims public through the national media, but they started an international network of support online. This network made it possible for distant activists and foreigners to familiarize and participate in the struggle. Very soon, what started as a national rebellion became an international movement inspired by the more general goals of justice, equality, human rights and against “the dark side” of neo-liberal globalization. Many activists fighting for underrepresented and exploited groups around the world identified with the Zapatistas and so the fight of one became the fight of many.

Outside of Mexico, the insurrection was widely hailed as a direct attack on the New World Order (Katzenberger iii). Through the years and until now, the global network of support has become vital for the movement, and at times even more important than the internal military organization. As Garrido and Halavais point out, “cross-national solidarity facilitated by the use of Internet has empowered and strengthened the Zapatista movement and has allowed its survival” (170). The strategic use of new technologies to create a network of global support has made the Zapatista movement a celebrated model of participatory effort towards social change. At the same time, it has made evident that new technologies are already starting to play a fundamental role in social and political struggles in the Digital Age.

The electronic books on the situation of activism published by CAE, as well as the political tactics followed by the Zapatistas indicate that, since the last decade of the twentieth century, there has been a growing concern in the activist community about how to achieve political effectiveness in this epoch. In other words, the challenge that activists face in today’s world is how to capture the interest and attention of the general community, surpassing the limitations of space and time. Although quite different, the answers in both cases point towards the necessity of going electronic.

The rationale behind the creation of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre departs precisely from the recognition of the necessity of going electronic as well as a determination to support the Zapatista struggle in a creative way. Probably, one of the main reasons the group had to support this struggle and not others has to do with the tight connection between the Zapatista reaction and the larger anti neoliberal-globalization movement. As I mentioned above, at an international level, fighting for the Zapatistas was

considered a direct attack on neoliberalism and globalization, the strongest oppressing forces in the current world order. But, of course, there are in fact many ways through which resistance can be expressed online. EDT chose a very particular way; which one and why is what I explore next.

A Theatre of Activism

During the first four years of the Zapatista movement, the Internet was mainly used as a site for communication and transmission of information from inside the conflict zones in Mexico to the outside (other Mexican provinces or other countries). However, in 1998 the members of the EDT thought it would be a good idea to challenge this rather simple use of the Internet as a site for information exchange and move towards considering it to be a site of direct and symbolic action (Wray, "The EDT & ECD" 3). For this reason, EDT launched FloodNet, a software product that helps its users to flood or blockade websites.

As Stephen Wray explained a year later, FloodNet came out from the desire to further develop the cyber-actions of an Italian group called Anonymous Digital Coalition in order to support the Zapatista movement. The kind of cyber-actions that the Anonymous Digital Coalition were promoting at that time were called "net-strikes" and consisted of getting a mass of users to flood a target server in order to express disagreement with a certain issue. After the Acteal Massacre that took place in Chiapas, Mexico, in December 1997, EDT members decided to use the net to call for "net-strikes" against five Mexican financial institutions' websites. Their aim was to "have thousands of people around the world simultaneously load these websites on to their Internet browsers" so they could block the websites (Wray, "On Electronic Civil Disobedience" 110). With FloodNet, this kind of online mass-protest, which EDT found ideal for their resistance purposes, became more "effective" since it enabled personal computers to send reload commands automatically. Notice though that this idea of effectiveness needs further explanation. Strictly speaking, Floodnet is not exactly meant to be efficient. While this software component certainly helps users to flood a server, it is also deliberately inefficient in the sense that EDT members refused to use high-tech hacker-like knowledge to design it. Floodnet's code is not sophisticated enough to make a website collapse rapidly and easily. It depends on thousands and even millions of users

to enhance its power. Thus, what is important for EDT is not so much to make a server crash but to enable a mass virtual sit-in among multiple computer users threatening enough to be noticed (Dominguez “Electronic Disturbance” 390).

EDT’s actions, then, began both as an exploration of the possibilities of online resistance and as part of the larger social movement known as Digital Zapatismo. In her article “Digital Zapatistas”, Jill Lane makes a central point when she emphasizes the Zapatista rebellion as the event that catalyzed the formation of the EDT (135). In a way, EDT’s practice turns out to be, not only a series of online protests supporting different causes, but an attempt to further develop the Zapatista’s theory on how to conduct a social revolution in the global era.

Aside from the relevance that digital technologies have had for the Zapatistas, it is important to highlight another characteristic of their procedures: theatricality. In his article “Subcomandante of performance” Gómez Peña explains that Subcomandante Marcos, the leader of the Zapatistas, strategically used performance and media techniques to enter “in the political wrestling arena of contemporary Mexico (90).” Wearing those ski masks, and occasionally using fake weapons, paper airplanes or other kinds of props, has helped Zapatistas (for more than a decade now) draw the attention of the media and general public by making their actions bigger, symbolic and memorable. “The war was carried on as if it were a performance (90)” summarized Gómez-Peña in 1995. There is a strong correlation between the Zapatistas’ use of simulation and other theatre techniques and EDT’s proposed concept of political theatre.

Like the Zapatistas, EDT recognizes the usefulness of theatrical techniques to draw people’s attention and to offer resistance at a semantic level. As Jill Lane explains, semantic resistance is different from syntactical resistance. The latter involves harming or modifying the codes by which a computer functions. This is the hacker’s preferred level of action. Differently, semantic resistance involves “undermining the discursive norms and realities of the system as a whole” (136). For instance, this is the kind of resistance that the Zapatistas attempted in January 2000 when they attacked a military camp in Mexico with paper airplanes which contained protest messages and poems for the soldiers. This simulation of an airplane attack inflicted no physical harm on the soldiers. Instead, it contested the

common meaning of an “airplane attack” in a war situation (Lane 129-130). Drawing on the idea of using theatrical techniques such as simulation, but with an important twist, EDT decided to create an online “theatre of activism” that would make theatrical strategies deliberately evident. In other words, they came up with an activism that points towards its own theatricality, and, thus, calls for a different state of conscience in his audience/collaborators: one that integrates the idea of being doing “theatre” and of being actually protesting. In this way, the proposed actions become self-reflexive; they urge the recognition of their own constructedness.

The First Performances

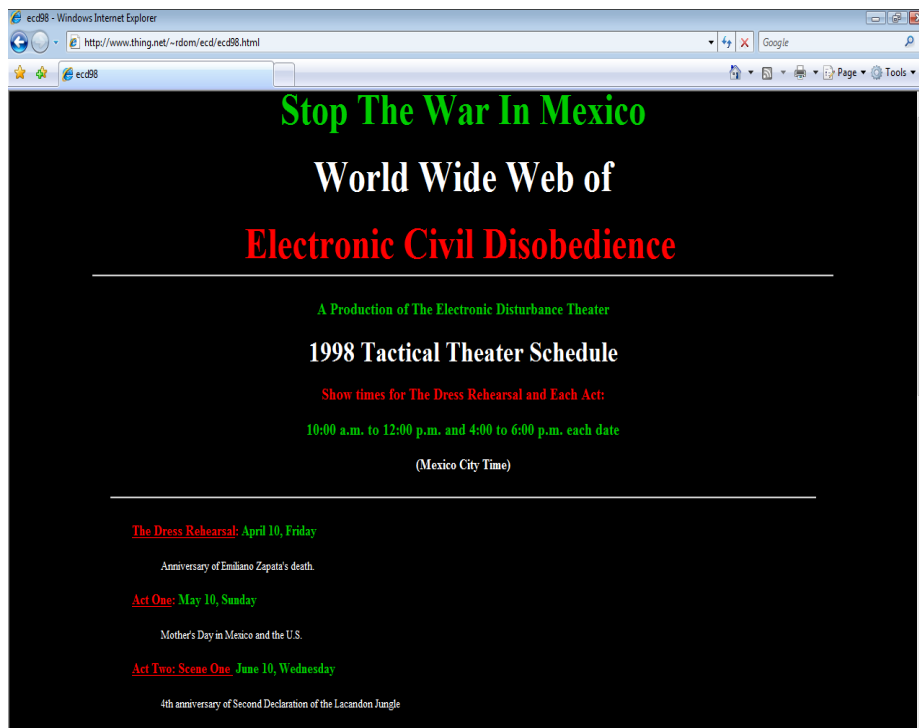


Image 1: “1998 Tactical Theater Schedule” (part I)

(Source for both images: <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd98.html>)

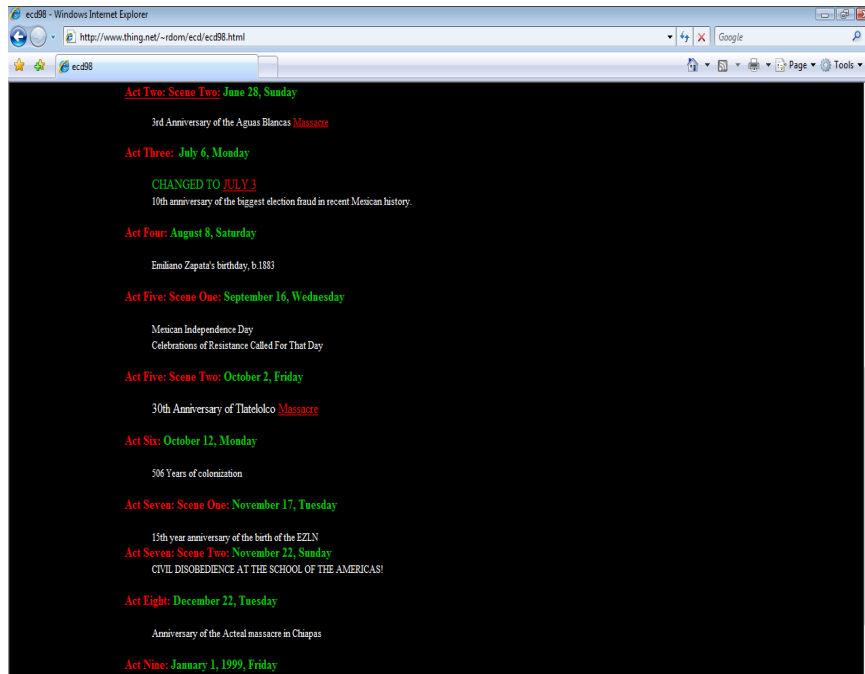


Image 2: “1998 Tactical Theater Schedule” (part II)
(Source: <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd98.html>)

Image 1 and 2 are photographs of a webpage at EDT’s website at www.thing.net. They show the “tactical theatre schedule” that was posted in 1998 to inform the possible audience about the “show times”. As we can see, traditional theater terminology provided the frame for the series of gestures that were carried on in that year. On April 10 1998, EDT debuted with a “Dress Rehearsal” where Floodnet Tactical Version 1.0 was showcased for the first time in an act of Electronic Civil Disobedience against Mexican President Zedillo’s website. The gesture had the aim of disrupting the site in order to call the attention both of the authorities and the media on their disagreement with the Acteal Massacre that had taken place in Chiapas the year before. The protest was thought to be successful given the fact that the access to the website was blocked intermittently on the day of the event by around 8,000 participants using Floodnet (Wray, “The EDT & ECD” 4).

After the “Dress Rehearsal”, a total of nine “acts” (some of them with sub-acts or “scenes”) commemorating the anniversaries of important events or figures in Mexico’s political history are announced in the schedule. This means that in the following months EDT staged more disturbances in

support of the Zapatistas' cause and against neoliberal economy. The way to proceed was similar in all cases. EDT would send a call for action through email listservs; then, on the day of the appointment, participants accessed the group's webpage to activate Floodnet and stay there until the protest was over or for as long as they wanted. A couple of days later EDT would upload comments and reactions regarding the performance.

