Tactical **Media**

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RITA RALEY

For Russell, who is very generous,

and Alan, who is very patient

Culture and art have become productive resources. But, exactly like the "general intellect," they can transform themselves into political resources for the multitude.

—PAOLO VIRNO

I don't believe in revolution, but I do believe in revolutionary resistance.

—PAUL VIRILIO

May I tell a story? I have no idea whether it is true. It is the third day of the Bolshevik Revolution, and Lenin is sitting somewhere in Saint Petersburg. Trotsky comes running in and says, "Kronstadt has been taken! We are lost!" Or whatever he said. And Lenin answers, "It doesn't matter! We existed for three days!" That's what I mean. It won't be carried to completion, but we are a generation that sees a vision of a utopia.

—VILÉM FLUSSER, *The Freedom of the Migrant*

Contents

Introduction
Tactical Media as Virtuosic Performance

Why save the world when we can design it?

—SERPICA NARO

There is much in the world to protest. The pressing question, particularly for a generation schooled in intellectual history by those who believed in revolution and had in fact stormed the barricades, is this: how does one express dissent and conceive of revolutionary transformation while distancing oneself from one's forebears, whose lingering nostalgia for their own storming of the barricades, not to mention their idealistic belief in the possibility of visible and permanent social change, seems quaint, if even a trifle embarrassing? Of course, the Battle of Seattle caught the world by surprise. Antiglobalization, WTO, and G8 protests have been nothing if not spectacular, starkly defined spatial and temporal events. So, too, were the street demonstrations in support of U.S. immigrant rights in the spring of 2006. But the fact remains that the doxa about the value, cultural significance, and efficacy of the streets has changed. This is less an objective than a subjective truth, a truth of perception, a general impression of a shared sensibility. It is precisely this change in sensibility that politically engaged new media art projects negotiate. As we will see in the pages that follow, Critical Art Ensemble's suggestion that "the streets are dead capital" informs their theses about the work, and the targets, of tactical media. Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) argues that the shift in revolutionary investments corresponds with a shift in the nature of power, which has removed itself from the streets and become nomadic. Activism and dissent, in turn, must, and do, enter the network, as we will see from the new media art projects I address in this book. These projects are not oriented toward the grand, sweeping revolutionary event; rather, they engage in a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education.

Josh On and Futurefarmers' *They Rule* (2001/2004) affords us an example of a new media work that is at once aesthetic design, intellectual investigation, and political activism.[1] A work of tactical cartography, *They Rule* affords users the ability to visualize the myriad and intricate connections among Fortune 100 corporations and directors. Users can choose from a list of institutions, people, and companies and build their own maps from the data the artists have compiled from SEC filings and public Web sites. Or they can view the archived maps that powerfully document the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of "the ten richest people" and "the magnificent seven."

By rendering economic and political complexity in the form of a basic cartography, *They Rule* strives to make legible the kind of behind-the-scenes loyalties and corporate collusions that drive public policy. Further, its use of simple, monochromatic icons and geometric lines suggests that "design" as such is constituted by the architecture of corporate power. With Mark Lombardi's graphite-on-paper drawings, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11,* and Craig Unger's *House of Bush, House of Saud* as precedents, the maps voted most popular tend to be those that trace the degrees of separation from, variously, the Bush family, Dick Cheney, Harken Energy, and Halliburton.[2] Tactical maps such as these do not offer the omniscient point of view we associate with Cartesian cartographic practice; in that they are individually tailored and produced, they are fundamentally subjective. *They Rule* in particular embodies a sense of bottom-up resistance: it may map the top-down power relations, but it does so in a manner and style we have come to associate with cultural dissent and oppositionality. *See what I have made,* the tactical user says. *See how I try to manage the ties that bind and produce me.* It may be a hollow laugh at power, but it is still a laugh, the enjoyment at once solitary and shared, for, as the list of "hot" or favored maps on the site indicates, *They Rule* forges a social bond and a political consciousness held in common.[3]

Oil politics are even more directly at the fore in Michael Mandiberg's *Oil Standard,* a Firefox plug-in that uses real-time pricing information in the dynamic conversion of U.S. dollars into barrels of crude oil.[4] The most recent book on media activism? One half barrel. Last month's water bill? A full barrel. So are we instructed in the new monetary stan-
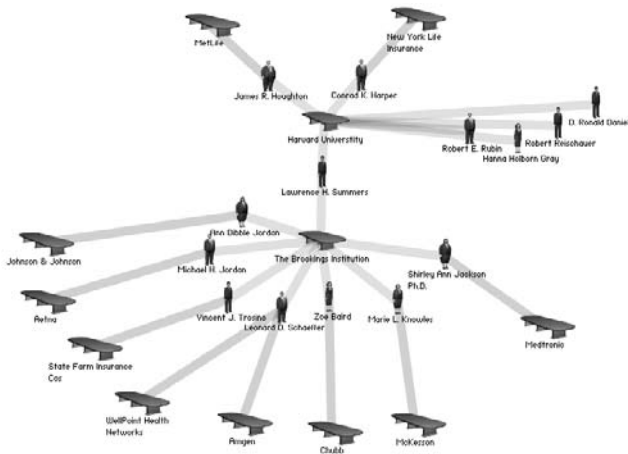
Josh On/Futurefarmers, They Rule, *"Why Harvard Doesn't Fund Alternative Health Care Research" (created by user Shojo).*

dard, the fluctuating unit of account to which the dollar is pegged, a unit that in turn fixes the value of the dollar. There are practical differences between these two projects—one is a visualization tool, and the other is a browser plug-in—but they share certain pedagogical and ideological investments. How we might account for the work they do, and how we might account for the political interventions of other new media artist-activists, is the subject of this book.

Tactical Media contributes to the discourse on the digital humanities by examining the aesthetic and critical practices that have specifically emerged out of, and in direct response to, both the postindustrial society and neoliberal globalization. The hallmark of the postindustrial society is the information economy and the emergence of a corresponding technical intelligentsia. It is theorized in these terms by Daniel Bell and in terms of informational capitalism by Manuel Castells, who uses the phrase to describe the new "techno-economic system," the structure of which was ultimately determined by the neoliberalism of the 1980s.[5] Regardless of the terminology employed, it is "information" and the collapse of the Bretton Woods system regulating the monetary economy that make possible neoliberal globalization, the name given to the philosophy governing our current global markets. In sum, the ideology of neoliberal

globalization holds that financial markets should operate unfettered and that state intervention or regulation of any kind is anathema. What new digital art practices have emerged out of a context in which efficiency, operationalism, and instrumental rationality are core values and market transactions the predominant social good?

