

From the Urban Dérive to the Internet Dérive:  
Deterritorialized Capitalism in the Guise of a Digital Utopia

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When the internet was introduced to the general public in the United States in the early 1990s, artists were some of the earliest adopters, appointing themselves as the forerunners of a new cultural avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> The potential of the internet as a democratic platform for information sharing and the change it heralded were widely discussed in popular news media: the '90s were quickly labeled as the dawn of a new Age of Information. As a result, artistic production saw a resurgence of revolutionary optimism. Artists found a new hope in the internet as a space for change and as stage for social revolution, despite the pessimism cultivated by the postmodernist cultural criticism of the 1970s and '80s, which had suggested that the project of modernist idealism was dead and, with it, the possibility of revolution.<sup>23</sup> In particular, the internet art avant-garde, who called themselves "Net.artists," revived the avant-garde radicalism that was thought to have gone on hiatus following the dissolution of the Situationist International in 1972. Between 1957 and 1972, the Situationist International (SI), a collective of European artists, thinkers, and activists, including Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, Asger Jorn, and Jorgen Nash, had focused upon the city and a reconceptualization of urban space as a hosting site for societal change and utopian possibilities. While the SI had sought to transform the everyday lives of individuals under the control of consumer capitalism in the concrete space of the city, the internet artists found a new opportunity in the virtual space of the internet. Their enthusiasm for the seeming horizontal paradigms of this new space corresponded to the interests of postmodernist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of the rhizome, which prioritized a network of interconnected

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<sup>1</sup> "Early adopter" is a term for those who are the first to use a new technology when it first hits the market. Early adopters are often willing to weather the bugs and risks associated with devoting a lot of time to a technology that may prove to be a dead end or become obsolete such as 8-track tapes or mini-discs.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Drolet, ed, *The Postmodernism Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Here the term "postmodernist" is used as identified by Micheal Drolet (footnote 2), who means it as a 'catch-call' descriptor for the multiple strairings of postructuralist philosophy post 1968. This term therefore encompasses, the philosophical writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze. In the realm of visual art, "posmodernist" refers to reconsiderations of subjectivity and the biases of systems in determining or expressing meaning. It does not mean to address what is often described as the more conservative, reactionary manifestations of anti-modern nostalgia that typified much art of the 1980s. See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh. *Art Since 1900: modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

nodes above the metanarratives of modernist teleologies.<sup>4</sup> Using Deleuze and Guattari as a bridge to the radical tactics of the SI, especially what was called the *dérive* and *détournement*, these artists hoped to create free, collective, and democratic art, often in opposition to the dominance of capitalism. In what follows, I will explore the Net.artists' inheritance of Situationist tactics through the 1990s in order to ground an argument about the inevitability of their failure to achieve their stated aims of democratizing artistic production and revolutionizing society. The internet, I argue, is not a space fundamentally or structurally opposed to capitalist-created hierarchies but instead another format for capitalism to flourish free from restrictions of the State and, therefore, a space where anti-capitalist art can not successfully evade the inequities of consumer capitalism.

### **The Avant-Garde Inheritance: the SI and the Refusal of Functionalism**

Convinced that consumerist constructions stunt the ability of humans to experience everyday life fully, the Situationist International sought to foment revolution against consumer capitalism. For them, the natural and inevitable site of this revolution was the city. Rapidly burgeoning urban space and shifting demographics presented urban space as a terrain of possibility. To some degree, the SI's rhetoric became action in the form of the May 1968 general strike in France. The strike was sparked by student protests at the University of Paris at Nanterre who had complaints which ranged from restrictions on students' facilities and social life to the banning of political debates. The students were also, in part, responding to world events such as the war in Vietnam and the spread of corresponding Maoist ideologies. Students at the Sorbonne in Paris picked up the protest when officials closed the university at Nanterre and the discontent soon spread to the workers and then throughout the country, paralyzing the government for several months.<sup>5</sup>

Whether the Situationists instigated the activities or, more likely, reflected the mood of the country at the time, they played an important role in the production of leaflets and propaganda posters

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<sup>4</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002).

during the spread of the general strike. **(Illus. 1)** The SI had inherited a Marxist view that pre-War industrialism conquered the workplace and destroyed any psychological satisfaction, fulfillment, variety and happiness experienced while working. Applying this Marxist mentality to the growth of consumerism in the 1950s and beyond, they believed that capitalism conquered the home and everyday life of the individual, as well as the workplace.<sup>6</sup> Central to this critique was the rejection of the systematic methods for living envisioned by modernist architects of the 1920s and 30s, the most prominent of whom was Le Corbusier.

In 1920, the architect Le Corbusier had collaborated on launching the publication *L'Esprit Nouveau* where he first posited his idea that architecture and the urban envelope that surrounds it should be a “*machine à habiter*” (machine for living).<sup>7</sup> This phrase was quickly taken up by a wide range of modernist architects under the impetus of constructive or positive advancements in art and architecture as opposed to the perceived negativity of movements such as Dada, which merely negated culture and values. These architects saw their role as part of an avant-garde that would push human existence and dwelling toward positive progress through constructive means. Whereby Dada was tearing apart and trivializing culture and modern life, the followers of Le Corbusier wanted to create a new and more efficient way to live. Conversely, the “machine for living” was taken up by legions of critics who disparaged its implication that daily life could be somehow rationalized into geometric and mathematically precise living arrangements. In a 1929 lecture, Le Corbusier defended against his critics by arguing, “If the expression has infuriated, it is because it contains the word ‘machine,’ representing evidently in all minds the idea of functioning, of efficiency, of work, of production. And the term ‘for living,’ representing exactly the concepts of ethics, of social standing, of the organization of existence, on which there is the most complete disagreement.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Le Corbusier indicates that all aspects of everyday life should be efficient and productive. He wanted to eradicate the

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<sup>6</sup> Guy Debord, “Soundtracks of Two Films by Guy Debord: On the Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Period of Time,” in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 31.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Gardiner, *Le Corbusier* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974) 2.

<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier, “A Dwelling at Human Scale,” *Precisions* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991) 86-7.

disorganized living spaces of the bourgeoisie, arguing they were not fully rationalized for efficiency. And yet, as the SI's critique helped to make cogent, Le Corbusier misjudged how his machine-like architecture would affect the mental well-being of people living in it.

Le Corbusier's International Style was applied to many of the most infamous public housing projects in America, including Cabrini Green in Chicago and St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe buildings. When these projects were systematically torn down beginning in the 70s, many postmodern critiques heralded the end of modernist idealism. In their time, however, Le Corbusier and his admirers had believed that until architecture and living space were organized into a rational order, people would be overwhelmed and frustrated in their daily lives.<sup>9</sup> The style of architecture Le Corbusier advocated was known as "functionalism," although Le Corbusier himself rejected the term.<sup>10</sup>

**(Illus. 2)**

Although the Situationist International came from a similar point of view regarding the mental well-being of humans in their everyday life, they rejected wholeheartedly the notion that this would be achieved by rational, functional, utilitarian living arrangements. Reacting to Le Corbusier's "machine for living," and in a gesture more reminiscent of the avant-garde precedents set by Dadaism and Surrealism, the Situationists wanted to rethink the city in a way that would facilitate spontaneity of movement and play.<sup>11</sup> In order to foment revolution, the Situationist International developed a concept of urban space and architecture as a battleground of emotionally and psychologically oppressive forms and structures. They held that architecture is "the simplest

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<sup>9</sup> Simon Richards, *Le Corbusier and the Concept of Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 37-39.

<sup>10</sup> Gardiner, 2.

<sup>11</sup> The practices of the Situationists owe much to the Dadaist experience and expression of a bankruptcy in culture, itself realized in light of the carnage of World War I. Like Dada, the Situationists wanted to introduce a sense of play in everyday life and were actively questioning the definition of art and its validity. The Situationist practice of the *dérive*, which allowed one to drift freely through the city, owes much to the wanderings of the Surrealists. The SI's interest in the psychological effect of architectural environments is related the Surrealist belief that the psychological unconscious expresses true will and desire.

means of *articulating* time and space, of *modulating* reality, of engendering dreams.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, they asserted, to live a life with more psychological satisfaction, free from the shackles of mass consumption, one must begin with the subversion of architecture and space. To be sure, the SI were mainly concerned with the “material environment of life,” what they perceived of as the physical objects which surround us, and the behavior and emotions it inspires and which “radically transform it.”<sup>13</sup> The city and the transformation of urban life were where the SI saw this relationship most clearly expressed. The physical surroundings and material conditions of life held the potential for happiness or misery.

Several important theoretical concepts were established as a result of this view of spatial relations and continue to be effective tools for anti-capitalist action, including subversively anti-capitalist internet art such as RTMark and eToy who utilized the Situationist technique of *detournement*.<sup>14</sup> Psychogeography was a term the Situationists used to describe the ways in which spaces and “geography” effect the emotions and behaviors experienced while living in them.<sup>15</sup> This idea was embodied most notably by the *dérive* and the creation of psychogeographic maps. The SI held that the maps they created, whether transposed from different elements or created from scratch “can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete *insubordination* to habitual influences.”<sup>16</sup>

**(Illus. 3)** As is seen in this map, *Naked City* 1958, Debord wanted to illustrate how the traditional organization of the city and adherence to standard maps limit movements through the city by imposing a hierarchical order of pathways and stifle the mental well being of the person in the space. In this jumble of neighborhood fragments with arrows connecting them to various other fragments, random connections are made in a non-hierarchical structure. This nodal system of

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<sup>12</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 2.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 22.

<sup>14</sup> RTMark and eToy are two anti-capitalist internet projects which utilized the language and imagery of corporations in order to subvert them.

<sup>15</sup> Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

points throughout the city is not unlike the structure of the internet, which is delocalized and de-centered in much the same way as the city is in Situationist maps. The Situationists were re-forming the city into interconnected nodes in order to subvert social order and structure. Early internet artists found this same type of decentralized nodal point structure in the world wide web. The internet was literally a web of interconnected web pages linked to one another in a vast, interconnected network. While the Situationists were busy re-arranging the dominant orders and structures of existing urban space, the internet artists found, in essence, a ready-made structure following this pattern of arrangement.

The SI tactic of the *dérive* was related to the Situationist maps and their delocalized nature. The *dérive* was a “drifting” through city space, which was spontaneous as opposed to routine. By finding new pathways and routes that might contradict the functionalist essence of planned urban space, the drifter was able to be playful rather than bored and unfulfilled by the monotony of consumer-controlled daily life. The *dérive* through the city and the experience of navigating cyberspace are, at least, structurally similar. However, in comparison to the de-hierarchized space of the internet, the urban *dérive* is imposed on an existing hierarchically organized system while the internet *dérive* or “surfing the net” was a ready-made tendency. This tendency is being eroded with the subtle ways corporations funnel user pathways through sites online, but the instinctive way of navigating the net, at its inception, was the *dérive*.

The last important SI tactic to resurface in avant-garde net.art of the 1990s is *detournement*, an idea which has had a powerful influence on art and activism since the 60s. *Detournement* is the subversion of material objects, advertisements, works of art, maps, or any other visual or written device utilized by spectacular culture<sup>17</sup> in order to expose some sort of ironic or exposing truth through the signs and language understood in consumer culture.<sup>18</sup> As I expand on later, this form of subversion was utilized extensively by the art/activist projects RTMark and eToy, as well as

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<sup>17</sup> This is a term utilized by the SI to describe the ways in which members of consumer societies are conditioned to watch and be spectators in their own lives rather than participate

<sup>18</sup> Guy Debord, “Methods of Detournement,” in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981)10.



many other internet artists. Due to the ease of “theft” of digital content, it was easy for internet artists to copy the contents of a webpage and alter it in a subversive way. The ability of users to left click and select the option “View Source” on any web page they open in their browser allowed internet artists to see the HTML code of any of the websites they visited and effectively download and re-create them.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the Situationists were practicing artists and focused on the ways in which individuals are limited in their emotions and behavior due to the control of capital over all aspects of life. One of the major factors in the disbanding of the group was the dispute between various factions over whether they could, under the strictures of their ideological refusal of ‘spectacle,’ produce art at all. Many members of the group saw their construction of situations, ‘events’ meant to bridge the gap between art and everyday life in a spontaneous moment, as the opposite of a work of art.<sup>20</sup> The exclusivity of the group, Guy Debord’s control, and the nature of art itself as a consumable or spectacular product all led to turmoil both among group members and their professed ideologies.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, much of the writing of the SI appeared to be a call to action to challenge the status quo and start a very real, political revolution. In “The Bad Days Will End,” Raoul Vaneigem declares,

Many people are skeptical about the possibility of a new revolutionary movement, continually repeating that the proletariat has been integrated or that the workers are now satisfied, etc. This means one of two things: either they are declaring

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<sup>19</sup> The “View Source” option in internet browser technology allows the user to see only the HTML code that is downloaded by his or her computer. This code is downloaded by the browser and interpreted by that program. For example, if one’s browser is Internet Explorer, that program interprets the code to create the display of text and images you see in the browser window. HTML is a client-side language, which means it is interpreted on the side of the user. Other more sophisticated languages like PHP are server-side languages and are therefore interpreted by the server, transformed into HTML and are never seen by the user in their original form. This can be seen as another way the transparency of the internet has been reined in by corporations and individuals eager to protect their sites’ contents.

