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“Learning from Las Vegas”: Border Aesthetics, Disturbance, and Electronic Disobedience. An Interview with Performance Artist Ricardo Dominguez

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Since the 1980s the performance artist Ricardo Dominguez has been involved in collaborative art projects experimenting with political aesthetics. Critical Art Ensemble, formed in 1987, explored intersections between art, technology, political activism as well as critical theory. In the 1990s, the Zapatista uprising and its insurgent use of communication technology inspired Dominguez to rethink his notion of art and art’s role in society. In 1997 Dominguez was co-founder of *The Electronic Disturbance Theater*. About a decade later, in 2008, the group initiated the installation and performance piece *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (TBT). The Electronic Disturbance Theater planned to distribute inexpensive mobile phones among individuals South of the US–Mexico border who planned to cross North. The group had developed a phone app that provided experimental poetry to unauthorized migrants while using GPS technology to lead them to water stations in the deserts of the borderlands. As an installation (water stations) and a performance (distribution, poetry, crossing of the border), the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* calls attention to the process of crossing the border and the dangers involved. After all, each year about 250 deaths of migrants are registered in the borderlands, most of them caused by dehydration.¹ TBT’s art intervention confronts the public with the borderlands as a place of violence and death. At the same time, it reflects on art’s potential of going beyond its own complicity in power structures. TBT also links art and politics to the technological and digitalized culture of surveillance.

In 2010, the development of the project caused controversy as the project was funded by public money in California. Dominguez, who is professor in the visual arts department at UC San Diego, was accused of misusing public funds and of promoting illegal activities—the group of artists was seen as providing aid to undocumented border crossers. The artists of *The Electronic Disturbance Theater* were investigated by the FBI Office of Cybercrimes and UC San Diego. The pivotal questions raised in the investigation were: Can TBT be regarded as art? Is it an aesthetic way of dealing with social issues? And if it is considered to be art: To what extent is it legitimate for art to interfere in politics, social issues, and humanitarian action? Ultimately the University of California stated that TBT did not misuse research funds, but would not comment

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on whether it had broken any laws. Dominguez kept his tenure at the University of California San Diego.

The interview, as genre and method, enables a dialogic engagement in artistic production. The following exchange between the artist and the cultural studies scholar, approaches Dominguez' complex art projects and aesthetics by interrogating the function of the arts in differently shaped border spaces of nations, social groups, and art scenes. Markus Heide met the artist and scholar at UCSD in the fall of 2017.



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M.H.: Let me start by proposing an evolution of border art: In the 1980s and 1990s artists and writers who engaged in what today is referred to as “border art”—like Gloria Anzaldúa and Guillermo Gómez-Peña—had a strong focus on forms of cultural blending and mixing as well as liberating concepts of de-categorization. Some of these artists and writers highlighted the utopian potential of border space. Their literary and artistic work has contributed to, and has been used as a source for, theorizing various forms of mixing. Their border art inspired postcolonial concepts of hybridity, metissage, and mestizaje. Following this period, in the late 1990s and particularly after 9/11, surveillance became a concern in art that critically explored border paradigms. More recently, the focus of border art shifted towards questions of violence: narco violence, femicide, immigration, but also structural violence that established criteria defining who is allowed to cross the border and who is not.

Could you please comment on your notion of the history of border art, its critical potential and the issues that shape artistic work on borders and border space in our contemporary moment?

R.D.: Well, one of the things I would like to mark and point out concerning this question of the border, la frontera, la linea, particularly as we are here at the Tijuana–San Diego border, is that the work that I have been involved in was not specifically founded on the attempt of understanding the nature of the border in the way, I think, border art, as you outlined it, did. Border art, very early on, explicitly looked at the histories of places and spaces and encountered them in these layers you mentioned, from the mythopoetic to the sites of violence, the politics of control, hyper-militarized, racialized, laborized, and market driven.

However, I got involved in issues circling around borders from a very different starting point: I was raised in Las Vegas, Nevada. Nevada had a different sensibility about the “nature of the world.” A perception that was shaped by mafia capitalism and hyper simulation. Thus, I come less from a position of “learning from the border” and more from a position of “learning from Las Vegas.”

Las Vegas creates a different sort of transversal. Or at least I have found that the world has become more Las Vegas-like as I have gotten older, with hyper militarized zones, accelerating states of neon culture, and a global casino capitalism at the core of neoliberalism. You have to remember that Nevada is very much a military place, maybe 98% of the state are controlled, run, or shaped by the military. The civilian population is Las Vegas, Carson City, and Reno. And then there are bordellos along the way and then there is the nuclear test site which is massive, *Area 51* (which does not exist) and Nellis Air Force Base which I think is the second largest or the largest experimental air craft space in the world where they test remote control systems and run the US Drones all over the world. Nevada is built with the US Empire DNA of mafia, military, and Mormonism—all entangled.