One such art practice is the persuasive game, the mechanics of which are particularly well suited to political themes such as labor, migrancy, and war. As Ian Bogost and others have noted, persuasive games take care to model causality and consequences; within them, critical arguments are made via the emphasis on the effects of gameplay actions. For example, the dystopian *TuboFlex,* by Molleindustria, takes precarious labor as its central theme.[6]

Set in 2010, the game literalizes the ideology of a flexible, modular, and mobile workforce with Tuboflex Inc., a postindustrial workplace in which the player/worker is propelled on demand from task to task via something like a pneumatic tube. Somewhat in the mode of Chaplin's *Modern Times,* the repetitive and often mechanized work speeds up as the player progresses through the different workplace settings, which include a McDonald's drive-through window, Santa Claus putting smiles on the faces of children (an instance of affective labor), assembly line drilling, an office worker with a computer, and a box handler at a shipping warehouse. All the scenarios feature temporary work, replaceable and finite (as with the seasonal labor during Christmas). The quickest of players can manage to stave off the ending of the game for a time, but all attempts to play end with the central character begging on the street. The game rhetoric is clearly pedagogical and persuasive, as with all political or activist games. The lesson of this game in particular is that "life" has been mobilized for work, that the techniques for biopolitical management of the body include the tools of the postindustrial workplace, and that postindustrial labor is not in fact radically heterogeneous.

Many of the formal features and thematic concerns of the field of new media art, information art, or digital art have been articulated in works authored or edited by Michael Rush, Lev Manovich, Stephen Wilson, Christiane Paul, Julian Stallabrass, Rachel Greene, Lucy Kimbell, Bruce Wands, Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, and Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito.[7] On the whole, these surveys address the genealogies of new media art,

Molleindustria, TuboFlex.

the specificity of medium and mechanism, new modes of reader-user en-
gagement, the distinctive language of computational media, the particu-
larities of composition and delivery (programming languages, software
applications, the cultural and technical aspects of networks). Combining
an analysis of social contexts and media texts, my book will address the
varying responses of new media artists to the neoliberal condition in all
its aspects—political, economic, cultural. In that it foregrounds techno-
logical expertise, it is less a study of new media art in terms of consump-
tion and modes of embodied interactivity than a study of production
and technique. There have been numerous studies of "wired" political
engagement in all its diverse forms, network-based activism and politi-
cal organization (e.g., clicktivism, smart mobs) and hacktivism chief
among them.[8] While I do cross paths with some of these studies in my
treatment of electronic civil disobedience and other hacktivist tactics,
my interests lie in articulating the aesthetic strategies of artist-activists
producing persuasive games, information visualizations, and hybrid (we
might even say "new") forms of academic criticism. I will note, too, that
I do not propose a full catalog of works that would be situated under
the label "activism, hacktivism, artivism." Such archiving efforts already
exist, and to pursue that course would be to move into the mode of the

encyclopedia, somewhat like Stephen Wilson's crucial guide *Information Arts.* Instead, I sample works and art practices that are paradigmatic. My study will not collapse the material distinctions among these different media projects, but it will articulate them all as instances of tactical media. This is to say that they are all forms of critical intervention, dissent, and resistance. I will go further to find strong and suggestive correlations between tactical media—as I understand it, but also as it has been theorized by Critical Art Ensemble, Carbon Defense League, and the digerati—and virtuosity, intellectual labor that manifests in virtuoso performance rather than extrinsic product.

The Next Five Minutes

Generally taken to refer to practices such as reverse engineering, hacktivism, denial-of-service attacks, the digital hijack, contestational robotics, collaborative software, and open-access technology labs, "tactical media" is a mutable category that is not meant to be either fixed or exclusive. If there were one function or critical rationale that would produce a sense of categorical unity, it would be disturbance. In its most expansive articulation, tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible. Tactical media operates in the field of the symbolic, the site of power in the postindustrial society. Critical Art Ensemble has insisted that tactical media are pliable and that pliability allows for on-the-fly critical intervention: statements, performances, and actions that must continually be altered in response to their object, "constantly reconfigured to meet social demands."[9] Geert Lovink has also emphasized the inclusiveness and flexibility of tactical media, which he identifies as a "deliberately slippery term, a tool for creating 'temporary consensus zones' based on unexpected alliances."[10] In use since the first Next Five Minutes conference (N5M) in Amsterdam in 1993, the term "tactical" itself was, as Lovink explains, "introduced to disrupt and go beyond the rigid dichotomies that have restricted thinking in this area for so long."[11] As the organizers of N5M indicate, the dichotomies under pressure include amateur and professional, "all forms of old and new, both lucid

and sophisticated media."[12] Since the category of tactical media has been fluid since its inception and since the assemblage of practices it would seek to describe has not yet been fully articulated, I will assume a critical license to work within its perimeters, highlighting certain discursive features and introducing others. The distinct temporality of tactical media, their ephemerality, along with their opening to the unexpected, will be one of the key components of my analysis.

That tactical media present a challenge to "the existing semiotic regime by replicating and redeploying it," as Critical Art Ensemble explains, might seem to indicate that the critical object is the substitution of one message for another, the imposition of an alternative set of signs in the place of the dominant. But when the Yes Men launched gwbush.com and announced the "Amnesty 2000" campaign, effectively hijacking the president's official Web site, their purpose was not to impose a definitive countermessage but to provoke and to reveal, to defamiliarize and to critique. Lovink notes that tactical networks do not "aim to become an alternative CNN, a Yahoo! for the protest generation."[13] Rather, the activity of disturbance and provocation "offers participants in the projects a new way of seeing, understanding, and (in the best-case scenario) interacting with a given system."[14] A charming but dated and even futile endeavor, perhaps, hopelessly removed from the real politics and activities of social transformation? Irredeemably caught up in the kind of irony that disguises a co-optation by the very system with which one putatively interacts anew? In what terms can we speak of the efficacy of cybersquatting? Critical Art Ensemble addresses the question by casting its lot with speculation, uncertainty, and the aleatory:

> Treading water in the pool of liquid power need not be an image of acquiescence and complicity. In spite of their awkward situation, the political activist and the cultural activist (anachronistically known as the artist) can still produce disturbances. Although such action may more closely resemble the gestures of a drowning person, and it is uncertain just what is being disturbed, in this situation the postmodern roll of the dice favors the act of disturbance.[15]

It is not simply that interventions by tactical media may disturb but that the outcomes of those disturbances remain uncertain and unpredictable. Moreover, we can see in CAE's figure of the drowning person an emphasis on the perception of the audience: we can read the interventions

either as hopeless desperation or, to extend the metaphor, as a strong battle against the currents. For historical perspective we might juxtapose CAE's hope of "offering participants a new way of seeing, understanding, and interacting" with Félix Guattari's 1992 call to "invent new spheres of reference so as to open the way to a reappropriation and a resymbolization of the use of communication and information tools outside of the hackneyed formulae of marketing."[16] The actual developments we have seen in the intervening years—peer-to-peer computing, as just one example—retroactively respond to this call for symbolic awareness and individual technological mastery. What I wish to emphasize in CAE's vision and Guattari's appeal is the necessary abstraction, the unspecified qualities, of the way, the "new way," forward. As will become clear throughout the course of this book, tactical media requires a certain openness, a surrendering to chance or the "postmodern roll of the dice"; even more, it requires that its practitioners cede control over its outcomes.

