

Commodify Your Consumption:

Tactical Surfing / Wakes of Resistance

Applying a theory to a practice not only illuminates the practice; it opens up new ways of understanding the theory. Here I want to apply Michel de Certeau's seminal text *The Practice of Everyday Life* to the contemporary practice of "artistic surfing" in the hopes of broadening an understanding of both. What I'm calling "artistic surfing" (aka "surf clubbing," "spirit surfing") takes its inspiration from group blogging, particularly anonymous group photoblogs like 4chan.org. Internet "surf clubs" are basically invitation-only group photoblogs where artists surf the internet intuitively and obliquely, collect detritus (predominantly from commercial sites and social networking sites), recontextualize it via bricolage, titling, and Photoshop remixing, and post it at the surf club's blog where it is often further recontextualized and reposted.¹

The Practice of Everyday Life proves very useful in analyzing this mode of artistic surfing. Internet surfing is basically a hybrid of reading and walking, both practices that *The Practice of Everyday Life* explores in detail. In order to properly apply de Certeau to artistic surfing, I will have to recoup him (or at least borrow him) from the cadre of "tactical media" artists and theorists who have claimed him as their patron saint since 1997.² In the process of my analysis, I will propose a gradual continuum between production and consumption, discuss the differences between "deep" net art and "surface" net art, pragmatically redefine "resistance," and explore some ways that tactical consumption might be intensified in order to efficaciously modulate the network and the world.

A Production / Consumption Continuum

In 1980 de Certeau observed that academics analyzed media either in terms of its content ("information") or in terms of its delivery mechanisms ("television" in his era, "networks" in our era). What was lacking was a way to talk about the creative "reception/consumption/use" happening at the consumer end of the

line -- how were the "users/consumers" modulating institutional input in the practice of their lives? They weren't merely passive receivers. In de Certeau's words, "To assume that [the public is moulded by the products imposed on it] is to misunderstand the act of 'consumption.' This misunderstanding assumes that 'assimilating' necessarily means 'becoming similar to' what one absorbs, and not 'making something similar' to what one is, making it one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it."³

de Certeau described an implicit dichotomy between production and consumption. On the production side were strategic institutions who had power, financial resources, and an established physical base of operations. On the consumption side were tactical users/consumers who lacked power but were more mobile than institutions. "A tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power."⁴

Into the midst of this dichotomy, the web introduces a problematic entity -- the hobbyist user. The hobbyist user (aka prosumer, surfer, social networked netizen) doesn't have the productive agency of an institutional corporation, but she has more productive agency than de Certeau's original television viewer. She can't produce Hollywood movies, but she can upload YouTube videos.

As early as 2000, Pierre Bourriaud wrote, "There is (fertile) static on the borders between consumption and production that can be perceived well beyond the borders of art."⁵ Four years later Nato Thompson argued, "The dependence on these two terms [strategies vs. tactics] seems to create a barren but much needed middle ground. Instead of a polarizing dichotomy, maybe it would be more useful to consider these terms as the two poles of resistant aesthetics. That is to say that a project vacillates in its relationship to power from tactics to strategies. While owning the dominant system may feel impossible, it feels more than a little slackerish to depend on defeat."⁶

I here take up their challenge and pose a cursory continuum, ranging from strategic production to tactical consumption.

1. **Producer** (tied to "spatial or institutional location", production of physical objects) [abstract expressionist artist as hero]
2. **Protester** (opposes corporate production, but in a way that produces its own form of spectacle) [overtly "political" '70s art]
3. **"Tactical Media" Artist** (ephemeral actions, but still ends up in galleries and art history books) [Critical Art Ensemble]
4. **Remix Artist** (perpetually remixes media as a talisman against being commodified) [D.J. Spooky]
5. **Artistic Web Surfer** (reconstitutes found source material as the trace of a surfed path through the web) [surf clubs, MySpace video remixers, 4chan users, "filter feeder" link list curators⁷]
6. **Theorist** (poaches source material from language and remixes it in the form of ideas, attributes sources in order to give props and leave bread crumbs) [Talmudic commentators, scholarly researchers, Deleuze creating new "ideas" from Spinozan and Nietzschean source material]
7. **Anarchist Drifter** (purposefully wanders in order to reconstitute space, often just for herself) [Hakim Bey's "Temporary Autonomous Zone," Debord's derive, Baudelaire's flaneur]
8. **de Certeauian User/Consumer** (watches television, reads books, walks around, and personally reconstitutes the meaning of the one-to-many streams of media broadcast at her) [all humans who watch, read, walk, cook, and live; the majority of whom are *not* artists.]

Note that, according to this continuum, artistic surfers are actually operating closer to what de Certeau originally means by "tactical use" than many "tactical media" artists are. This is because "tactical media" artists have never really been "consumers." By and large they use de Certeau's analysis of writing and walking (and cooking and living) as a kind of metaphor for more overt forms of subversive action (denial of service attacks on hardware or genetic mutations of wetware). In conjunction with the art institutions that feature such "tactical

media" work, these actions can be considered (admittedly weak) forms of institutional strategic production. Whereas artistic web surfers are actually reading and wandering (they let their fingers to the drifting, so to speak).

de Certeau's analysis of reading fits naturally when applied to practices of artistic surfing: "[Consumers are] unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality... They trace 'indeterminate trajectories' that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move."⁸ Replace "consumer" with "artistic web surfer" and the sentence seems as if it were written in 2008.