<sup>20</sup> Tom McDonough, “Editorial Notes: The Meaning of Decay in Art,” *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) 85-93.

<sup>21</sup> Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992).

themselves satisfied—in which case we will fight them without any equivocation—or they are identifying themselves with a category separate from the workers (artists, for example)—in which case we will fight this illusion by showing them that the new proletariat is tending to encompass almost everybody.<sup>22</sup>

Vaneigem never fully explains the definition of a revolutionary movement. Unlike the writings of Marx which very clearly separated the proletariat from the bourgeoisie, the workers from the bosses or the oppressed versus the oppressor, Vaneigem's writing suggests that most of us are caught up in this new proletariat. If this is true, it is not readily apparent who it is that we are supposed to be staging our new revolution against. The only opponents are illusive, fluctuating, and abstract entities such as corporations, consumerism, and entertainment which are made up of all of us anyway. Certainly, one could go after the corporate CEOs as the culprits, but aren't they perhaps disillusioned into the slavish allegiance to consumerism just as we all are and therefore part of the new proletariat too? Based on this assumption, the SI's suggestion of a new revolution is not in the political sense at all, since the opponent is no known political group or entity. The new revolution is based on the individual revolution experienced by those who want to live without the need to conspicuously consume and those who want to continue the critique of capitalism. Any physical or political revolution, as May 1968 could be seen to be, was destined for failure because it was fighting an imaginary enemy. This opponent, based on this logic, is not some external power or force but rather the consumer conditioning existing in all of us as participants in a consumer capitalist society.

If political revolutionary activities are assumed to be ineffective because the enemy lies within ourselves, not in some external scapegoat, then the SI has succeeded in delivering some very useful tools for accomplishing a revolution in our daily lives. Namely, the *dérive* and *detournement* provide ways of escaping the psychological need to consume and also ways to point out the shallow hypocrisy of the system. To their ultimate disappointment, many did not see

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<sup>22</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, "The Bad Days Will End," in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 85.

this personal revolution as the ultimate goal and were hoping for a dramatic political revolution to overthrow the oppressive forces of capitalism. The revolutionary actions taken by the followers of the SI in various parts of Europe, notably France and England, failed to change the pervasiveness and widespread acceptance of consumer values.<sup>23</sup> According to Sadie Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture: Situationist International in the Postmodern Age*, it was actually *these* failed revolutions that consequently influenced the somewhat pessimistic outlook of postmodern theory on prospects of revolution, making the internet artists' take-up of the SI strategies somewhat ironic, if not perverse. The strike of May 1968, after all, did not accomplish any long-term change in the system and led to widespread disillusionment with the revolutionary project and modernism itself. Many theorists in the 70s and 80s, especially those in France, lost faith in any kind of objectivity at all. Without the objectivity of meaning and social justice, the impetus for revolution and the value of its pursuit disappeared.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Postmodern Rupture: After the SI and Before the Internet**

In many ways, we can see this disruption to the revolutionary ideal as having spurred Jean-François Lyotard in 1979 to identify a new period in philosophical thought which he coined as "postmodernism".<sup>25</sup> In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard outlines his skepticism of grand narratives ("metanarratives"), the singular chronologies or theories such as Marxism which tell one, overarching narrative. He claimed that, "Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables... I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it."<sup>26</sup>

One of the most powerful metanarratives in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the opposition to capitalism and

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<sup>23</sup> In England, members of anarchist and punk movements were inspired by Situationist activities. See Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992) 143-7.

<sup>24</sup> Plant, 150-187.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1998) 3.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the belief that its destruction through social and political revolution was imminent. The hope for change evident in the writings and actions of the Situationist International as well as in the work of the early internet artists demanded the continuity of a narrative of progress through revolution. Many of the other key theorists associated with the term postmodernism such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze also professed a profound skepticism with regard to the organization of philosophy and language.

Two threads of postmodernism developed in opposition to each other in the ensuing years. On one end of the spectrum, there was a neoconservative trend in cultural production, first in architecture than in visual art. Hal Foster describes this as “marked by an eclectic historicism, in which old and new modes and styles (used goods, as it were) are retooled and recycled.”<sup>27</sup> These neoconservatives are characterized as anti-modernist in a way that seeks to return to the traditions, institutions, and modes of cultural production which they believed modernism has diminished such as traditional painting. According to Foster, these neoconservatives blamed cultural production for the ills of society without recognizing the economic modernization that came along with it, including the negative social effects of, for example, privatization.<sup>28</sup> For the postmodernists, the failures of architectural modernism lay in the failure of the urban utopian project. While the Situationist International believed that the site of revolution was this urban space, neoconservative postmodernists saw the key to Situationist theory as a mistaken conclusion. They simultaneously espoused the impossibility of revolutionary architecture and welcomed the architecture of superficial and elaborately decorated “sheds” like those found in Las Vegas, for example.<sup>29</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, poststructuralist postmodernism is similar to neoconservative postmodernism in that it is anti-modernist. Its reasons for being so, however, are different and, in fact, opposed to the stance neoconservatives take. Poststructuralist postmodernism “questions the truth content of visual representation” and dissects the ways in

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<sup>27</sup> Hal Foster, “(Post)modern Polemics,” in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1985) 121.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 126-7.

which meaning of symbols are relative.<sup>30</sup> These two lines of postmodernist thought, however, may be two “symptoms of the same ‘schizophrenic’ collapse of the subject and of historical narrativity—as signs of the same process of reification and fragmentation under late capitalism.”<sup>31</sup> The characterization of late capitalism as schizophrenic in nature stems from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose writings on the subject predated the internet, which was heralded as a manifest realization of the forms of organization outlined by Deleuze and Guattari.

### **The Imperfect Rhizome: Deleuze, Guattari and the Internet**

In their 1980 work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari follow up and refine their analysis of multiplicities and flows of capital within the psychoanalytical framework they first articulated in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). Here, they propose a system of socio-political organization that consists of interconnected nodes on a horizontal plane rather than a multileveled hierarchy. They call this system of organization a “rhizome”, using a botanical metaphor for plant systems that are structured like grasses or tubers and produce shoots in a network of nodes. They compare the rhizome to the hierarchical tree-like or arboreal structure which is vertical and restricts direction of flow. The defining principles of this model are “connection and heterogeneity; any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.”<sup>32</sup> Another principle outlined is multiplicity, where the subject dissolves into the object and vice versa, image and reality blur, with no notion of unity to take power over the system.<sup>33</sup> A final principle is “asignifying rupture.” Here, they endorse meaning composed “against the oversignifying break separating structures or cutting across a single structure. A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines.”<sup>34</sup> This principle emphasizes the delocalization of power in the rhizomatic model. Without a hierarchy of command, the power of the system can not be simply destroyed at one

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, 132.

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004) 7.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 10.

point, thereby disconnecting the rest of the chain. Instead, each node is connected but resilient. If one section of the rhizome is wiped out, the rest can still survive.

The rhizome model provided an alternative to the power of hierarchical systems and the linearity of the metanarratives. It finds its greatest significance in a related concept detailed by Deleuze and Guattari: the flow of capital described in terms of deterritorializations and reterritorializations. Deleuze and Guattari describe the flux of capital as a force that is constantly deterritorializing systems in order allow the most capital to be accumulated from their freedom and openness before reterritorializing the system in order to rein it in and extract even more capital. In *Anti-Oedipus*, this process is described:

As a corollary of this law, there is the twofold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other. The more the capitalist machine deterritorializes, decoding, and axiomatizing flow in order to extract surplus value from them, the more its ancillary apparatuses, such as government bureaucracies and the forces of law and order, do their utmost to reterritorialize, absorbing in the process a larger and larger share of surplus value <sup>35</sup>

This indicates that somehow the government and capitalism are co-conspirators in this accumulation of capital, both working independently and reacting to one another in order to concentrate wealth. In utilizing the rhizome model, however, internet users of the early 90s were hoping to escape this constant fluctuation of capital. The rhizome is just as much a part of this system, though, and subject to its relative deterritorializations and reterritorializations.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain how the flow of capital operates as a force independent of the State of governmental power:

When the flows reach this capitalist threshold of decoding and deterritorialization (naked labor, independent capital), there is no longer a need for a State, for

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<sup>35</sup> Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Althone Press Ltd., 1984) 34-35.

distinct juridical and political domination, in order to ensure appropriation, which has become directly economic... Today we can depict an enormous, so-called stateless, monetary mass that circulates through foreign exchange and across borders, eluding control by the States, forming a multinational ecumenical organization... And in fact capitalism is not short on war cries against the State, not only in the name of the market, but by virtue of its superior deterritorialization.<sup>36</sup>

One might wonder why the state still exists at all, if capitalism itself is far better at extracting surplus if it exists without territory. Although capital does not need the State, the State succeeds in effectively appeasing these capitalist forces through reterritorialization. Although this process is not as effective as capital's deterritorializations, the antiquated nation-states survive based on their ability to designate territories which facilitate accumulation of more capital. Deleuze and Guattari write that "It is thus proper to State deterritorialization to moderate the superior deterritorialization of capital and to provide the latter with compensatory reterritorializations."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the State maintains its tenuous control. The concept of capital's increasing hold on the world's wealth and resources through its deterritorializations is explored further by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*, which is more directly related to the state of politics and capital in the real world. In this book, the "Empire" of the title is the empire created by capitalism as the dominate order of our world, continually grasping power from the anachronistic nation-state governments, some seeking to regulate it more than others.<sup>38</sup>

When the world wide web was introduced to consumers in the early 90s, Deleuze and Guattari's postulation of the rhizome model was like a prophecy come true. Artists and theorists did not take long to recognize that many of the qualities and structures manifest in the internet were the same as those of the rhizome model. Once an internal government and academic group of separate networks, the internet was made available to a broader public in the 90s and those who had

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<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 500-501.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 502.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

access were free to put whatever they liked online, talk with whomever they chose, and set up whatever communities they could imagine.<sup>39</sup> In this way, capitalism was operating independently of the State, as described above, in order to extract more capital than the system previously produced.

The followers of Deleuze and Guattari were not the dominant presence online in the 90s, by any means. Naturally, those accustomed to the culture of consumer capitalism, which either dominated or was ascendant in practically every country where the internet was used in these early days, saw this as an opportunity to set up business and commerce. In order to make business truly successful on the internet, though, a certain amount of governmental reterritorialization of capital was necessary. Legitimation of online business through domain registration, secure monetary services, and the presence of established businesses offering their wares online helped to not only produce a climate where internet consumption was acceptable and trustworthy but also regulated so that more money was funneled into creation of consolidated corporations. In the late 90s and into the 2000s, with the consolidation of successful entrepreneurial sites like MySpace and YouTube into large corporations, the reterritorialization of capital is coming full circle again.