It is in these terms that we can understand the tendency of Critical Art Ensemble and collectives such as the Bureau of Inverse Technology to provide assembly instructions for their products and projects, not all of which are designed to be fully realized. The Bureau of Inverse Technology's "BIT Cab" project plans to co-opt the wireless GPS infrastructure currently in use for advertisements on taxi roofs to provide site-specific information about toxic pollution instead.[17] For this and their other projects, the critical emphasis falls not only on the moment of execution, the actual performance, but also on the engineer's reports and kit instructions, information that would allow viewers themselves to master the mechanism. To do so would be to reappropriate the technological platform, to deploy it for "inverse" purposes. Exercises in "tactical gizmology" are fundamentally educative: witness an illustrative Eyebeam workshop (August 2002), the objective of which was to give participants hands-on experience with hardware and to teach them to build digital tags for "friendly" interventions in spaces where we have come to expect screens, such as movie kiosks.[18] The broader ideological and pedagogical imperative, the balancing of symbolic and network awareness, similarly lies behind Konrad Becker and Francisco de Sousa Webber's Netbase/t0, a nonprofit Internet provider that also supports workshops, lectures,

and instructional courses in the interest of developing a "heightened consciousness for the implications of the new communication and information technologies."[19] What interests me in particular is the double lesson, both the kit information for "BIT Cab" and the environmental messages transmitted through the taxi displays. The Bureau of Inverse Technology's FAQ unusually comprises authoritative questions without answers, ranging from "How do you negotiate the difference between Art and Engineering?" to "Why?" It is almost necessary that these inquiries be left unanswered, I will speculate, because tactical media focuses on open-ended questions rather than prepackaged lessons, instructions rather than products.[20] Carbon Defense League—whose many projects include Re-code.com, FtheVote.com, and the collaborative reverse engineering of a Nintendo Game Boy—proposes that tactical media aims to create situations "where criticality can occur."[21] More important, "tactical media practitioners should not suggest where the use of these qualities [criticality] should lead once unrestrained."[22] Their operative field, rather, is that of the next five minutes.

Choosing tactics over strategy might seem to suggest a certain temporal structure: the temporary rather than the protracted, the unguarded and unexpected moment rather than the long-range plan. But, as Carbon Defense League explains, both temporalities are at work in tactical media:

> Incident-based parasitic media response takes place in a very specific time and space. There is no need for the parasite to live longer than a few days or even a few seconds. The more complex system is generative parasitic media response. Generative parasites must adapt and grow with their host system. This growth creates an allowance for greater sustainability of backdoors or hijacks. A parasite need not take advantage of its host's vulnerability to hijack. It is in the best interest of the parasite to live and feed alongside its host.[23]

The incident-based parasite exists in the here and now. It uses itself up in its operation. The generative parasite, on the other hand, has to study and understand its host; it must adapt in order to thrive. So, too, does the host adapt to its parasite. While parasitic media responses may have a cumulative effect, any systemic change they bring about may be both imperceptible and undesirable.

This is avant-garde artistic experimentation that shuns the manifesto

("the style of the disempowered"), lacks a big picture, and refuses strategy: the doing, the performance, is all.[24] As Critical Art Ensemble observes, "After two centuries of revolution and near-revolution, one historical lesson continually appears—authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted."[25] There are, then, as Lovink notes, "no apocalyptic or revolutionary expectations here."[26] Absolute victory is neither a desirable nor a truly attainable object for tactical media, which is why it will be possible for me to trace parallels between guerrilla warfare and systems disruption. The political imaginary for our moment is thus not Sergei Eisenstein's *October* but the muddled film adaptation of Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*. Its fantasy—the destruction of the Old Bailey and Parliament without loss of life—and the abstractions of V's idea tell us a great deal about the symbolic value and currency of this revolutionary mythology at the present.[27] Indeed, is this not the fantasy of revolution without revolution, as Slavoj Žižek would say?[28] Josh On, whose *Antiwargame* I will address in a later chapter, maintains that "it is possible to have a revolution" in the game simulation that he has collaboratively designed. In its theoretical outcome, "everyone jumps up and down and is happy. I think you need a ton of protesters."[29] Situating even the *simulation* of revolution within the realm of possibility, and framing it as revolutionary happiness rather than revolutionary violence, On's comment has much to tell us about the orientation of tactical media. There are no proffered fantasies of radical systemic change: it exists as a possibility within the realm of the imagination—another technology of simulation—but it requires collective action, a "ton of protesters." This is not the mystification of the California Ideology 2.0, whereby digital artisans articulate a vision of individual freedom realizable from within the structures of the network society.[30] But neither is it the replacement of the old with the new vanguard, an avant-garde 2.0, whereby "a technocratic class of resistors acts on behalf of 'the people,'" a fantasy that, Critical Art Ensemble explains, "seems every bit as suspect, although it is not as fantastic as thinking that the people of the world will unite."[31] What is required, rather, is a multitude of different creative agents, a multitude that fuses or is situated between the individual and the collective.[32] On this note, the work of artist collectives in particular allows us to think about the emancipatory potential of sociality and cooperation.

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe, immaterial labor directly involves social interaction; in this sense, cooperation is not imposed from outside but emerges from within. To continue along these lines, we might think about the double-sided quality of the labor of programmers and technocrats: on the one hand it is a means of economic value, but on the other it can be a source of subversive, if not revolutionary, potentiality.

Lovink and David Garcia together argue that tactical media are not mired in the position of the oppositional or the minoritarian.[33] Tactical media events and projects, and the moments of dissent and critique they produce, are not simply oppositional because there is no definitive "they" to confront. They also cannot easily inhabit an oppositional stance because—as we will see in examples ranging from an intervention in the game space of *America's Army* and corporate-sponsored visualizations of stock market data—tactical media are "forced to operate within the parameters of global capitalism," or, in Critical Art Ensemble's terms, in the "pool of liquid power."[34] These artist-activists thus critique and resist the new world order but do so from within by intervening on the site of symbolic systems of power: networks of finance, technologies of war, even, as in the case of the Yes Men, corporate conferences. This is more than Dadaist provocation, however, and not simply a variant of a radical art practice that endeavors to disrupt sociopolitical, economic, and cultural structures. Their campaigns comprise little tactics rather than bold strategies, but paradoxically we might understand their efforts by turning to a theorist of 4GW (fourth-generation warfare), John Robb: "To global guerillas, the point of greatest emphasis is the systempunkt. It is a point in the system . . . usually identified by one of the many autonomous groups in the field, that will collapse the target system if it is destroyed. Within an infrastructure system, this collapse takes the form of disrupted flows that result in financial loss or supply shortages. Within a market, the result is a destabilization of the psychology of the marketplace that will introduce severe inefficiencies and chaos."[35] One of the premises of my study is that this articulation of dynamic, decentralized, and bottom-up resilience has become paradigmatic for netwar, activist movements, and the academy. Witness the central statement in Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker's *The Exploit:* "Protocological

struggles do not center around changing existent technologies but instead involve discovering holes in existent technologies and projecting potential change through those holes. Hackers call these holes 'exploits.'"[36] Whether oriented toward systempunkt or exploit, tactical media comes so close to its core informational and technological apparatuses that protest in a sense becomes the mirror image of its object, its aesthetic replicatory and reiterative rather than strictly oppositional. As we will see, then, tactical media's imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism, is not spatial but temporal. So, informed by Critical Art Ensemble's understanding of power as diffused, networked, multiple, and a-territorial, tactical media do not necessarily evade the us-them dialectic, but they do recast it such that "us" and "them" are no longer permanently situated.