This weaker tactical position is neither inherently better or inherently worse (it's better in some ways and worse in others). My point is that the dichotomy between strategic production and tactical consumption is more fruitfully understood as a continuum with middle ground.

Institutional Production of the "Interactive Subject"

The problem is, not all forms of web 2.0 "interactivity" are inherently "tactical." Put another way, mere "use" does not automatically constitute "resistance."

Is using off-the-shelf corporate software to create a "unique/personal" MySpace page a way of subverting the institutions of mass media production, or is it simply one more example of these institutions using the myth of "originality" to assimilate and amass a demographic market of "unique" individuals? Artists who use these templates have to be particularly wily if they hope to keep from being assimilated and rendered "tactically" impotent.

How do you hack/resist a platform that already allows (indeed, invites) you to customize it? Either we have arrived at an open source utopia and we simply need to keep using these social networking tools appreciatively in the ways that

they afford; or the agency of our radical "resistance" has been rendered irrelevant because the corporations have decided to let the people eat cake (provided we eat their particular brand of interactive cake).

The agency that de Certeau's consumer enacted to tactically reassemble the one-to-many media broadcasted to her in 1980 is being increasingly usurped by institutionally recommended (and protocologically enforced) modes of interactive behavior. Once the consumer mistakes these institutional "suggestions" for the exercises of her own tactical agency, she fails to exercise that actual agency. With so many "customizable options" available, how can she "resist?"⁹

In a fleeting moment of insight, Billy Joel sings, "I got remote control and a color TV / I don't change channels so they must change me." The corollary may actually be more accurate.¹⁰ The more I change channels, the more they change me. I sacrifice my "resistant" agency at the altar of trivial difference. The danger of MySpace and YouTube is not the threat that they may wind up archiving and owning all the "content" I produce, or that they are currently getting rich off the content I produce, but that they control the parameters within which I produce "my original" content.

"Production" turns out to be an amorphous term. It begs the question "production of what?" Now that "consumers" have become "content producers," we should be asking ourselves, Who are the meta-producers? Who produces the contexts surrounding "creative" prosumer production? Who produces the tools that suggest the proper "way" in which amateur's are to produce? These meta-producers are no longer producing "content." Or rather, their "content" is the production of an "interactive" human subject -- a subject who feels autonomous, empowered, and creative; but who may have difficulty enacting any pragmatic agency. This transition from spectacularized consumption to spectacularized production is insidious.

The placebo effect of web 2.0 "empowerment" is at least as problematic as the original one-to-many TV effect of disenfranchisement. At least in 1980 there was a suspicion that something needed to be resisted.

Deep Net Art and Surface Net Art

I want to propose another continuum that is related to the production/consumption continuum, but not an exact mirror of it. Deep net art is net art made by programmers/coders/hackers who attempt to modulate the network by opening up its hood and tweaking it down toward its protocological core. Surface net art is net art made by artistic net surfers who attempt to modulate the network by staying on the surface of the network and tweaking in amongst the images, animations, videos, human languages, and other readymade media that travel across its surface.¹¹



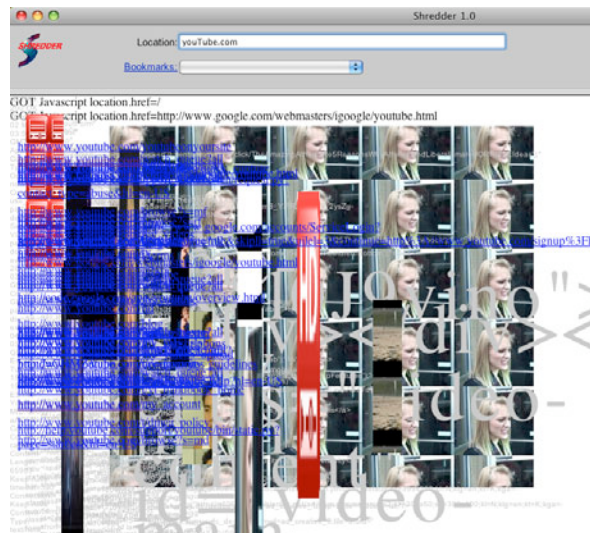
Surfing the branded surface. From Bruce Mau, *Life Style* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 364-5.

In 1990, Gilles Deleuze wrote that "societies of control operate with... computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy or

the introduction of viruses."¹² According to this model, surface net art can be considered a kind of passive culture jamming that occurs at the level of uttered human language, and deep net art can be understood as the active viral piracy that occurs at a machine code level.

In general, early net artists were more concerned with code than contemporary net artists are (this is an oversimplification).¹³ Contemporary net artists have a lot of online tools, templates, and content already developed for them, so they can afford to be less concerned with code and content production. YouTube and MySpace aren't radical in their underlying architecture; they are radical in their mass popularity and ease of use.¹⁴

Compare an earlier net art piece like Mark Napier's "Shredder"¹⁵ with a contemporary net art piece like Oliver Laric's "50 50."¹⁶ Both pieces "remix" online media, but Napier's remix happens at a deep level. He's under the hood of the browser itself (although not exactly at the level of TCP/IP network routers). Laric's piece happens at a surface level. It's really a video piece. It need not be viewed online. It qualifies as net art simply because it takes its content from YouTube and conceptually examines YouTube culture. It is art "about" net culture.



screenshot of *Shredder*, 1998 (Mark Napier)



stills from *50 50*, 2007 (Oliver Laric)

When I say "deep" and "surface," I don't mean that one is better and the other worse. I'm just describing a level of technical engagement. Both of the above pieces are conceptual, and both pieces are formal. By engaging at a deep level, Napier's piece conceptually problematizes the myth of "form vs. content." By engaging at a surface level, Laric's piece conceptually problematizes the myth of "unique identity via subculture participation." The concepts are different, and the formal aesthetics are different; but that doesn't mean that one piece is completely conceptual and the other piece is completely formal. Different methods of artistic production lead to different conceptual and aesthetic outcomes.