### **The Internet: Californian Ideologues and Deleuzoguattarians**

Most of those interested in the internet during the 1990s were those which saw it with a commercially oriented optimism. In their 1996 article, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron outlined an attitude toward technology, termed the 'Californian Ideology,' which:

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<sup>39</sup> *Internet Society: A Brief History of the Internet.* <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml>



promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies. This amalgamation of opposites has been achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies. In the digital utopia, everybody will be both hip and rich.<sup>40</sup>

At the advent of the internet in the early 1990s, both those on the activist left and the libertarian right were quick to laud the new technology as the beacon of hope for building a new digital utopia. For the conservatives, the internet provided an economic escape from the regulation of the government and an outlet for digital cowboys to stake out their territory and make tremendous profits through individualistic, entrepreneurial initiative. For the liberals, it was the realization of an openly sharing, democratic, gift economy, a kind of cyber commune where everyone was equal and everyone could participate. These two polar opposites were united briefly in their enthusiasm for the internet, but, as Barbrook and Cameron suggested in 1996 and as has been realized today, the Californian ideologues have decidedly drifted to the right, celebrating individualism on the net and the realization of the American Dream of self-made wealth through hard work and entrepreneurial zeal.<sup>41</sup> For those artists and activists residing in the liberal camp of this philosophy, the excitement of creating work online and sharing in digital communities overrode their critical capacities toward the medium itself. In the wake of Barbrook and Cameron's article, internet artists acquired a new skepticism towards these blindly optimistic attitudes, especially those who participated in the internet mailing list Nettime, which facilitated much of the early discourse on internet art.<sup>42</sup>

One of the earliest online communities, along with e-mail list Nettime, was Mark Tribe's Rhizome mailing lists which later morphed into the Rhizome website. In addition to providing forums and e-mail lists, Rhizome has been actively archiving new media art since the early 90s. Although its current manifestation, Rhizome.org, never explicitly states it is based on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome as a metaphor for decentralized networking, it obviously uses this

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," *Science as Culture*, 6:1 (no.26, 1996), 44-72.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) 51-52.

concept as a structural, if not ideological, inspiration. Completing his MA in visual art in San Diego in 1994 just as the internet was quickly gaining popularity, Mark Tribe developed into a quintessential Californian Ideologue.<sup>43</sup> He originally began Rhizome under the .com extension ("Rhizome.com") as a for-profit business while living in Berlin.<sup>44</sup> He hoped that his new .com would profit from providing something new for the web and its artist and theorist enthusiasts.<sup>45</sup> According to Tribe:

Rhizome moved to New York City where the Internet content industry, now known as Silicon Alley, was taking off. We incorporated as a for-profit entity, Rhizome.com, in July 1996. It soon became clear that Rhizome.com's advertising-based revenue model was fatally limited by market size. A second, more commercially focused enterprise, StockObjects, was started in 1997 as a way to leverage existing assets and build a viable business. StockObjects.com funded Rhizome.org's operations for two years.<sup>46</sup>

In this article, Tribe sounds more like a hard-nosed capitalist than a proponent of Deleuze and Guattari's anti-capitalist, delocalized, deterritorialized rhizome structure, suggesting, almost ironically, the proof of Deleuze and Guattari's expectation that capital reterritorializes sites of difference. Tribe even attempts to defend his side business venture in a discussion thread from 1997:

StockObjects makes sense as a business. Not only does it support RHIZOME, it also provides a valuable alternative source of revenue for the community RHIZOME serves. StockObjects is about creating a market for the work that we do, both in the studio and on the job. It's about

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<sup>43</sup> CV, *Mark Tribe Home Page*, <http://nothing.org> (Feb. 18, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> In general, ".com" as an extension is used for commercial for-profit business while the ".org" extension is generally used for personal or not-for-profit organizations

<sup>45</sup> Greene, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Tribe, "Archiving net.art," *ON OFF: Net Art Online and in Print*, <http://www.afsnitp.dk/onoff/Texts/tribearchivingne.html> (Feb. 18, 2007).

finding a way to pay the rent in a world that is reluctant to pay for art.<sup>47</sup>

Although from the start, Tribe set out to create a business, he seems to have accidentally fallen into creating a seminal part of (internet) art history, which was much later turned into a non-profit and ultimately acquired by the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Rather than a successful CEO, Tribe became an influential theoretician. Although it may seem obvious, after witnessing the progression of business on the web, Tribe's project functioned much more naturally as part of the gift economy of the internet and it progressed from there into the gift economy of information sharing already in place in the academic world.<sup>48</sup> Mark Tribe and his Californian Ideologue peers had merged with their, as Barbrook terms it, 'deleuzoguattarian' European peers whereby the former's futurism and the latter's primitivism united to celebrate a new utopia for individualism online.<sup>49</sup>

Another early internet facilitator was Äda'web, an online hosting site for the work of established artists anxious to experiment with the internet as a medium. Äda'web claims to have been created "with the goal to provide contemporary artists... a station from which they can engage in a dialogue with users of the internet."<sup>50</sup> This claim suggests that somehow a non-art world audience was getting involved in the internet art discourse. In her 2004 *Internet Art*, Rachel Greene, claims that "online nodes like Äda'web filled important gaps between artists and established institutions and audiences of art enthusiasts," but later states that "the small group of

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Tribe, "RHIZOME and STOCKOBJECTS," *Rhizome.org*, Aug. 8, 1997, <http://rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=1337&page=1#753> (Feb. 18, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> The gift economy is the idea of free exchange forming an alternative economy to capitalism. In a capitalist economy everything has a price, but in a gift economy there is a certain amount of social pressure to give "belongings" away. This idea was taken up by many different writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Guy Debord in his *Potlatch* publication. These writers were inspired by sociological and anthropological writings about the gift economies of native North Americans and other tribal cultures around the world. One of the key works which inspired the application of the gift economy to western European thinking was the 1925 work *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss. English edition: Marcel Mauss, *The gift : the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Richard Barbrook, "The Holy Fools," *The Hypermedia Research Centre*, <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-holyfools-print.html> (Feb. 19, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Äda'web, *Walker Art Center*, [http://adaweb.walkerart.org/nota/messages/read\\_ada.html](http://adaweb.walkerart.org/nota/messages/read_ada.html) (Feb. 20, 2007).

interested participants, numbering just a few thousand until 1999, contributed to an intimate and close-knit sensibility.”<sup>51</sup> Although it may have seemed like, because it was located on the internet, this site was somehow more accessible to the general public or those on the fringes or outside of the art world, sites like Äda’web were no more accessible or widely seen than *Artforum* is at the local bookstore. The relatively small number of participants in the site’s discussion were mostly those in the art world already, hence no real gaps were being bridged.

The well-known artists who participated in projects for the site, such as Jenny Holzer, who merely translated her trademark truisms to the internet in *Please Change Beliefs*, also helped keep the site firmly in the scope of the art world audience.<sup>52</sup> (Illus. 4) In Holzer’s project, visitors can click on a truism such as “BOREDOM MAKES YOU DO CRAZY THINGS” and change it. The new texts are then archived and the visitor is brought to a page which displays the altered truisms.<sup>53</sup> This work’s only defining attribute as internet art is its interactivity, although it appears to include interactivity merely as a provision to existing online. Based on the structure of the piece, there is no compelling reason for it to be interactive; it does not display the altered truisms on the main opening page and it merely logs your alteration in a database you may or may not even view when you submit it. Interactivity is something which dominates all aspects of activity, not just art activity, online, and is therefore unimpressive in this case. Holzer’s piece is either an attempt to jump on the bandwagon of a new trendy medium or lend some legitimacy to the medium for the benefit of those artists who were not previously established offline. The implication is that the art world was watching internet art and fostering it from very early on, no matter how excluded “from the broader art discourse” internet artists and enthusiasts may have felt.<sup>54</sup> The extent to which internet art was broadly welcomed and acknowledged by art institutions and already has a place firmly within the establishment is evidenced by the fact that Äda’web is now hosted by the Walker Art Center and Rhizome.org is hosted by the New Museum of Contemporary Art. No matter how

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<sup>51</sup> Greene, 60.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Jenny Holzer, “Please Change Beliefs,” Äda’web, <http://adaweb.walkerart.org/project/holzer/cgi/pcb.cgi?truism> (Feb. 20, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> According to Greene, 60.

much internet artists would like to believe that they were the lone hackers and cowboys of the internet, expressing their individualism and staking out their territory without the need of institutional backing, they have been courting the support of art and governmental institutions all along.

## **Net.art**

As suggested above, the forerunners of internet art were the artists loosely associated with the term “net.art”. These included Vuk Cosic, Alexei Shulgin, jodi.org, Olia Lialina, and Heath Bunting. According to Josephine Berry, the utopianism found in the work of these artists can be tied to and exemplified in the narrative surrounding the origins of the term “net.art. In a post on the nettime mailing list in 1997, Alexei Shulgin related the story of how Vuk Cosic came upon this term. Shulgin discloses that Vuk Cosic had discovered “net.art” among the jibberish text of an e-mail which was scrambled due to incompatibility between the software of the sender and receiver.<sup>55</sup> Among the nonsensical ASCII characters, Cosic saw this combination of characters and delighted in the fact that it was “readymade” by the computer glitch itself.<sup>56</sup> The story itself, as Cosic readily admits, is fictional and seen as a work of net.art in itself.<sup>57</sup> In her analysis, Berry postulates that the union of these two terms separated by the dot signifies a juncture at which “technology unites with art’s power to reveal and articulate the world in non-instrumental ways... this tale points toward some kind of Heideggerian utopia in which art and technology’s erstwhile

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<sup>55</sup> Alexei Shulgin, “Net.art – the origin,” nettime, Mar 18 1997, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9703/msg00094.html> (Feb 24 2007).

<sup>56</sup> ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) is the simplest text character format which functions by assigning numerical values to letters, allowing for a standard character set across computers and programming languages; Mary Brandel, “1963: The debut of ASCII,” *CNN.com*, <http://edition.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9907/06/1963.idg/index.html> (Feb 24 2007).

<sup>57</sup> Cosic makes this clear in his history of net.art on META.morphoses, stating, “net.art is an expression that was coined by Pit Schultz sometime in 1995. Alexei wrote that silly story about me for fun, and that e-mail is still the most frequently referenced work of net.art.”

<http://metamorfosis.risco.pt/English/vukCosic-en.html> (Feb 25, 2007).

Also found at <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/008056.php> (Feb 25, 2007) in an interview with Cosic.

Pit Schultz was one of the original founders of the nettime mailing list. *FREE BITFLOWS* <http://freebitflows.t0.or.at/f/participants/pitschultz> (Feb 25 2007).

identity is regained.”<sup>58</sup> Here, it would seem Berry is making reference to Heidegger’s essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in which he seeks to connect man to technology by means of an essential relationship between the two, not a relationship of user and tool. He states that “modern technology too is a means to an end. That is why the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means.”<sup>59</sup> Heidegger doesn’t see technology as a means to an end but as something which reveals and brings forth the truth of our reality to us, unlocking the energy inherent in our surroundings. In this way, technology’s revelation of truth creates a positive change in the world.

According to this analysis, technology has the ability to disintegrate reality as we know it and create a virtual reality or puncture our experiences and consciousness. “Net.art” and the mythology surrounding it bridge the gap between art and technology.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, art has the ability to represent and reveal the world and our sense of reality to us. By combining these into the singular net.art, a fusion of technology and art, a utopian ideology is realized while these two powerful forces act in tandem. Net.art, by this line of thought, simultaneously expands our notion of reality and exposes, through its unique aesthetic or anti-aesthetic qualities, the world in ways that are usually hampered by technological mediators. In this way, both art and technology are potentially freed from their respective restrictions. Technology is freed from its inherent systematic order and art is released from its centralized social function and elitism in this utopian idealization.<sup>61</sup>

The inherent hypocrisy in this early internet avant garde group, much like other revolutionary adherents like the aforementioned deleuzoguattarians/California ideologues and the Situationist

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<sup>58</sup> Josephine Berry, “The Thematics of Site-Specific Art on the Net” (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2001) 39.

<sup>59</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, William Lovitt, trans., (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977) 5.

<sup>60</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003) 8.

<sup>61</sup> Berry, 40-42.