To articulate tactical media in terms of performance rather than as static art object emphasizes viewer experience and engagement. Tactical media is thus relational in the terms Nicolas Bourriaud has outlined, like much contemporary art activity, in that it takes "as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space."[37] Among its many subjects, then, is the sphere of human relations, moments of social encounter and moments of direct address and engagement with the viewer. Moreover, the performance paradigm allows CAE and other tactical media practitioners to conceive of "participants" as a flexible rather than fixed role, encompassing both artists—cultural workers— and viewers. To conceive of tactical media in terms of performance is to point to a fluidity of its actants, to emphasize its ephemerality, and to shift the weight of emphasis slightly to the audience, which does not simply complete the signifying field of the work but records a memory of the performance. And here we must once again place tactical media in the context of Bourriaud's commentary on contemporary relational art, to stress that the audience is an analytic category, singular yet multiple, heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, an experiential rather than ontological entity. As Bourriaud explains, "the audience concept must not be mythicized—the idea of a unified 'mass' has more to do with a Fascist aesthetic than with these momentary experiences, where everyone has to hang on to his/her identity. It is a matter of predefined coding and

restricted to a contract, and not a matter of a social binding hardening around totems of identity."[38] The audience concept is thus as flexible and ephemeral as the artistic activity itself. Tactical media is performance for which a consumable product is not the primary endgame; it foregrounds the experiential over the physical. It "leaves few material traces. As the action comes to an end, what is left is primarily living memory."[39] Hacktivist tactics such as FloodNet, as we will see in chapter 1, leave material traces of their operation in server logs; however, as Critical Art Ensemble explains, "traces and residues are far less problematic than strategic products, which come to dominate the space in which they are placed."[40]

If there is to be no strategic product, no manifesto, and even no totality, what, then, is the task of this book? For practitioners of tactical media, shifting from strategy to tactics is important because it renders the phenomenon of resistance fleeting, ephemeral, and subject to continual morphing. The swarming operations of flash mobs provide an analogue: media artist-activists gain access to a server, a URL, or a game space; perform an intervention; and then just as suddenly disperse. What has to be acknowledged, though, is that the critical operation makes visible, stabilizes, and even concretizes a set of projects for which ephemerality and mutability are not only part of the epistemology of the work but also a means of functioning. To some degree, this book will take what are diverse, "deliberately slippery," and heterogeneous practices—and what is a stratified political movement—and make them cohere. The tactics of tactical media are not homogeneous, but in the act of assembly, I will provide a certain coherence that these projects may resist. Lovink, after all, notes that "tactical media are not so much in need of theories or Big Ideas. . . . There is no 'World Federation of Tactical Media.'"[41] One must therefore pose the question: is there a lurking danger in bringing tactics into visibility, in making stable that which maintains a kind of power by being unstable? Is there a contradiction between my methodology and the tactics I describe? An initial response, both pragmatic and prosaic, is to note that there is not necessarily a way out of this problem: a critical text, after all, demands a certain coherence, and therefore all one can do is point to the contradiction between the critical act and the heterogeneous and even subscopic aspects of the projects under discussion. There

are, however, other strategies: one might place tactical media under erasure or perhaps develop a methodology and a mode of critical writing that contains within it a kind of instability, such as Matthew Fuller was able to do in his magisterial *Media Ecologies,* which performatively renders his media objects fundamentally unstable, such that neither critic nor reader can get a definitive fix on them.

But we can find a better answer to this question within the works of tactical media themselves, which are more interested in repurposing, modifying, and disrupting than they are in remaining invisible. They are invested in stability, at least insofar as they want to have a material effect on the world, however temporary and provisional, which is to say that their object is not exactly formlessness and uncontainability. In fact, in that their tinkering, playing, and visualizing are themselves a kind of academic criticism, they are not so far removed from my own discourse. That is, these artist-activists may not necessarily be invested in the idea of a fundamental structural transformation, but they are invested in cultural critique, itself invested with a transformative power that may not be immediately perceptible but in which one must place a certain belief. And cultural critique, insofar as it abstracts and generalizes, itself allows for the formation of a provisionally stable descriptive category: abstraction is one means of establishing temporary, nonessential, even tactical commonality among art practices as disparate as distributed denial-of-service attacks and information visualization. This commonality does not suggest homogeneity; rather, abstraction forges a set of tactical links that do not collapse the differences among different projects, practices, and investments.

The initial development of tactical media was coterminous with the development of information technologies and the subsequent dot-com boom—this is the era of the first Next Five Minutes (N5M) conferences— but the war on terror, the expansion of financial capitalism, and the intensified implementation of neoliberal policies in the opening years of the twenty-first century have given rise to what I read as a more fluid, extensive, and thereby more powerful set of art-activist practices. It is therefore not simply critical license that allows me to see beyond the era of tactical gizmology and to discover a range of new media art prac-

tices with clear sociopolitical engagements. In the pages that follow, I showcase different projects on topics such as territorial borders, war, and finance capital. Such a structure cannot hope to be comprehensive; rather, it is representative and illustrative. The projects I discuss are not isolate or discrete but intricately linked: the voice of dissent is not alone in the wilderness of the art world, somehow external to its primary institutions, but is growing into a resounding chorus. What might seem to be the presentist quality of my discussion—many of the projects I discuss are mere months old—is counterbalanced by an attention to the rich history of interventionist art practices that inform tactical media. It is further counterbalanced by a sociology-of-knowledge approach that outlines the conditions to which tactical media projects respond.

Tactical Gizmology

In the age of the network society, a range of new media activities have been written under the sign of the tactical: TXTMobs; contestational robotics (LittleBrother); hacktivism (encompassing practices such as electronic civil disobedience, distributed denial-of-service attacks, and campaigns by the Electronic Frontier Foundation);[42] alternative or independent media; clicktivism (Moveon.org); peer-to-peer network building; virtual communities (WELL, BBS); laboratories (Makrolab); open-source software platforms; anticorporate parody (Yes Men, 0100101110101101.ORG); cybersquatting (Etoy, Vaticano.org);[43] modding; and Life hacks (the dissemination of instructions about how to hack the iPhone or how to plant herbicide-resistant seeds). One might think, then, that this is an analytic and artistic category designating all technology-based activism. But in my analysis, tactical media is also the rubric for work that does not easily fit within the activism category, whose political critique is subtle, not immediately obvious, even covert.