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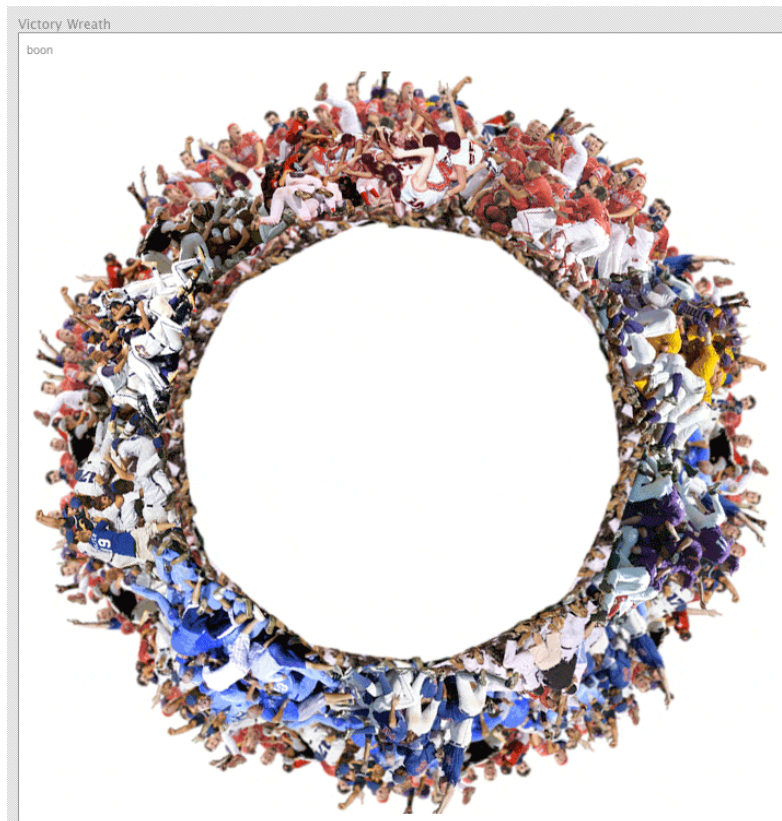
The Wake: Strong Consumption as Weak Production

"Once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analyzed, it remains to be asked what the consumer makes of these images and during these hours."¹⁷

- Michel de Certeau

Unlike watching television, artistic surfing literally *makes* something out of time spent surfing (whether link lists, found object bricolage galleries, or surface modulated media). These traces or "wakes"¹⁸ are then turned back out onto the

web for others to see. In this sense, artistic web surfing is like reading on steroids -- it is a kind of reading that leaves a trace which can itself be read. Even prior to "artistic surfing," a browser's history retained a wake of the surfer's movements through the web. This wake could be exported as an HTML document and posted back onto the web.¹⁹ Delicious bookmarking simply makes such wake externalization easier, taxonomical, and more user-curated. Surf clubs like Spirit Surfers exercise an even stronger form of consumption. Surfers post not only their "wakes" (bread crumbs and field notes from their surfing excursions in the form of relevant source material), but also their "boons" (remixed and/or recontextualized "booty" -- found digital objects, conceptual tropes, and bricolaged nuggets that are the "product" of such surfing excursions). This form of strong consumption (artistic web surfing) results in forms of weak production (a surf club post, a YouTube remix, a delicious bookmark list).



screenshot of *Victory Wreath*, 2009, animated gif (INFOpruner). URL: <http://www.spiritsurfers.net/monastery/?p=903>

This externalization of the artist's internal, subjective derive modulates the existing web dataspace. The web (or at least those microcosmic sections of the web located at surf club URLs and delicious.com) is modulated from an undigested, pre-surfed commercial space into a newly modified, post-surfed, modulated space -- a space that has been put to "tactical use." Technically, artistic web surfing is hardly a radical practice. Anybody posting a link from their weblog is "technically" doing almost the same thing. The "art" of this practice is in qualitative meme modulation rather than deep level technical skills. As with academic research, success depends on the particular sources you choose and the ways in which you choose to contextualize them -- creation via selection, compilation, and enframing.

Enacting a Way, Not Producing an Object

The associative connections we make between the discrete pieces of media we receive every day exert a kind of "in-between" agency. Internalized, these associative connections contextualize and thus control a large portion of our personal experience. Externalized and distributed (commodified), they may begin to exert a similar liminal agency, one less co-optable by institutions. These associative connections are not merely autonomous, idiosyncratic, and subjective. Instead, they negotiate an ongoing equilibrium between received media form and exerted consumer will. Like tightrope walking, these associative connections enact and maintain a perpetually negotiated balance of meaning within a system that includes the tightrope walker herself as part of the equation.²⁰ These thinking, reading, surfing, poaching, associative connections operate as de Certeauian tactics.