M.H.: Plus a heavy load of postmodernist cultures of imitation and simulation, at least in Las Vegas?

R.D.: Yes, I knew about the expanding forms of simulation before I read Jean Baudrillard or Guy Debord and the Situationists. I came into consciousness in that immersive environment. The notion of borders was not specifically the same for me as for the border artists you referred to. I grew up with a screenal state of being. I remember watching JFK getting killed, assassination culture, I grew up with the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Pentagon papers, the Civil Rights Movement. There was activism, particularly within Chicano culture, Chicano Power, Cesar Chávez, also the anti-nuclear movement. But it was within this kind of space where those things did not manifest themselves in my life as direct social manifestations of living forms. I became aware about Chicanos/as and all of the above but it was all almost completely screenal, it was from films and TV. I learned about the history of enslavement and racism from Blaxploitation movies. I asked myself: Why do I have to go to North Las Vegas to watch Blaxploitation movies? I began to understand the structure of segregation in my world through screenal encounters, screens spoke to me about the society I lived in. It was not about: What is going on with the African-American community in Vegas but rather I was politicized by questions like: Why can't I see this film in Las Vegas? Which led to the question why are the African-American communities only in North Las Vegas? It was an odd way to encounter these critical questions, but it was the way that it occurred for me.

Then, in the 1980s, I moved to Tallahassee, Florida, and that was the moment when Critical Art Ensemble (<http://critical-art.net/>) emerged, starting in 1987. Tallahassee is very close to Georgia—so, if you want, another kind of border situation that I encountered. Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) tried explicitly to consider the development of radical gestures in the cultural frontier—not the cultural nodes of New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, but Tallahassee, Florida. There I was able to work in an intimate way, with a small group of artists focused on developing interventions, disturbances, and speculative gestures into the cultures around us. We also saw ourselves as being part of the long history of 20th century European and US avant-gardes: Dada, Surrealism, the Futurists, Duchampian gestures, and the Situationists. We felt that artists at the turn of the 20th century considered the gestures of revolution as the core aesthetic question and in the 1960s and 1970s artists had investigated subversion

as the primary aesthetic space of investigation. In the 1980s, under the penumbra of Reaganism and Thatcherism, we had to define another territory that we developed in our research and practice and this became the question of disturbance. Disturbance was based on trying to create a speculative encounter with what we were seeing as the emergence of the constellation of capital(ism)s that were going to be rolled out in the 1990s. The first wave was what we named as virtual capitalism, where data bodies and real bodies were de-segregated from each other, and the value was in data bodies only. It did not matter how much you studied or how many books you wrote, rather it was your credit line, your social security number that counted as significant data, that was the authenticator of your value to virtual capitalism. This is how CAE started to develop the theory of electronic civil disobedience as a way to disturb that virtual capitalist culture.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s we worked with the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) Tallahassee as many in our community were dying. We took on these radical, cyberpunkish ideas, and let those theories hit the ground, while trying to deal with the attacks on gay and queer culture. Epistemologically gate crashing with the therapeutic state, saying that the pharmacies, the medical establishment, the insurance companies, Reagan, did not really care about the disease or know how to deal with. We started thinking about the community research initiatives that ACT UP/Goldengate was calling for—that we become our own pharmaceutical researchers, what later came to be named citizen science, and start to make our own drugs, changing the protocols of the therapeutic-state. This was very clear training ground for the theories we were developing—and how we might pursue these types of gestures. But again: we worked with a notion of “the border” that differed from border art created in the US–Mexico borderlands at the time—but we were crossing other types of “borders” —research borders.

We also began exploring Florida in a broader sense as a place for our actions, as a cultural frontier. We developed gestures entitled “exit cultures”—cultures that were outside of the economic force of the simulacrum of Disneyworld and other products of entertainment. We started working with farm laborers who struggled with Burger King and other companies. We initiated “fiestas criticas” (critical parties) where we would create our radical disturbance gestures but in the context of community gatherings that allowed us to connect this to questions of unionization and local working conditions. The farm workers would, for example, show us where the managers lived and where they lived and then we would present our disturbance gestures during the parties to create dialogues about where the farmworkers might push back the unbearable conditions that they worked under. We saw these as ways to take our gestures to spaces that we had really only investigated on a critical-aesthetic “meta” level at that point.