The true departure from this earlier wave of tactical media can be achieved by revisiting Michel de Certeau, whose theorizing of tactics and strategy in *The Practice of Everyday Life* deeply informs Lovink, Critical Art Ensemble, and others writing about tactical media in the 1990s and extending through the publication of a special issue of the journal *Subsol*

on the topic in 2002.[44] On the whole, from this critical discourse we get the sense that "tactical media" ought exclusively to mean the use of low- or no-tech tools as a mode of protest against governmental, corporate, and biopolitical structures of control. In my view, we can take a more expansive view than that of DIY and protests articulated via billboards and simple scripts, although such tactics still require our critical attention. Put simply, de Certeau's neat alignment of users and tactics, producers and strategy, is complicated by tactical media practitioners who write their own scripts and build their own gadgets. Tactics, that is, are tools for users who are also producers. As the Tactical Media Crew explains, "Tactical Media are what happens when cheap 'do it yourself' media made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics are exploited by those who are outside of the normal hierarchies of power and knowledge."[45] Thus does the Institute for Applied Autonomy hail the new models of technical expertise: "Praise be to the tinkerers, to the toy makers, and to the amateurs. New versions of expertise must be constructed."[46]

Such tinkering might include Critical Art Ensemble's hacking of a Nintendo Game Boy to produce *Super Kid Fighter,* a text-based role-playing game modeled on Wilhelm Reich's writing about children's sexual rights. In the new game space, players have to ditch school, sell drugs, and engage in other criminal activities to fulfill the objective, which is to gain admission to the town's brothel. The purpose of this reengineering is to counter what the artists regard as the false Puritanism in the U.S. social context (the mass hysteria about children seeing Janet Jackson's breast, for example). We will see a different kind of reengineering at work in my second chapter, where I discuss Joseph DeLappe's intervention in the game space of *America's Army,* with the result that it temporarily functions not as a game of military valorization but as a game of mourning. What both modes of reengineering indicate is the extent to which tactical media operates both at the level of technological apparatus and at the level of content and representation. It is not simply about reappropriating the instrument but also about reengineering semiotic systems and reflecting critically on institutions of power and control. The work of the Preemptive Media collective—which informs and deforms mobile digital technologies such as RFID, Wi-Fi, and bar codes—is particularly

apposite here. Preemptive Media's object is to exploit consumer electronics for a larger purpose, not only to instruct users and consumers but also to foster critical consciousness and a kind of low-tech amateurism. In one representative performance, *Swipe* (2002–2005), the collective installed a bar at a media arts event and scanned the driver's licenses of all the bar patrons, producing a visualization of the data along with individual receipts detailing each patron's demographics including income, profession, and consumer habits.[47] The idea behind this activity was to encourage consumer awareness of processes of automated identification data collection (AIDC) and to encourage a critical conversation about privacy, surveillance, and data mining. As the setting indicates, *Swipe* functioned within a social, rather than private, symbolic realm, its relational aesthetic true to Nicolas Bourriaud's vision of an artistic praxis that struggles against the reifying and commodifying of social relations. It is in this sense that readers can understand my expansion of the category of tactical media beyond a narrow focus on tactical gizmology, such that it might also encompass practices such as artistic data visualization.

A strong emphasis on DIY drives the work of tactical gizmologists: in an updating of Alan Kay, the mantra is "Give every user her tool and show her how to work it." It makes intuitive sense, then, that the Electronic Civil Disobedience group—which I discuss at length in my first chapter—not only encourages users to participate in distributed denial-of-service actions but also encourages them to modify the script. Given this appreciation of tinkering and production, and given, too, the powerful cultural and economic force of open-source movements, we might expect the current generation of new media art-activists to place a premium on code and invite user participation that was also pedagogical. As we will see, however, this is not necessarily the case. A brief return to Josh On's *They Rule* will be instructive: unlike the work of Bureau d'Etudes, which provides visual analyses of financial capitalism and contemporary political networks, users of *They Rule* are allowed to create their own cartographic structures.[48] We work within the parameters of *They Rule* but not at the level of its code. Tactical media practitioners, then, are not code workers whose raison d'être is the revealing of the symbolic, and at

times actual, conditions of production. None of the game or visualization interfaces that I discuss in this book make visible the underlying streams of encoded information except in representative form; that is, the encoded information is only present as something else, for example, the gamelike creatures representing national currencies in John Klima's *ecosystm,* which features prominently in my third chapter. Our limited engagement, then, is part of the epistemology of tactical media: we are meant to interact and engage while simultaneously becoming aware of our own limitations and our own inability to make an immediately perceptible impact on the project as it stands in for the socioeconomic and political system.

Despite the expansive title, then, the project of this book is not to archive all those cultural productions, works, and practices that profess or otherwise support a radical politics. In that sense it differs from projects such as *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life,* the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition and corresponding book documenting public-space and street-based performances.[49] As the title might indicate, de Certeau provides a crucial theoretical lens through which to view the tactics of artists such as the Yes Men, Reverend Billy, the Surveillance Camera Players, and the Biotic Pie Brigade. Their interventions are also situated in the tradition of the Situationists, with their two tactics of *detourné* and *dérive,* and the culture jamming of the yippies. The works I engage differ not only with respect to medium but also in tone: there are aspects of humor and parody present in some of the games and installations I discuss, surely, but the payoff is not exclusively the trick or the prank.[50]

A case in point is the "digital hijacks" of the überprovocateur Hans Bernhard, one of the founders of Etoy and Ubermorgen.com, the art collective responsible for projects such as "Vote-Auction" (slogan: "Bringing Capitalism and Democracy Closer Together"), "Injunction Generator," and "Google Will Eat Itself."[51] Ubermorgen's latest subversive happening is *Amazon Noir: The Big Book Crime* (November 2006), a hijack of Amazon's "search inside" tool that both violated and critically reflected on digital copyright. With the assistance of Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio, Ubermorgen produced a software bot ("foolingware") that

outwitted Amazon's search feature by making five thousand to ten thousand search inquiries per book and reassembling the individual parts into a complete text. Users were then able to "legally" copy and distribute copyrighted books: between April and October 2006, over three thousand books were distributed through peer-to-peer networks such as BitTorrent.[52] In the end, the artists, the self-described "bad guys" in this particular scenario of media hacking, were of course threatened with legal action; Amazon bought the Amazon Noir software, and the two parties settled out of court with a nondisclosure agreement. What remains of the hijack are an abstract diagram of the software bot and pdf files of some half-dozen books, among them Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*. Their political point is as manifest as the genre of noir would indicate. But to recognize the intellectual lineage and philosophical content of this collective's work, one need only look at their name: *Ubermorgen*, after all, means "the day after tomorrow" or "super-tomorrow."[53]