It seems that on June 10th the Mexican Secretaría de Gobernación struck back when Floodnet was being used to disturb its web site. Upon the activation of a java script²⁸, "the Gobernación site would open window after window on the Floodnet users' browser (5)". As a consequence of this reaction EDT was notified that the browsers of some participants collapsed (EDT "Chronology of Swarm"). By June 17, the balance made by EDT about the effects of their proposed online actions was the following:

In its short lived history, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre has demonstrated the capability to take action against portions of a political opponent's Internet infrastructure. While at the same it has shown that its actions are of such a scale that they warrant state reaction and intervention, at least on the part of the Mexican government. ("The EDT & ECD" 6).

Considering this balance a promising start, EDT decided to continue developing their online strategies and finding ways to resist possible counterattacks.

Before I go on explaining what happened on EDT's 1998 campaign, I must introduce a brief parenthesis to highlight that most of the virtual sit-ins implied more than simply flooding a target server. In fact, an important characteristic of EDT is its constant aim to find creative and performative ways to carry out disturbing actions. A good example of a strategy that emphasized the political gesture they were trying to convey in 1998 is associated to the way they used the "404 error message" in some of the first events in which the group was involved. Taking advantage of the fact that a "404 message" appears on a computer screen every time something can not be found in a webpage, Floodnet would continuously request a search for "human rights" or "justice" in the Mexican governments' website. After the unsuccessful search, the reply on the participants' screens would read something like "justice not found in

²⁸ See Glossary.

this page”. For Jill Lane, this aesthetic intervention enables a kind of “social revelation” that adds up a conceptual artistic component to the protest (139). More than a “social revelation” --an explanation that seems too serious for the trick-- I agree with Jordan and Taylor that this performative ingredient is satirical (87). It seems logic to consider that those who protested already believed that justice or human rights could not be found (metaphorically speaking) in the target websites. Making these websites confirm this belief in a 404 message is a clever mockery, an enhancing ironic commentary. The creativeness of the method and the humor it adds disturbs cyberspace discourses not only at a syntactic level (the code) but also at a semantic level.

An important climax in the history of EDT’s first performances came at the beginning of September 1998 when the project was presented at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria. That year, the topic of the festival was the “Information Warfare”. On September 5, the group sent out the email call to participate in a gesture scheduled for September 9:

In solidarity with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, and with people everywhere struggling against the global neoliberal economy, the Electronic Disturbance Theater calls for multiple acts of Electronic Civil Disobedience (SWARM), on Wednesday, September 9, 1998.[...] Actions will begin at 11:00 a.m. (Linz time) for a 24 hour period. [...]Our FloodNet software will target three web sites in Mexico, the United States, and Europe representing three important sectors: government, military, and financial. 1) President Zedillo, 2) The Pentagon, 3) The Frankfurt Stock Exchange. (EDT “Chronology of Swarm”)

The action took place on the announced date, but not without surprises and obstacles. According to Ricardo Dominguez’s account of the events, the day before, some members of the hacker community expressed their absolute disagreement with the project. From their perspective, FloodNet was nothing more than “unacceptable network abuse” (EDT “Chronology of Swarm”). In addition, on the morning of September 9, Dominguez received a threatening phone call from an anonymous Spanish speaker who wanted the presentation cancelled. In spite of these things, the group decided not to cancel. The action was

counter-attacked then with a hostile Java applet which stopped participants from joining the sit-in. Dominguez summarizes what happened during the day in the following way:

At 7:05 p.m. the Electronic Disturbance Theater made an opening announcement at the InfoWeapon Contest award ceremony to inform Ars Electronica participants that 1) Ricardo Dominguez had received a threatening phone call, 2) a hostile Java applet had been launched against FloodNet, and the 3) Stefan Wray had received an email message from New York University that system administrators there had been contacted by the DISA of DOD about the ECD page. (EDT “Chronology of Swarm”)

Although the September 9 action was not successful in disrupting any server, it definitively captured the attention of artists, hackers, institutions and journalists. Even NYU was concerned about the use of the University Internet server for this kind of political project and asked Wray (a PHD student at that time) to reconsider the contents of the website.

Overall, the attention they were getting was seen as a good sign by the group, and so they decided to continue working with their proposed form of online theatrical activism in spite of the detractors. Of course, the experience at the InfoWar Festival proved their project to be highly controversial, as well as technologically vulnerable. Although EDT was not deaf to the critique, they believed at that time, --and continue to believe now—that the kind of disturbances they stage are valuable when fighting for what they consider a higher law (Dominguez “Electronic Civil Disobedience” 663). Above all, what Dominguez means by “higher law” refers to the human right to equality and justice. In this sense, the group defends its project as a legitimate form of theatrical activism and calls for the critics to do the same: “The digital agitprop actions of the Electronic Disturbance Theater call for research and development of html democracies and the right to block data for human rights (Dominguez “Electronic Disturbance Theatre” 286). Is the flooding of a server seriously unethical as some hackers have stated? Probably yes, if one considers their argument that the crashing of the site can affect any person’s right to free access of information. Is the action of blocking data worth doing in order to manifest disagreement with certain

events that seemingly deny other human rights? This is the question that those who decide to join EDT's gestures need to answer every time.

After September 1998, EDT has showed a continuous interest in both making sure their software tools work properly –that is, to remain somehow inefficient while not being so vulnerable to counterattacks, and developing the theory for what they do. A part of their theory can be found in the Website at thething.net; other ideas can be traced in interviews and articles. Discussion on their practice is certainly something EDT wants to promote.

The Theory behind the Practice

According to Stephen Wray, the kind of practice EDT proposes was conceived in the spirit of traditional Civil Disobedience started by David Thoreau in the nineteenth century but adapted into the virtual context. For this reason, the terms “Electronic Civil Disobedience” and even “Electronic Disturbance” were borrowed from CAE's books; they were considered the best way to describe the nature of their actions (Wray “The EDT & ECD” 1-3). As I have mentioned before, this nature has to do with carrying out non-violent direct actions such as sit-ins and blockades in the Internet, with the aim of slowing the flow of a website and thus call the attention upon a particular cause. It is important to point out that the borrowing of the terms does not mean that EDT has applied CAE's theory word for word. While it is true that CAE's ideas were influential to the conception of the project, the form of electronic civil disobedience that EDT developed did not turn out to be what CAE envisioned²⁹. EDT's own theory and practice either leaves aside or reinterprets some of CAE's fundamental beliefs.

From the writings and statements of EDT, it is possible to identify four main characteristics that the group members highlight about their work: complementarity, mass agency, visibility, and performance. The first characteristic has to do with the fact that EDT considers their online actions to be a strategy that complements offline activism. Although it is true that the virtual sit-ins could be carried on as independent strategies, that is not what EDT encourages:

²⁹ See Chapter 1, “Electronic Civil Disobedience, Simulation, and the Public Sphere” in *Digital Resistance* by the Critical Art Ensemble, p. 14.

EDT has always promoted VR-sit-in's as part of a hybrid action that takes place both on streets and on-line. The on-line element being just one more tool that can be used by activists to bring focus on the issues at hand. EDT has never promoted the idea that only electronic action counts. (Krempf 10)

Recalling the previous section, one of CAE's main arguments in *Electronic Disturbance* and *Electronic Civil Disobedience* was that the new field for activism had to be cyberspace and not the streets. As we can see, while EDT recognizes that it has become necessary for activism to reach cyberspace, they do not agree that offline actions are already obsolete. In fact, they consider that the "dismissal of physical actions may be precipitous (Wray, "On Electronic Civil Disobedience" 110)." For this reason EDT's performances tend to be only a part of many other actions taken in support of a cause. In the case of the Zapatista movement, it is clear that online theatrical activism never tried to substitute street demonstrations and marches, which also have had an important role in the history of the movement. From another angle, this complementarity also suggests that EDT is not really offering a platform or a sophisticated plan that tells how to bring about revolution or exactly what kind of society would be best, but merely a "tool" that some people can use to protest against the current world order.

The second and third characteristics, mass agency and visibility are related in the sense that they are the two main arguments with which EDT defends the validity of their actions. In the first place, the level of disturbance that a proposed action can achieve depends on the number of participants. The group could certainly have chosen to disrupt networks using one or two computers and applying hackers' skills, but what they do instead is inviting people to join their cause and participate in the creation of a simultaneous massive reaction. Consequently, EDT often contends that their protests do not only express the political feelings of four individuals, but the political feelings of a mass of citizens. Without the presence of enough people using Floodnet in their computers at the same time, the virtual sit-in simply does not happen. Presence is a key concept here and it is connected to the rule of visibility. As a counter measure to the user invisibility that cyberspace generates, EDT has searched for a way not only to make virtual bodies count, but to be perceived. Unlike underground online activists or hackers, they make their

names, plans and tactics public. They frame their activism as a public performance. By doing so, the virtual bodies of all those who choose to collaborate in an online action become a distinguishable and relevant presence during the event.

ECD is not a secret attack. ECD is the unbearable weight of human beings online in a civil and transparent protest –whose main goal is to question and spread information about what they feel is a social condition that must be corrected to create a better society for all. (Dominguez “Electronic Civil Disobedience” 664)

The fourth characteristic that EDT highlights about their work is theatricality. The very name chosen by the group indicates that this characteristic is essential to their proposal. EDT does not consider their work to be mere activism but also “theater”. In this sense they refer to their virtual protests as “actions” and “gestures or performances” interchangeably. The deliberate link with the theatre world makes EDT’s work unique among other types of activism and also complex. It leads to a consideration of the work not only as activism but as an experimental form of cultural performance. When interviewed, Dominguez often brings to attention that their work emerges from a history of radical social interventionist aesthetics. Specifically, he points out EDT’s connections with a theatrical tradition that includes: The Workers Theatre movement, Piscator’s Documentary Theatre, Boal’s Invisible Theatre and the Situationist gestures.

The function of ‘disturbance’ for me is a hybrid between Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theatre and the Situationist gesture. It allows for visceral and political poetics to carve out social spaces for mass and intimate protest that can now be polyspatial. (“Electronic Civil Disobedience” 669).

Recalling Boal’s ideas, the Invisible Theatre advocated for a liberated spectator who would act himself/herself instead of delegating power to a character on a play. In this sense, this theatre was considered a rehearsal for revolution. Like Boal, the Situationists wanted to empower people, but unlike the Invisible Theatre, their gestures were not framed by a fictional situation; the idea was not to rehearse revolution but to create situations that would enable people to revolutionize their everyday lives. EDT’s gestures are perhaps closer to the Situationists’ in this sense; they construct a situation on the Internet that enables an alternative life experience with direct impact on social reality.

Our gestures (only one type of ECD) staged a simulation of Distributed Denial of Service as the outcome of mass agency and digital liminality. We move among net hacking, net activism, net performance, net art and those who have no net link at all. To me this intermixing of social zones is what CAE meant by recombinant theater. (Dominguez “Electronic Civil Disobedience” 670)

As we can see, EDT sometimes describes its gestures as a “simulation” of a Denial of Service attack (DDoS)³⁰ because the kind of code they use is deliberately inefficient. Yet, because the action has real effects, their use of the word “simulation” is closer to the meaning of *potential DDoS* than to mere *illusion*. In addition, this other quote remarks how, for EDT, theatre is a hybrid form now; one that involves different social groups, activities, disciplines and even a different realm--the virtual.

In spite of the links that EDT establishes with the theatre world, it must be noted that their concept of theatre is not easy to pin down. Especially because, as of today, the word “theatre” still carries along traditional ideas such as the necessity of a theatre building, a script, characters, representation, and so on. As I shall explain in the next chapter, a way to better understand the connection is by looking at the works of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner where it becomes clearer how and why theatricality can also be observed outside its old boundaries.

³⁰ See Glossary.

After 1998

To complete the general picture of what EDT does, Table 1 shows a list of the gestures that EDT has staged from 1998 to 2008.

