Gift(wrap)ing New Media (in an Authentic Chilkat Blanket)

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"The Internet is actually a social condition where everyone in the network society is connected directly, without intermediation, to everyone else." Eben Moglen [1]

"Totalitarianism ruins democracy by attempting to fill the void created by democratic revolution and banish the indeterminacy of the social." Rosalyn Deutsche [2]

A lot has been written in recent years about the "Gift Economy" operating within the confines of networked art and culture. This economy of information and ideas works in contrast to the monolithic economy of financial capital, or so it is said by many of its proponents. The electrified art world has seen the rise (and some say the decline) of large-scale projects based on cultural capital trading like Rhizome.org, the Nettime lists, and various components of international festivals and conferences. There are counterparts in the business sector, in the proliferation of open-source products and services like Linux and the late Napster, and links to the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) tradition of punk, indy and craft cultures as well as the politico-philosophy of anarchism.

Critiques of the "cyberlibertarianism" of the high-tech industry have spelled out the paradox that is the dominant ideology of the Wired world. [3] The desire for "free markets" from the neo-liberal, high-tech sector has been criticized for taking from the commons, but not giving back. In tandem with this "cyberselfishness," some camps put forward theories of anarchy and information as a naturally open system. Unlike the traditional libertarians, who believe in traditional methods for keeping the market "free" and "competitive," proponents of open-source movements prophesize the (natural) death of copyright law. The restriction of information through legislative methods is an anachronism that stands in the way of the natural, unimpeded flow of technical progress. This brings me to the use of the opening quotes above, neither of which are actually all that recent (in Net years anyway). At first glance, I don't think there's much of a relationship

between them, oppositional or complementary. However, there's been something about the utopic/dystopic/cynical debates on "New Media" that has kept me going back to Deutsche's critical analysis of re-masculinizing, totalitarian calls for a unified "Public Space." Her critique of the depoliticized rhetoric of the public sphere, and its slippages in representation, seems to offer some insight into our current debates over electronic "space." While Moglen's, and others', utopian belief in anarchy and the direct democracy offered by Networked culture would seem to suggest a belief in heterogeneous and decentered politics, Deutsche warns us to be skeptical of utopianism, especially when it seems to have solutions for the "problems of democracy." As Deutsche's "Agoraphobia" argues, claims of solutions to social and political instability - whether of the nostalgic or futuristic kind - often have authoritarianism as models, that is, the desire to eliminate conflict. Well-intentioned Great Societies should, by now, generate some apprehension, especially when technology is claimed as their New Foundation.

" ...if you start from the facts the facts are always on your side. It turns out that treating software as property makes bad software." (Moglen)

A major tenet of this techno-anarchist philosophy (which is by no means monolithic) is that copyright law is not just wrong because it controls access to information, but also because the results of practicing the law result in naturally inferior products. If more people have access to the means of production for software, then more flaws will be designed out and the software will be adapted to more individuals. A basic bottom-up design structure, designed as evolution, no?

This all sounds very good, and even sensible, but how does the "infowar" between the cyberlibertarians, technoanarchists, and old-school managers get played out? And what, exactly, is a qualitative statement like "bad software" to mean when many don't equate making money from work to be "bad." Outside of the debates over digital information distribution, another group of activists has aligned themselves with some notion of anarchist philosophy in their resistance to the neo-liberal economic order. Seeing themselves in direct combat with consumerism and corporate conglomeration, they wage battle on a local level, with their eyes on its global, historical significance. In the turn of the millennium street protests in the US, Genoa, Prague, etc., a relatively small group of self-described (and press-labeled) anarchists decided that marching was not enough. Breaking windows, spray painting, and other tactics were used, the most publicized US incident being their minor part in the 1999 WTO event in Seattle. This form of property destruction served two purposes for participants: the literal and symbolic breaking of the sanctity of property; and the infliction of real monetary damage to the corporate infrastructure - hitting them "where it hurts...

the wallet." [4]

My problem with the so-called anarchists' acts of property destruction is theoretical, as well as pragmatic. Aside from the obvious arguments made by many of the "peaceful" civil disobedients that property destruction resulted in the state coming down harder (literally) on other protesters, the theoretical understanding of their actions reveals other significant issues. The tactics of direct action and property destruction in the US, goes back at least to the work of groups like Earth First!, Greenpeace, the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front, as well as the direct action panhandling of the German-American Anarchists of the Haymarket era. These groups practice(d) direct interventions, like road blocking, tree spiking, breaking and entering, destroying GMO test fields, and general monkey wrenching, that are designed to directly interfere with corporate activity they disagree with, and in the mean time, and slowing down the machine enough to open public dialogue about those activities through media exposure. Those that attack property as part of street demonstrations on the other hand, claim that their actions will force corporate behavior to change through threats of further financial damages.