Data Visualization as Tactical Media

Three world maps are aligned on the opening screen of the digital artist John Klima's *Political Landscape, Emotional Terrain:* one political, one topographical, another emotional. Color-coded in accordance with data culled from the United Nations, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the World Health Organization, respectively, the three maps register global reports of human rights abuse, geophysical data, and life expectancy statistics.[54] The cartographic display, which is interactive and three-dimensional, renders the political and emotional components of individual lives in different colors and tonalities and makes it possible to compare incidents of UN-classified political oppression and life expectancy. Klima describes the work: "Frequently, we use the metaphor of a landscape to describe a seemingly unrelated human condition, be it political or personal. . . . I decided to create a series of global terrains that relate to the aforementioned metaphors. . . . The result is a compelling visual comparison and representation of a particularly intriguing source dataset."[55] His methodology for the graphing component of the project is the A* (A-star) algorithm used for artificial intelligence and
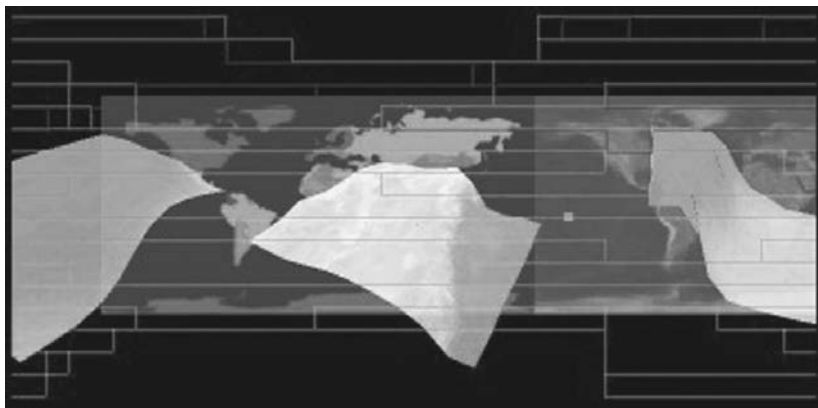
John Klima, Political Landscape, Emotional Terrain, *September 2002.*

the gaming industry. This algorithm allows a character or sprite to avoid artificial and physical obstacles and navigate the most efficient solution path through a terrain, which creates the appearance of intelligence.[56]

In the context of this work by Klima, the A* algorithm functions as a graphing technique that produces a visual analysis of the data sets and makes the links among them paradoxically concrete. As a consequence, biopolitics are rendered in the interface of the game.[57] In *Political Landscape, Emotional Terrain,* "life" is brought into the arena of knowledge, management, and calculation. The integrated maps register biopolitical control of the individual body and of populations while also articulating statistics as the mechanism of that control. They function as a visual illustration of the modern Foucauldian regime of power, which is "situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population."[58] Occluded, but still suggested, by the data Klima integrates into a global biopolitical terrain are the range and proliferation of techniques required to coordinate control of the individual body and of the species body. The global management that *Political Landscape* suggests has been accomplished by the instrumental rationalization of medical, economic, and political systems.

Klima's aesthetic practices in computer media involve elements of data and information visualization, interactive computer-animated 3-D graphics, elementary robotics (using nonautonomous agents), gaming

paradigms, and data manipulation.[59] Like the network-based data visualization artwork of Lisa Jevbratt, Klima tends to focus on larger social processes rather than on real-time personal experiences.[60] Klima's work revolves around representations of global events, processes, and statistics. Working within a tradition of electronic art that takes data as its material, signals that it then aestheticizes, modifies, interrupts, negates, and returns, Klima's particular source material includes financial market data and "terrain, topography, and geographic information systems."[61] As he notes with regard to one of his recent works, *Terrain Machine,* Klima works toward "an aesthetic investigation of the world as it currently exists 'in data.'"[62] Such a project invites certain questions: What does the aestheticizing of data ultimately reveal about that data? How can one use data maps and visualizations to think about causes and material effects? In a data visualization project, especially using the data of global finance and the statistics of global control, what aesthetic does one produce? Is it simply replicatory or reiterative of the logic of the control society and of neoliberal globalization?[63] I suggest that the visual spectacles Klima produces are subversive of the technicity and technological rationality inherent in statistical calculation and that they are also generated by a practice and an operation that produces an aesthetic. This aesthetic is grounded in the material realities of global capitalism and the global language of statistics, risk, and probability.

Because the data are not continually updated and are thereby static, *Political Landscape* does not immediately register continuous control, monitoring, or assessment. However, particularly when read in the context of Klima's related projects—*The Great Game,* which translated daily Department of Defense records of the Afghanistan bombing campaign into the interface of a topographical game, and *ecosystm,* which animates real-time currency exchange rates—this project does suggest an increasingly complex, invasive, and integrated regime of control. The authority of disciplinary institutions (school, factory, prison) is no longer temporally and spatially limited by these institutions; it is not owned or bounded but administered. Control is dispersive rather than concentrative; it works by communication rather than by confinement. One does not need to look to the Department of Homeland Security to recognize

that we are now in a moment marked by new structures of continuous oversight and what Gilles Deleuze calls "open circuits" of control. Indeed, the administrative control of information requires immediately executable, incessant, and flexible strategies of surveillance. One difference between the two orders of society, according to Gilles Deleuze in his reading of the problematic in Foucault, is that control "is short-term and rapidly shifting, but at the same time continuous and unbounded, whereas discipline was long-term, infinite, and discontinuous."[64] Control is constantly subject to reconstitution, its indexes of command contingent, its structure neither fixed nor stable. The figure for the control society is the snake rather than the mole, which would suggest non-destinational movement rather than a teleology. And the machine that expresses the social forms of the control society is the computer. Many of Klima's digital art projects, particularly *ecosystm*, function as visual illustrations and supplementary figures of this metastable control system. Here and in subsequent chapters, I offer an integrative reading of Klima's style, practice, aesthetic, and political project as contemporaneous with its moment: exemplary of the tele-visioning and projecting of the world through the computer screen and illustrative of certain discursive features of globalization.

In a different context, but on the theme of the abstraction of numbers, Fernando Coronil has aligned the global market with globalcentric discourses in their mutual technological rationalization, which reduces material things to numbers. The distillation of the West into abstract financial networks, Coronil suggests, has contributed to the occlusion of "real" modalities of power.[65] The global market functions as an allegory for his reading of the effects of globalcentric discourses because it absorbs the commodity as a thing and transforms it into a historical entity of the stock market. This transformation erases the commodity's "proper" identity and converts its qualitative value into the quantitative. To a certain extent, *Political Landscape, Emotional Terrain* provides a visual representation of this logic of the global market, the transformation of material bodies into statistics, assets, even geometric icons. However, in that Klima uses official data sets that generate symbolic representational systems, these systems are not simulacral. But the work indeed registers the extent to which the "real" modalities of power are eclipsed and evacuated by figures and data streams.