International, was that, while simultaneously celebrating and advocating the democratizing, inclusive ideologies of a harmonious utopia, they did not, in reality, want literally everyone involved. In an interview on the Nettime mailing list from 1997, Alexei Shulgin speculated that “if everybody is online, if anybody makes webpages, it will become overwhelming. Who would search for grains of gold in all this shit?”<sup>62</sup> The net.artists thrive on their relative exclusivity and insider niche knowledge. Berry suggests that:

strangely enough, the small and initially elite artistic virtual communities, seemed to function both for and against the preservation of art’s survival. The free exchange of intellectual gifts which occurred within them (although obviously not in these lists alone) seemed to promise the wider release of the non-alienated creativity of the multitude, whilst at the same time helping to maintain the self-identity of artists and art in the alien context of the Net.<sup>63</sup>

Berry argues that Richard Barbrook is misguided in arguing that somehow the gift economy created through these online forums and e-mailing lists opposes the prevalence of consumer capitalism on the web. Rather, these “gifts” are tied up in the elite experts participating in these discussions and are, in fact, owned and reproduced by the moderating sites such as Rhizome.org or the Nettime mailing list, entitling Rhizome to control and edit which artworks are allowed into the digital and internet art canons through their printed and online publications. Additionally, these intellectual gifts can result in real world material gain in the form of academic positions. Therefore, an academic gift exchange is a façade which tops off yet another group of capitalist producers.<sup>64</sup>

The early projects of the net.artists took on a very traditionally avant-garde trajectory. The international group of artists were from Slovenia (Cosic), Russia (Shulgin and Lialina), the Netherlands (jodi.org), and England (Heath Bunting). In her article “My Art World is Bigger than Your Art World,” Caitlin Jones discusses how internet art fits into the progression of avant-garde challenges to art institutions, namely the challenges posed by photography, the readymade, and

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<sup>62</sup> Qtd. Stallabrass, 68.

<sup>63</sup> Berry, 204.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 203-205.

video/tv art. All of these revolutions in art-making degraded the aura of the individual work of art, and art institutions found ways of eventually commodifying and putting aura and originality back into all of these aura-defying works of art. As critical as internet art and its precursors were of art institutions, they eventually must embrace them and the recuperation the ensues. Vuk Cosic is quoted by Jones as saying, "I am not only attacking some abstract artworld setup I was born into but also spelling out the mistake I have very much helped propagate with my own actions. To me, it is not enough to notice this shift from community to audience, but I also need to share the guilt." In many ways, internet art was never outside art institutions but had to be commercialized in order to gain its place as a successful movement.<sup>65</sup> While the form of the internet surely posed a challenge to the art world, it was not an insurmountable one.

The similarities between the net.artists and their Situationist predecessors is worth dwelling upon, and not just for the shared ambitions of their tactics. Both groups were composed of artists from various parts of Europe, both pursued idealisms and ideologies advocating a method or pathway to avoid living with the pressures of consumer capitalism, and both groups had an active interest in revolutionizing art or rejecting art and the way it's viewed. On the surface, net.art espoused an ambivalence as to whether it was art or not. This uncertainty, however, was still grounded within the rigorously policed parameters of the art world and desperately depended upon legitimacy from the art institutions it was ostensibly rejecting. In this way, the net.artists are the direct successors of dadaism, surrealism, and the Situationist International. As in these other groups, net.art negated the current systems of evaluating art in place in the art world. It rejected these dominant systems and placed itself in opposition to the positive assertions of the Californian Ideologues. While rejecting one form of internet optimism, the net.artists were subscribing to strands of hope posed by the rhizome model proffered by Deleuze and Guattari's brand of critical theory.

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<sup>65</sup> Caitlin Jones, "My Art World is Bigger than Your Art World," *The Believer*, December 2005/January 2006, 3-13.



The net.art movement did, in fact, have a strong desire to place itself in an art historical context as the next avant-garde, despite their challenging choice of medium. In *Internet Art: The Clash of Online Culture and Commerce*, Julian Stallabrass demonstrates this point in his discussion of a nettime dialogue between many of the key players in net.art:

In the fascinating discussion about the definition of net.art that took place in the nettime forum, the various contributors often invoked other art forms as precursors. As Robert Adrian pointed out, these included video, sculpture, telematic art, land art, installation, mail art, media art, Fluxus and the readymade.<sup>66</sup>

Even as early as 1997, when this discussion was taking place, net.artists were keen to put themselves in an art historical perspective. Vuk Cosic, who was probably the most interested in pursuing this traditional avant-garde format of operation, organized a conference of net.artists such as Alexei Shulgin, Heath Bunting, and Pit Schultz in May 1996 in Trieste, Italy. This conference was titled "Net.art per se" and consisted of "a day & 1/2 long closed brainstorming session moderated only in the direction of allowing everybody to say a word, and with the public panel discussion the second afternoon where some of the articulated dilemmas will be presented to the broader audience of the Festival."<sup>67</sup> During this festival, a manifesto of sorts was produced which included discussions of how art was possible in this medium, how the audience affects the art, questions of reproduction and distribution, and specific aesthetics.<sup>68</sup> The conference itself, in fact, and its exchange is described by Cosic as fundamental to the practice of net.art. He states, in an interview on the nettime listserv:

I go to conferences. That's net.art actually. That is an art practice that has to do a lot with the net. You come to the conference. You meet one hundred and a few people from abroad. That's a net. Art is not only the making of a product, which then can be sold in an art market and praised by an art thinker or mediator.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Stallabrass, 139.

<sup>67</sup> Vuk Cosic, "www.ljudmila.org" <http://www.ljudmila.org/naps/home.html> (Mar 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Vuk Cosic, "nettime post: Vuk Cosik Interview: net.art per se" (27 Sept 1997) <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9709/msg00053.html> (Mar 2007).

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*

Cosic and other net.artists are recognized today as the pioneers of internet art precisely because they placed themselves in this historical context as a new avant-garde. Although they celebrated the power of interconnected networks in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari, these artists were also 'networking' in the business sense. Networking socially with peers is a useful way of gaining recognition in the art world. Essentially, networking with those within the art world and attracting their notice and attention was nothing new and idealistically 'rhizomatic'. Networking is important to all types of artists.

The artistic work of the net.artists, although fairly diverse, was dominated by several themes and areas of interest. One of these themes was an obsession with the fabric and building blocks of HTML and the internet. The format and elements of the internet were utilized by this group of artists extensively. They were fascinated with the hyperlink. This fascination with the interconnectedness of pages on the internet through these links can be seen as a trace of a Deleuze and Guattari-esque optimism regarding a non-hierarchical network. Pathways of links and online navigation, however, are not perfectly or exactly non-hierarchical. In Heath Bunting's work, *Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible*, an article about Bunting and his work is reproduced on a web page where every word of the article, except a few words chosen by the artist, is activated as a hyperlink to the domain for that word.<sup>70</sup> **(Illus. 5)** For example, [www.are.com](http://www.are.com), [www.hyperlinks.com](http://www.hyperlinks.com), [www.to.com](http://www.to.com), [www.the.com](http://www.the.com), etc. The hyperlinks are a light gray against the white background, the non-linked words are an even lighter gray and, as such, are barely visible. Once a link is clicked, it turns black and therefore becomes visible. The words that Bunting does not link are words that he claims for himself, not allowing the corporate ownership of these choice words which include "Heath", "Bunting", "graffiti artist", "mother" and the titles of his other works.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See Bunting's site for work [http://www.irational.org/\\_readme.html](http://www.irational.org/_readme.html)

<sup>71</sup> Steve Dietz. "beyond.interface: net art and Art on the Net II," *Archives and Museum Informatics: Conferences, Consulting, Publishing and Training for Cultural Heritage Professionals* <[http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/bunting\\_fr.html](http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/bunting_fr.html)> (Feb 28, 2007)

This piece is a good example of the celebration of the hyperlink and the role of language online. By choosing to link every word to its eponymous domain, Bunting demonstrates how even the simplest elements of textual language online have been claimed by individuals or companies. The strange thing remains that it is unclear who exactly is controlling these domains. The well-known multinational corporations, the classic bad-guys of consumer capitalism, are not represented by these links. The established dotcoms are not even apparently in control of these websites. Most of the links lead to something that I'll term an Active Non-Site for lack of a better description.

**(Illus. 6)** It's rare these days to receive a 'page does not exist' error from your browser window with such simple, single words as domain names.<sup>72</sup> When a user types in any simple dotcom name, the web browser, if it does not load an active business site, will usually load one of these Active Non-Sites. These sites are characterized by only a vague association, if any association at all, with the word of their domain name and usually a generic, pre-programmed and loaded interface which includes a search box and some links to shopping and consumer ads, usually through an external provider such as Google AdWords. These pages are, in essence, not designed or moderated by anybody but exist as places of nothingness like random advertising leaflets for products no one really wants or needs. One of the most telling examples of this is the site loaded when Bunting's "activist" ([www.activist.com](http://www.activist.com)) link is clicked. At the time of writing, some of the links on the site include Activist Ringtones, Activist Gear, Community Activist, Activist Chavez. Other links shows popular categories as Autos: Car Insurance, Used Cars, Auto Repairs, Finances: Debt Consolidation, Debit Cards, Mortgage, and Lifestyle: Personals, Fitness, Pets. The rest of the page consists of similarly ridiculous links. It's obvious from this page that an external program is merely loading ads and search terms, probably taken from Google or other search engines, and merely inputting them randomly into the various slots on the page.

While it is fairly unknown where these links directed a web viewer in 1996 when the piece was created, today they link to sites demonstrating the very interesting phenomenon of automation online. Presumably, Bunting had intended to show through these links how rapidly corporations

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<sup>72</sup> Domain names are the web site address names such as "amazon.com" which must be purchased and registered to place content online

had taken over and 'purchased' all content online. Now, in 2007, the piece shows that much of the internet's content is created by computers themselves. Bunting's work might also be thought of as an attempt to demonstrate his relationship to these assumed corporate powers through his lowly position as an individual with his own website. Following this logic, through the equalizing force of the hyperlink, an individual artist is connected to many corporations which are bound by the same limits of programming that the artist is bound by. The fact that few, if any, of these sites are connected to people or corporations with any sort of real power demonstrates how the internet itself has reached some level of autonomy through the help of sophisticated programs. To be sure, these Active Non-Sites are owned by someone, probably a domain hosting company who hopes to auction them off to a high bidder or maintains them in a state of limbo until they are clear to be sold after a previous term of ownership has ended.<sup>73</sup> While Bunting's site puts his site as well as these links on the same level in terms of access, the level of automation on these other sites strictly opposes the very human quality and care in Bunting's site. In a way, Bunting can not compete with the sterility and un-humanness of these sites. His site's hand-crafted appearance puts him at a distinct disadvantage against the impenetrability of these links and their generically generated commercial connections.

Artists also celebrated the inherent meanings of internet elements through their use of frames to load multiple pages in one browser window.<sup>74</sup> This can be seen as an extension of their fascination with hyperlinks. In Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*, Lialina

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<sup>73</sup> Domain hosting companies are set up as such so that internet users do not have to have their own server in their homes. Servers are computers that allow for communication with other internet users and need to be active 24 hours a day to allow constant access to a site. Often servers also need to be quite large to accommodate large volumes of visitors. It is usually much more pragmatic, in these cases, for individuals to host their sites with domain hosting companies who house large rooms full of servers so that individuals do not have to worry about housing large and complex equipment in their homes. Domain registration is overseen by ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) which is a non-profit who took over the role of registering domain names, IP addresses, port assignments and more from the US government in 1998. More information at <http://www.icann.org/>. It is possible for certain companies or even individuals to buy up popular domains and sell them to the highest bidder. Common, one-word domains with the .com ending are especially valuable.