Date	Information about the Gesture	Approximate Number of Participants
1998-1999	Zapatista Floodnet Multiple virtual sit-ins against Mexican government and Pentagon websites (principally), and in support of the Zapatista movement.	100,000plus
2000 Apr.	12 days of action in support of the global movement against GM crops.	Unknown
2000 May	Action against Starbucks.	Unknown
2000 Nov.	Netstrike 214T against death penalty.	Unknown
2001	Harvard living wage campaign virtual sit-in.	Unknown
2001 June	Virtual sit-in against Lufthansa's 'deportation business'.	Unknown
2001 June	Virtual Sit-in for Vieques	Unknown
2001	Digital protest against the violence of G8 security forces.	14,750
2002 Jan./Feb.	Netstrike against the World Economic Fools meeting in NYC.	100,000 plus
2002 Apr.	General strike protesting the Israeli aggression against and in solidarity with the Palestinian people and leadership in Ramallah.	Unknown
2002 May	Protest against NATO.	Unknown
2002 May/June	Protest in support of labor and indigenous rights in Mexico. Sponsored by The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School.	37,000 plus
2002 Aug.	Action in solidarity with the families of the disappeared and murdered young women of Juarez, Mexico. In collaboration with Women in Black and Coco Fusco.	10,000
2002 Oct.	E-Protest in support of the indigenous bill of rights in Mexico and against the Mexican Supreme Court decision on Dia de la Raza.	48,000
2002 Nov.	Action against the WTO at next round of WTO talks in Sydney, Australia.	Unknown
2002 Nov.	International online protest against repression in Italy (Called for by E-Cowboys for Peace, Germany).	Unknown
2002 Dec.	Action against Domingo Cavallo teaching at NYU Stern School of Business.	Cancelled. Email campaign instead.

Date	Information about the Gesture	Approximate # of Participants
2003 Mar.	Virtual Sit-in of dow 'Greenwash' site.	
2003 Oct./Nov.	Days of the Dead e-actions and street vigils for the murdered women of Juarez, Mexico.	133,896
2004 Aug./Sep.	Say no to war, Say no to Bush, Say no to terrorism.	300,000 plus
2005 May	Virtual sit-in against The Minutemen (a non-governmental group of people who patrol the US/Mexican border to people from crossing)	75,000 plus
2006 Oct.	Virtual sit-in against the websites of the G8+5 and the Mexican government during the G8+5 meetings. In collaboration with The Borderlands Hacklab and Rising Tide North	Unknown
2006	Protest against the Mexican government for the attacks on the teachers of Oaxaca	10,000 plus
2007 May	Virtual protest in support of health care in the state of Michigan and against Medicaid cuts.	Unknown
2008 Mar.	Virtual sit-in against nano/bio war profiteers. In collaboration with the borderlands Hacklab.	Unknown

TABLE 1. EDT's Gestures 1998-2008. (Source: <<http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html>>)

As we can see, while the focus of the electronic protests were the Mexican and US governments in most cases, some of them have also been performed to support international political causes. This means that after 1998 EDT has been engaged with the more general agenda of protesting for human rights around the world and not just in support of Mexicans. Perhaps this is the reason why no more “tactical theater schedules” were posted after the first one. Rather than focusing on one target (e.g., the Zapatista rebellion), the group opened its agenda to emerging struggles around the world.

Another thing to notice is that EDT often works in collaboration with other artists or activist organizations rather than alone. For example, in the action against the websites of the G8+5 and the Mexican Government in October 2006, the activist groups The Borderlands Hacklab and Rising Tide North, were also involved. In August 2002, the gesture in solidarity with the families of the disappeared and murdered young woman in Juárez, México, was organized in collaboration with Women in Black and performance artist Coco Fusco. In this case, the online performance was scheduled to happen at the same

time as street performances were scheduled to happen. These two examples, then, confirm that collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and the use of multiple strategies that combine online and offline interventions are key elements for EDT's practice.

Efficacy Issues

Considering what has been indicated thus far, it should be noted that EDT's approximation to politics and culture coincides with a moment in which the left is reformulating its objectives and strategies. While the "New Left" of the 1960s brought about a more critical approach to Marxism and a variety of social movements concerned, not only with class struggle, but with race, gender and sexual orientation as well. More recent generations of leftist social activists include an even broader variety of concerns (e.g. environment, immigration, disabilities), and are exploring new strategies to effect change in this globalized and digitalized world. Unlike the political actors and parties of the "old left", an increasing number of social activists in this epoch are showing less interest in obtaining power than in encouraging horizontal ways of distributing it. For Ruth Reitan, the most important shift in the "sea-change" that leftist activism has experienced in the last couple of decades has to do with its globalization, with going from national to transnational levels of contention (1). Reitan also observes that as a result of a proliferation in joint campaigns and the creation of ties between different social activist networks, "environmental, workers', women's, immigrant, minority, indigenous and peace networks are all becoming entwined with those struggling against neoliberal globalization³¹". In this way, the inclusive term "anti-globalization movement" has come to refer to a "network of networks", a movement made of different movements (2). In tune with this context, the previous sections of this chapter have showed how EDT's project emerged from the desire to develop online cultural-activist strategies to support the Zapatista struggle (and more generally the anti neoliberal-globalization movement) in what the group believed it could be a more effective way. Although engaging in a political analysis of EDT's project is not the objective of this study, a general panorama on the group's gestures would not be complete without considering if their cultural-

³¹ Typically, those struggling against neoliberal globalization directly target the "neoliberal triumvirate" of the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization (Reitan 1).

activist proposal is politically efficacious or not. Since art as a form of cultural expression is used by EDT as a medium for social change, it is important to discuss the kind of efficacy that can be expected from the gestures.

The political efficacy of EDT's performances is controversial, yet, more often than not the balance falls in the debit side. In 1999, a third book by the Critical Art Ensemble was published online: *Digital Resistance*. In this book CAE evaluates the forms of digital resistance that emerged after the publication of their first two books. Instead of being excited about the existing initiatives, they expressed disappointment about the way Electronic Civil Disobedience has been reconfigured:

Rather than attempting to create a mass movement of public objectors, CAE suggested a decentralized flow of particularized microorganizations (cells) that would produce multiple currents and trajectories to slow the velocity of capitalist political economy. This suggestion never sat well with more traditional activists. [...] CAE still believes that ECD is an underground activity that should be kept out of the public/popular sphere (as in the hacker tradition) and the eye of the media, and that simulationist tactics as they are currently being used by resistant forces are only modestly effective if not counterproductive. ("Digital Resistance" 14)

The reason CAE has for contending that the type of online activism proposed by groups like EDT is not effective is that it depends on the media in a high degree: "The indirect approach of media manipulation using a spectacle of disobedience designed to muster public sympathy and support is a losing proposition (15)." The problem they see is that governments and corporations are already prepared and used to doing battle in the media context. In this sense, they point out that small groups of online activists do not have a chance to win the war because there is no way they can outdo these stronger sources of power (15). One example of how this can be true is the fact that online mass activists have had to struggle with a cyberterrorist label that some journalists and more strict cyberlaws have promoted, specially in the USA after the 9/11 events³².

³² See Sandor Vegh's article: "Hacktivists or Cyberterrorists? The Changing Media Discourse on Hacking." *First Monday* 7.10 (2002). < <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/998/919>>

CAE's critique of online mass activism touches very important issues and points out some of the limitations that EDT gestures face when attempting to effect major political and social changes. Trying to offer a critical reflection on the gestures as well as a response to disapproving evaluations such as the above mentioned, Stephen Wray (one of the group members) comments:

Are these methods of computerized activism effective? The answer depends on how effectiveness is defined. If the desired goal of ECD is to draw the attention to particular issues by engaging in actions that are unusual and will attract some degree of media coverage, then these actions have a high degree of effectiveness. If however, effectiveness is measured by assessing the action's ability to catalyze a more profound mobilization of people, then probably these new techniques are not effective. (Wray "On Electronic Civil Disobedience" 109)

So, from EDT's perspective, their achievement consists of carrying out extra-ordinary acts that get a fair amount of attention. Perhaps a key observation here is that while CAE discusses in its theory a way to bring the whole capitalist and authoritative system down (a radical plan to catalyze a political and economical revolution), with its less radical practice, EDT gives priority to the creation of liminal spaces and tools for mass social "democratic" and creative expression. Because EDT and CAE's actual goals differ, it is logic that their projects resort to different resources. CAE turns to the hacker community expecting to benefit from their knowledge of cyberspatial codes, efficiency and discretion. In contrast, EDT turns to theatre art searching for techniques to make their gestures bigger, noisier, reflexive and disturbing.

Looking at Table 1 in the previous section, the number of participants in some of the performances, as well as the fact that they have had some media coverage can confirm EDT's ability to attract and engage audiences. Nevertheless, have EDT's gestures been noticed enough to consider them politically effective? Is showing opposition to neoliberal globalization --in the scale of participation EDT's performances have achieved-- enough to subvert it? The answer is probably not; especially because the contribution of the group to leftist activism is not exactly a plan but merely a method for registering social disagreement. Even Wray recognizes that the electronic gestures are not enough to catalyze a "more

profound mobilization of people”. In their call for action against the WTO conferences, the Electrohippies, an activist group that started mirroring EDT’s actions in 1999, gave a good idea of what can be expected from the virtual protests: “In the scale of things we can’t hope to be more effective than an annoying mosquito” (qtd. in Duncombe 391). For both groups, being an annoying mosquito on the Internet—no matter how small and easily repressed-- is better than just passively accepting the new technologies as just another medium for control and oppression.

In 2004 EDT’s project was invited to become part of the technology institute Calit2 at the University of California, San Diego, and the group accepted. According to Dominguez, the positive aspect of the institutionalization of their project is that it “has allowed the practice of ECD to continue routing around the post-9/11 Patriot Act’s attempt to place ECD under the umbrella of ‘cyberterrorism’ and once more to re-anchor the gesture as an act of radical poetics, of ‘utopian performativity’” (“Electronic Civil Disobedience” 661). Although the possibility of continuing doing research on ECD and staging performances is an asset, now that the project is no longer working from the margins of society it has become even easier for EDT’s critics (such as CAE) to demonstrate that these gestures are excessively controlled and therefore fail to break the machine of digital capitalism.

All in all, EDT is considered to be one of the oldest and most solid proposals of online mass hacktivism. Their form of electronic civil disobedience has been mirrored by other groups and they are often invited to employ their virtual strategies for mobilization in support of different causes. They are also known by the media, by the Mexican and U.S. governments, and by many scholars, activists and artists around the globe. In this sense, it can be said that their performances have had some relevant social and cultural impact in society. From the artistic perspective specifically, they have achieved to open a new path for researching and understanding theatre and performance in the digital age. This path, however, has been taking longer to be fully explored and acknowledged.

To summarize, in this chapter my intention has been to give a general panorama on what EDT does and why. The staging of virtual sit-ins is a practice that offers a response to the challenge of finding ways of online resistance. Interestingly, EDT members propose not only online direct activism but, in

relation to Boal's idea of an invisible theatre and the Situationist movement of the 1960s, a form of cultural-cyberspatial intervention also. This means that new political strategies of the left are coming along with the formulation of new cultural strategies. Founding an online "theatre of activism" is a creative response to the challenges of the digital age; by enabling reflexive and collective direct action EDT is appealing to relevant socio-cultural transformations. The political efficacy of the project, however, seems to be very limited. From another perspective, in this fusion of political and artistic goals, the concept of theatre loses most of its traditional meanings. The coming chapter will expand this panorama of EDT's proposed project with a detailed examination of EDT's performances considered from the perspective of 5 basic theatre elements: dramatic structure, author, stage/scenery, performer and audience. In this way, it will be possible to take a closer look at EDT's (dis)connections with the traditional concept of theatre.