Ultimately, the "products" of artistic surfing are not simply discrete pieces of media. Instead, any instantiated results are best understood as traces or wakes produced by the movement of the artist over the surface of the web. These enacted wakes may then begin to resonate sympathetically with other surfers moving along the web surface in similar ways. These externalized associative connections transmit tactics of becoming to those who have ears to hear,

transmissions that are difficult to decipher by the corporate radar. These externalized wakes produce something not so much "resistant" as simply alterior. They enact and celebrate the joy of surfing itself, of making connections, of thinking at all.

Here again, de Certeau's description of the act of reading is readily applicable to the act of artistic surfing. He says that reading consists of all sorts of "detours, drifts across the page, metamorphoses and anamorphoses of the text produced by the travelling eye, imaginary or meditative flights taking off from a few words, overlapping of spaces on the military organized surfaces of the text, and ephemeral dances."²¹

In his watershed 1945 article "As We May Think," Vannevar Bush envisioned a personal computer capable of constructing "memex paths."²² These paths were trails that a researcher took through data, with particular associative connections permanently archived and taxonomized by the researcher. Its contemporary equivalent might be a something like a wiki or ShiftSpace where the researcher can add her own hyperlinked associations between discrete pieces of data, meta-tag these associations, and then save the entire thread/derive/wake/path.²³ Bush prophetically envisioned that these paths could then be linked by the researcher to other related paths, and that these meta-webs of micro-paths could be shared with other researchers. I could link into your memex paths and you could link into mine. As Ted Nelson has lamented, thus far the web has only realized a fraction of Bush's more robust vision for memex path functionality.

In the context of artistic surfing, Bush is important because he introduces the concept that a kind of knowledge can be transferred from one person to another (or from the same person to herself years later) not simply by aggregating discrete content, but by exteriorizing the paths that a person takes through discrete content. Bush's proposed memex paths are a kind of enacted, vectorial knowing -- a knowing that modulates through and is modulated by

"content," but that is itself "contentless" and not synonymous with content. Think of surf club threads as Dadaist memex paths on lo-res absinthe.

Rag & Bone

"Can't you hear us yelling 'rag and bone'? / Bring out your junk and we'll give it a home / A broken trumpet or a telephone / C'mon and give it to me"

- *White Stripes*

Associative connections are impossible to make without some form of source content to connect, and the content of most artistic surfing is surface web junk. This is not to say that artistic surfing is *about* junk, but that that it is enacted *on/in/through* junk. Artistic surfers begin with (apparently) banal visual content so that any clever visual pun or trope they make seems all the more clever, because the subject matter itself is so (apparently) crappy. This move (selecting and modulating junk) foregrounds ways of reading rather than what is being read.

Selecting corporate detritus (along with banal, prosumer/hobbyist detritus) foregrounds the spaces in between the content rather than the content itself, but it also has a particular embodied affect, since all matter (even a badly animated gif) matters. I will take a cue from Kevin Bewersdorf²⁴ and compare surf clubs to Joseph Cornell's boxes, but in order to reveal differences rather than similarities. Cornell's boxes are simultaneously melancholy and wondrous because they extract objects from their used, embodied, immanent, material, historical contexts and suspend them in an idiosyncratic, museological ether. Cornell's boxes reveal and enshroud the historical project of the enlightenment gone melancholically awry. Whereas surf club posts expose a kind of modernist cultural amnesia -- a perpetual, blanking reset where thing after thing after thing is endlessly culled from the churning corporate well of an eternal now[here]. Unlike Cornell's boxes, the "objects" bricolaged in surf club posts are immaterial, appropriated not from the corner antique store, but from the corporate ether. As a result, I find a lot of surf club "work" not so much pathos-

inducing as "pathetic" (and not necessarily in a derogatory sense). It feels kind of like gleeful children making absurd sculptures out of strewn body parts in a land-mined field that they have always known, a field inherited from a war they can't remember. All very post-Dada. If Cornell's work enacts the slippages of memory; then artistic surfing enacts the manic, doomed attempt to manufacture any kind of memory at all in the fluorescent light of an eternally modern present.

This fetishistic fascination with junk has its promising aspects and its dangerous pitfalls. When done well, this kind of surfing plunges into the stream of corporate detritus, inflecting and modulating it from within (it tactically enacts and externalizes ways of connecting). When done poorly, this kind of surfing lapses into a kind of banal wallowing whose wakes are no more transformative than the original detritus through which they move (it simply becomes about a fetishistic love of junk). As George Santayana wryly observes, "Americans love junk; it's not the junk that bothers me, it's the love."²⁵

The "resistant political value" of well-done artistic surfing is that it enacts, externalizes, and virally propagates a "tactical" way of moving through corporate culture. As I read these externalized readings (surf club threads, YouTube remixes), I don't just read "about" their source content, or even "about" how they operate; I am compelled (or at least invited) to "re-enact" their operation -- to read them in the same way they themselves have read. To poach de Certeau, "[These practices] say exactly what they do. They constitute an act which they intend to mean."²⁶

Things Speaking To Each Other

"A tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike the bearer."²⁷

- Michel de Certeau

Artistic surfing, like conceptual art and stand-up comedy, relies on placing just the right elements in just the right context with just the right inflection at just the right time. It is an art of economy. In this respect, the analog patron saint of artistic surfing may not be Duchamp in his readymade phase (since he was dealing with discrete singular objects in the context of institutional critique), or Joseph Cornell (since he was dealing with memory and the archive), but Haim Steinbach and his curious object ensembles.