M.H.: So your initial moment is not the Chicano movement but you contributed to border art coming from a political aesthetics influenced by cyberpunk and critical gestures of disturbing the power structures of capitalist cultures. Theorists of avant-garde art, like for example Peter Bürger, have outlined how the institution of capitalism, like schools, the museum, the media, tend to incorporate avant garde art. By such institutionalizing the radical gestures become part of the system.

I understand your more recent collective work, like TBT as commenting on questions of institutionalizing. In what ways, would you say, are your work and your aesthetics dealing with issues of institutionalized art? And in what way is this part of what we might refer to as border aesthetics?

R.D.: Well, a few years ago, I taught classes on *The Borders of Aesthetics/The Aesthetics of Borders*. My approach to these questions of aesthetics is always connected to a collaborative understanding of the production of art. I have myself always worked in a collaborative form. My own training as an artist is in theater and everything in the theater gets done in an ensemble. You have to work with a director, with writers, lighting people. I also was a jazz trombonist, so you have to do a lot of listening. The moment when I began to think in terms of an “expanded theater,” Critical Art Ensemble, and later Electronic Disturbance Theater, emerged—people tend to fetishize the terms “electronic” and “disturbance” but they forget about “theater”. The same holds for Critical Art *Ensemble*: an ensemble as theater, a band, a group, a collective activity. I have never really done anything in the singularity of a unique artist, I never stressed the uniqueness of the artist. I have been lucky to collaborate, to produce art as a collaborative process, usually lasting for a long time, about ten years.

This is just a way I naturally work because of my history in theater and music. At the same time, the artists I worked with were not overly bound to the institutions of art, like the gallery, the museum, or the school. But we were not necessarily opposed to their potentiality, especially in activist driven networks. That is why I was fascinated by net.art (or net art) and tactical media in the 1990s. This was a scene that no museum, gallery or institution could contain. It made things possible that the regular art scene did not know. Sharing URL's with others all over the connected world, those clicking into net art, its aesthetic, philosophy and technology—we routed around specific spaces of representation and to distributed cultures. We could fight over the definition of what net.art or net (without a dot) art actually was and its channels of distribution. But there was a sense of peer to peer, it was open, sharable, uncontained and it was not hyper-antagonism but rather it was part of that world that defines the question of art. It was a space where activism and art and technology intersected, and for me, all this was part of the same performative matrix, each with their own tensions and nuances and all of this was part of the debate of what art is all about. It was uncontained. It made it possible that works of art would expand into a public space as part of its call and response. The work we did was part of agitprop theater history that we were interested in.

This form of public art was probably the closest I came to Chicano art, the field workers, union labor. I was really fascinated by El Teatro Campesino and the way they used theater to activate new states of being and multiple ways of responding. So, for example, farm laborers were suddenly chosen to play the mean manager in the play. Those people took on authority and power and became important members of the union. Stories that I heard were like that they were sent off by themselves to other places, like they were given 20 bucks and sent to Chicago, in order to start the action there. These young men and women were empowered by this act of participatory theater. I was fascinated by that and also by Bertold Brecht's theories of estrangement theater and other concepts of theater and performance. It was the linkage around theater and agitprop that created this performative matrix that emerged between activism, technology and art. My interest was all about theater and the broader performative matrix that you might define as art. So, yes, it is always a “we” but not necessarily bound to a specific identity formation.

M.H.: In your TBT project, undocumented immigrants are made part of the performance. One might say that in a way the project makes use of, or even exploits, the suffering of the border crossers who, after all, go through difficult, at times, life-threatening

moments and experiences. Could you please comment on the different roles of the undocumented immigrant and of the artist in this project?

R.D.: Well, I guess, the relation between artists and other actors has been a concern in our art projects much earlier, quite some time before TBT. Our activities, like the civil disobedience work, took place in dialogue with the Zapatistas in Chiapas: the Electronic Disturbance Theater, virtual sit-in technology, direct action and other ideas of the 1990s were connected to the agitprop tradition that I mentioned, and it was in dialogue with digital Zapatista communities that were trying to bring about direct action. I think our role was part of the logic of “giving a voice to,” and it was formed on the distinction of “there” and “here,” “there” are the Zapatistas in Chiapas and “here” we are creating digital Zapatismo. So, yes, in this context one could ask: Do we exploit the Zapatistas or do they exploit us? However, the Zapatistas called for cyber manifestation—so for us that was a way to connect and to walk with them.

