

Deviant Discourses: An Interview with Critical Art Ensemble
by Don Simmons

Questioning is at the center of any experimental practice, be it scientific or artistic. When heading into an area that is unfamiliar, the result can be change, understanding or failure. To pursue an experimental practice means that one must not be afraid of failure. The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) is one such group of artists whose need for active inquiry outweighs any fear of failure. The members of CAE have been critically examining structures of authority since 1987 when they formed in Tallahassee, Florida, while attending Florida State University as students. Currently, they form a collective of five tactical media artists whose experimental practice engages critical thought, technology-based art and political activism. Their diverse body of work has taken the form of audio-visual media, performative interventions, computer graphic interfaces, robotics and biology. Their book projects include *The Electronic Disturbance* (1994), *Electronic Civil Disobedience* (1996), *Flesh Machine* (1998), *Digital Resistance* (2001) and *The Molecular Invasion* (forthcoming). This interview derived from my own interest in trying to comprehend the work and writing of CAE. It was conducted via email during the month of December 2001.

Don Simmons: In the wake of September 11 have your views changed on your own activities?

CAE: Not really. In terms of activities we are doing the same thing we were doing before 9/11. Nothing has really changed in the world, economically or politically. One war has been intensified. It always was there (as was the US military and the CIA), we just didn't have CNN (America's press agent) spinning it to the world every day. The quantity of war occurring is fundamentally the same as before. It's happening all over Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central America. The invasive economic structure of pancapitalism is just the same as before. Don't believe the hype that everything has changed. Whatever a person was doing before 9/11 is what they should be doing now, whether that's in the areas of human rights, labor organizing, fighting AIDS, standing against globalization and corporate aggression, and so on. To anyone who says now, peace in Afghanistan is the primary political issue of the day, we ask, where were you during the last 20 years of war there? Why wasn't it an issue then? Both capitalism and fundamentalism have been wreaking havoc all over the world—the terminal abuse of people didn't just take a quantum leap because now it happened in NYC. To believe that all of sudden the world is different is a shocking expression of ethnocentrism, and is to believe that the lives of Americans are somehow more valuable than those of the millions of others who have been sacrificed worldwide for the sake of profit and political power. For the overwhelming majority of the world's population (the minority being those at the top of the capitalist food chain), nothing has changed. This situation is business as usual. From CAE's perspective, for the resistance it should be business as usual as well.

The one thing that has changed in western countries is that the authoritarians who control these nations are taking advantage of the current climate of hysteria

to reconfigure the symbolic order to better favor corporate identity and needs. Further, those activists who have been fighting to maintain or expand the minimal ability of individuals and groups to express dissent just had their workload doubled, as we watch fundamental rights erode like a beach during a hurricane.

DS: You have been criticized for being "terrorists" on the net, referring to your "Mythologies of Terrorism on the Net" essay in *Digital Resistance*. How do you feel about this accusation?

CAE: Obviously that is a silly accusation. We have always advocated peaceful means of resistance. The problem is that some of the models CAE has developed are powerful ones that could actually slow the system. Anything that disrupts the absolute of the commodity, now more than ever given your last question, is considered terrorism. This is part of the reconfiguration of the symbolic order—all dissent is equated with terrorism. We are witnessing a brutal attempt to synthesize pure capitalism in western countries—perfect spectacle; perfect order.

DS: Some from the left have also called CAE extremists. Is there a middle ground between electronic blockages and street level activism or is the street permanently dead as a space for political activism?

CAE: We have been called extremists, but in most cases it has been by people who are not really familiar with our work. And not to generalize too much, but it's often by people stuck in the 60s, who refuse any models of activism except those representative of that period. As for the middle ground, we don't have to look for it. Activists' methods are not intended to be in competition with one another. It is not an either/or choice, it's an and/both. Model building is about inventing as many tools as possible to serve resistant activity, and using whatever works best in a given situation.

Further, we must remember that capital has to be confronted with resistance wherever it goes. When CAE first introduced Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD), activist culture was skeptical about confrontation in cyberspace; now it's a common method. Street and electronic resistance are used together in harmony. Now we are trying to get people used to the idea of fighting capital at the molecular level. Molecular territory is being captured by capital on a daily basis without facing any molecular form of contestation. We can reverse-engineer the molecular invasion. Many activists (especially greens) do not like this idea. However, CAE believes that once we demonstrate how this model works, people will come around to it, just like with ECD. For example, any trait of adaptability in a genetically modified organism can be reverse-engineered into a characteristic of susceptibility. That means precision targeting of GMOs without leaving polluting residue is possible. For example, the modified enzyme that makes Roundup Ready plants resistant to the Roundup herbicide can be targeted and reverse-engineered. It's time to make science work for resistant purposes. Unfortunately there are those who think it's enough just to demonstrate with signs and big puppets.