Chapter Three: Reconfiguring Traditional Theatre Elements

My first contact with the Electronic Disturbance Theatre can be defined in terms of confusion and suspicion. As I browsed in their website at thething.net, learning about the numerous sit-ins that they have staged, and about the reasons to engage in electronic civil disobedience, I couldn't find anything that seemed clearly theatrical to me, except for the name of the group. Was I missing something? Is the allusion of theatre merely metaphorical? How are these online protests related to theatre? The first chapter of this study is my answer to the first question: Yes, I was missing the whole picture. I wasn't considering that my traditional concept of theatre –the one I learned at elementary school– might be limited or perhaps even growing obsolete. This chapter contains my answers to the second and third questions addressed from my revised angle. If we are currently experiencing new social realities and political and cultural practices are changing accordingly, what concept of theatre is EDT suggesting? What kind of reconfiguration of traditional theatre conventions do their performances suppose?

EDT's proposed concept of theatre is based on a contemporary version of the idea that life is theatre. The theatrical metaphor has been suggested repeatedly by artists and scholars throughout history as an insightful way to explain life (take for instance Calderon de la Barca's play *La Vida es Sueño*, or Shakespeare's *As You Like It*); however, since the second half of the Twentieth century, particularly after the dissemination of sociologist Erving Goffman's ideas, it seems that the metaphoric quality of the statement has been gradually disappearing. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Goffman illustrates the nature of social interaction by pointing out its resemblance to traditional theatre performance. Without overtly contending that life *is* theatre, he suggested that the boundaries between acting and not acting in real life were often blurred, making the distinction a very hard endeavor:

...[O]rdinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts, even in the hands of

unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify. (72)

The idea that life is a “dramatically enacted thing”, just like theatre, was further developed by theatre director and scholar Richard Schechner, who has proposed the concept of “restored behavior” to explain human action. For him, nothing is ever done for the first time; instead, previously behaved behaviors are continuously re-combined and enacted in all kinds of life situations (i.e in every day life, in arts, in sports, in carnivals, in political demonstrations); and because recombining involves endless possibilities, no performance can repeat exactly another performance in spite of its condition of restored behavior (“Performance Studies” 29-35). From this perspective it can be said that, in life, all people perform in some way. But, of course, human behavior is so multifaceted that different levels of performance-awareness must be acknowledged. “Being” and “doing” are the first two levels that Schechner identifies in his theoretical model. In these levels, restorations of behaviors occur, but there is no awareness or a will to perform; merely the person “is” or the person “acts”. The third level, “showing doing”, can be understood as the performance proper; the level where the performing arts emerge. It means “underlining and action for those who are watching” (“Performance Studies” 28). “Explaining ‘showing doing’” is the fourth level. It is also the most complex since it involves the highest level of awareness. In Schechner words:

...“explaining ‘showing doing’” is a reflexive effort to comprehend the world of performance and the world as performance. This comprehension is usually the work of critics and scholars. But sometimes, in Brechtian theatre when the actor steps outside the role to comment on what the character is doing, and in critically aware performance art such as Guillermo Gómez Peña’s and Coco Fusco’s *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992), a performance is **reflexive**. (28) [emphasis in the original]

EDT’s performances belong to the third and fourth levels of Schechner’s classification: “showing doing” and explaining “showing doing”. Each gesture is an attempt to underline an action for its audience, and, at the same time, an attempt to point towards its own performative nature. In other words, EDT’s political

demonstrations are a form of staged reality presented in a way that is critically aware of the kind of behavior it involves.

Interestingly enough, the group chose to use the term “theater” and not “performance” to construct their artistic name. Although it is clear that Schechner’s more encompassing and flexible term fits better to what they do, this preference of the group reveals an aim to establish a connection, not only with performance (in its current broad sense), but also with the specific world of theatre in a more traditional sense. The term “theater” in *Electronic Disturbance Theater*, probably refers both to the place where electronic disturbances are enacted and to the recognition of the theatricality involved in the events that the group organizes.

Beyond the name, other possible connections with traditional theatre are worth analyzing in order to understand what kind of cultural performance the group is suggesting. For this reason, the following sections offer an inside view of EDT’s work considered from the perspective of key elements of traditional theatre: dramatic structure, authors/director, stage and scenery, performer and audience. My main intention in all sections is to examine in what ways the events proposed by EDT follow or use traditional theatrical concepts and in what ways these concepts are reconfigured by their practice.

Dramatic Structure

When talking about dramatic structure in traditional theatre, one refers to the way the elements of the script are combined. For Aristotle, who considered the conflict or action the most important part of a play, an effective dramatic structure had to include at least three basic elements in the following order: an introduction, a climax or turning point, and a resolution. For many centuries, this ordering of the plot was considered the essential structure of drama. This tradition, however, started to be challenged in the twentieth century by the experiments and claims of some innovators. The very famous writings of Antonin Artaud are the best example of how there was an aim to push theatre to a post-dramatic era. Interestingly, at about the same time these changes were taking place in the field of theatre, the anthropologist Victor Turner found the Aristotelian dramatic structure particularly useful to elucidate the nature of human

conflicts as ritual processes. After spending three years observing human behavior in African villages, he came up with the conclusion that “something like drama” was constantly emerging from the otherwise fairly even surfaces of social life (“From Ritual to Theatre” 9). Thus, he developed a theory where he proposed the concept of “social drama” to define those “units of a-harmonic process, arising in conflict situations (“Dramas, Fields and Metaphors” 37)”. According to his model, social dramas always develop in four phases of public action which are:

... (1) *breach* of regular norm-governed social relations made publicly visible by the infraction of a rule ordinary held to be binding [...] this course of events moves on to the second phase (2) of *crisis*, when people are in the process of being induced, seduced, cajoled or threatened to take sides by those who confront one another [...] Most public crises have what I call “liminal” characteristics, since each is a threshold (*limen*) between more or less stable or harmonic phases of the social process, but it is not usually a “sacred” or ritualized *limen*, hedged about by taboos and thrust from the centers of public life. Rather does it take up its menacing stance in the agora itself, and, as it were, challenges the representatives of order to grapple with it. [...] (3) the application of *redressive or remedial procedures* [...] This phase is perhaps the most reflexive of the social drama. The community, acting through its representative, throws itself back upon itself, to measure what some of its members have done, and how have they conducted themselves with reference to its own standards. [...] The fourth phase (4) consists of either the *reintegration* of the disturbed social group, or of the *recognition or legitimation of irreparable schism* between the contending parties. (“The Anthropology of Performance” 34-35)

Although the theory of social drama has been criticized for assuming that all human conflict can fit in a rather simplistic, totalizing, and eminently Western model –the Aristotelian–, it is useful to understand EDT’s actions in two important ways: First, because it acknowledges a fluid relationship between social and aesthetic processes; and second, because the structure that EDT uses to organize and frame its protests is dramatic precisely in a Turnerian-like sense. When interviewed by performance artist and theorist Coco Fusco, Ricardo Dominguez offered the following description of how his gestures work:

Each performance has a very traditional three-act structure: act 1, the email call to a core actor/audience network (you may also start to get responses from reporters for information and updates); act 2, the gesture itself, which is not very interesting to look at since you don't really see that much –you just click (click=action); act 3, you re-encounter your core actor/audience network to determine what might have occurred within your staging space, how many people participated, where they came from, what they might have said, and of course, what has been reported about the performance. (Fusco 156)

The first thing to notice here is that acts 1 and 3 mentioned by Dominguez are not part of the gesture itself (only “act 2”). They are included in the description because each performance is understood as a social process and not only as an aesthetic drama. In this sense, the three “acts” that give structure to EDT’s protests match with the first three phases of the Turnerian social drama. For example, applying the model, the email call for action sent by EDT can be understood as the *breach* which leads to a *crisis* by inviting an audience to collaborate in a protest, the performance proper. This performance has liminoid characteristics. It involves a voluntary expression of rebellious behavior and radical experimentation. What Turner called “spontaneous communitas³³” is bound to emerge since participants and artists form relatively undifferentiated ties and share a synchronized experience. The *redressive action* is discussed in the third phase, which also functions as a temporary conclusion for the crisis. This is the phase when EDT posts newspaper reports on their website, the approximate number of participants, and, in general terms, the reception of the protest. Instead of arriving to a fourth phase, EDT’s social dramas have been performed one after another for more than ten years now. This means that a major social transformation has not been achieved as a result of these staged crisis or performances. As Turner also noted in his research, the final resolution of a major conflict –the fight for human rights and against neoliberal globalization in EDT’s case, whether it is reintegration or schism, can involve an indefinite number of crisis before happening.

³³ For Victor Turner, spontaneous communitas is the temporal formation of relations of sympathy among those participating in a liminal event. This sympathy involves understanding the other in a way that is “free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. [...] Individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous communitas become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event”. (“From Ritual to Theatre 48).

Although EDT's social dramas are organized according to a traditional dramatic structure, they move away from Aristotle's poetics in two important ways: they are not mimetic and they are not meant to be watched. In very general and conventional terms, the art of theatre has been defined as the presentation of a script performed on a stage by actors for an audience that is watching (Hischak 2). Traditionally, the story in the script involves a fictional representation of life or mimesis. But what happens in the case of EDT's re-presentations? An event takes place online; that is for sure. Yet, no fictional script is represented; no portrait of reality is involved. By contrast, the performers/audience carry on certain dramatic actions which have repercussions in social reality.

Usually, all there is to see on the screen of the computer while the performance is going on is a textual description of the purpose and motives for the action. In addition, there is some kind of abstract representation of Floodnet working –lines and colors– after the participant clicks to join the action. For this reason, when interviewed by Fusco, Dominguez noted that phase 2 “is not very interesting to look at since you don't really see that much”. However, I should observe that this is not entirely true for all of EDT's performances. Some of them, as I have mentioned before, have aesthetic interventions which are interesting to watch (at least for a few moments), such as the “404 reply message” that asserts the lack of human rights in the target server. Probably, what Dominguez wanted to emphasize by saying that there is nothing very interesting to see in act 2, is that watching is not the most important part in his online performances. As Paul Virilio has pointed out, “[t]o see at a distance, to hear at a distance: that was the essence of the audio-visual perspective of old. But to reach at a distance, to feel at a distance, that amounts to shifting the perspective towards a domain it did not yet encompass: that of contact, of contact-at-a-distance: tele-contact (4)”. In other words, cyberspace has brought about a new form of perspective –a tactile one. Yet, tactile in this new context does not imply touching but sensing or feeling.

EDT's gestures, then, involve an extreme type of non-mimetic performance where the things that happen are for real, and are not exactly meant to be seen but rather felt, reflected upon, and even imagined by the audience. They are a hybrid kind of socio-cultural event where the experience and its consequences as mediated by the unbound framework of the Net matter the most. In this way, phases 1 and 3 are very

important for the performer/audience to have a complete experience. The email call is meant not only to encourage participation, but to inform and urge the audience to document themselves on the subject matter. Phase 3 is about the artists/activists providing-receiving feedback and summarizing what happened during the staged crisis; it is about reflecting on the performance.

The fact that EDT uses an Aristotelian-like dramatic structure to frame and give coherence to its actions might seem outdated at present. Considering that political theatre innovators in the 20th century often tried to liberate theatre precisely from this convention, and that post-structuralist theorists, such as Deleuze and Guatari, discredited structures, essences and foundational thought as fascist ways of acting in the world (Auslander "Theory" 84), it looked like the time of grand narratives was over, at least for experimental forms of cultural performance. Yet, EDT's social dramas have a meta-narrative; their discourse is expressed in terms that suppose a progressist and utopianist vision of the world. For each performance, EDT proposes a target, gives reasons for being against it, people are invited to join the protest, and then they all claim "victory" if the event was big enough to be noticed. This kind of inflammatory discourse where right and wrong, allies and enemies, are clearly distinguished is essential for agitprop theatre and other forms of making political propaganda. Its simplicity helps people assimilating a message easily, as well as clearly identifying an enemy.

From a negative point of view, it can certainly be disturbing that the rhetoric used in the calls for action produces a dialectical-theatrical split into protagonists and antagonists. For every gesture there seems to be a good side (EDT members and the internet users who collaborate in the gesture) and a bad side (governments, corporations, banks). A problem with this simplistic view of social problems is that it ignores the complexity behind each one of them.