What is dangerously absent from their analysis of such actions is an understanding of the contexts in which they exist. Any amount of damage that can be inflicted on any number of Gap, Starbucks, or McDonalds stores is little more than damage to the surface of an economic and cultural superstructure. While potentially successful as symbolic actions (breaking the "spell" of bystanders) the benefits may actually be minimal compared to the negative consequences. In other words, forcing the corporate state to show its authoritarian face can only be good if it will be rejected by the mainstream, which requires (at least) sympathetic media coverage - hardly something that can be counted on for any demonstration against capital. [5] In the meantime, workers and the state subsidize the costs incurred by street-level destruction. Corporations will get financial incentives to reestablish more secure, developed retail districts and the state will more rigorously enforce property protection, much like what has happened to post 1992 LA. [6]

" ...the most significant difference between political thought inside the digerati and outside it is that in the networked society, anarchism is a viable political philosophy" [7]

What does a "viable political philosophy" mean when it is dependent on the acceptance of a technological superstructure that, for most, cannot be separated from the dominant economic infrastructure? And how viable is a politic that is confined to a technological dream state that is not, nor can be, universally enjoyed? Such dualisms ignore the complexity of relationships between different

ideologies and populations to technology. [8] If you're not part of their solution, where are you? Where are the "un-plugged" (to steal Ars Electronica's last theme) and the welfare recipient in these "alternative" plans for the "cooperative and ecological societies of the future"? [9] As capital cannibalizes itself, an economic Call to Order can be heard in the gasps of "pull media" as it's suffocated by mega-mergers. And while "information wants to be free," not many are finding the same to be true of food and rent.

Subjective freedom, autonomy of conscience and the empowerment of individual will is matched to an inverse degree by economic and social dependence. This dependence is only partly a result of the atomization of artists... Its greater part lies not in relations of distribution but in the mechanisms of the system of belief which produce the value of works of art, and affirm the legitimacy of our activity. Andrea Fraser [10]

As Fraser pointed out almost 10 years ago, we (cultural producers) may want to start considering some of the problems faced in the navigation of technology and culture as more than ones of distribution. The recent Verio plug-pull of NY based service provider the Thing because of nothing more than a DMCA threat by a large transnational corporation, should illustrate the weakness of the technological Net that supports the free sharing of critical cultural capital. [11] "ICTs do not lend themselves to be hired for shared speculation on democracy without steep interests attached and monthly payments in hard, cold cash." [12]

One of the major tenets of gift economics is that the winners are those with the most to give away. It shouldn't take too much to see some of the practical problems of interpreting this as emanicipatory for anything but capital, or even as a more egalitarian form of cultural distribution. The ideology of gift economics has often been couched in ethnographic and humanistic sentiment that stakes its claims in apolitical and scientist ethics. The reference made by many to the Potlatch ceremonies of the US Pacific Northwest cultures as somehow proof of another form of wealth distribution is telling. Rarely do such arguments attach a political economy to either the NW cultures, or to the desire to find a universal referent for our current situation. While it may be useful to point to specific models, it is dangerously authoritarian and utopian to assert the immanence of any cultural system. Libertarian and anarchist theologies both lay claim to innate human tendencies, then cry fowl when someone else with more power acts contrary to the pattern. The Fittest apparently don't care for theory, whether political or evolutionary.

" The more perfect civilisation is, the less occasion has it for government, because the more does it regulate its own affairs, and govern itself..." (Thomas Paine, quoted in Barbrook)