As for the street being dead, that is just an absurd idea. To power vectors, the streets exist as dead capital (i.e., they are not a particularly valuable asset to capital), but for living and for action, the streets are very much alive.

DS: Politically progressive art discourse has been dominated by theory, as opposed to experiential learning. How does CAE fit into this binary environment?

CAE: We don't think there is such a dramatic separation. Look at all the identity theory over the past 30 years from people such as Audre Lorde, or Doug Crimp. These works are loaded with personal stories and experiences. Most of what they reply and react to is taken from life experience. As long as "the personal is political" remains a significant aphorism, experiential learning will be important to discourse generation.

As for CAE, if we are interested in talking to word culture, we write books. If we want to speak to image culture we make images. The group is not committed to any medium, only to effective communication with an audience. We are back to using the right tool for the job—tactical media at its best.

DS: In your first book, *The Electronic Disturbance*, you make reference to individual's "rolling the dice", taking a chance and doing an action without thinking too far ahead because results are too unpredictable. Do you still feel the same way?

CAE: When CAE speaks of "rolling the dice," we are referring to the nature of experimentation. When experimenting, the outcome is unknown. The hope is that the starting hypothesis will be correct, but more times than not it isn't. Experiments fail or go in unexpected directions. If you are doing experiments that have a political impact, failure can have serious negative implications and consequences for the experimenters, or, even worse, for those around them. In spite of this, CAE believes that you still have to try. Far worse is to remain inactive (especially if it's due to paralysis emerging from fear of unpredictability and lack of control) in a time when authoritarian culture is growing by leaps and bounds. That is unforgivable. The damage unresisted authoritarianism will do to people is much worse than anything that could be caused by a failed experiment designed to undermine it.

DS: In CAE's multi-disciplinary collective, the voices must be varied. What are the advantages of being multi-faceted? And do you see any disadvantages?

CAE: The advantage is simple. The larger the group's skill base, knowledge base, and logistical base, the more projects that can be done, and the more issues and environments can be addressed. The nonrational impact of this ability is also important. Fourier believed that humans have a natural tendency to want a broad variety of experience. He called the tendency to desire and search for this type of difference in life the "butterfly." Having wandered through many different areas of culture, CAE members have profited tremendously by the

pleasure of difference: We tend not to get bored, and haven't suffered from activist burn-out. Letting the butterfly loose is very helpful in maintaining group solidarity over the long-term.

If there is a disadvantage, we are unsure what it is. The one we get asked about all the time is "don't you worry that your personal vision is being compromised?" Being believers in mutual aid for purposes of production, CAE's reply is that our project is made easier and better because of our voluntary association. As a group, we do far better work together than any of us could do on our own.

DS: The concept of "community" is a major concern in the contemporary art world today. Do you think that community has vanished from our lives in this information age and do you feel it can reappear again?

CAE: Vanished would be too strong. Communities can still be found in the first world, but they are very nonrepresentative. The division of labor is too complex, people are too mobile, and the population is too dense for community to exist as defined in any sociological sense. As Ken Wark says, we don't have roots, we have aeriels. Because communities are so nonrepresentative of contemporary social organization, CAE believes it's a bad mistake to create actions that assume they are ubiquitous and available. (The right organizing around the vaporware of family values is quite analogous. That campaign was a foolish illusion that went nowhere). It is best to organize around principles and structures that have a materiality. Rather than community, CAE has always preferred the idea of coalition.

The good news is that community as an organizing principle seems to be slowly losing its grip on art/activist culture (along with central committees, unions, and parties) and is being replaced with autonomous cells and temporary, single-issue coalitions with ever-shifting rotational leadership. "The people united will never be defeated" has given way to the more practical idea that tactical unity among resistant political configurations for an immediate and specific purpose can have a systemic impact, in spite of differences and contradictions within coalitions. Such immediatism and decentralization have proven to be the best defenses against infiltration and co-optation, as well as aiding in the creation, albeit temporary, of powerful popular fronts. Anarchist forms of organization are finally getting their turn.

DS: Is there a public space for debates and discussions to take place? Or are these spaces illusions or other power structures at work?

CAE: Public space doesn't exist. That concept was dead on arrival in the late 18th century. The bourgeois ideal that there could be open spaces where all types of people could mingle to debate the political issues of the day always was a fantasy. All space is managed and militarized. Now with global communication systems, those who control the systems or have the capital to buy access control the grand majority of "public" speech. There are two ways for minority and dissenting voices to be heard: Radical appropriation of communications (very

illegal, and now would be considered terrorism), or coalitions that have the capital to rent time on global systems or to construct alternative networks. The latter is not very competitive with the global systems, but better than nothing. At the very least, such networks can maintain communications and solidarity among coalition itself.

DS: In *The Electronic Disturbance*, CAE writes, "It is time to openly and boldly use the methodology of recombination so as to better parallel the technology of our time." Can you explain this statement?