<sup>74</sup> Frames, in HTML, are a method of dividing the screen of the browser window so that different HTML files load in different windows on the screen. Each of these browser divisions effectively acts as an independent web page and any link clicked from these windows will load a page only in that particular window.

constructs a narrative which loads into many different frames within a single browser window, depending on where the visitor clicks.<sup>75</sup> **(illus. 7)** In this way, Lialina composes a non-linear narrative. This piece is the ultimate expression of both celebration of forms of the internet and its networked structure. Lialina's project suggests that on the internet, even a story has no decisive beginning or end. There is no linear timeline for the plot, but rather it is determined and pieced together by the person viewing the site. To assume that the entire internet is non-hierarchical or unauthored is a mistake, despite the fact that individual sites might come close to equalizing links and elements within themselves. Even in Lialina's story, certain choices made by the artist determine which elements are seen at what times. While this narrative may contain more choice and viewer interaction than a linear novel ever will, there still is a certain order which the links follow and a certain number of choices that the viewer has at any given time. On the opening screen, there is one choice: click the link that leads into the story. This is followed by one choice, followed by one choice, followed by 2 choices, 3 choices, 4 choices, 7 choices, and so on. After all the choices are used up, all that remains is a link to e-mail Lialina and a link to a page containing different projects imitating the original. While the internet allows greater choice in narrative and organization of information, it still contains a hierarchy.

This is true of all aspects of web browsing. We are not unleashed into the web at a random site, a random node in the "rhizome." Instead, we must enter the web through some form of hierarchy. This could be by first typing in search terms through Google, by clicking on a link sent in an e-mail, or by finding a link to a certain site from another already known site. All of these ways of interacting with the internet impose hierarchies on the network, and it must be this way for the sake of convenience. In order for the internet to be truly horizontal and nodal, users would have to be thrown to a random page each time they opened their browser windows and navigate through to other pages merely by clicking links provided. They would also not have the ability to type addresses into their browsers. Obviously, this would not be very convenient or practical. We need some forms of vertical organization in order to find what we're looking for online. This

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<sup>75</sup> *My Boyfriend Came Back from War*, <http://www.teleportacia.org/war/>

means that far more people are going to go to Google.com than Lialina's teleportacia.org. While it is true that one does not directly stem from the other, knowledge of Lialina's site depends on a hierarchy of information or being in the know about net.art. It is not very likely that one would stumble upon Lialina's site without the help of other information-disseminating sites and e-mail lists which teleportacia.org depends on in many ways. In the same way as the internet rhizome is not perfectly non-hierarchical, the internet *dérive* is not perfectly spontaneous. While the comparison between the Situationist idea of the *dérive* and web surfing shows as many seductive similarities as the comparison between the rhizome model and the internet, it would be a mistake to assume web surfing patterns are not conditioned, in large part, by corporations and consumerism. While anyone can post a video on YouTube and has the chance to be seen by millions of people, ultimately those that are featured on the front page by the editors of the site have the most likelihood of being seen.

The definition of internet art, as opposed to the more distinct categorization net.art, has been the subject of some debate. In the articles, books, and web posts written on the subject, most appear to agree with internet art curator Steve Dietz in that, when speaking of internet art, we speak of “net art projects for which the Net is both a sufficient and necessary condition of viewing/experiencing/participating.”<sup>76</sup> This definition fits for all of these early net.art projects because they were located within and experienced purely on the internet with little or no necessity for outside vehicles. At the intersection of art and activism, however, this definition is stretched but still met. Although it is obvious that the net is integral to the meaning of these works and is therefore the “necessary condition,” it is less clear that the net would be “sufficient” if the non-net world's inclusion in these activities were acknowledged and addressed. Despite the externality of activist initiatives, the web becomes sufficient as both the disseminator of these external activities and itself a representation of the goals of liberal activism against establishment governments and economies. In fact, the real-world, physical connection that some of these sites have

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<sup>76</sup> Steve Dietz, “beyond.interface: net art and Art on the Net II,” *Archives and Museum Informatics: Conferences, Consulting, Publishing and Training for Cultural Heritage Professionals* [http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/dietz\\_pencilmedia.html](http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/dietz_pencilmedia.html) (Feb 27, 2007).

acknowledged through their work and their ability to affect the reality of the physical world, despite their locus online, overcomes the Californian Ideology net worship but still may play into the other brand of net worship as propagated by the cult of followers and proponents of Deleuze and Guattari. The Situationist International were firm believers that the physical and material surrounds of architecture and the urban landscape deeply affected people psychologically and, therefore, a change in the relationship between this materiality and humans would result in more freedom and satisfaction. Artists working online rejected the relationship with the physical in favor of forming a purely digital pathway to freedom and satisfaction. By ignoring the physical world where the internet was rooted, these artists were simultaneously ignoring the real world consequences of the internet and how it functioned as part of the material world.

### **Anti-capitalist Art and Activism on the Internet**

Among those who were the first to bridge the gap between real world activism and artistic activities were the group ®™ark (RTMark) pronounced 'Art Mark'.<sup>77</sup> **(Illus. 8)** Founded in 1994, RTMark is a legal corporation "offering limited liability to activists, artists, and other cultural producers."<sup>78</sup> The tenuous position of RTMark leant itself well to aiding other artists and activist groups, as well as staging their own projects, from an ambiguous angle of attack and under the same protection that the United States offers any other corporation. It was uncertain whether RTMark were artists or activists and whether their project existed in cyberspace or in the real world. There seemed to be a conscious effort on the part of RTMark to sponsor or promote projects which dealt with and addressed the non-cyber world in some way, even if they did so by using the internet. One example of a project which was sponsored by RTMark and influenced the real world through the internet was the Zapatista FloodNet project. In this project, a group based in Linz Australia called Electronic Disturbance Theater staged, with the help of funding from RTMark, the program FloodNet which will crash the server of a website by sending repeated requests to load the page. If enough people run the program at one time, the program will

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<sup>77</sup> Greene, 92.

<sup>78</sup> RTMark, "www.rtmk.com", [http://www.rtmk.com/rcom/success/about\\_rtmk](http://www.rtmk.com/rcom/success/about_rtmk) (Mar 2007).

effectively shut down a website. EDT staged this project as a protest and show of support for the Zapatista separatist movement in Mexico against the Mexican president at the time, Ernesto Zedillo, and his governmental websites as well the US website for the Pentagon and the Frankfurt Stock Exchange website.<sup>79</sup> The staging of this project demonstrated how greatly the internet can influence the actual material world surrounding us.

Another group which used a similar paradigm of corporate mimicry was eToy.com. **(Illus. 9)** Similar to RTMark, this Swiss collective was founded in 1994 and waged digital war against corporations and supported subversive art and activism.<sup>80</sup> One of their projects was *Digital Hijack* in 1996 which re-directed users who typed popular search terms into a search engine to a page which effectively kept them captive while they listened to an audio files and viewed websites discussing both the arrested and imprisoned hacker Kevin Mitnick the internet dominance of Netscape<sup>81</sup> **(Illus. 10)** The struggle eToy is most famous for now, however, is their fight against online start-up business EToys.com, a large toy selling corporation online in the late 90s. In 1999, eToys, the toy-seller, began receiving complaints from customers who had mis-typed the domain name for etoys.com as etoy.com and instead were taken to the art site. Stallabrass quotes an eToy spokesperson as saying:

There was profanity, there were sado-masochistic images, there were images of terrorist activity. That's upsetting to many people. That's not a comment on whether it has artistic merit. It's about our responsibility to our customers, and our responsibility to address what was beginning to be confusion in the marketplace. Obviously, we also took into account that one of the stated intents of etoy is to disrupt business.<sup>82</sup>

Subsequently EToys attempted to buy off etoy with shares and cash valued at \$516,000 in order to convince them to change their domain name, but etoy felt they would have been greatly

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<sup>79</sup> "RTMark: FloodNet press release," *RTMark.com* (9 Sept 1998) <http://www.rtmark.com/legacy/zapfloodpr.html> (March 2007).

<sup>80</sup> "etoy.HISTORY" <http://history.etoy.com/> (March 2007).

<sup>81</sup> Stallabrass, 81.

<sup>82</sup> Qtd. in Stallabrass, 96.



compromising their artistic integrity and the premise of their entire project by doing so. Although etoy had established their domain long before EToys.com, EToys took legal action, assuming that the much smaller and less powerful etoy would cave in at the prospect of a court battle. Etoy, however, was ready to launch a full-fledged campaign to defend their site against the giant corporate power. RTMark and several other well known art organizations online immediately joined etoy's TOYWAR campaign which attracted "1798 activists, artists, lawyers and journalists" to join their TOY.army against EToys.com.<sup>83</sup> **(illus. 11)** Along with the support of more than 300 articles written in the mainstream media and 250 resistance sites established, EToys.com began to face some very bad publicity for their charges against etoy.com.<sup>84</sup> Once again activists put FloodNet to use, this time against Etoys.com during the busy Christmas season. The program simultaneously prohibited customers from placing orders and tampered with the number of visitors to site, which was used by investors to determine the share value of the company. As a result, stock prices plummeted. In 1999, with the dot.com bubble already bursting, eToys began a quick descent into bankruptcy, which they filed for in 2001.<sup>85</sup> This case is a prime example of the very real and expensive consequences and influence the internet holds over the material world. How was etoy able to bring down the goliath corporation? Some might say that the internet, with its delocalization and interconnected networking, was responsible for giving power to the "little guy". Perhaps, though, this is a chimera that somehow the internet supports those less powerful against the stronger corporate and capitalism powers. In reality, it may be that EToys's downfall stemmed from their anachronistic desire to attack etoy through an inefficient bureaucratic, governmental method: the court. If EToys had played etoy's game and allowed the natural laws of capitalism to work with the deterritorialization of the internet, they might have triumphed, holding far more resources and capital than etoy.com.

While groups like RTMark and etoy successfully recognize, sabotage, and spoof the corporate world, both online and offline, they still celebrate the horizontal structure of the internet as

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<sup>83</sup> "TOYWAR.COM" <http://toywar.etoy.com/> (March 2007)

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*

<sup>85</sup> Stallabrass, 100-101.

something different and inherently opposed to the structure of capitalist forces in the non-virtual realm. This manifestation of the love of the rhizome model exemplified in the works of these artists is clear. These artists, although very aware of the commercial presence online, seem to believe that the internet, which facilitates their democratic ideals, delocalized activist cells, and horizontal organization, is working to their advantage while the corporate world is still rooted in hierarchy. Hierarchy organizes power in the archaic Nation-State, but the delocalized network of the internet facilitates commerce in global capitalism just as successfully as it does activism. In recent years this has been accomplished with even greater pervasiveness. As the giants of internet corporations suck up publicity outlets on and offline, the little guys, the artists and activists, are all but unnoticed, tiny needles in the haystack of the internet, fulfilling Shulgin's fear of being lost in all the "shit." In fact, the traditional art institutional method of recognition is the only way for these sites to be noticed at all, therefore defeating the purpose of supposed autonomy online. It is rare, with the volume of information continually growing and expanding on the internet, that the average person would just "surf in" and somehow find these art works and activist sites without either the aid of institutional websites, some prior background, or the suggestion of an outside source.

### **Deterritorialized Capitalism**

Technology and the internet no longer constitute a niche interest group or hobbyist activity. In 2007, they increasingly pervade all aspects of our interaction and daily life. It is increasingly easy to recede into a world of virtually mediated communication and technological innovations such as e-mail and web enabled phones, PDAs, and wireless cards have produced a condition where we are almost never disconnected from the onslaught of personal and professional contact with each other. Some have even postulated that this creates an environment where professionals are constantly "in the office" wherever they go, even on vacation, where the PDA or phone will

continually receive e-mails and leave a worker with no escape from work as they are constantly in contact and, to the delight of a corporate employer, more and more productive.<sup>86</sup>

Where once only a phone line, computer, and a modem (still a major obstacle for many to obtain at that time) were all one needed to access the internet, now wireless routers, cable installations, wireless cards, and many other additional consumer products are needed in order to take full advantages of the information on the net. For internet artists who dreamed of a free space for activism and open art sharing, the space is increasingly unequal and disconnected from the poor in post-industrial countries and millions in developing nations throughout the world, not to mention the non-English speaking world who are not able to read pages due to the English bias of internet information and programming languages like HTML. While the internet differs from many other consumer goods in that it is essentially an immaterial presence in the world -- especially in the case of wireless where it literally exists invisibly around us-- it is not without physical existence as a commodity and physical impacts on those who either use it or are unable to use it. Accessibility still remains the one largest inequality of the internet, especially with increasing dependence on the internet for success and advancement in society.