One Minute Managers V.2, 1990, 2 plastic laminated wooden shelves, aluminum alloy stock pots, leather medicine balls (Haim Steinbach)



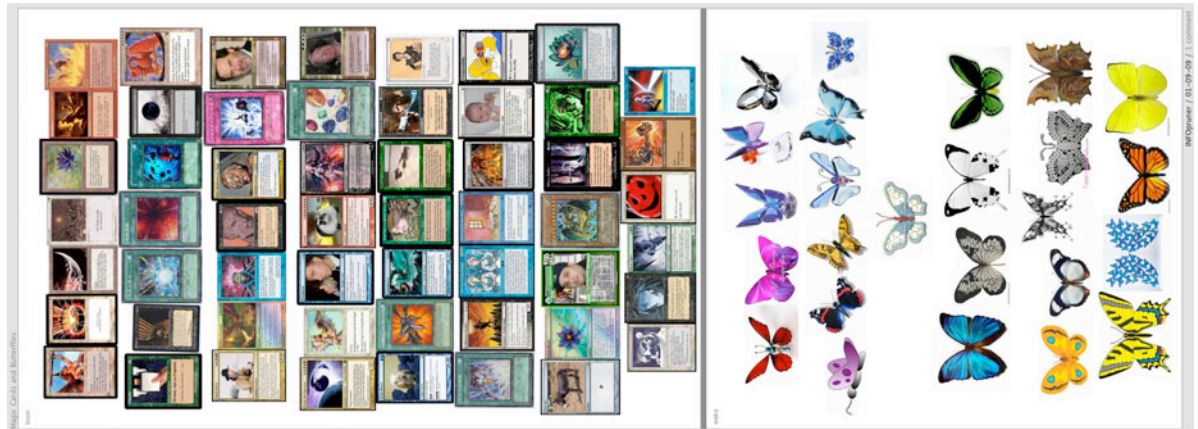
supremely black, 1985, wood formica, ceramic pitchers, cardboard detergent boxes (Haim Steinbach)

Steinbach claims that objects "have functions for us that are not unlike language."²⁸ Unlike the object ensembles of Fred Wilson or Mark Dion, Steinbach's objects are not stand-in signifiers for abstract signifieds (colonialism,

consumption, New England history, etc.). Instead, because of the strangely purposeful/purposefully strange way Steinbach selects, arranges, displays, and labels them, his objects begin to resonate with each other (to "speak to" each other) in a way that implies a disontological syntax of embodied sympathies. This syntax has something to do with the physical characteristics of the objects (color, surface material, weight, reflectivity) and something to do with their cultural history (what they are actually used for, what era they connote), but it is not simply a composite of these two components. In some sense, their syntax happens in addition to them. This implicit disontological syntax is also governed by the way the objects are positioned in the world in relation to each other. Steinbach's rigorously constructed shelves and their precise placement on the wall are as much a part of his work as the objects themselves. Fellow sculptor Lisa Lapinski argues, "The shelf works are fractions: the things in the world divided by the minimalist object."²⁹

All objects in the world are probably related to each other in a similar way, but we humans aren't used to perceiving these irreducible relationships (and the objects themselves feel no obligation to disclose them to our ontological "minds"). The genius of Steinbach's installations is that they begin to hint at this mysterious embodied syntax that might exist amongst all objects. Whether and in what form this syntax of objects actually exists is ultimately unverifiable, but the mere suggestion of its existence is disontologically thrilling. Art critic Bruce Hainey succinctly and poetically summarizes Steinbach's work: "Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* by quoting Augustine's *Confessions* on the naming of objects. Steinbach pulls his quotations directly from the world; his confessions deranged in glorious 3-D approach the unnameable."³⁰

Although "found" online "objects" are immaterial, their forms can be serialized and juxtaposed so that they take on a sculptural quality. Like Steinbach's physical objects, these immaterial "things" also begin speaking to each other. Such dialogue is not surprising. Language may be "immaterial," but it is still an immanent force in the world (like electricity or gravity).



Magic Cards and Butterflies [screenshot, rotated counter-clockwise], 1985, (INFOpruner).
 URL: <http://www.spiritsurfers.net/monastery/?p=887>

At its best, surf club bricolage is more than merely a series of inside jokes amongst a select group of net.junk aficionados, but something more akin to the minimal conceptualism (or conceptual minimalism) of Steinbach.

The "art" of such ensembles is largely in their enframing. Here again, de Certeau is applicable: "This [tactical] response is *singular*. Within the ensemble in which it occurs, it is merely *one more detail* -- an action, a word -- so well-placed as to reverse the situation."³¹ The discrete "things" themselves will never look like much. They are by definition unspectacular. This is why their enframing has to be particularly deft and clever.

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Resistance Is Futile (or How I Learned To Stop Kicking Against The Pricks)

"There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons."

- Gilles Deleuze³²

Whenever anyone starts playfully remixing corporate junk, the ethical question inevitably arises, "How is such work *resistant*?" This question implicitly accuses the work of one or more cardinal sins: pragmatic impotence, "political" disengagement, intellectual wankery, regressive formalism, "personal" inauthenticity, and getting duped by the institutional strategies that all artwork is obliged to "resist." (Jeffrey Nealon argues that "Resistance implies or necessitates a kind of totalized, normative, repressive enemy and/or a kind of authenticity of subversive response."³³) The easy answer to this challenge is a familiar one: "This art is not political." But if (following Bruno Latour) we define politics as matters of public concern that gather around "things" (rivers, bridges, weather systems, laboratory equipment, buildings, food, networks, images, and yes, even pixels), then all art work is inherently political.