For Steve Dixon, however, a refreshing characteristic of an emerging digital performance avant-garde is precisely the return to the "grand narratives". While cultural theorists "may have studiously avoided them", Dixon points out that digital performers are tackling again "embarrassingly large modernist questions" such as love, nature, death, morality, religion, and revolution ("Digital Performance" 661-662). Dixon suggests that the kind of experiment EDT proposes brings back to life the historical

avant-gardes' concern to cause and advance major social change and to transform the way art functions in society ("Digital Performance" 8). In this sense, the proposal positively moves away from the "self-confirming, self-consuming snake" of postmodernism (661).

Looking at EDT's gestures from Dixon's angle, what can be positive about EDT's predetermined narrative is that it is not exactly *for* the people to watch or learn or understand; it is about people deciding to embrace a proposed socio-political cause and participating in the creation of a gesture that supports it. Besides, if Dixon is right, one of the implications of EDT's mixture of political and artistic goals on the Internet is the emergence of a new possible understanding of overtly political online cultural performance—a new hybrid genre where boundaries between direct action politics and aesthetics disappear within the realm of cyberspace.

The Role of the Authors

From the latin *auctor*, an author is broadly defined as one who is the maker, or originator of some form of intellectual or creative work³⁴. For many centuries, theatre practice was focused on the performance of a script. Consequently, playwrights had a privileged position as the geniuses behind the artistic work. In the twentieth century, when the spectacle started to gain importance over the script, the figure of the director also became a recognized authority in theatre, both as creator of the concept and supervisor of the performance. In conventional theatre, playwrights and directors alike present a finished vision of the world which is meant to be both personal and universal at the same time. Some theatre innovators and theorists such as Augusto Boal, and more recently, the Critical Art Ensemble, have hardly criticized the imposition of authority that the role of the author and the role of the director suppose in most theatre performances. For them, finished visions of the world should not be imposed on audiences if theatrical events really want to encourage active participation and not be a source of oppression. Thus, they have repeatedly warned the artists in the field that the privileged position of the director, actor, author, or any other authority should be eliminated from contemporary theatre practice ("Recombinant Theatre" 158).

³⁴ See: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/44635/author>

Now, to absolutely eliminate the privileged position of artists in their proposed performances is extremely difficult in the practice –if not impossible– as CAE also recognizes. Yet, the effort to avoid rigid hierarchical stratifications must be done every time.

. One of the things that make EDT's proposed kind of political performance very appealing is that the collaboration of the audience is essential for its existence. At least from this angle, the role of Dominguez, Wray, Karasic and Stalbaum appears to be closer to the ideal of a non-existent authority in a performance proposed by CAE than to the more conventional role of the author or genius behind. Another evidence of EDT's will to empower their audience is the Disturbance Developer Kit (DDK) that they launched in 1999. The Kit is a software tool designed to help people create their own gestures and can be downloaded from their website. With DDK, internet users have the possibility to stage their own events and choose what struggles to support. By making this software available to anyone EDT also manifests a will to join what has been recently labeled as the "open source culture" on the Internet.

Likewise, it cannot be denied that EDT's performances also suggest a finished vision of the world; one that despite being completed by the audience, still reaches a totality. Consequently, there seems to be a paradoxical tension between EDT's predetermined narrative (the progressist vision of the world that the type of structure and the discourse used in the gestures entail), and the kind of empowered collaboration that the group wants to encourage in their audiences/performers. On the one hand, EDT members are the originators of the structure and concept of the performances they promote. Even further, they are the creators of Floodnet, and the ones that decide which struggle to support and how. On the other hand, their events depend on the collaboration of the audience and encourage its mirroring (reproduction) –more actions mean more chances to cause major changes in society. Thus, the kind of position that EDT members assume with respect to their work appears to be ambivalent. Because they encourage agency and collaboration their control over the action remains minimal, but, at the same time, audiences must assume a certain vision of the world during the performance. A vision that is compatible with the cause EDT is sponsoring at that moment. It seems then that the group is combining different aesthetic and sociopolitical positions to try and give an answer to their context: the modern and the postmodern. Perhaps it could also

be said that their work is reflecting a period of transition from modern and postmodern paradigms to a digital paradigm which is still in the process of germination.

The contradictory kind of authority I have just described can also be observed in Ricardo Dominguez's role as a "director". To begin with, in the discussion on Staging Virtual Theater that he had with Coco Fusco some years ago, I was surprised to read that Dominguez considered his position as "director" of the performances as "very traditional":

My role as a director to my actor/audience network is both very intimate and very removed—a very traditional position for a director. Some actor/audience networks only want to know where to click, some networks want to mirror the gesture, some networks want to build something else, some want to build more networks, some want to know if the action is real, some networks protest the protest—not for content but for the gesture itself. So the question is: How do you stage them all? How do you get them all to focus on the performance and its social spine—the emotional spine of this mass gesture? You treat each actor/audience network as a unique somatic architecture that needs to connect with the right frequency (the "right vibe," we used to say in the '70s) to feel they are participating in the performance and have agency to expand the performance. [...] ³⁵
(Fusco 155-156)

While it is true that EDT has an empowered position when choosing the cause and launching the event, and that Dominguez coordinates all the networks of performers to make sure they are in the "right vibe"; this does not make him a very traditional director. Traditional directors are concerned, above all, with making sure that their aesthetic concept comes to life on stage. Dominguez's role goes beyond that; his job does not stop when the performance begins; rather he participates as a political leader. Moreover,

³⁵ [...] To direct an on-line performance like EDT's you need to have a strong sense of how actor/audience network relations function so that you can build trust and a strong sense of collaboration and autonomy. [...] For an on-line performance you want to have a high level of "betweenness" or liminal flow between the networks. You want to be open to actor/audience clusters and what they need to gain a strong sense of information access and control. You don't want them to be dependent on your connections for access to the flow: that ends up building single points of breakdown. The more you reach a high degree of "betweenness" between you and your actor/audience the more the networks will grow and function beyond the limited event of the performance. (Fusco 157-158)

traditional directors are authorities, they usually have control over the staff, the cast, the roles, the choreography; yet Dominguez does not get to choose exactly who is going to participate or how many performers will be involved. His control is limited in some ways. In this sense, his function seems to be closer to that of a facilitator; someone whose leadership role aims to invite and enable actions rather than to impose a certain style or aesthetic vision. In summary, Dominguez's role does not seem very traditional; he is concerned with efficacy as much as aesthetics. Plus, the kind of agency he allows the performers/audience to have during a performance is somehow contradictory in the sense that people are urged to take action, and yet, they still have to follow EDT's vision of a political struggle.

Stage and Scenery

As I noted earlier, twentieth century political theatre innovators showed an interest in abandoning the traditional stage provided by theatre buildings in the search of alternative spaces that would enable a different kind of relation between actors or performers and audiences. Among the alternatives, the streets proved to be one of the favorite ones because actors and audiences came into a closer contact. With the rise of the Digital Era, some artists are taking a step further in the reconfiguration of the concept of stage by acknowledging the Internet as an attractive option. Unlike other alternatives to the traditional proscenium or apron stage, the Internet has a virtual nature. This makes it radically different from any other staging spaces. Hence, it seems reasonable to ask: How is EDT's selected staging space used? What possibilities does it offer to the artists/activists and their audiences? Where in cyberspace is it? Do EDT gestures have scenery? If so, what functions do their sceneries fulfill?

In the previous chapters I explained that EDT's innovative proposal consists of using the Internet as a theatre for activism. In this sense, one of their main goals is to turn the Internet into a decisive stage for public issues concerning human rights. If as we have seen the Internet is currently suffering a strong commodification process, it could be said that the mere fact of using this space to stage mass gestures already involves some form of resistance to the current world order.

Whether an offline performance takes place in a proscenium stage, an arena or in the street, there is always a geographical location involved. This spatial limitation plays an important role determining what kind of audience attends a performance. (ie. a street performance in Lima is most likely to attract Peruvians than Australians or Egyptians for obvious reasons). Since the Internet is a system that transgresses national boundaries, one of the most interesting possibilities that it offers is that it allows people all around the globe to be the audience of the same online performance at the same time. For EDT, this means that anyone who has access to a computer can join their events no matter where they live. It also means that the virtual sit-ins can disrupt websites of governments and corporations from any country. In addition, because the Internet enables fast access to large amounts of information, at least in theory, during a performance the participants of an online mass action are more likely to be familiar with the details of the cause than those in an offline mass action, which in the best of the cases receive a flyer.

Of course, staging mass gestures online also has its limitations. Having access to a computer and some basic skills to use it are the most obvious ones. A little less obvious is that in order to attend the performances, internet users must know in advance where to go in cyberspace. While street performances can attract people who were only passing by, it seems less likely that an internet user will run into an EDT online performance just by mere chance. This limitation has made me wonder whether EDT's stage is closer to the concept of street theater or to the traditional theater building. For Dominguez, what he and his group do is "a reconfiguration of street theatre" ("EDT" 284). The logic behind this assertion is that the Internet is a public space—with "cyberstreets", which they use to stage performances that everyone can experience for free. What does not seem to fit with the street theater analogy is that EDT has an official website which was built with the specific objective of serving as a launching stage for their actions. This website sets aside a space that is exclusively used for their events just as a theatre building. Although it is true that the target of the gestures can be anywhere in cyberspace, the events are always launched from the same specific location—their website. At least in this sense, their proposed stage can be seen as a reconfiguration of the traditional theatre building.

Now, if EDT's stage involves a reconfiguration of the function of the theatre building, the next questions that need to be answered are: How is cyberspace being used by EDT? How does their staging space look like and where in cyberspace is it? Because it is a computer-generated stage, two of the most important characteristics of the stage are that there is no clear separation between audience and artist space, and that it requires certain degree of interactivity from the beginning; that is, from the moment an internet user enters EDT's stage.

The official website of the group –their theatrical space-- is located at <http://www.thing.net/~rdm/ece/ece.html>. The home page has a very simple design. It has a gray background and the general information about the gestures is centered, sometimes written in red, sometimes in blue. Since 1998, the information about the gestures has been posted one on top of the other so by scrolling down the page it is possible to learn about all the gestures that have been staged. Each gesture has its own scenery at a specific webpage that can be accessed by clicking on the link provided by the home page. In conventional theatre terminology, the scenery is that which is used to create a setting for a theatrical production. Normally, this can range from a single prop on a stage (i.e. a chair, a bucket) to an elaborate architectural structure (i.e. a palace, a factory). In any case, the usual construction elements include physical objects and materials, as well as sound and light resources. The construction of EDT sceneries is quite different. It depends on the HyperText Markup Language (HTML) with an embedded javascript which I have previously described: FloodNet. The sceneries for each gesture are not very different from one another. They always include abundant text with clear specifications about the time, the target, reasons to protest and how to join the action. A simple click in the correct icon initiates Floodnet on the screen of a participant. In addition to the links that take the user to a gesture's specific setting where phase 2 (the gesture) takes place, the homepage provides abundant links to interviews and newspaper reports which further discuss both the reasons for the performances and their reception. On the left hand corner of EDT's home page, there are also five blue square icons that can take the user to the "1998 tactical theatre schedule", to more information about FloodNet, the Disturbance Developer's Kit, EDT's founding members, and the practice of Electronic Civil Disobedience. Moreover, there is an icon that promises

“archives”, but it does not work³⁶. The primary language of the website is English, but for many gestures the texts are also available in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Chinese and German. In sum, this official website, with its links to the gestures’ sceneries, constitutes the core scenario for EDT’s work.