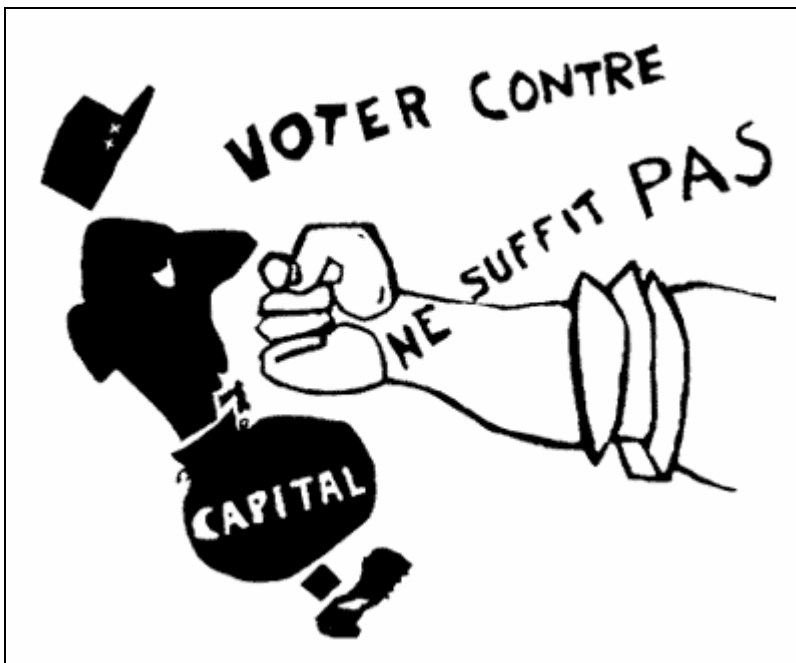
The overthrow of capitalism is not imminent. The internet has not created a revolution against consumer capitalism but has instead facilitated a new outlet for expansion of corporations on a global level. These big businesses have been taking advantage of the delocalization of the internet from its inception. They have been adapting their structures to take advantage of the much-celebrated horizontal structure which activists and artists used. While the activists and artists hoped the internet would allow them the advantage over corporations and the ability to target their power structures from an impenetrable vantage point, the corporations were likewise adapting themselves in the same manner. Activists and socially conscious artists have always had to work within the manifestations of capitalism and inequality in order to assert their messages of social justice in creative and subversive ways. This condition is equally true of

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<sup>86</sup> See discussion of this in Richard DeGrandpre, *Digitopia: The Look of the New Digital You* (New York: AtRandom.com, 2001)

artwork which operates on or in tandem with the internet, not outside of the realm of capitalist power and influence. Instead of providing a new platform for anti-capitalist utopia, the internet was instead the next phase of capitalist development.

## Illustrations



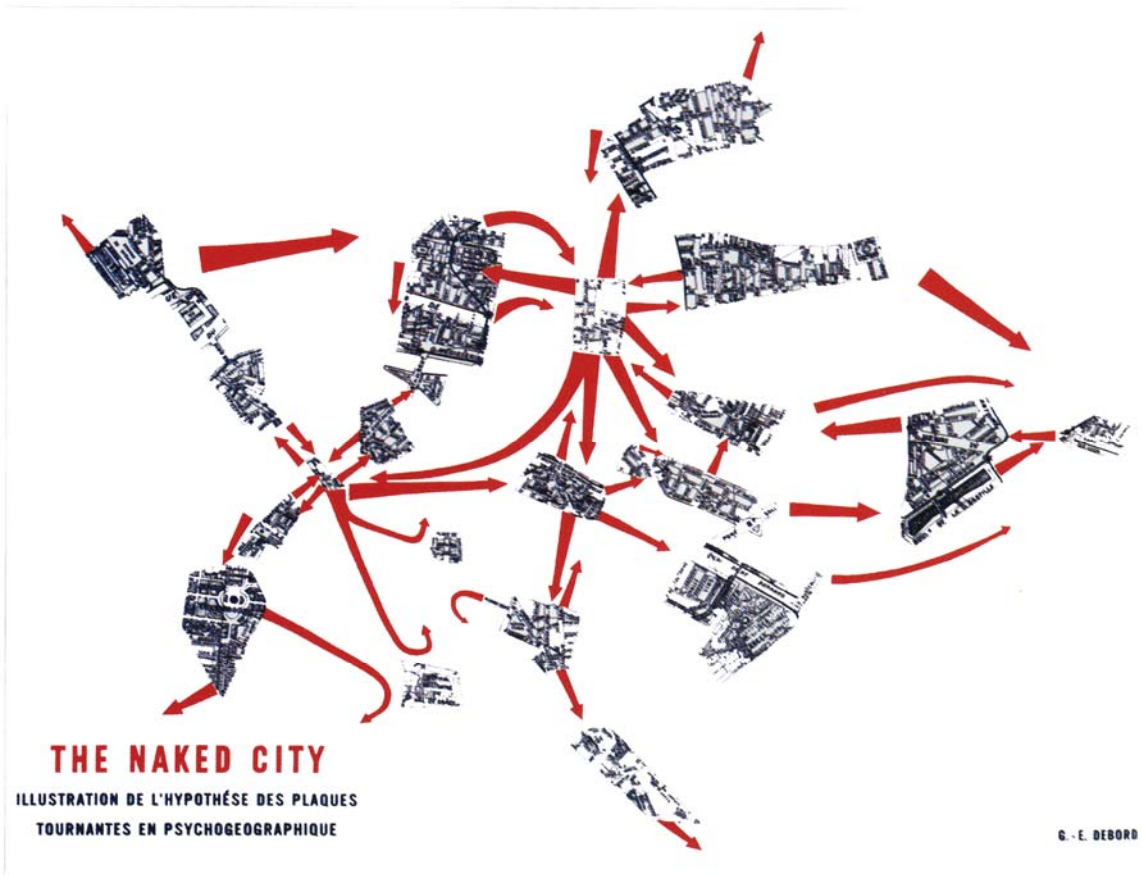
**Illustration 1** – propaganda posters from May 1968, top reads “The police are attacking the University” and the bottom reads “Voting against Capital is not enough”

Source: Nothingness.org <http://picturebook.nothingness.org/pbook/may68/display/100>



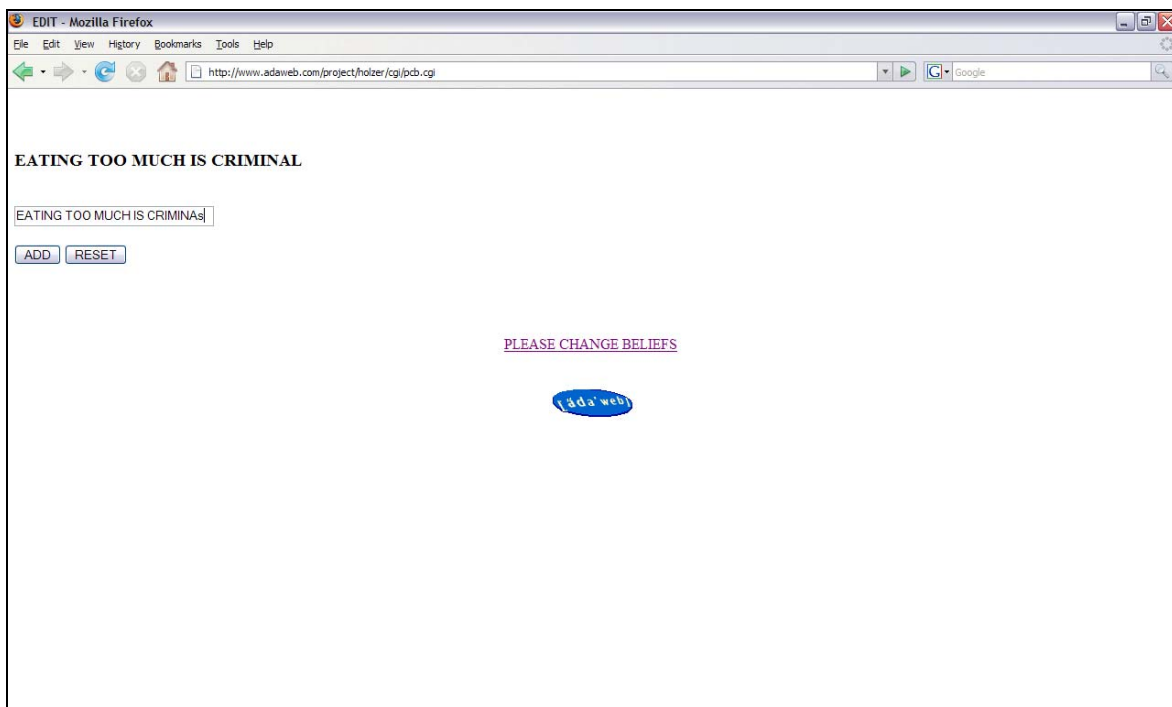
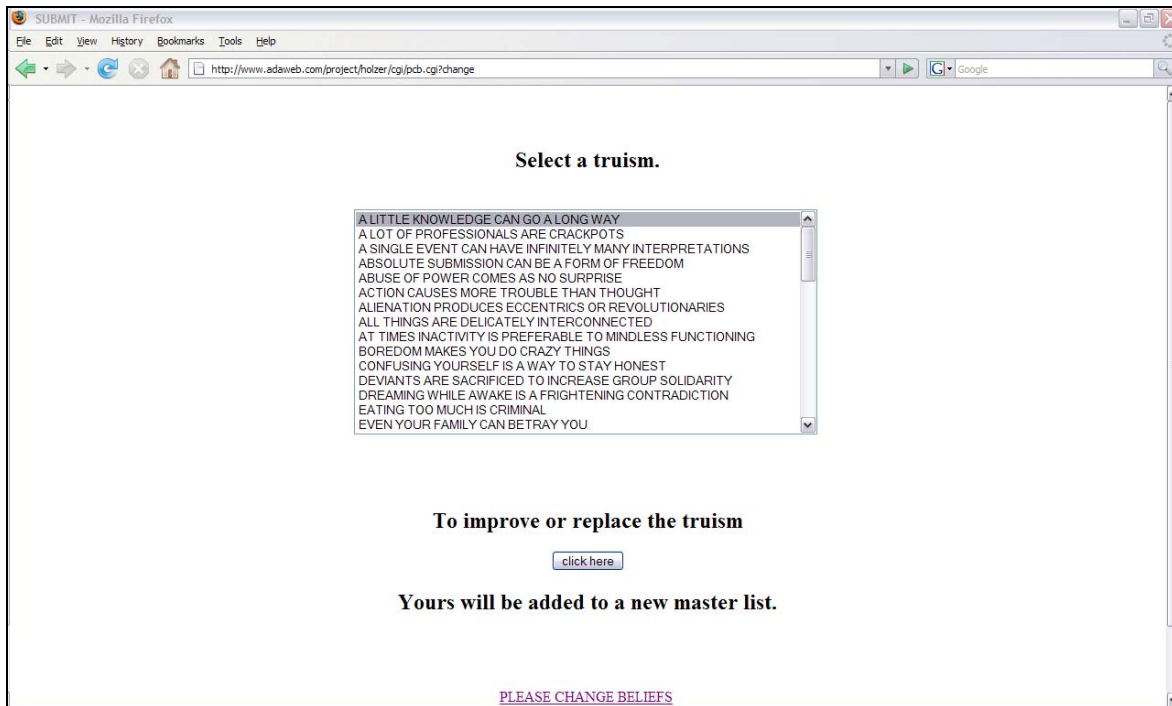
**Illustration 2** – Unite d'habitation, Marseilles, Le Corbusier, 1947-52

Source: Pawley, Martin and Yukio Futagawa. *Le Corbusier*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1970.