Klima's *Political Landscape* highlights the very space between the meta-geophysical and the geophysical, the virtual and the real. The map's continents, in other words, operate in both registers by recording that which is invisible to, if not evacuated by, the global statistic. Gathering together the whole of North America under the lowest possible statistical incidence of human rights abuse, for example, the monochromatic spaces on the map have an attendant homogenizing force and power of occlusion. The telecontinental map announces the remainder, through its absence, as that which cannot be discursively captured or managed. Even as it gestures toward totalization, the statistic must necessarily remain incomplete, an incompleteness emphasized in Klima's data visualization project.

To speak of the political-aesthetic work of data visualization, we thus need to acknowledge a distinction between functional or pragmatic visualization on the one hand and artistic visualization on the other.[66] The difference is not in aesthetic—many transportation maps are nothing if not beautiful, and the power of *They Rule* is less visual than conceptual—but rather in intentionality, procedure, and self-reflexivity. Artistic visualizations do not proceed from the assumption that data are neutral; in fact, one of the desired effects is often that the viewer will recognize the gaps and perspective embedded not only in the data but in any act of calculation. In that sense, artistic visualizations are fundamentally perspectival, and here we can remember one of Lovink and Garcia's comments: "Tactical media do not just report events, as they are never impartial they always participate."[67] If their use of persuasive rhetoric is subtle and they do not themselves make overt arguments, these works of tactical cartography give the users all the tools necessary to map structures of capital, power, and influence (John On's visualizations).

In data visualization projects, the data bear an ideological valence recorded in the art. These works rely on the real elements from which the statistics are drawn, but they also critique both their ideology and source. If the data are flawed, these works document and critique that flaw by rendering the data in other forms. They visualize and materialize the data so as to give it a kind of ideological and political impact that it might not otherwise have. Witness Valdis Krebs's political book network, a visualization of Amazon.com purchases from January 2003 that

Valdis Krebs, "Political Patterns on the WWW."

divide almost precisely into "red" and "blue" categories, two communities of readers linked only by their common investment in one book: Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong: The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*.[68] Visualizations such as I discuss here do not interrupt the flows of informational capitalism as much as they interpret and represent the integrative alliances among finance capitalism and biopolitical regimes of control. It is perhaps in this respect that we might discern the metapolitical content of their art.

Virtuosity

Storming the Winter Palace is no longer an option, as has frequently been noted, but what would be its postimperial equivalent? Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that older modes of political organization have become obsolete partly because of the linear structure that traces the progression of struggle from the moment of insurrection to the forming of political vanguards, or "the dictatorship of the proletariat."[69] But would contemporary forms of revolutionary resistance, or revolutionary becoming, as they are articulated in the work of tactical media, also run the risk of vanguardism in the guise of the Netzvolk, the digerati, the cognitariat, the hacker class, the virtual class—however one is to articulate the new proletariat class of the symbolic economy?[70] Perhaps the notion that revolutionary resistance no longer requires a single spatiality,

or Foucault's notion that "there is no single locus of great Refusal," means that power will not, cannot, reconstitute either on-site or in the hands of a limited few. If we have only a "plurality of resistances," a "being-against," always and everywhere (with echoes of Trotsky's Permanent Revolution and Snowball's continual rebellions difficult to overlook), then in fact the teleology of revolutionary organization itself is disrupted.[71] Instead of a single, spectacular disruption, we have a "multiplicity of discontinuous sites of enunciation."[72]

The models of resistance, dissent, and "being-against" articulated by tactical media do not adhere to the ideology of the "wired" Left (e.g., Arthur and Marilouise Kroker), which draws explicitly on twentieth-century traditions of activism and social protest. Neither do they adhere to the ideology of the cyberlibertarians, who have been active in public-policy debates about censorship, privacy, and intellectual property and tend to focus on individual freedom rather than social justice.[73] Instead we can locate in the work of these new media artist-activists a kind of virtuosity that is also a politics: political activity that would supplement but not displace other forms, modes, and practices of politico-aesthetic engagement in the network society, specifically refusal, destructivity, cyberactivism, and hacktivism.

After Hardt and Negri's *Empire,* the paradigmatic figure of refusal and exodus would no doubt be Bartleby, whose refusal is one of evasion and withdrawal rather than of confrontation. His refrain "I would prefer not to" is passive but not without menace. It is expressive of dignity yet still announces a power held over him. The refrain cedes power but retains the power to withhold. As the neoliberal state began fully to emerge in the 1980s, Hakim Bey fired an even closer shot across the bow: "Refusal of *Work* can take the forms of absenteeism, on-job drunkenness, sabotage, and sheer inattention—but it can also give rise to new modes of rebellion: more self-employment, participation in the 'black' economy and *'lavoro nero,'* welfare scams and other criminal options, pot farming, etc.—all more or less 'invisible' activities compared to traditional leftist confrontational tactics such as the general strike."[74] And now, Maurizio Lazzarato explains how refusal plays out in the context of Workerism and attendant revolutionary praxis: "These social struggles and 'invisible' behaviors engage both in direct, molar confrontations

with the apparatuses of power and strategies of withdrawal, flight and circumvention. In the same way, they alternatively articulate strategies of both separation and 'mediation,' both negotiation and refusal."[75] Finally, Alan Liu updates the industrial-age gesture of refusal to the postindustrial cubicle and locates dissent in the ethos of cool:

> There are only two equivocal ways that the archaic and the unreasonable can protest their submission to the new rationalization. One is to quit and move to another job, which exactly reproduces the conditions of mobility, modularity, and random access that support the "flexibility" and "centralization" of postindustrialism. The other way is just as conflicted: to express in lifestyle and, increasingly, in what I have called "workstyle" the enormous reserve of petty kink that *Processed World* called "bad attitude" but that now appears with mind-numbing regularity in popular culture, the media, and the Web as "cool."[76]

The law of cool, then, is "the 'gesture' of ambivalent, recusant oppositionality (not quite a 'statement,' 'expression,' or even 'representation' of defiance) within knowledge work."[77] The coolest ideology of art within the culture of information is "destructive creativity," of which hacking would be one logical extension.