Many of those benefiting from high tech gift economies have become tiresome of critics who point out the "dark side" of the Net. Dystopic rants on surveillance, privacy, conformity, homogeneity, and more have been dismissed as unfounded by many. And the "digital divide" argument serves as both a conservative and neoliberal tool for diverting attention from the structural problems of social and economic inequity by insisting that the problem is merely access to technology. The digital panopticon is said to be antithetical to the current direction of media history, a relic of Cold War fantasies of "Big Brother." According to those making these arguments, "almost everybody prefers the bottom-up Net over this top-down version," and "even neo-liberals are realising that the trading of physical commodities is much easier outside the digital panopticon." [13] Are we to gather from these statements that AOL really represents a "bottom-up" approach, or that the "almost everyone" in question is really a more selective group than it sounds. An understanding of the panopticon that positions it in opposition to the interests of "free trade" would seem to be missing some of the significance of the development of capital as an evolving system. Clinging to a long anachronistic, but still rhetorically functioning State vs. private property dichotomy, these arguments gloss over the fact that neo-liberalism is the ideology behind the WTO, FTAA, EU, WBCSD - organizations designed to overcome the boundaries of nation states, and hence obligations to the welfare of their governed people. It is not the State that sits in opposition to free trade, it's people. Those that think governments are the sole beneficiaries of the panopticon must not be paying attention to where most surveillance and data collection occurs, namely commerce. It is also important to restate one of the crucial components of the panopticon theory, that of "self-governance." While Barbrook's use of Paine's words suggests a more anarcho-utopian philosophy, the social goals of the panopticon are self-regulation and internalized control - that's what makes the unmanned tower more efficient. Ironically, a Dow representative once said, "People do things more effectively when they want to as opposed to being coerced to do them." [14]

This reevaluation of privacy and surveillance has its avant-garde cultural arm as well.

0100101110101101.ORG, a net.org collective has applied some of the concepts of the Gnu General Public License to their works of art. Their project *life_sharing* - based on the activity of file sharing between computer units - opens up the contents of their computer to the Internet, via a Web interface, The collective maintains that the entire contents of the computer in question will be available for perusal and downloading. They position the work as an exercise in self-portraiture, with larger and universal implications. As they say, "...a computer... ends up looking like its owner's brain. If you accept the assumption... you will also

assume that sharing your computer entails way more than sharing a desktop or a book, something we might call life_sharing." This human-computer personality complex is derived from a universalization of the human condition as mere information. With obvious connections to genetic sciences and the (attempted) complete quantification of experience, 0100101110101101.ORG's project represents data as transcendent and self-sustaining, as life itself. Ironically, it is similar analogies that are being used by the corporate state to regulate civic activity online. As hearings on "cyberterrorism" and "cyberprotests" make clear, the rhetoric against electronic civil disobedience relies on the ability to equate computer crimes with acts of violent terrorism against human bodies.

Along with the project's linking of life and art, as commodified lifestyle, there is also an attack on conventional privacy. Josephine Berry wrote of *life_sharing*:

"In a more overtly political sense, the project identifies the attempt to ring-fence and protect information as both a futile exercise and a fearful capitulation to the myth of individual identity." [15] Maybe the collective says it more clearly, "The idea of privacy itself is obsolete." [16] Not wanting to seem like a total surrender, these claims are buffered by claims that the saturation of data prevents any wholesale mining and utilization of personal information anyway.

I know such grand standing is aimed at technocrats and the "digerati," but the decontextualization of issues like privacy are troubling nonetheless. The people I know that work in social services would argue that many of the people they work with have already given up any claims to privacy through violently intrusive interrogations and constant surveillance. Their identity is already intricately linked to data networks, and they're acutely aware of it - it's not hidden from them. Against this total digitization of life, The Institute for Applied Autonomy's *iSee* project identifies many groups (which seem to cover just about everyone) that may be concerned about surveillance, and ways to avoid the constant collection of data, if only for a moment. [17] Certainly, the ideology of isolated individualism, the public/private dichotomy, and the openness of information are areas much in need of further critique, but such discourse should be aware of differences in privilege. For many, privacy has long been (made) obsolete.

A notion of a gift economy, whether functional or symbolic, has been a part of art world discussions beyond the Net. In a review for the *Nation*, Arthur Danto claimed the emergence of a new generosity in contemporary art that could be seen in the last Whitney Biennial. [18] Looking at the work of certain included artists, Danto chose to see a new humanism and spirituality being celebrated. Consider his interpretation of William Pope. L's five-year crawl up NYC's Broadway as having "the aura of certain ritual enactments that require worshipers to climb some sacred stairway on their knees." What Danto sees in this work is a kind of