**Illustration 3** – *The Naked City*, Guy Debord, 1958

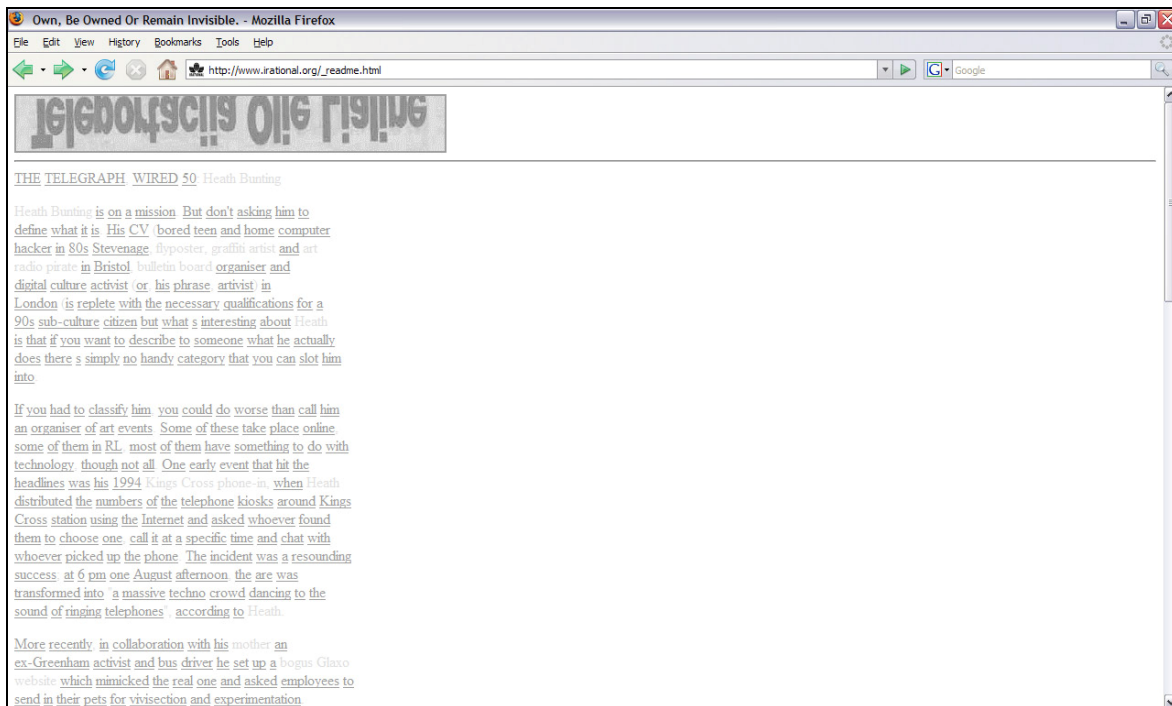
Source: Ford, Simon. *The Situationist International: a user's guide*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005.



**Illustration 4 – *Please Change Beliefs*, Jenny Holzer, 1995**

Source: <http://www.adaweb.com/project/holzer/cgi/pcb.cgi?change>

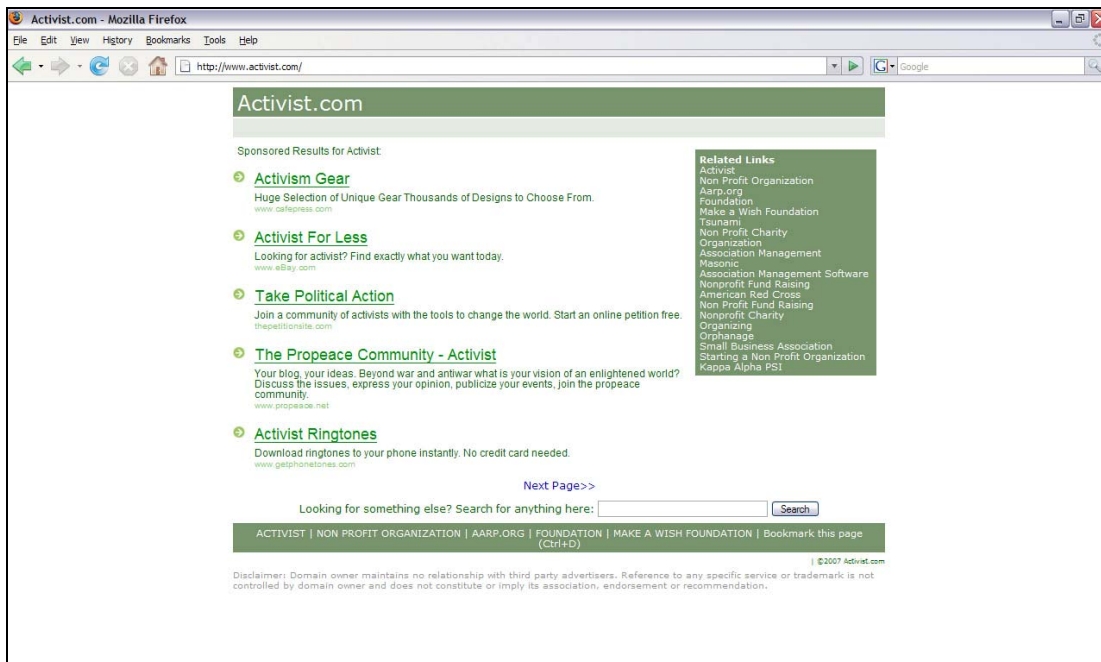
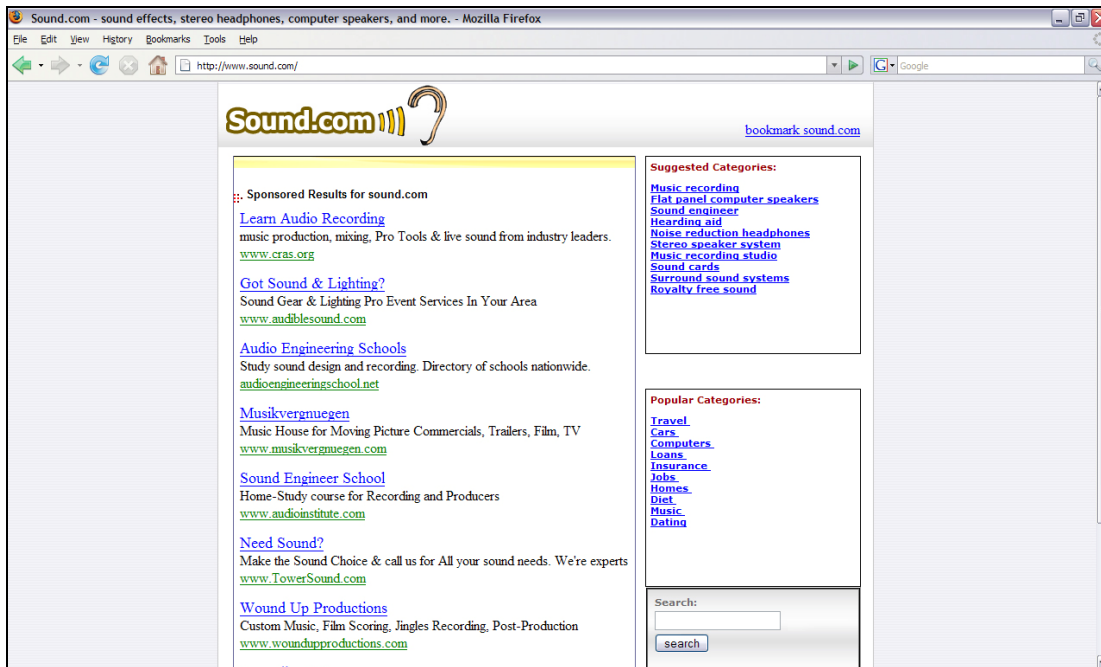