As we will see in chapter 1, hacktivist tactics of the Electronic Civil Disobedience movement, the Electronic Disturbance Theater, and the Zapatistas (Floodnet applications that produced pseudo–error messages such as "human rights not found on this server") correspond to, and are occasionally informed by, Deleuze's notion of the event. To precipitate an event is to act without knowing the situation into which one will be propelled, to change things as they exist: "For a while, they have a real rebellious spontaneity. . . . Events can't be explained by the situations that give rise to them, or into which they lead. They appear for a moment, and it's that moment that matters, it's the chance we must seize. . . . If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control."[78] The event is unpredictable; it is not fixable or determinable. It becomes history only after its rupture. There is a certain skepticism within new media studies toward activist practices modeled on the structure of the event.[79] The unpredictable event troubles the teleology of class struggle; from that perspective, it is perhaps too messianic, the notion that revolutionary change, if it comes at

all, depends on the unforeseen too troubling. From the perspective of transvergence, as Marcos Novak has described it, the event might be too deeply embedded in—because it is constituted by—the disciplinary language of philosophy and would thereby inhibit the emergence of truly transdisciplinary collaborative practices. But there are intersections between the structure of the event and self-organizing new media works that are open to the unexpected, both programmed and non-programmed in the sense that they are open to a nonpredictable future. From the perspective of a tactical media practitioner, the belief in this temporal opening to a better tomorrow makes the question of immediate efficacy less pronounced. A skeptic might wonder what difference a temporary disturbance makes, but for tactical media there is a certain power in the spontaneous eruption, the momentary evasion of protocological control structures, the creation of temporary autonomous zones, that surely play their part in making possible the opening for political transformations.

It is in this sense that we might understand why the rhetoric of emancipatory human agency is largely absent from the projects featured in this book. They are not mired in the present, but neither do they fully invest in the kind of imaginary and prescriptive social engineering that one finds in a utopian text. Instead their sense of historical time is unpredictable, open, contingent, variable. Responding to Jean-François Lyotard's lament that postmodern architecture has been forced to abandon the project of fundamental structural transformation for the project of "minor modifications," or what we might call tinkering, Bourriaud articulates the aesthetico-political rationale of contemporary art praxis in terms absolutely applicable to tactical media. Art in the present moment, he explains, is "*learning to inhabit the world in a better way,* instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution. Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist."[80] With the recognition that there is no getting outside the global techno-military-economic world order, tactical media thus performs a sociopolitical intervention by gesturing only obliquely toward a better world in the future, its vision of tomorrow much like that offered at the

end of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men:* a boat fleetingly visible on the horizon and detached from any concrete articulation of an ideal political community or certain historical destiny.

That said, the crushing experience of a seemingly permanent war on terror, alongside Halliburton-Enron economics (and we could continue the list), has been sufficient to squash even the staunchest of affirmative beliefs, so it is not surprising that Lovink would come eventually to regard tactical media with a great deal more pessimism. In 2005, with Ned Rossiter, he writes:

> Tactical media too often assume to reproduce the curious spatio-temporal dynamic and structural logic of the modern state and industrial capital: difference and renewal from the peripheries. But there's a paradox at work here. Disruptive as their actions may often be, tactical media corroborate the temporal mode of post-Fordist capital: short-termism. . . . This is why tactical media are treated with a kind of benign tolerance. There is a neurotic tendency to disappear. Anything that solidifies is lost in the system. The ideal is to be little more than a temporary glitch, a brief instance of noise or interference. Tactical media set themselves up for exploitation in the same manner that "modders" do in the game industry: both dispense with their knowledge of loop holes in the system for free. They point out the problem, and then run away. Capital is delighted, and thanks the tactical media outfit or nerd-modder for the home improvement.[81]

A comparative analysis of the earlier "ABC of Tactical Media" manifesto (1997) and this manifesto for organized networks reveals a similar investment in dissensus rather than the overly idealistic consensus. It also reveals a subjective, rather than objective, reappraisal of the logic of tactical media. It is not that its functioning has changed in the intervening years but that the perception of its power and efficacy has changed: what was once "provisional" and "flexible response" is now regarded as "short-termism." While I am less certain about the definitive claim that capitalism is always able to erase the possibilities for political repurposing, I would acknowledge that Lovink and Rossiter make a strong point in their critique. Their emphasis on perspectival, subjective truths about tactical media, however, reminds us of the integral role that the audience has to play. The right question to ask is not whether tactical media *works* or not, whether it succeeds or fails in spectacular fashion to ef-

fect structural transformation; rather, we should be asking to what extent it strengthens social relations and to what extent its activities are virtuosic.

What I wish now to point to is a correlation between tactical media as performance and what Paolo Virno has theorized as virtuosity. Virtuosity necessarily partakes of the same underlying unpredictability that constitutes the structure of the event. In his analysis of the multitude, Virno explains that virtuosity is "activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product, without settling into a 'finished product,' or into an object which would survive the performance." Unlike the plastic arts, where what survives the artist is a material product, virtuosity exists as performance or in the traces of performance it leaves. Because the performance does not result in an end product, the activity of the virtuoso requires the performance of an audience to witness and record a memory of her achievement. It is in this sense that the performance as such "makes sense only if it is seen or heard."[82] Virno here draws on Hannah Arendt in noting the affinity between performing artists and politics: both need "a publicly organized space for their 'work,' and both depend upon others for the performance itself."[83] Virno pushes further to note that "all virtuosity is intrinsically *political*."[84] In my view, tactical media projects share with performing artists and political actions a sense of contingency in that they too are performed "on the fly" and require the presence and response of a user to complete their signifying fields. It is in this respect that we can understand the foregrounding of technique and technological expertise, which might initially appear to frustrate attempts to situate these works in relation to a social context and which also seems instead to invest in what Pierre Bourdieu calls a "pure aesthetic."[85]

Entered into fashion shows with the slogan "Precarity Is in Fashion," the Japanese designer Serpica Naro emerged on the metaphoric stage with the provocative question "Why save the world when we can design it?" Serpica Naro—an anagram of San Precario—was a brand itself designed, as it were, by Milanese precarity activists to stage a disruptive protest during fashion week. In general terms, precarity is the name

given to life without security, certainty, or predictability, life that is essentially subject to financial markets. More specifically, precarity identifies uncertainty as the fundamental condition of labor in the postindustrial moment. It is the name given to intermittent work, work without stability and a living wage, a category of temporary labor that links together chain workers, service workers, and knowledge workers.[86] In response to the ideologies of corporate creativity and innovation, which imagine a flexible, modular, streamlined, and mobile workforce capable of rapid-fire response to competition, precarity activists speak to the material conditions of unemployment, job security, and social exclusion in the contemporary moment. That the Milanese precarity activists should engage these issues through the medium of design and performance, in addition to traditional organizational models, suggests a certain cultural logic. The event of the fashion show was an elaborate hoax: the activists' "actual" protest was staged via fake threats and protests against the designer, thus necessitating protection and a strong police presence at the event, the simulation of danger and insecurity thus negating the very distinction on which the law is based. This tactic of placing design at the center of political engagement truly is, as Serpica Naro promises, the triumph of creativity over insecurity.

The practice of designing rather than saving the world is another model of political engagement that has elements of destructivity (it often participates in a similar poetics of interference and interruption) and elements of other modes of political organization that depend on collectivity and solidarity. The degree of ethical concern in the works I discuss in this book should no doubt not be underestimated, but perhaps it could be suggested that their politics are a metapolitics. However, the unavoidably cynical conclusion is that, while their critical practices do not have the hollowness or emptiness of Space Invaders—the paradigmatic scene of the individual fighting back against a relentless and formless enemy—at times they participate in the same solitary, and sedentary, aesthetic.