CAE: CAE was speaking about digitality. Digital systems of recombination and replication are for the most part a threat to analogic culture's laws concerning privatization. It seemed like a good point of intervention. Unfortunately, this shift did not turn out to be what we hoped. Resistant culture is not overthrowing laws concerning privatization. Instead, various institutions of capital are slugging it out. Some believe digital material should be free and open source, while others say privatization should continue like it always has. Something new is in the process of being born in the history of profit making and privatization, and it probably won't be good.

DS: How does the recombinative strategy differ from the compilative as employed by, for example, the Russian filmmaker Esther Shub in the laboratory period of post-revolutionary era?

CAE: They share cultural DNA, in the same way that the recombinant strategy does with combines, readymades, collage, constellations, appropriation, plagiarism and all the other digital methods of production. The most significant difference is that recombinant strategy is interdisciplinary in nature, while these others are not. They are methods conceived within the framework of specialized systems of production. They function within a system, and were not used for combining systems themselves. At the end of making a collage, you have a 2D art work, or with a combine, 3D. When recombination is done boldly, no one knows what it is. This method is used to escape specialization in order to find less determined spaces for invention. For example, when CAE is in a traditional art space, patrons often ask us "what are you doing here?" The reason for this question is that our recombinant work doesn't really look like art as defined by the specialization and does not correspond to what one generally finds in the museum space. CAE's work kind of looks like art, somewhat like science, somewhat like activism, somewhat like theater, but not really any of them. (This is hell when it's time to get grants.)

DS: As advocates of plagiarism and anti-copyright, can anyone appropriate and use your ideas?

CAE: We try to walk it like we talk it. All our work is anti-copyrighted and available at no charge. All our books can be downloaded for free at CAE's web site. People are welcome to appropriate it and use it, but what we really hope for is that it will be taken and used as materials to make other tools of resistance. Do remember, however, that our policy of open access is not all altruism on CAE's

part. The fast and wide distribution of digital material creates value at the analogic level. For example, because we give our books away on line, they are better known and translated more rapidly thus creating a larger market. This translates into more hard-copy books being sold. With anti-copyright, everyone benefits. Unfortunately, most people have not figured this out yet, and stick to the old ways of privatization thinking they are protecting their labor investment, when all they actually doing is maintaining its obscurity.

DS: Stylistically *Flesh Machine* appears to be written differently, more as one writer as opposed to several essays, is there a reason for this?

CAE: Not really. *Flesh Machine* had a specific theme—the development of second wave eugenics. In our other books, we were doing a general survey of the intersections and interactions between technology, cultural production, and activism. CAE's new book, *The Molecular Invasion*, which is a companion to *Flesh Machine*, is also very specific. It covers the cultural politics of transgenics.

DS: In *Flesh Machine*, you say, "After the war machine came to full fruition with the implementation of fully matured total war during World War II, along with the attendant economic expansion, it became possible to allocate a generous helping of excess capital for the expansion of the next machine." Do you think this may happen again after the current war is over?

CAE: What would the next machine be? Unlike WWII, we don't think any great breakthroughs, technological or historical, will result from the current military action that would in turn lead to the construction of another grand machine. Further, the flesh machine has not reached maturity yet, so it should remain a primary focus for quite a while. The molecular invasion has only just begun.

DS: In your new book, *Digital Resistance*, you make reference to writing the discourse on ECD through the development of general models rather than specific examples. Is there not a problem in this method of readers misunderstanding your intentions?

CAE: Sure, misinterpretation is always a possibility. Texts and especially intentions are commonly misunderstood. It's simply a pitfall of abstraction.

DS: Involving the discourse of ECD, you have stated the "writing can be clear and accessible but it should be made to resist the eye of the media." What do you mean by that?

CAE: CAE's concern is about how to produce literature that speaks to those concerned with the praxis of social justice, but to not produce work that agencies of authority can use to whip up public hysteria that can be used to mandate the expansion of the disciplinary apparatus. It's a tricky business. On the one hand, we don't want our books (nor our tactical media work) to be boring and overly academic (the Frankfurt School method), and on the other, they have to be alienating enough that we don't find ourselves in *Time* magazine as the latest reason the public needs a strong police state to protect them. General models,

historical examples, anything that can't be sensationalized is what we use to walk this fine line.

DS: What relevance does the work of Antonin Artaud have for CAE?

CAE: We like the prophets of excess such as Artaud, de Sade, Poe, Lautréamont, Gide, Genet, Bataille and so on. They are not a big help in terms of production, but they remind us of why we resist. They remind of what is possible in the under-economy of pleasure. They define individual autonomy, and what an individual could do if not forced to live under the tyranny of reason.

Don Simmons is an emerging electronic media artist who currently lives in Halifax. This interview was conducted while Don was completing his MFA degree at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax.

More information about the Critical Art Ensemble and their web projects can be found at: < <http://www.critical-art.net/> >