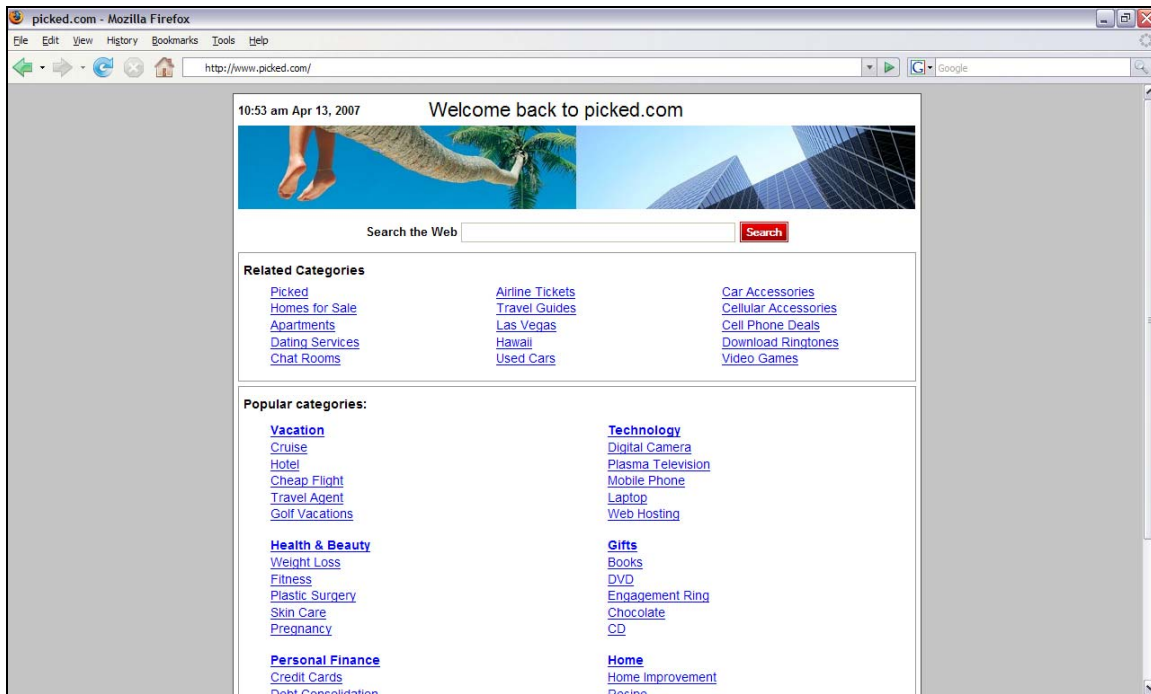


**Illustration 5 – Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible, Heath Bunting, 1996**

Source: <http://www.adaweb.com/project/holzer/cgi/pcb.cgi?change>

Illustration 6 – 3 “Active Non-Sites” – Sound.com, Activist.com, and Picked.com





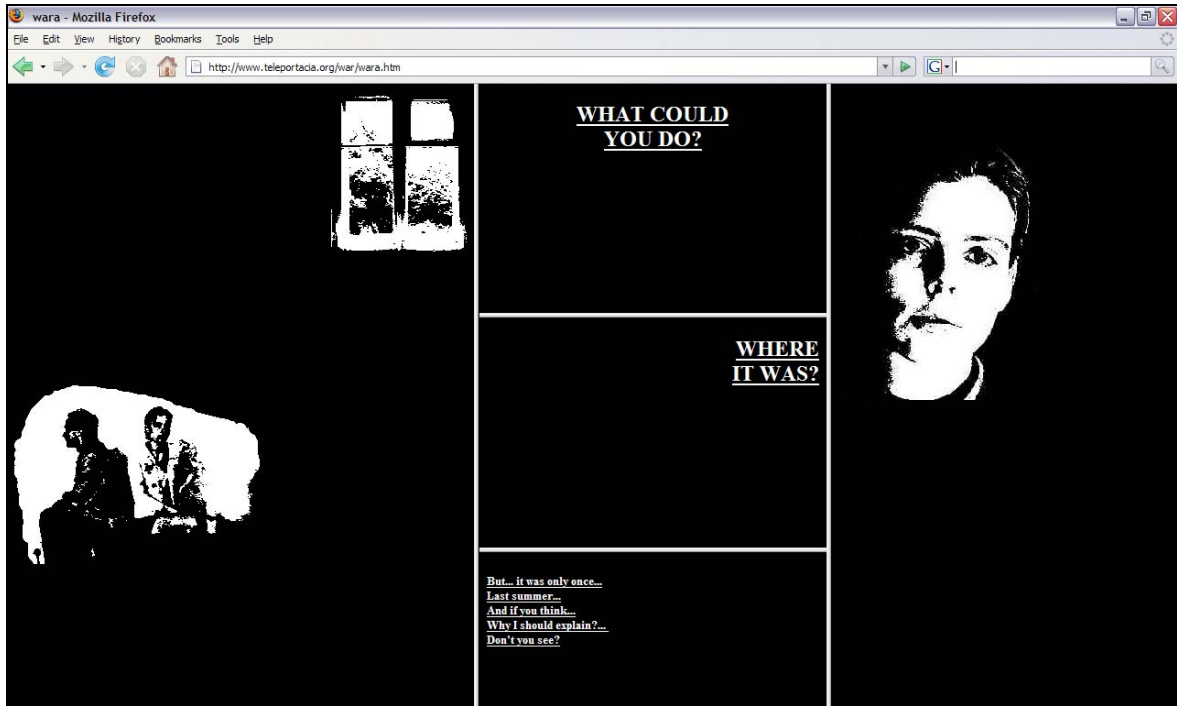
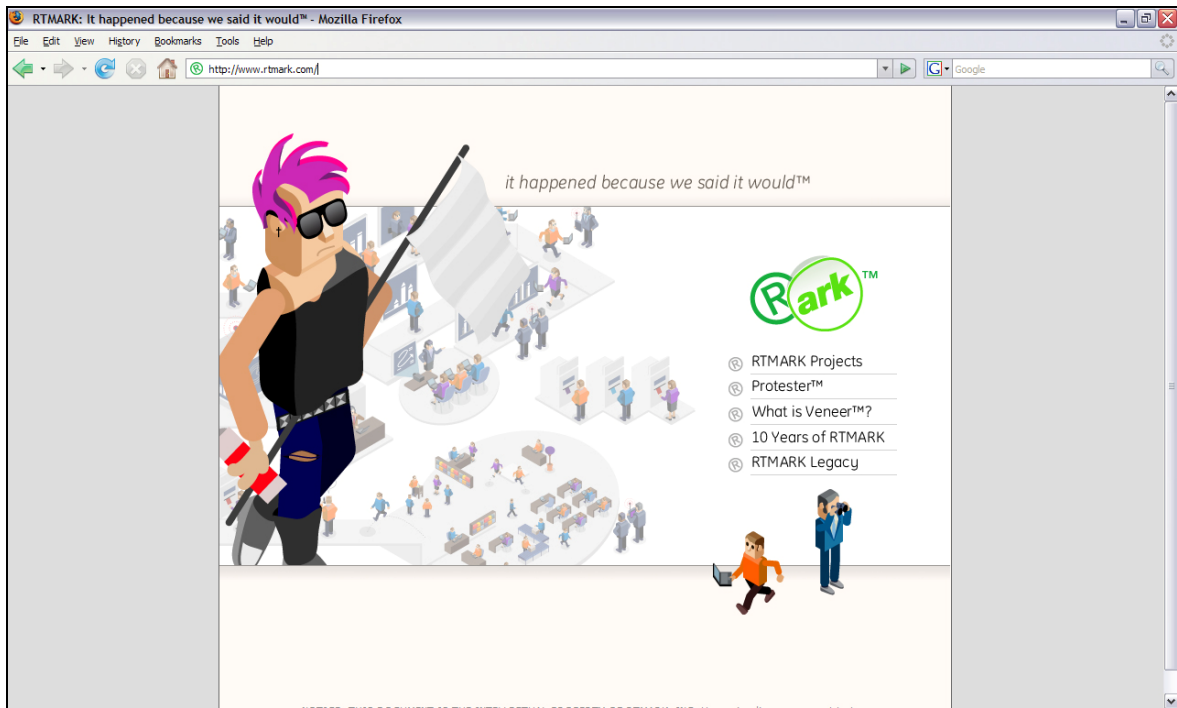


Illustration 7 – *My Boyfriend Came Back from War*, Olia Lialina, 1996

Source: <http://www.teleportacia.org/war>



**Illustration 8** – RTMark, started 1996

Source: <http://www.rtmk.com/>

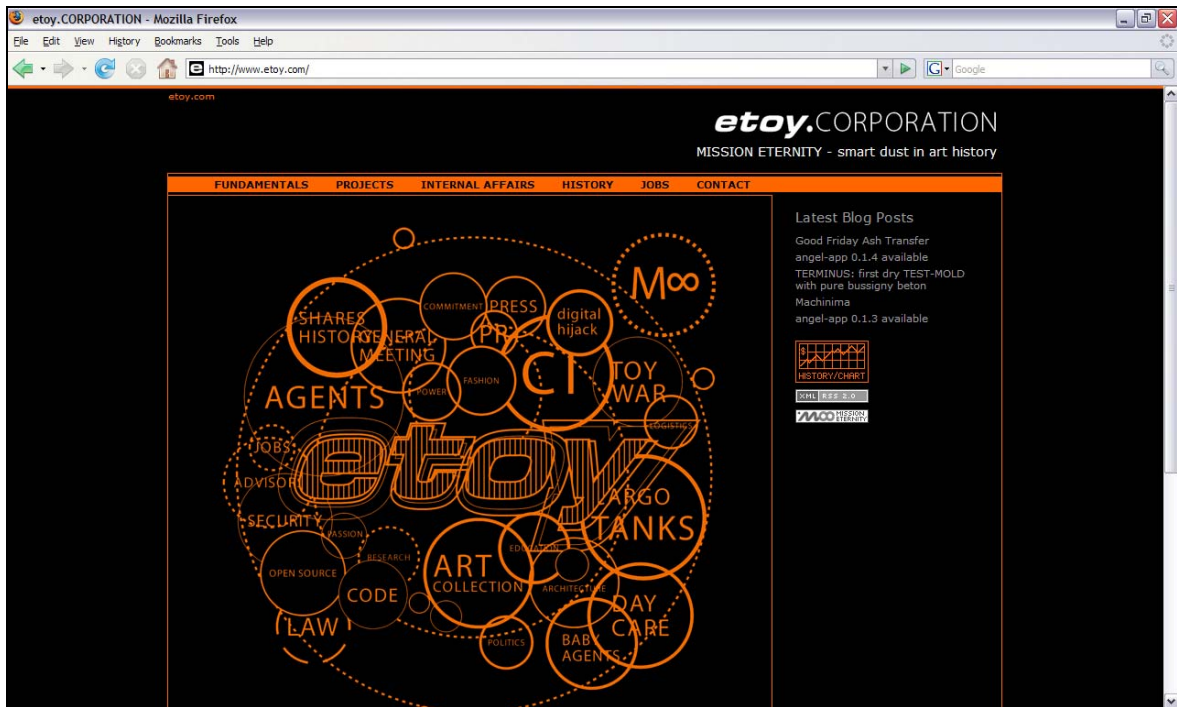


Illustration 9 – eToy.com, started 1994

Source: <http://www.etoy.com>

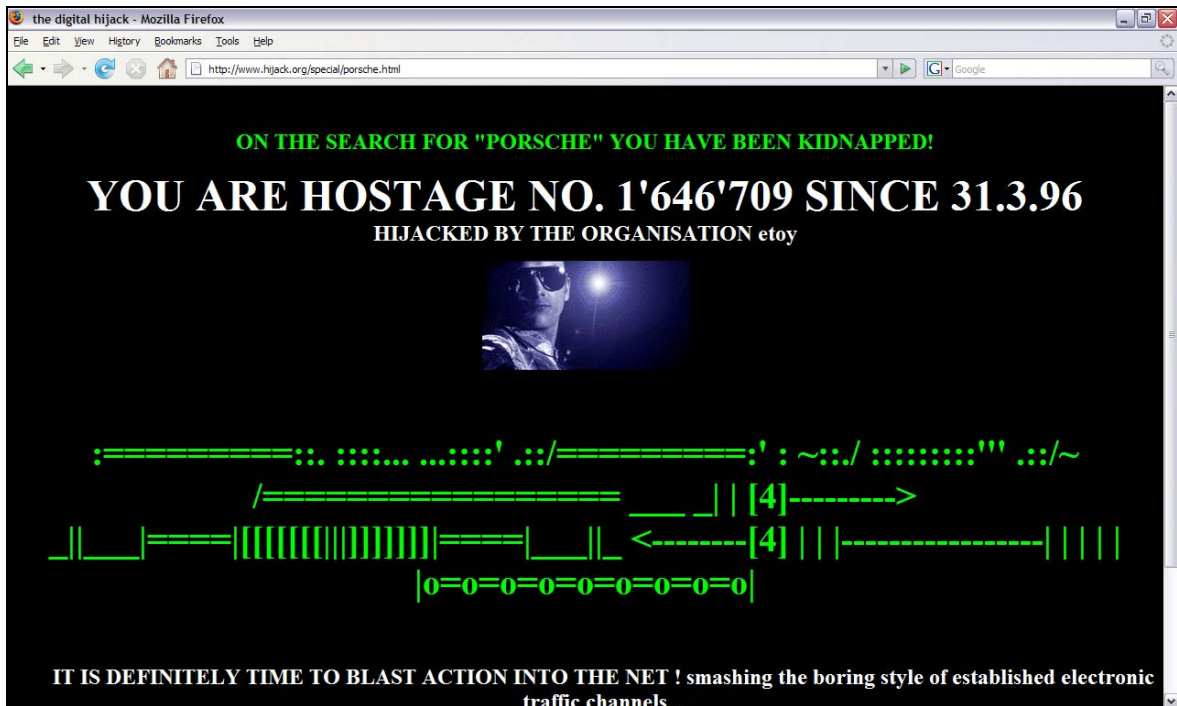


Illustration 10 – *Digital Hijack*, 1996

Source: [http://www.hijack.org/hijacksearch.html?pg=q&what=web&fmt=.\\_&q=porsche](http://www.hijack.org/hijacksearch.html?pg=q&what=web&fmt=._&q=porsche)

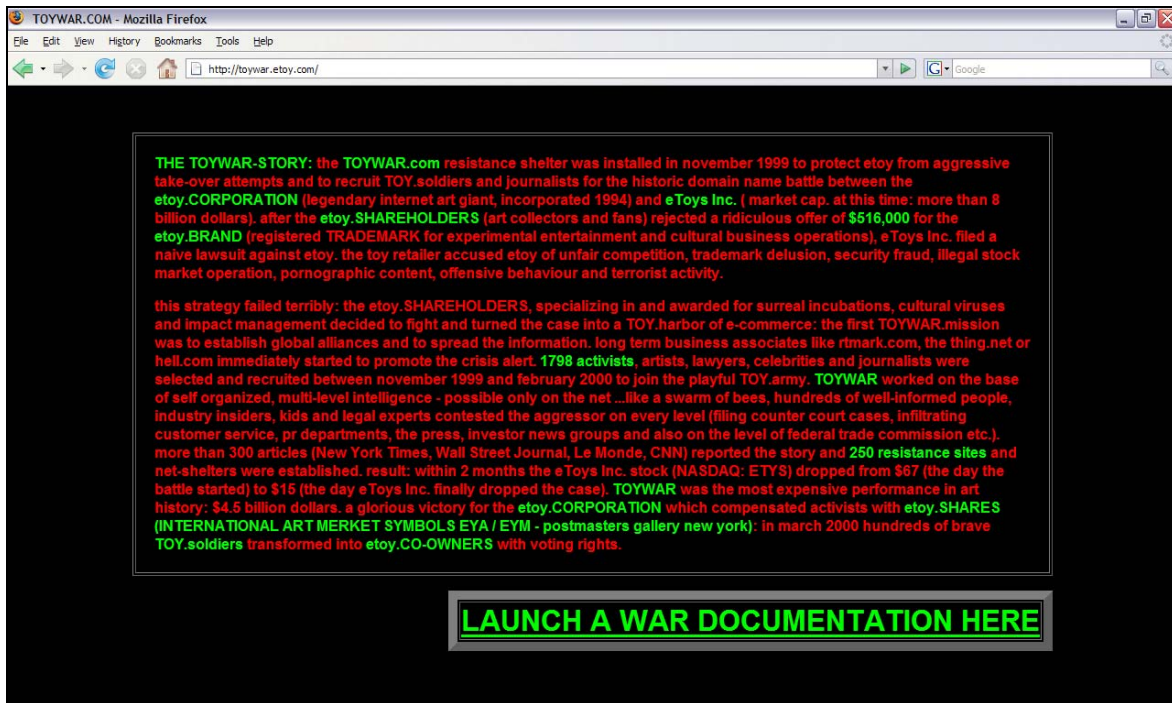


Illustration 11 – TOYWAR, 1999/2000

Source: <http://toywar.etoys.com>



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