Rather than simply dodge the question, "How is artistic surfing *resistant*?", I want to question the implicit assumption that *resistance* is always the best tool for the job.

Resistance is Reactionary

By definition, one problem with resistance is that it is reactionary. As institutional strategies shift from the production of objects to the production of "interactive subjects," resistance is forced to shift inversely. Eventually, institutions begin to anticipate these resistant reactions and incorporate them into their proactive strategies. Rather than playing this incessant game of cat and mouse with the corporations, why not choose a "proactive" political goal not defined by negation?

Resistance Is Already Everywhere

"Power is nothing other than what it does."³⁴

- Jeffrey Nealon

"Life-resistance is nothing more than the act of living."³⁵

- Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker

Another problem with the idea of "resistance" in and of itself as a radical art move is that resistance is already everywhere. Domination and resistance are both forms of power, and power is always omnipresent.³⁶ Jeffrey Nealon asks, "Resistance to *what*... We can hardly position ourselves 'against' power, wealth, and truth itself in any kind of wholesale way insofar as any kind of effective critique will have to work toward redeploying those very resources of power, truth and/or wealth."³⁷ Likewise, Geert Lovink asks, "Is it possible for tactical media makers, activists and artists... to take an amoral position and see control as an environment one can navigate through instead of merely condemn it as a tool in the hands of authorities?"³⁸

By definition, anyone web surfing (or reading, walking, cooking, living) is already "resisting" (in some form, however weak) imposed institutional strategies of production. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau doesn't radically call for resistant forms of tactical consumption to be invented from scratch. Instead, he radically illuminates how forms of tactical consumption have always existed.

Resistance is dead. Long Live the Emergent Virtual.

Henri Bergson's concept of "the virtual" continues to supersede the concept of "political resistance" as a contemporary ethical goal of artistic production (at least in those circles where artists still feel the need to maintain some sort of ethical goal). If the goal of "political resistance" is to stick it to the man, then the goal of "the emergent virtual" might be to modulate and inflect both ourselves and "the man" until these binary dichotomies are tweaked into something heretofore unknown (beyond mere dialectical resolution or synthetic hybridization, since those two things are already known). This "heretofore unknown" is what Bergson calls "the virtual." Will the virtual be better or worse than where we are now? We can't know from here, since by definition, the virtual is heretofore unknown. The pursuit of the virtual thus involves a risk and a wager (as all art good art should).

McKenzie Wark explains, "History is the virtual... made actual... The virtual is not just the potential latent in matter, it is the potential of potential."³⁹ Galloway and Thacker observe, "The nonbeing of the present moment is by far the hardest thing to imagine... What is it... that hasn't happened, and how could it ever be achieved?"⁴⁰

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Playing The Whole Network Surface as An Instrument

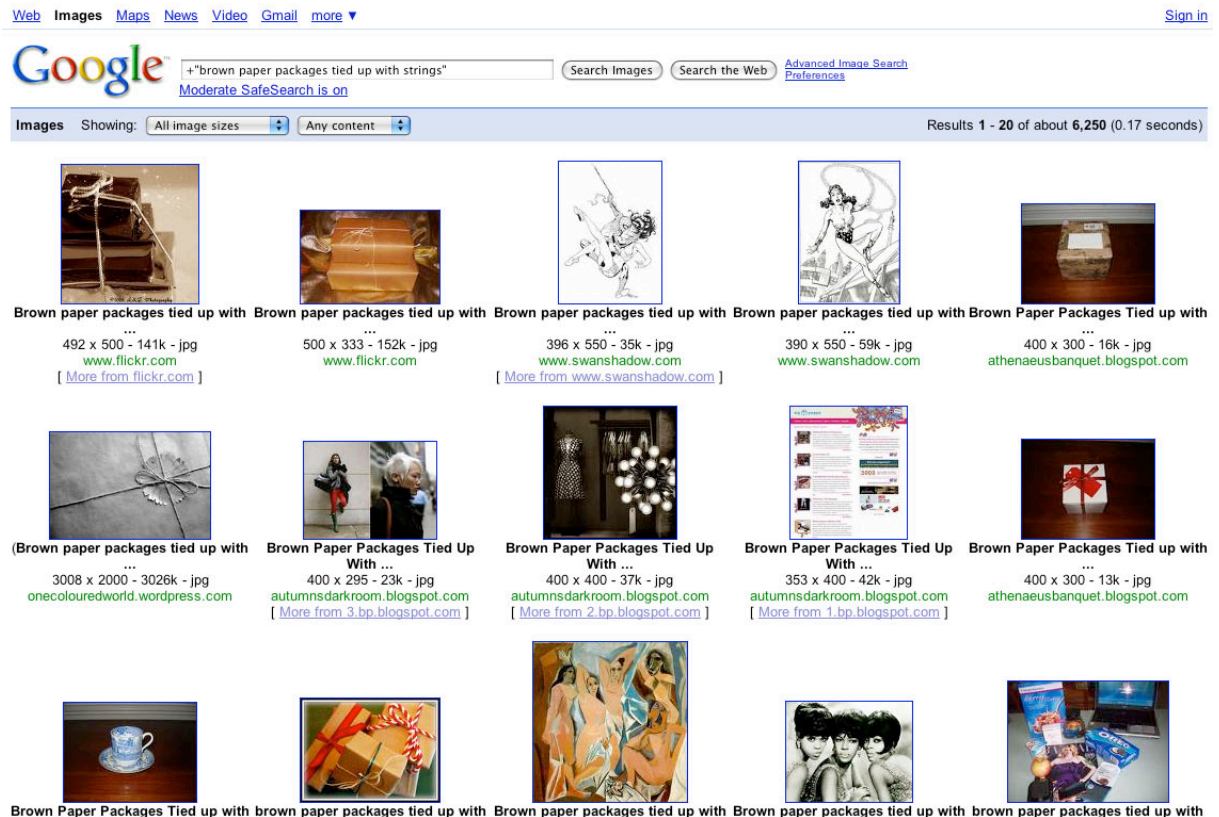
"The net as a whole [is] more interesting than any individual art project."⁴¹