Traditionally, there are three functions that theatrical scenery must fulfill: it should suggest the location of the characters, it should express a mood, and it should offer a practical setting for the actions of the performers. Although EDT’s sceneries are far from being traditional, one can notice that they also intend to fulfill these requirements in some way. The home page contains clear textual indicators of what the webpage is about; the use of gray, blue and red colors set a sober but intense mood, and the disposition of the elements (icons, links) makes navigation relatively easy. In spite of the fact that the practical purpose of creating the setting and the narrative for the performances is achieved, I must observe that the accomplishment remains at a basic level. There seems to be room for improvement both in terms of aesthetics and practicality. For instance, the links are not regularly updated, and the use of colors, spaces and underlining in the texts that offer the gestures’ information is sometimes confusing. It is not easy to distinguish the hyperlinks from the mere texts or the boundaries between one gesture’s information and another. Moreover, it is common to find typing and spelling mistakes in the calls for action. In the texts where the language is other than English there are also errors in punctuation and even grammar. While this careless style of writing is frequent in everyday chat rooms, emails, blogs, and other Internet spaces, perhaps EDT’s seriousness both as artists and activists could be compromised by the fact that they are not careful enough with the language, aesthetics and practicality of their scenery.

Furthermore, it seems that EDT’s online stage does not make the most of the possibilities offered by the Internet. For example, it is somehow disappointing that the stage is only used as a forum in a limited way, especially because one of the main objectives of EDT’s performances is to encourage audience participation. Indeed, some newspaper reviews and articles are posted after the performances; however, it would be interesting to be able to read the comments of the performer-audiences, or any visitor as well.

³⁶ The link expired and has not been updated as of August 2009.

In summary, EDT is proposing the use of the Internet as a stage for their hybrid performances. Its theatrical space is more like a reconfiguration of the traditional theatre building than of street theatre as the group suggests. While experimenting in this space, EDT has opened an interesting path for political performance which includes the possibility of having global and interactive audiences. Some other possibilities are yet to be explored, beginning with an improvement of the groups virtual stage, their website.

Performer/Audience

From the theatrical perspective, one of the most interesting and also transgressing characteristics of EDT's hybrid proposal is the fusion of the concepts of performer, audience and internet user. First of all, it should be mentioned that the role of the actor is eliminated in this fusion. In other words, there is no impersonation of a character, but, as in performance art, only people doing something. Now, while a performer is conventionally defined as the person who does something in front of someone else who is watching –the audience–, in an EDT gesture, internet users become both the performers of the action and the audience. In a way, this fusion appears to be an extreme answer to the dream of many 20th century theatre practitioners of dragging audiences out from their passive role in theatrical events. Of course, from a different perspective, this also seems to be the logical way to appeal to an emerging type of computer-literate audiences which are already used to interactive interfaces. Considering this, I will start this section by discussing the ways in which the goal of the active audience is fulfilled by EDT's practice and what its limitations are.

One of the most basic facts about the kind of relationship between a human and a computer is that it is interactive. Using a computer involves clicking, pushing buttons, dragging icons, typing information, and so on. For this reason, it has been particularly easy for artists to claim “interactivity” for any kind of artwork that incorporates computer media. As Steve Dixon explains in *Digital Performance*, the term “interactivity” is currently being abused more than properly used (561-563). For that reason, to facilitate the proper identification of ascending levels and depths of interactivity in artworks and performances,

Dixon proposes the following four categories: Navigation (involves simple clicking and browsing); participation (joining the performance at some specific point); conversation (undertaking dialogue with or during the performance); collaboration (altering it significantly) (563). When offering this classification, Dixon is careful to indicate that more interactivity does not necessarily mean that a performance is 'better'. As he notes, many times, giving less freedom to the users/audience has proved more engaging and productive than a wide open structure (564). Nevertheless, I would also like to emphasize that more interaction means that the performance highly depends on the audiences' contribution and, in that sense, the authority of the author diminishes, leaving room for a less hierarchical kind of relations between artists and audiences. In the case of EDT, the type of interaction generated by the events according to Dixon's categorization is somewhere between participative and collaborative. Audiences are specifically urged to act together with the artists to create a mass protest. That is, they are recruited not as viewers but as members of an activist theatre troupe whose contribution really matters. Put differently, when a gesture has an impact on society, it is the outcome of an active audience that participates and not just the sole effort of the artists.

A limitation in this respect would be that the performers/audiences do not have the option to incorporate any creative input in the narrative of the gesture or to undertake any kind of dialogue with other participants while they are taking action. It is true that the participants are given the tools to create their own gestures –the Disturbance Developer Kit–, but in the particular case of the protests organized by Dominguez, Wray, Stalbaum and Karasic, collaboration is about being present more than about flowing. People and artists do not really share, converse or interact among each other in the proposed stage. Perhaps in this sense, it would be possible to understand the otherwise exaggerated claim that CAE incorporates in their article on Recombinant Theatre:

ICT has promised that a fully interactive, living, virtual theatre is just around the corner if we just stay online. As yet, CAE knows of no virtual theatre that has a multifaceted, interactive social dimension, and certainly nothing with any resistant potential. (161)

Doubtlessly, the kind of collaboration that EDT enables has limitations. As I indicated in the last section, the group's virtual stage does not even seem to be exploiting all of its interactive possibilities. Yet, it seems extreme to absolutely discard EDT's resistant potential as CAE suggests. It cannot be denied that EDT's actions have challenged the commodification of the Internet and have achieved a certain degree of attention. In addition, it is important to emphasize that the value of mere online presence here should not be undermined. Making a mass presence possible and relevant online is in fact one of EDT's greatest achievements. But this takes us to other essential discussions regarding the conception of presence, liveness and community in online theatres.

Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg and Sterlac's experiments with technological additions to the human body are the two most cited examples of how, since a couple of decades ago, some scholars and artists have started to enthusiastically suggest that the human body can be transcended in the Information Age. Drawing on these ideas, it seems that we are inevitably turning into "cyborgs", – technologically expanded human bodies–, since we are increasingly depending on a wide range of technologies such as hearing aids, computers, cell phones, and so on. Particularly for Haraway, our ciborgization also indicates that we have become post-humans and that the possibility to free ourselves from our stigmatized bodies has come true. The modern concept of fixed identity, for example, collapses on the Internet. Given the fact that nobody can assume who we are by looking at our physical traits, we can remodel ourselves as we want to. Although Haraway's ideas have been extremely valuable to encourage discussion about our current condition as humans, her arguments have often been criticized by other scholars. For instance, Katherine Hayles reminds us that getting rid of bodies or any other material entities is more utopist than realistic. The virtual condition, she explains, is not about substituting physical bodies and objects with electronic simulations. This is not possible because, ultimately, the virtual depends on a material medium to exist (46). The virtual condition, then, should be understood as complementary to our material condition in the world. Kevin Robins also warns us to be careful when considering the possibility of constructing 'new' identities on the Internet. Among other things, those new identities are not likely to set us free from worries or problems. Thinking that the physical body will

disappear is nothing but wishful thinking (Robins 203-207). Moreover, because the physical body is not visible, one could also argue that it is easier for certain institutions to control a faceless mass of internet users.

From a theatre-specific point of view, Haraway and Sterlac's propositions are not very popular since the physically present human body is widely considered the quintessence of theatre. As Auslander highlights, traditional theatre defenders have often argued that the lack of physical body presence in "virtual theatres" condemns any mediated forms of online performance to a deadly "vibe". This is alleged as a negative characteristic as opposed to the energy, community, "liveness" and even magic that successful theatrical events are said to generate for sure when physical bodies are sharing the same time and physical location (2). In his very controversial book, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Auslander contradicts this idea by arguing that there are no ontological differences between "live" and "mediated" performance. "Live performance" he contends, should not be assumed to be better or even a form of resistance to a highly mediated culture (as it is now), because 'liveness' can also be an intrinsic characteristic of mediated forms (184). As I noted earlier, Auslander is in favor of a whole reconsideration of live performance and theatrical concepts given the fact that times are changing, the influence of media culture is inevitable, and that new forms of art are emerging. Of course, a consensus is not likely to come soon. For instance, in her article "Utopian performativity" Jill Dolan confesses:

I must admit that I believe in all the things that Auslander disparages, mostly because as a one-time actor, and as a director, writer, spectator, critic, and performance theorist, I've experienced them all. I've felt the magic of theatre; I've been moved by the palpable energy that performances that "work" generate; and I've witnessed the potential of the temporary communities formed when groups of people gather to see other people labor in present, continuous time, [...] (458)

Like Dolan, many theatre practitioners have responded to Auslander's argument defensively, to the point that he has been accused of hating "live performance". In the most recent edition of his book, he has to explain that this is not the case. By reconsidering theatrical categories he does not mean to say that traditional theatre or any other forms of "live" cultural performance have lost all its value and will in fact

disappear; he is just suggesting that concepts should widen to account for the new forms too (Auslander xi).

Auslander is not alone in his attempt of questioning established categories and concepts. In his article "The Presence of the Mediated", Roger Copland suggests that the concept of presence is crying out for reexamination in a world where technological media has become an inescapable part of our lives.

But one thing is certain: The balance between what we glean about the world directly through our senses and what we absorb vicariously through the media has been irreversibly tipped in the direction of the latter. And to assume that a few hours of "live" theatre will somehow restore a healthy sense of "being there" is naive and self-deceptive. The ongoing critique of theatrical presence is valuable insofar as it reminds us that no experience (no matter how "live") is entirely unmediated. The "copy theory of knowledge" was invalidated long ago. The innocent eye never existed. Furthermore, the idea that the theatre's "liveness" is-in and of itself-a virtue, a source of automatic, unearned moral superiority to film and television, is sheer bourgeois sentimentality.

(42)

Just as Auslander and Copland, EDT's members take as a point of departure the idea that a mediated performance can have liveness, and that physical proximity is not the condition sine qua non of presence in this epoch. However, in line with more conventional theatre practitioners, they consider the human body a fundamental component of theatrical events and do not trust in the possibility of eradicating it. Thus, while it is true that bodies are not physically present in EDT's stages, embodied virtual presence at a given time and at a given address on the Internet is proposed as a fundament for their gestures. According to Dominguez, EDT's stages are spaces for embodied mass social expression where a sense of community and social transformations are possible ("Electronic Civil Disobedience" 664). Indeed, with this assertion he aims to challenge, just as Auslander and Copland, the conventional and essentialist conception of the key role of presence (as physical proximity) in "live" performance. Interestingly enough, he has even dared to borrow Jill Dolan's term to elucidate EDT's gestures:

This *utopian performativity* carries the shapes of past historical embodiments and discursive conventions of civil disobedience as a practice, while at the same time creating a ‘gestic insistence’, in a Brechtian sense, that provokes a constant reconsideration of the performativity of ECD in the ‘no-place’ and the ‘ever-place’ of post-contemporary digital environments. (662)
[emphasis is mine]

While Dolan uses the term “utopian performative” to refer to common “feelings and sensibilities” aiming for a more just and equitable future that are largely specific to “live performance” in the traditional sense (Dolan 460), Dominguez appropriates it to indicate that EDT’s gestures can encourage those feelings as well. And indeed, in EDT’s online events, being digitally *there* makes a difference. Not only it increases the possibility of disruption of a target server, but also opens a space for mass social expression and community. Of course, EDT’s predetermined narrative imposes some limits as to what can be expressed; yet, precisely because the idea is to express massive disagreement with a certain issue, it can be said that the disrupters are likely to develop some kind of bond during the performances.