I think, in the beginning we were functioning in a moment of the emergent aesthetics of transparency: like this is us, these are our bodies, these are our names, our identities and so on. But then that shifted. Post 9/11 the policy of transparency became pervasive. Like banks, government, everybody claimed to follow the policy of transparency. Transparency was in the air. And that was part of a moment, 9/11 surveillance, blockage, transparency. When the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* began to emerge, one of the core questions that we had was: Can the undocumented, the refugees, the community crossing the devil’s highway really be approached from a position of transparency? Can we really consider this within the logic of transparency? Here is this tool, here is the GPS location, and we are leading them to water. The concern came up that we are exploiting a community. Such considerations led us to think that we might have to mobilize some element of the opaque in the gesture, some kind of opacity, some figure that does not appear directly. There was nothing hidden. Because in the 1990s it was like: “This is Ricardo Dominguez, you can find me in Williamburg, Brooklyn, this is our body, this is our data body, here is the code”—there was nothing hidden, it was like: “Here I am, FBI come and get me.” But now the question was for us: The figure crossing the devil’s highway could not be captured by this logic of “here is the body, here is the pain, here is the photograph.” Can this figure be captured within the logic of transparency?

In the last few years Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 have been reading Édouard Glissant on “the rights to opacity,” relationality between the subaltern and the metropolis, and the possibility of opaque aesthetics, the right to disappear. Then we also began to consider that undocumented immigrants should not be seen as this essentialist Zombie crossing the border taking away our jobs—but as transborder gestures that were inventing new forms of being and becoming. We were interested in finding ways to re-configure the border crosser into a transborder body that activated a new kind of conceptual embodiment of what it meant to be a global flow. In this global flow there was a new trans-nation, the trans-nation that was fighting the idea of “globalization is borderization.” We—the artists and the undocumented border crosser—became co-workers in this critique.

However, as we were developing TBT, we came to the conclusion that opacity is good and interesting but that it had become, since cyber punk, a kind of the standard move against surveillance culture and that it is a more conventional reaction to the culture of surveillance. My students were into camouflage but did we really want to play this

gambit of opacity and camouflaging? Did we really want to go in this direction of camouflaging? And then Amy Sarah Carroll, who is a poet and a border arts scholar, and who wrote different sets of poetry for TBT, posited that perhaps we should focus on an aesthetics between transparency and opacity. She suggested the concept of *translucency*. Translucency would create a frictional aesthetic point between transparency and opacity and would make it possible to detach the tool and to untie the tool TBT from a specific undocumented body. It could be a generalized desert crosser, could be Syrian immigrant, could be children from Central America, or anybody crossing the border. At the same time the transparent aesthetic would emphasize that EDT 2.0 were helping crossers reach water, but the immigrant could not be fully seen—they were opaque, we were transparent and TBT was a translucent shifter. Translucency would be shifting from a global positioning system to a geo-poetic system as the core of the gesture. What was developed was a geo-aesthetics in which we were co-makers and there was transparent water for the crosser and then there was this system in the middle where it was difficult to tell where either side was and to determine what was opaque. We felt that translucency would expand the performative matrix of the application—moving it from a locative media project to a dislocative media gesture.

We worked with NGOs who provide the water (like Waterstations Inc., and Border Angels). It took time to convince them that TBT worked and about the importance of the role of poetry for the project. We told them that we are artists and that we are interested in different frames of the art work and also that the poetry will help individuals to survive in the desert. Eventually we succeeded. The poetry is transparent, translucent and opaque—sometimes all at the same time. It was a way to open ourselves to specific imagined community, the Trumpian Mexican zombie who takes away his position as CEO, but the pain and the exploitation are shown in terms of a more generalized flow about globalization as borderization—with the immediate objective goal of not letting people die in the desert. We used a negative dialectics of poetry in order to show something that does not exist. Our approach aimed at stimulating aesthetic confusion.

M.H.: Poetry was used in order to be subversive. Aestheticizing as a strategy to lead people across the border and to help them survive.

R.D.: Yes, and the FBI believed we did so. But you have to see that poetry had been very much part of our work from the start. We were deeply attached to poetry, even before TBT. Poetry was our conceptual training ground—starting back in the days of Critical Art Ensemble—we made handmade poetry books. Tactical Poetics enabled us to develop a system of poetry that we called utopian plagiarism—today we might name it non-creative-writing or conceptual poetry. For EDT 1.0/2.0 our interest in poetry was linked to the Zapatistas who, for example, launched paper airplanes against the military. The paper that the planes were made of contained poems. Such actions inspired many of our media art projects. TBT did not suddenly discover poetry as a useful artistic form of expression. It was part of our art projects long before TBT.