- Eddo Stern

I want to return to the practice of artistic surfing (now even more broadly imagined) and explore an additional tactic that might result in an actualization of the virtual. Instead of surfing the entire network and posting the results of your surfing sessions on a single, discrete, compartmentalized (albeit "socially networked") platform; I propose the purposeful and systematic dispersion of your wake across multiple nodes of the network via multiple accounts on multiple social networking platforms (multiple private URLs, group photoblogs, Delicious, Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Tumblr, etc). The goal is to make the scope of your wake wider than the scope of your personal surfing excursions.

Begin simply, by "playing" Google Image Search (<http://images.google.com/>) as an improvisational instrument. Construct Boolean search queries that auto-bricolage revelatory results. Post these Boolean searches as links throughout the entire network and title them as if they were works of art. Every time someone clicks on your link, they will automatically "perform" a Google search that you have "conducted." The results will vary from week to week depending on Google's image ranking algorithms and other network activity. This tactic produces a very shallow wake, but since these Google Image search "pieces" are

so low bandwidth (they are simply text links), they are easily dispersed. You could even write them on pieces of paper and hand them out at the mall. This type of work is similar to Cagean or Fluxus performance instructions. It is as much about language and utterance as it is about "found digital objects."



Screenshot from *My Favorite Things*, 1959/2009, Oscar Hammerstein + Google. (A series of separate Google Image searches constructed from the lyrics of the song "My Favorite Things." This particular screenshot is from a search for "brown paper packages tied up with strings.") Meta-URL: <http://rhizome.org/discuss/view/41769>

If you are going to play the entire network as an instrument, you will eventually want to control the search results that people see when they type in targeted words that you choose to hijack. Select a word you want to hijack at Google Image Search and begin propagating your own selected images throughout the network, taxonomically associating them with the word you have chosen (via XML tags, meta-tags, URLs, descriptive body text, file and folder names, associative linking, etc.) Initially, you will need a small army of collaborators to help jump-start this dispersal. Offline performances, gallery installations, and

promotional publicity stunts should also be enacted in order to generate more press for your meme. Press about these enacted historical events will be fed back into Google, further propagating your meme. Once your image/word meme reaches critical viral mass, you won't be able to stop people from dispersing and modulating your images.

In 1996, eToy's "Digital Hijack" achieved something similar by hijacking searches for popular words at search engines, gaining high rankings for those words, and linking people who searched for those words to their own "Digital Hijack" web site. But this was accomplished with bots and code at a deep level. Accomplish your hijack with the help of human participation. By the time you hijack the words you want, it won't be a deep level software "hack;" it will be a surface level, natural language "hack." Your chosen image results will appear not because of your coding skills, but because of your social networking (aka "web 2.0 marketing") skills. Google will merely be accurately reflecting the popularity of the image/word meme you have chosen to disperse. The goal is ultimately to "hack" human language, history, and thought in order to force Google Images to auto-bricolage on your behalf. Your "work" will be perpetually performed every time someone does an image search for the key word you have hijacked. Rather than artistically surf through a terrain seeded by corporations, you will be seeding your own emergent terrain through which others will artistically surf. These two practices (artistic surfing and massively distributed wake seeding) are not mutually exclusive.

Parables For The Hypertrophic

"Saying that politics is an act of 'resistance' was never true, except for the most literal interpretation of conservatism. We must search-and-replace all occurrences of 'resistance' with 'impulsion' or perhaps 'thrust.' Thus the concept of resistance in politics should be superseded by the concept of hypertrophy."^{#2}

- Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker

Hypertrophy is the unhealthy enlarging of an organ beyond its normal functional capacity. It is a form of modulation and rupture that may cause new uses to emerge. Paul Virilio famously compared the internet to the Titanic: "It is an instrument which performs extraordinarily well but which contains its own catastrophe."⁴³ I posit that this catastrophe is contained not only at a deep technological level of computer code and hardware, but also at a surface level of uttered language, memes, and cheesy lo-res animations.

It seems unfortunate and unnecessary to segregate the promising moves and tactics of surface level play involved in contemporary artistic surfing practices from the deep level ethical aspirations of earlier net.art practices. And it is indeed a waste to apply de Certeau's critical insights *only* to art work that identifies itself as "tactical media." Artistic surfing was tailor-made for de Certeauian critical analysis. This paper is a step toward fruitfully applying *The Practice of Everyday Life* to the practice of artistic surfing.