Considering issues of identity, it is also important to notice that EDT’s gestures offer a space to remodel spectator, and activist subjectivities. Audiences do not attend the gesture to be mere spectators but performers; they are not there just to be entertained or persuaded but to take action; and the actions they take are not part of a fiction, they have an impact both in the virtual and the physical realities. Furthermore, performers are invited to perform an activist role. Not any type of activist role though. Performers become activists who express their political concerns online in a way that does not pose a risk for the physical body, and that is meant to be more global than local. From the activist perspective, online activism has been criticized for enabling a form of light commitment. Because the physical body of the activist is not on the fire line while the action is happening, some people consider virtual demonstrations an easy and comfortable way to engage in a political struggle (Jordan and Taylor 80). When compared to offline political performances, EDT’s virtual sit-ins are certainly less dangerous for the participants. The question that arises though is whether it is really necessary to compare both kinds of activism. Let us remember that EDT’s gestures are not meant to substitute offline political actions. Instead, the idea is to

complement, offering internet users a way to experience an activist role in society from their own computers. Besides, not jeopardizing the physical body does not mean that there is no risk at all. When participating in an online protest, the virtual body of the performer is vulnerable and exposed. Attending a sit-in might bring about computer damage or, in some cases the attacked server is able to recognize an IP address. This entails that there is always the latent risk of being denied future access to a website or a system³⁷.

The possibility of remodeling spectator and activist traditional roles can indeed be a positive feature of EDT's work; however, there is also a very important limitation in this respect. It is hardly open to anyone. To participate you need a personal computer and to be connected to EDT's artistic-activist community. Since EDT's audiences usually consist of people that already belong to some kind of artistic, scholarly or activist network (contacted by email), the opportunity to remodel subjectivity is most often given to those who are already likely and able (economically, politically) to do it. In this sense, the project is elitist. Although EDT is not unaware of this fact, they expect that in the future more people will be able to connect to the Internet. Even if this actually happens, given the historical dominance of inequality in our societies, a time when every person in the world will have equal access to the Internet seems to be only wishful thinking.

The last thing I want to observe about EDT is that they address two kinds of audiences. The first kind is the one I have been discussing in this section, the performer/audience who collaborate in the gestures. The second kind of audience consists precisely of those "others" that are meant to notice the gesture: the Authorities, the media, journalists, the opponents, the artistic and activist communities, the citizens of the world; society, to put it in one word. While the collaboration of the performer/audience is fundamental for the creation of the action, the amount of attention and the kind of reactions of the second audience are essential for the consummation of the theatrical event as well as for its evaluation. Thus, my

³⁷ Two anecdotes illustrate these risks. According to EDT's reports, on June 10 1998, when the Mexican government's website stroke back during the performance staged by EDT, the browsers of some participants using Floodnet crashed (EDT "Cronology of Swarm"). Also, when explaining why the virtual sit-in to protest Cavallo's visit to the NYU School of Business was canceled, professor Diana Taylor tells that the authorities of the University threatened to cancel Internet access privileges to all those who decided to participate. (Lane 141-142).

goal in the coming section is precisely to bring about the kind of reactions that EDT's second audience has had; in other words, to discuss some reception issues.

The Other Audience

As I explained in Chapter 2, when presented at the 1998 Ars Electronica festival, EDT's project was highly controversial. It led to heated discussions, particularly among the activist and hacker communities, as well as to some serious redressive actions such as counter-attacks from Mexican and US authorities. Because the performances have a confrontational agenda and involve direct actions with real consequences, it cannot be a surprise that the three most recurrent issues in these controversies have to do with ethics, legality, and the political efficacy of the gestures. In Chapter 2, I already discussed how the political efficacy of the performances is limited. This section, then, focuses on the first two issues.

Being on the edge of legal and ethical borders has often been considered a negative aspect of EDT's performances. After the very first performance on April 10 1998, the human rights organization AME La Paz, based in Mexico, expressed disagreement with EDT's proposal. They sent a letter to the group asking to stop the disturbances on the account of two main reasons: that their "disruptive" nature could cause the Mexican government to take revenge on Zapatista organizations based in Mexico; and that initiating a net-war was not the appropriate way to achieve peace because it was intrusive rather than a passive act of civil disobedience.

[...] What can assure us that once the hacker's war has started, we, who are broadcasting from Chiapas and Mexico, will not be the probable, and weakest, victims? [...] We also think your Electronic Civil Disobedience on April is a brilliant, intelligent and well-planned proposal, but it is unnecessary and dangerous. We have to let you know that we are grateful for what you are doing for Mexico, but we have the right to tell you that the struggle for the peace is within the law and not at the edge of it. (García 15)

In addition, AME La Paz mentioned that EDT should have consulted the online Zapatistas in Mexico before flooding President Zedillo's website. In this sense, their critique opened never-ending debates in

two directions. The first has to do with international borders on the Internet. Do they exist? Should they be respected? AME La Paz' perspective suggested that they should, since EDT's interventions could bring trouble to Mexican Zapatistas rather than help them. In response to this claim, EDT admitted that cyberspatial borders were a contested issue and promised, as a temporary solution, that the next target (in May 1998) would be within US cyber territory. While this promise was kept, in the following months they retargeted Mexican government websites. Their final decision was that the Internet has no borders. The decision seemed to be based on their conviction that their project was a legitimate and necessary form of cultural resistance. Yet, with the current digital divide, one might wonder if this is really the best way to go; especially in the cases when the gesture is directed towards the government of a less digitally developed country. As AME La Paz warns, the actions might have negative repercussions in the offline world. This urges us to consider the other important issue brought about by the letter. Are EDT gestures legal? What kind of practice are they? For AME La Paz, it was evident that the gestures were subversive attacks carried out by hackers, and that these actions would bring about a war on the Internet. AME La Paz members have not been the only ones to think this way. It was not long before the idea of an increasing number of "cyberterrorists" attacking computers and networks spread in the US and Mexico. It did not have to do with EDT actions only, but with the fact that by the end of the twentieth century an increasing number of cyberactivists were starting to get the attention of the media by defacing websites, destroying data, avoiding censorship, and carrying out other rebellious acts. In this sense, EDT was often mentioned as an example of how hackers with political agendas (hacktivists) were disrupting the Internet. To clarify their conceptual proposal, since 1998 and until now, whenever interviewed and also in their website, EDT members have always highlighted that their electronic social disturbances are not the same as destruction or disruption; they are comparable to sitting down in the middle of a street in a theatrical act of civil disobedience³⁸. According to a reporter of the *New York Times*:

³⁸ "The reason we use disturbance is because it is not subversion, it's not destruction. It would be very easy then for the dot.mils, the dot.govs and the dot.coms to say this is cyberterrorism, this is cyber crime. Because the way they define those paradigms is through the hacker paradigm: it has to be anonymous, it has to be at a high level and it actually has to work. It is very difficult to explain to the hacker that: No, we don't want it to work. We always get emails from these high level systems saying 'hey, I really like what you are doing, if you could only do this to the code and that, it will slam everything down.' And we go, 'no, we like it the way it is.' It is not efficient. It just blocks bandwidth. It is like a lot of people getting onto the digital highway. It's not cutting the highway or breaking it into two." (Dominguez "Electronic Disturbance: An Interview" 390-391). See Also: Amy Harmony. "Hacktivists' of

Socially conscious organizations are increasingly engaged in a practice known as hacktivism. Hacktivists use computer hacker tactics to advance their causes. For instance, they organize virtual sit-ins, which can paralyze a targeted site by flooding it with requests for information. [...] Ricardo Dominguez, a New York artist and a founder of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, considers such activities a form of theater. [...] "Its gestures create a simulation of something dramatic occurring in the social matrix," he said. [...] "Most people expect to see a play unfold before their eyes." For his group, if an online performance works well, then a social change will occur that is not immediately visible. (2)

After the 1998 campaign in support of the Zapatistas, probably because of the tensions with US authorities, an emphatic note was posted on EDT's website: "Floodnet is art, not hacking" ("EDT Floodnet Scrapbook"). This statement was followed by an explanation of how they created the software program as a form of performative expression that did not violate the 1998 cyberlaw. While defending the artistic nature of their work is coherent with what they were proposing since the beginning, one might wonder if the extreme exaltation of Floodnet as being art and not a destructive weapon might be suggesting a definition of art that contradicts their own claim. That is, art is not and should not be considered politically innocuous. Notice that this was a one time note that perhaps was considered necessary in order to avoid serious trouble with the law and be able to continue promoting the staged virtual sit-ins.

On May 23, 2000 Professor Dorothy Denning from Georgetown University presented a testimony before the Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism Committee on Armed Services U.S. House of Representatives where she analyzed acts so-called "cyberterrorism"; regarding EDT her opinion was:

While the above incidents were motivated by political and social reasons, whether they were sufficiently harmful or frightening to be classified as cyberterrorism is a judgment call. To the best of my knowledge, no attack so far has led to violence or injury to persons, although some may

All Persuasions Take Their Struggle to the Web." *The New York Times* 31 Oct.1998: A1; William K. Rashbaum "Forum in New York: Computer Security; Protesters and Police Plot and Thwart Online." *The New York Times* 1 Feb. 2002: A19; Matthew Mirapaul. "A Stronger, More Theatrical Role for Female Activists." *The New York Times* 23 July, 2001: E2.

have intimidated their victims. 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. Most activists, whether participating in the Million Mom's March or a Web sit-in, are not terrorists. My personal view is that the threat of cyberterrorism has been mainly theoretical. (10)

Certainly EDT actions are not life-threatening. Neither are they a surprise, for EDT members keep their identities available to the public and the sit-ins are always announced beforehand so that the opponents know what to expect. While it seems exaggerated to label EDT members and all its collaborators as cyberterrorists, it is true that their ethics can be questioned. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, EDT's actions have been strongly criticized by other activists –“digitally correct hacktivists” according to Jordan and Taylor, because of the way they disturb servers. From their perspective, blockading the flow of data is not acceptable since it constitutes a violation of a human right: the right to access information freely. For Oxblood Ruffin, a member of the hacktivist group The Cult of the Dead Cow:

Denial of Service attacks are a violation of the First Amendment, and of the freedoms of expression and assembly. No rationale, even in the service of the highest ideals, makes them anything other than what they are –illegal, unethical and uncivil. One does not make a better point in a public forum by shouting down one's opponent. (qtd. in Jordan & Taylor 98)

EDT's answer to this accusation highlights that their actions do not affect people, only data, and that it is worth sacrificing data flow to achieve a higher goal: justice and equality (Dominguez “Electronic Civil Disobedience” 663). Of course, those who fight to maintain cyberspace as an open source for everyone will never agree that blockading servers is the way to achieve equality; especially because beyond the disturbance, the virtual sit-ins do not come together with a clear plan or a proposal on how to make things better.

Finally, the fact the EDT's performances take place at the edge of all kinds of borders, including legal and ethical, has also been considered a positive aspect. Performance scholar Jon McKenzie, emphasizes how EDT has creatively and collaboratively merged art, activism and technology in practices

that explore possibilities for democratic resistance (“Democracy’s Performance 117). Configured as social dramas, EDT’s performances are liminal processes that allow a reflexive transgression of social structures. “Marginal, on the edge, in the interstices of institutions and at their limits, liminal performances are capable of temporarily staging and subverting their normative functions” (“Perform or Else” 8).

To summarize, in this chapter we have seen how in its attempt to produce political theatre in the virtual realm, EDT has brought about a new kind of hybrid practice. Although this practice cannot be understood in terms of traditional theatre, EDT has certainly drawn concepts and structures from this art form to give structure and coherence to their socio-cultural actions. As a new genre of virtual cultural performance EDT’s online social dramas defy traditional theatrical conceptions of liveness and presence. They are staged online mass protests that make virtual bodies count. Like in Boal’s theatre, the gestures aim to facilitate audience’s agency and to encourage revolutionary action. While selecting the Internet as a stage for activist performances opens a very interesting path for cultural resistance, EDT’s virtual theatrical space seems still to be underdeveloped. Because not everyone has access to the Internet it is also elitist. In terms of audience reception, EDT’s marginal and radical project has not been widely accepted but has encouraged interesting discussions on current activist methods and their relation to art. Coming to a close, the last chapter offers a defining term for EDT’s work as well as conclusions for this study.

Conclusions

Is Hactivism the Most Appropriate Way to Define EDT's Hybrid Work?