M.H.: In addition to transporting experimental poetry into the technologically guarded and militarized border zone, TBT can be read as reflecting on its own institutional context. Could you please comment on the role of institutions of knowledge production, of control, of art, or of economic profit, in TBT and in your work in general?

R.D.: When I came here to UC San Diego in 2004 I was in search of an institution that owns machines, IT, computers, that we—as independent artists—did not have in

New York and other places I lived and worked before. I was interested in three things: (1) Electronic disobedience and hacktivism; (2) I wanted to examine what happens when we use UC super-computer-technology against corporations or nation states; and (3) institutional critique as part of conceptual art: What happens when we use this concept against the university, against the institution of higher education, against the UC system itself? When I applied, they got interested in these ideas. I explained that I will do work within the paradigm of what I referred to as border art technology. I wanted to have a conversation with the border art movement but I emphasized that I would want to use technology in my artwork, so linking border art and technology.

Once in San Diego I started different groups, working with new media artists. And yes, the institutional context became relevant and created a contrast, a contradiction. What does it mean to be introjected into this institutional framework, into this wider university environment? After all, similar to Las Vegas, San Diego and UCSD are part of a militarized environment in which engineering, data collection, knowledge production take part. We started asking ourselves: What distancing or non-distancing is necessary as we are now integrated into the system? Your work is no longer only *disturbing* but it is part of the knowledge production system, part of the machine. I am not sure whether I have satisfying answers to these questions. For me as media artist who is interested in forms of critique, it is a very difficult position and relationship to the institution. Eventually, I got tenure and kept it even after the TBT controversy—it was not easy but it worked. I had this battle with the administration, caused by TBT—they wanted to take away my tenure. But we won. We won because our research is aesthetic. This does not mean that we did not face affects from this event, members of EDT 2.0 faced antagonism from other universities and institutions that still continue to this day.

However, as you indicate in your question, artists have to ask themselves: What does one do when one is institutionalized? The first thing that I thought was: institutional critique. But I am a professor and I have certain responsibilities. And in this context I asked myself: What can I do? How can I help? One thing that I discovered is that most artists work collaboratively. But we still bring students in under the Enlightenment inspired idea of the artistic singular genius. I tried to include the idea of collaborative work into our degree system. A door is now open for accepting collaborative groups in our programs. By now we do have a stronger focus on collaboration.

At UCSD I teach electronic disobedience and hacktivism and I received letters from the president of UCSD that our work was appreciated—but they only appreciate the IT and digital media educational aspect. So suddenly they discovered the content of what we did and started complaining. One of the most interesting aspects of all of this was to see the fragility of the UC system as a whole. Where did we as artists fit in? The difficulty for them was to define the parameters that we worked in: art, research, activism, aesthetics, technology.

I think to think schizoanalytics is probably the best way to approach the institution. I am lucky that I do not have to deal with it alone. The department has a long tradition of border art. So I did not come into this space and start entirely new things. For example, RTMark, which later became *The Yes Men* was part of our program. I believe that I was hired and I am still accepted because the university, or the knowledge business in a broader sense, found themselves in need of teaching IT and new digital visual communication skills and new technologies that are emerging. I guess, in the beginning they must have thought that we teach Photoshop or some other easily digestible tool.

M.H.: Are the US–Mexico border or border issues in a broader sense still part of your current work? Have the new administration and the ongoing shifts in US domestic and international politics influenced your current work already?

R.D.: Well, the issue of the US–Mexico border has a long history and many forms of artistic engagement have been created to disturb the borders of naturalization/militarization. Civil disobedience, as H. D. Thoreau defined it, came about because of the Mexican–American War. The South wanted to expand its slave economy. For Thoreau slavery was to be abolished and for Thoreau the war against Mexico was simply an excuse to expand the slave economy. The wall is part of this racial inscription, a national battle, all of these things, an abjection machine, a killing machine. *Operation Gatekeeper* 1994 and you can go back to Pancho Villa and Pershing using planes against them, this issue has a long history. The border as racial inscription, as paranoia, neoliberalism. Trumpism was already echoed in the reaction to the TBT and it is often the response to border art in general. Often border art disturbs the imaginary of Trumpism and the ideologies this stems from. I see TBT as part of this much longer history of border activism and border politics. Trumpism is part of the racialized scripting that has been with us for quite a while. As you know, the wall has been here for a very long time.

Endnote

1. See data provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2014).

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