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February 2009

NOTES

¹ Some active surf clubs as of February 2009:

<http://www.spiritsurfers.net>

<http://www.loshadka.org/wp/>

<http://doublehappiness.ilikenicethings.com/>

<http://www.supercentral.org/>

² David Garcia and Geert Lovink popularized the term "tactical media" in their 1997 article "The ABC of Tactical Media" (URL: http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html), in which they "poach" their understanding of "tactics" from de Certeau.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture As Screenplay : How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2000), 4.

⁶ Nato Thompson, "Contributions to a Resistant Visual Culture Glossary," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 1, no. 3 (2004). URL: <http://journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/3/thompson.htm>

⁷ See Anne-Marie Schleiner, "Fluidities and Oppositions among Curators, Filter Feeders, and Future Artists," *Intelligent Agent* 3, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2003). URL:

http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol3_No1_curation_schleiner.html

⁸ de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 34.

⁹ A cynical extreme of this position was expressed by Julian Stallabras in 2003: "It can hardly be expected that people crippled in other walks of life by mass-media trivialisation and the instrumentality of work will be able to slough off such ingrained influences and so realise rational discourse online." (*Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Pub., 2003), 67.) I'm not sure that "rational online discourse" is necessarily the ideal goal, but his point is duly noted. Spurse co-founder Iain Kerr says that every time he goes on a derive, he always winds up at a book store. His revolutionary epiphany: he has been conditioned to buy books.

¹⁰ "[Interaction] corresponds to a networked model of control... Many today say that new media technologies are ushering in a new era of enhanced freedom and that technologies of control are waning. We say, on the contrary, that *double the communication leads to double the control.*" (Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 124). Put more acidically, "Since democracy means having more consumer choices, and information technology will vastly increase the power of our channel changers, hey, presto! More democracy!" (Thomas Frank, "The New Gilded Age," *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler* (New York: Norton, 1997), 28).

¹¹ "There is really no need in this day and age to create imagery anymore because you can find anything online." (Petra Cortright quoting Oliver Laric. URL of mp3: http://rhizome.org/events/net_aesthetics/)

¹² Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *OCTOBER* 59, (Winter 1992), 3-7. URL:

<http://www.n5m.org/n5m2/media/texts/deleuze.htm>

¹³ There are plenty of early net artists who have always worked at a surface level. Heath Bunting's "Own, Be Owned, or Remain Invisible" (http://www.irational.org/heath/_readme.html) is a classic example of early surface net art.

¹⁴ Although "web 2.0" tools facilitate current artistic surfing practices, I resist the label "net art 2.0" because it suggests a kind of planned obsolescence, as if it were time for a "refreshing new trend" in net art. This is a convenient way to market new artists to old galleries, but not very historically accurate. If contemporary net art must be saddled with an "x.0" moniker, we should at least be up to 3.0 by now.

¹⁵ <http://potatoland.org/shredder/>

¹⁶ <http://oliverlaric.com/5050.htm>

¹⁷ *Everyday Life*, 31.

¹⁸ I am admittedly hijacking and mangling Kevin Bewersdorf's strict definition of "wake." According to Bewersdorf, a mere link list probably doesn't qualify as a wake, and a found animated gif posted on a group photoblog will more likely be a combination of "boon" and "frame." See Bewersdorf, "Spirit Surfing," 2008. URL:

<http://www.maximumsorrow.com/writing/spiritsurfing.html>

¹⁹ See Curt Cloninger's 2002 "traffic_report" project (<http://www.lab404.com/data>) which displays the browser histories and referrer logs of participating artists, designers, and writers within a twenty-four hour period.

²⁰ This observation is a slight modulation of de Certeau's modulation of Kant's analogy of the tightrope walker. See *Everyday Life*, 73, 79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

²² Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *The Atlantic*, (July 1945). URL:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/194507/bush>

²³ See <http://www.shiftspace.org>

²⁴ See Bewersdorf, "Spirit Surfing."

²⁵ Quoted by Gary Groth in "A Dream of Perfect Reception: The Movies of Quentin Tarantino," *Commodify Your Dissent*, 183.

²⁶ In de Certeau's original context, "these practices" are "tales, stories, poems, and treatises." *Everyday Life*, 80.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

²⁸ Joshua Decker, "Haim Steinbach (interview, pt. 1)," *Journal of Contemporary Art* 5, no. 2 (1992), 115. Quoted in Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 135.

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- ²⁹ Quoted in Bruce Hailey, "Haim Steinbach: Sonnabend Gallery, New York," *Artforum* 46, no. 4 (December 2007), 339.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 88.
- ³² Deleuze, *Societies of Control*.
- ³³ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications Since 1984* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008), 110.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ³⁵ Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 80.
- ³⁶ At least as Jeffrey Nealon interprets Foucault. See Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, 105.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Geert Lovink, "Isubmit, Youprofile, WeRank: Deconstructing the Web 2.0 Hype," *New Art Dynamics in Web 2 Mode: First Inclusiva-net Meeting* (Madrid, July 2007), 29. URL: http://medialab-prado.es/article/documentacion_-_1_encuentro_inclusiva-net
- ³⁹ McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), [009, 014].
- ⁴⁰ Galloway, *Exploit*, 133-4.
- ⁴¹ Paraphrased by Steve Dietz, "Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists," 1999. URL: <http://www.afsnitp.dk/onoff/Texts/dietzwhyhavether.html>
- ⁴² Galloway, *Exploit*, 98.
- ⁴³ Paul Virilio, "Infowar," *Ars Electronica*, ed. Timothy Druckery (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 334.