An interesting thing about EDT's reception is that their artistic propositions and, particularly, their innovative ideas about what online theatre can be in the digital era have often been pushed into the background by the weight of social and political considerations. The evidence for this is that hactivism is currently the most widely accepted term to refer to their work. But is it the most appropriate? Before explaining my reasons to doubt about it, further considerations regarding the meaning of the term are needed. As I mentioned in the introduction, in *Hactivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a cause?* Jordan and Taylor use the term "hactivism" to define the emerging phenomenon of Internet-based activism. For them, hactivism is not simply what hackers with political agendas do (the definition that the media has helped to spread), but the product of the convergence of three current existing contexts: viral times, the hacker community and the new social movements (39). "Viral times" is the metaphor used in their study to explain the kind of atmosphere generated by the social, economical and political state in Western societies (particularly in the United States) since the end of the twentieth century. More specifically, viral times refer to a generalized sense of vulnerability, uncertainty and ethical ambiguity. Computer viruses together with the incurable biological ones and other security threats such as terrorist attacks create a state of fear that constantly compromises social well-being. The increasing feeling of vulnerability and insecurity generated by these threats is also enhanced by the crisis of identity that individuals are suffering due to the crash of ideologies and the emergence of more abstract forms to experience the world – cyberspace. In addition, viral times are information-focused, highly dependant on new technologies and dominated by commodification processes. Hactivism is part of this atmosphere; it is both a contributor to the creation of viral times and a political response to it, "informational obsessed politics for informational times (19)."

Because of their knowledge on computers, the role of hackers has grown to be more prominent in viral times. Their understanding of the language of the code that structures cyberspace makes them very

handy, and at the same time a threat to established cyberspatial orders. Jordan and Taylor emphasize that it is only after the 1980's that the word starts to be used as a synonym for the more negative term crackers – persons who illicitly break into other people's computers and network systems. Before that, hackers were simply computer innovators or “computer *aficionados*”. Through their study, the authors attempt to restore the less negative connotation of the term by pointing out that ‘hacks’ do not always have malicious reasons (11). In fact, a part of the most recent generation of hackers has become politicized and is fighting for all kinds of human right causes. Whether hackers have become activists or activists and hackers have become allies, the result is this differentiated group which has been given the name “hacktivists” and which constitutes “positive” socio-political activity in viral times.

Hactivism takes politics infused with concerns about real world conditions into the abstract heart of contemporary capitalism, while at the same time, dragging hacking's traditional politics of information into new, unexpected alliances. (Jordan & Taylor 30)

While in 1994 the Critical Art Ensemble noticed that an alliance between activists and hackers was necessary but not so likely to happen unless hackers were dissuaded from only focusing on the aesthetics of efficiency (“The Electronic Disturbance” 138), Jordan and Taylor contend that this alliance is actually happening at present. Hacktivists, they say, combine the spirit of the hack with the spirit of the protest (39). Indeed, the authors provide enough evidence by giving examples of cyberactivists groups and analyzing the ways they apply technological know-how to achieve socio-political goals.

Now, although the blend of ‘spirits’ is clearly recognizable in the hacktivist tendency that Jordan and Taylor label as “digitally correct”, the same thing can not be said about the “mass action” tendency. Mass action hacktivism is “a combination of politics and inefficient technology”. This means that the hacktivists use “bad technology” for political purposes. However, if using technology efficiently, operating individually or in small groups and acting underground are essential components of the hacker spirit, the connection between hackers and online mass hacktivists (who choose to use inefficient technology) is not very clear. How much of the hacker traditional attitude can really be detected in the online mass hacktivist tendency?

According to Jordan and Taylor's analysis, EDT is one of the founders of mass action hacktivism. Yet, EDT's actions intentionally dismiss invisibility, individualism and complex technological strategies. Even when it is true that some computer knowledge was required for the development of Floodnet and other software tools, the main aim of the group has always been to "open a space for the *non-specialist* in computers to connect with civil society in a state of contestation (Dominguez 665, [emphasis is mine])." Thus, they have always made sure that the level of computer knowledge that a person needs to join a virtual sit-in is minimal. People only need to access the webpage and follow a very simple two-step procedure --which only involves clicking and choosing the connection speed-- in order to start sending the flood of requests to the targeted site. In addition, we must also remember that their software tool's efficiency is intentionally compromised by making it depend on a mass of users. For these reasons EDT's work is much more about moving away from the hacker spirit than appropriating it. At some point in their study, Jordan and Taylor accept that mass action hacktivists are "the least hacker-like of all hacktivists (110)."

In this sense, my question is, why would we want using hacktivism--a concept that refers to a spirit that EDT does not have and even tries to contradict? Isn't referring to EDT's gestures as mass action hacktivism more confusing than explanatory? And, what about the performative logic guiding the actions? For a kind of practice that, as we have seen, has been proposed as a hybrid of performance, politics and technology, the term hacktivism can be misleading. In this sense, my suggestion is to define EDT's work with a different term: online theatrivism. This suggestion goes hand in hand with my proposed interpretation of EDT's work as both online activism and a new virtual cultural performance genre.

In the 1990s, when analyzing how the streets had become a relevant stage for public expression Richard Schechner wrote:

There has been a mutually fruitful exchange between art performances and symbolic public actions. By the 1960s, these actions constituted a distinct liminoid-celebratory-political-theatrical-ritual genre with its own dramaturgy, *mise en scène*, role enactments, audience participation and reception. This theatre is ritual because it is efficacious, intending to produce real effects by means

of symbolic causes. It is more theatrical at the cusp where the street meets the media, where events are staged for the camera. (“The Future of Ritual” 51)

Online theatrivism is close to what Schechner describes in this paragraph. It is actual and symbolic; theatrical in the sense that political actions are deliberately staged to call the attention of target audiences, and also dramatic in view of the way each act is structured. A key difference, however, is the fact that it is not the streets but the Internet which is now starting to be relevant as a public stage. Considering that the Internet is not a physical but a virtual space, and that virtuality is shaking our perception of reality, this difference is huge.

Online Theatrivism

This study has been motivated by a desire to contribute to the understanding of what the Electronic Disturbance Theatre does. Departing from the recognition that their work is a hybrid form that proposes a blend of cultural performance and activism online, and that it is mostly the second aspect that has been previously discussed in academic studies, my intention has been to tackle the subject predominantly from a theatrical perspective. Bearing this intention in mind, and with the support of contemporary performance theories, throughout this study I have: 1) traced the changes in the conceptualization of theater that avant-garde artists encouraged during the twentieth century in order to highlight how EDT’s project departs from and continues with a history of experimentation, transgression, and innovation; 2) examined EDT’s origins and conceptual proposal paying particular attention to the way traditional theatre structures and elements are both used and reconfigured in order to create some sort of virtual theatre of activism; and 3) offered the term online theatrivism to define what EDT does.

In relation to the questions I raised in the introduction, my research suggests that EDT’s work is a creative attempt to respond to the challenge of resisting normalization and oppression in what has been called the Digital Age. It coincides with the historical avant-gardes notion that art should be practical and should pursue social change. Following a history of interventionist aesthetics established by radical innovators such as the Futurists, Brecht, Piscator, Krapow, Boal, the Situationists and many others, EDT

puts art at the service of social and political ideals. Like those in the forward-looking tendency of the late twentieth century avant-garde, EDT considers that the present and the future are inevitably related to the newest technologies, and thus has embraced them and made them a fundamental part of its practice. EDT's concept of theatre is disturbing because it transgresses many basic conventions, established disciplinary boundaries, and dominant opinions, including the contemporary ideas that theatre cannot happen in cyberspace, that theatre as an art form necessarily involves fictional and scripted representations of life, and that politics and art are necessarily separated social categories. While apparently defined boundaries between the practice of "theatre" (understood as the representation of a script by actors who impersonate characters for an audience to watch) and performance art (the art of presenting live actions) grew in the second half of the twentieth century, these boundaries are not respected by EDT's use of the word theatre, which is used as a synonym for the broader category "cultural performance". EDT's online theatrivism is definitively not theatre in a conventional sense, but it depends on a reconfiguration of traditional elements of the art form (ie. the Aristotelian dramatic structure, the theatre building) as well as an appropriation of performance art goals (i.e the presentation of the performer in the first person, the fusion of art and life) to construct and frame its social dramas. These social dramas are staged on the Internet, and are performed by ordinary users whose collaboration is essential for the creation and legitimating of the actions. As an act of Electronic Civil Disobedience, EDT's social dramas are rebellious but not violent. From a Turnerian perspective, they can be understood as liminoid processes that open *antistructural* spaces for temporary mass expression. Anti-structural here does not mean that the performances do not have a structure; it means that they enable a temporary separation from the dominant social order.

Probably, EDT's greatest achievement so far has been making possible for an embodied mass presence to become culturally and politically relevant on the Internet. The group has been successful at putting together a show of presence on the Internet that gets a fair amount of attention from the media and the chosen targets. The performances, however, present two serious problems. On the one hand, there is a problem with accessibility. Although the actions attempt to be symbols of democratic expression, because

they are not accessible for everyone, they end up being elitist. On the other hand, it must be highlighted that their achievements are not enough to sing victory. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the political efficacy of these social dramas is very limited. In spite of having staged several effective actions (effective in the sense that they have been noticed), evidence of significant social change or political reforms as a direct result of this publicity is not easy to find. In other words, it seems that these performances are very unlikely to bring about revolution. Of course, making a political analysis of EDT's project was not my objective in this study and therefore my conclusions in this respect are limited. Given the variety of political controversies raised by the project, more research from this perspective would also be interesting to pursue. Having said this, I will only add that EDT's resistant potential cannot be entirely denied in the sense that the gestures certainly challenge the dominant commodified use of the Internet. They encourage awareness and debate on important social struggles as well as a cultural and creative appropriation of the virtual realm.

Because EDT's performances function as a tactic to resist power in the Digital Age, the group has been identified as part of an emerging social movement called hacktivism. As we have seen, a problem with defining EDT's actions as hacktivism is that we get an inaccurate idea of their nature (and even opposing if one is not familiar with Jordan and Taylor's attempt to restore the term). The term hacktivism highlights the activist and the hacker spirits pushing EDT's performative logic to the background. Instead of hacktivism, I propose online theatrivism as a defining term in an effort to highlight that what EDT does is a hybrid that combines performance, activism and digital technologies. Online theatrivism allows us to see the theatrical elements that help organize and enhance the socio-political acts of protest. In addition, it reminds us that EDT's gestures are staged reality that recognizes itself as such, and thus entails a meta-commentary on activist behavior.

Finally, I want to make clear that this study does not attempt to suggest that more traditional aesthetic-focused offline theatrical events are dying in the context of the Digital Age; my intention here has been to acknowledge that other possibilities are already starting to be imagined.

Suggestions for Further Research

In this study I have focused on EDT's work in order to understand it and define it. I have paid particular attention to the group's proposed concept of theatre, which, as we have seen, challenges traditional definitions of the art form, and I have offered the term online theatrivism to define this new form of cultural performance. Online theatrivism, however, is not the only existing proposal for online performance. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, in recent decades, performance artists have been increasingly experimenting with computer technologies and the virtual space. An interesting next step would be to compare EDT's work with other hybrid projects, particularly those concerned with activism. For instance, Guerrilla Girls, a group of feminist activists and artists, also has a virtual performance venue where they encourage theatrical ways of social intervention³⁹. In a comparative study it would be interesting to find out: What sorts of virtual theatres are there? What kind of activism do they make possible? What kind of online stages are more likely to attract and engage internet users? How do different artists approach virtual and global audiences? In fact, with the central role that the spectator is playing in the most recent conceptualizations of theatre and performance, more research on virtual theatres' reception and audiences is really needed.

³⁹ See Matthew Mirapaul. "A Stronger, More Theatrical Role for Female Activists." *The New York Times* 23 July, 2001: E2.

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