martyr-like redistribution of spiritual wealth. Mundane acts of caring service elevated to the level of avant-garde art with recent roots in Felix Gonzales Torres and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Geert Lovink points out that online content providers now find themselves in a situation of mandated "sharing." Getting paid is often not an option. But, here, as in the development of free software, cultural content is provided by those that can afford it. The problem, or rather my problem, is that this "gift economy" that exists in a fairly contained portion of a capital-based infrastructure is being rhetorically universalized. While I would usually respond, "What's wrong with a universalized gift economy?", it seems that this gift economy, though beneficial to many areas of independent research, production, and distribution, can also become a tool for marginalization and even suffocation of independent cultural forms. Of course, independent culture doesn't require much funding for a local scale, but when that culture is technologically dependent and at the mercy of a larger infrastructure, it can be a fragile thing. If one makes the small analogical leap from information trading to many of the activities supported by non-profits and state-run agencies, in terms of gift economics, it doesn't look so good. That is in fact what Bush's volunteer and faith-based initiatives, given steam post 9/11, are meant to do [19]. And while such programs offer much needed services to those in need, their sustainability (at least democratically speaking) is another matter. This is capitalism working at its best: the social costs of profit are visibly marginalized and largely paid for by those that can least afford it. And as many (though probably not enough) have pointed out, even the information economy rides on the fleshy backs of labor that remains mostly invisible in the flowing data streams. [20]

All of this I'm saying must be taken with a grain of salt, as I'm a benefactor of much of what's traded in the gift e-conomy. My participation in online organizations like Rhizome.org has been extremely rewarding. I didn't flinch before pitching in my (whopping) 50 bucks when I heard they were in financial trouble, and before the membership fee was mandated. Yet, this was firstly dependent on my perception that such activity would be personally and professionally beneficial to me, and secondly, on my current financial security. When theorizing of gift economics, maybe we should run the theories through an ideological translator (the Bureau of Inverse Technology may have something for this already [21]) - something that reminds us that we create and recreate the systems that govern us everyday. The desire for technological progress to be evolutionary is blind utopianism at best and violently authoritarian at worst. To be sure, I don't want to criticize the practice of a gift economy, per se, but rather the belief that such an economic system exists apart from the necessities of expanding capital, with all its contradictions. One question I pose to myself is how to deal with the agoraphobia brought on by the "public spaces" of New Media, while hoping at the same time that the space for conflict grows, as history gives us reasons to fear the space that seems free from struggle.

Notes

1) Moglen, Eben, "Anarchism Triumphant: Free Software and the Death of Copyright," *First Monday*.

2) Deutsche, Rosalyn, "Agoraphobia," *Evictions*, MIT Press, 1996.

3) See Lovink, Geert, *Dark Fiber*, MIT Press, 2002; Borsook, Paulina, "Cyberselfish," PublicAffairs, 2001.

4) I certainly don't mean to speak for all those involved, as I'm sure some participants have their own rational, however, I'm making generalizations based on interviews and statements by outspoken participants and supporters. See the videos *Breaking the Spell*, Pickaxe Productions and *This is What Democracy Looks Like*, Big Noise Films.

5) Critical Art Ensemble, in *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, has written about the problems for symbolic acts of civil disobedience that take on the force of authorities directly and publicly. The post 9/11 political climate makes the seeming successes of Seattle and even the current anti-war efforts seem flimsy.

6) Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear*, (Vintage, 1998) recounts the reaction to the LA riots of 1992 by the state and commercial interests - retail subsidies for relocation and more privatized security, the fortification of downtown, rigorous zoning, and pulling money out of the areas most in need of infrastructural development.

7) Moglen, Eben, "Anarchism Triumphant".

8) As Cyberfeminists, like subRosa and The Old Boys Network, point out (and work to overcome), the old gender bending spaces of the Net have remained fairly masculine and Anglo-centric.

9) Barbrook, "The Regulation of Liberty: Free Speech, Free-Trade, Free Gifts on the Net", www.nmk.co.uk. While many are fighting oppression using electronic means, social worker friends tell me that many more are numbers in vast databases that decide whether they get into a section 8 house or not.

10) Fraser, Andrea, "How to Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction", 1994

11) www.theyesmen.org/dow

12) Flagan, Are, "The RGB Rainbow," Rhizome.org/object.rhiz?14842

13) Barbrook, "The Regulation of Liberty".

14) Tom Smolarek, Global Director for Environmental Health and Safety Operations, Dow Chemical Co., from www.dow.com, 1999.

15) Berry, Josephine, "Bare Code: Net Art and the Free Software Movement".

16) artists' statement, 0100101110101101.org

17) iSee, appliedautonomy.com.

18) Danto, Arthur, "The Show They Love to Hate," *The Nation*, 4.29.02.

19) see: usinfo.state.gov/usa/volunteer; www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/30/bush.sou.1408/?related; www.theglobalist.com/nor/globalbite/2002/02-08-02.shtml

20) The work of the SiliconValley Toxics Coalition (www.svtc.org) is just one group working for environmental justice in the US. Prema Murthy's "Mythic Hybrid" is also interesting in its cross referencing of new media theory and current realities for high tech women workers of India.

21) www.bureauit.org