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THE IRRITANTS OF EMPIRE: RITA RALEY'S *TACTICAL MEDIA*

Jodie Nicotra

Tactical Media by Rita Raley.
Electronic Mediations Series.
Minneapolis, MN: University of
Minnesota Press, 2009. Pp. 208, 33
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What are the most effective forms of political activism in an era of neoliberal globalization, millennial capitalism, postindustrialism, social networking, and media ubiquity? This is the implicit question behind Rita Raley's *Tactical Media*. If total revolution ever had been possible, Raley's book suggests, it certainly isn't now. Rather, in concordance with Michel Foucault's statement that "there is no single locus of the Great Refusal" . . . but only "a plurality of resistances,"¹ Raley endorses the value of temporary disturbances and provocations—the hallmark of the eponymous "tactical media."

"Tactical," of course, borrows from Michel de Certeau's well-known distinction between tactics and strategies in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In Certeau's formulation, the tactical action of consumers is more improvisational, playful, and responsive than the more schematic strategies, which are the province of producers. Though Raley resists Certeau's binaristic alignment of strategies with producers and tactics with consumers, she clearly sanctions the *modus operandi* of tactical media practitioners and their form of political critique. Less oppositional (which would imply a more defined or coherent enemy than that provided by millennial capitalism) than parodic and playful, tactical media aim to unsettle, taunt, and disturb for their political effect, their interest lying

in “open-ended questions rather than prepackaged lessons, instructions rather than products” (9). Reliant on emergent situations and chance, tactical media practitioners serve as the kairotic gadflies of the neoliberal regime.

Alongside more general categories like *hacktivism* (i.e., concerted, politically motivated cyber-attacks), *clicktivism*, or *slacktivism* (participating in online campaigns by organizations like Moveon.org), tactical media encompass such practices as TXTMobs, P2P network building, open source software, and *modding* (i.e., modifying hardware or software for purposes not originally intended by the designer). But at a slim 150 pages, Raley’s book is not simply a compendium of tactical media projects. She aims here to expand the category of tactical media beyond mere “tactical gizmology” (15) (the focus on technical interventions) to include projects like persuasive games and artistic data visualization—that is, the aesthetic as a tool for political critique. However, Raley writes, “This is more than Dadaist provocation . . . and not simply a variant of a radical art practice that endeavors to disrupt sociopolitical, economic, and cultural structures” (11). What defines her project (and tactical media more broadly) is its focus on disturbance of the symbolic: “In its most expansive articulation, tactical

media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible” (6).

Raley’s book consists of an introduction and three longish chapters: “Border Hacks,” “Virtual War,” and “Speculative Capital,” which deal with, respectively, tactical media responses in the form of persuasive games and hacktivism to anti-immigration policy, artistic response to U.S. military policy that relies on metaphors of war as a virtual game, and critical artistic visualizations of finance capital. Each of these sites was chosen for its relevance to the dominant neoliberal paradigm and what James Der Derian has dubbed *MIME-Net*, the military-industrial-media-entertainment network. While Raley includes a plethora of tactical media project examples, these serve mainly as occasions for critical reflection on neoliberalism. The book attempts to trace neoliberalism’s contours, assessing both the clever ways that it stymies or co-opts resistance, and pointing out how tactical media practitioners *do* manage to effect critique or resistance, contingent and temporary though these may be.

The types of projects Raley includes here range from those

legitimated and funded by the art community (gallery installations like Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway's *Black Shoals: Stock Market Planetarium* [2001], an artistic visualization of finance capital, and John Klima's *ecosystem* [2001], an installation at the Whitney Museum that "gives capital a graphic quality and renders money as an aesthetic object" [117]) to those that partake of the same styles of action as those ad hoc "shadowy networks" (77) so feared by George W. Bush after 9/11. These include the Electronic Disturbance Theater, for instance, whose illegal software hacks of websites with anti-immigration agendas, like those for the Minutemen and the Save Our States initiatives, disrupted the functioning of the system while making a point about the human effects of these organizations' political agendas. Some of Raley's most compelling examples are those who lie somewhere in between legitimated artists and ad hoc techno organizations: individual artist-activists like Joseph DeLappe, for instance. For his *Dead in Iraq* project (initiated in 2006), DeLappe types the names and information of American soldiers killed in Iraq into the text-message feature of the popular online console game and military recruitment tool *American's Army* (original release, 2002). Raley points out that in

his public memorializing of those made invisible by official political channels, DeLappe incidentally also highlights the emergence of a new definition of privacy: one less concerned with government surveillance than with freedom from intrusion by commercial (and other) interests. By breaking into fantasy play considered private (even though it's an online game shared by people who are in many cases strangers), DeLappe serves as a kind of irritating spam conscience.

Though a certain laudatory quality inevitably creeps into Raley's descriptions of tactical media projects (and understandably so—many of these are quite clever, and their efficacy as political critiques seems clear), *Tactical Media* rarely lapses into the frankly celebratory tone that characterizes much of the work on new media activism. In fact, Raley calls attention to the danger of uncritically buying into the efficacy of concepts (like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "nomadism," Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity," and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "multitude") heralded as liberatory by certain critical theorists—concepts that turn out to be quite easily co-opted by the very capitalist system that they may once have appeared to critique. Of the financial visualization projects (which could easily fall into

the same educational-but-uncritical visualizations of the market as Edward Tufte's work and Smart-Money's *Map of the Market*), Raley points out that if the audience does have some economic literacy, the projects' interpretation of market data does serve as a critique of the system. However, if the audience does not have economic literacy, these projects risk being seen uncritically, as mere entertainment. However, these are risks that have to be negotiated (not rejected out of hand). As she writes, "It is not simply that there are correlations between neoliberal globalization and new media art, or that one provides the context, the tools, and the need for the other, but that the writers and artists considered [in the "Speculative Capital" chapter] present a critique of informational capitalism, even as they are caught up within its very logic" (116).

Along with risks of co-option, Raley acknowledges the more immediate, practical risks for the tactical media practitioners themselves. One of these, of course, is the danger that the art will fail: that either the intervention will go unnoticed or that it will be dismissed as the work of pranksters. More threatening, though, are Raley's examples of those tactical media practitioners whose provocations or disturbances, to the bodily and civil detriment of the

practitioner, ended up calling into action the machinations of power. These include Steve Kurtz, the founder of Critical Art Ensemble and an artist who used bacterial cultures in his work to critique genetically modified food. Kurtz was jailed in 2005 (and recently released) on trumped-up charges of mail fraud, a Kafkaesque case that drew wide attention and was the subject of the film *Strange Culture* (2007). Another is Luis Hernandez, a Mexican artist and the coinventor of the persuasive three-dimensional open source game *Corridos* (2005), in which players absorb the "complex and imbricated histories of the ballad [*corrido*] and drug trafficking" (61). Hernandez was arrested, deported, and banned from the United States for five years after Homeland Security agents detained him in the Denver airport and declared him an "untrusted subject" when they found copies of the game and brochures in his luggage. Arguably, though it turned out badly for Hernandez, *Corridos* succeeded all too well by exposing the very risks that the game was designed to critique. Such examples provide helpful reminders that despite the apparently harmless cleverness of many tactical media projects, there are very real, tangible things at stake in the relations of power that they uncover and critique.

Theoretically sophisticated, well argued, and full of compelling examples, Raley's book is a pleasure to read and a valuable addition to work on new media and critical theory.

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change, folksonomy, William James's nitrous oxide experiments, and Kenneth Burke.

NOTE

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 137; quoted in Rita Raley, *Tactical Media*, Electronic Media series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 45.