Book Report: Electronic Civil Disobedience

by An MIT Student

Electronic Civil Disobedience & Other Unpopular Ideas
Critical Art Ensemble (1996)

Critical Art Ensemble's *Electronic Civil Disobedience & Other Unpopular Ideas,* officially published in 1996, is a collection of essays that present an introduction to Critical Art Ensemble's opinion on several contentious modern issues beginning with, and covering in most extensive detail, CAE's view of electronic civil disobedience. Throughout the work CAE refuse to pull punches as they present a resounding criticism of modern society, from the failure of activists to adjust to current power structures to the framing of habits frowned upon by society at large as addictions in need of a cure. Each essay focuses on a specific facet of society or activism that CAE feels is important and the individual pieces bear little resemblance to each other in terms of content. The tone throughout the work, however, is consistently caustic as the Critical Art Ensemble are far from pleased with the status quo and have a lot of feedback to dish out.

Electronic Civil Disobedience's eponymous first essay is a treatise on the nature of power in an era when the representation of power has changed drastically in the intervening years between the protests of the 1960's and the present day, 1996 by the publication of this work. CAE argue that power no longer truly resides in the "halls of power", structures such as palaces, castles, city halls, or other architectural monstrosities as it did in previous iterations of government. In these earlier days of protest the heart of institutional command and control lay at the center of these monolithic constructions allowing for the relatively simple disruption of institutional activity by merely laying siege, either metaphorical or literal, to the walls of these buildings. Any desperate enough organization could bring down the institutions governing their lives by merely breaching the walls of these structures, laying down an unavoidable reminder that the "mandate of heaven" no longer rested upon the crown of this particular group. This is evidently no longer the case.

Instead, CAE argue that modern power flows through the electronic exchange of information. Though the mighty landmarks of the previous incarnations of government are still present, any assault to them will ultimately prove futile. The loci of power are too decentralized in late capitalism to feel any debilitating effects when a single node in the network of bureaucracies fails by a slight amount. Rather that continuing the time battered tradition of picketing, protesting, and otherwise occupying public space, CAE stress that the most effective method of protest is the act of electronic civil disobedience, which they cover in rather piquant detail.

They also bemoan the inability of the two most important groups for successful electronic civil disobedience, political activists and hackers, to take place for knowing very much about their own specific field and very little about anything else. Instead they promote the swapping of technical knowledge for explanations of political issues in order to best not only take down electronic infrastructure as well as take down important electronic infrastructure. As a natural progression of this proposed set up CAE then describes their ideal counter-institution structure as a set of bureaucratic organizations that exist purely to fund autonomous small cells. Through

these suggested changes, CAE hopes to affect significant change to the way that protests are currently held.

The second essay, "Resisting the Bunker" expands loosely on the concept of space explored briefly in the first essay. CAE claims that the term 'public space' is a complete misnomer. Instead they argue that public space has been re-appropriated by the state, if ever it was completely free and cite a number of examples and hypothetical situations to demonstrate this thesis. Most central to their argument is their premise that art is not designed to engage and challenge its audience. Instead, they argue that since art may only be displayed in public places after a significant amount of bureaucratic 'red tape' must be sorted out that what is traditionally called art is merely another tool used by the state to maintain the status quo. CAE claim that the only true art is nomadic. It appears quick as lightning in one moment and leaves or is erased in another moment, demonstrating a concept to the audience, but never forcing them to think one way or another.

As an example of this effect, CAE cites the use of toy trains on a track in a public place. The performance is simple. The performer sets up a track and pushes toy trains around it in a public place, preferably one of consumption. The performer then merely talks to the audience and is eventually approached by the police who ask h/er to leave repeatedly, eventually threatening them with arrest. The reason that this action counts as art to the CAE is that it never directly engages with the audience. They may play with the trains or the track but eventually most go on their way. However, the artistic peak comes when, without fail, a policeman or security guard comes to arrest the performer for merely playing with toy trains. This demonstrates to the audience the ridiculousness of structured society, and allows them to participate on several levels.

The third essay is a brief discussion of the "Slacker luddites". CAE cite the slacker luddite as a sort of ideal person for the current era of constant work and consumption. First Critical Art Ensemble provide a brief history of the true luddites and contrast them strongly to the slacker luddites of today. Instead of shunning and fearing technology, these neo-luddites are strongly enamored of it. Instead they are concerned that with the apex of technological advance work will become nearly infinite and spend their lives performing the least amount of work necessary while attempting to 'steal' away productivity from their companies.

The authors claim that this revolt against the system stems from the desire of the powers that be to make work as unpleasant and unfulfilling as possible so as to make pleasure and consumption even more attractive propositions. The neo-luddites rebel against this unfulfilling and dreary workplace by being as unproductive as feasibly possible. CAE holds these neo-luddites up as examples for where resistance against the system is best placed, since in their opinion attacks on the system from within are much more effective than attacks from without.

The next essay, "The Technology of Uselessness" is a fairly broad attack on the conventional view of technological advance. CAE argue that instead of technology becoming progressively more useful and able to approach the ideal state of work being nearly or completely automated so that humanity can enjoy a good hedonistic romp, that since too much rapid technological advance scares the general public, technology has been progressing toward increasing

uselessness for a variety of reasons, first and foremost the desire to have technology on the margins of one's attention. CAE argue that since technology is designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, it becomes difficult for truly disruptive and positive technology to spread and have real impact. Instead, what becomes the focus is a cramming of useless features into devices to make consumers feel like they are getting their money's worth from products. CAE extend this argument to nuclear weapons and the Cold War, complaining that the United States and the USSR's arsenals of nuclear weapons were some of the most wasteful implementation of technology to ever exist. They were never planned to be used, were never in fact used, were eventually mothballed and thrown out without ever making a journey. CAE of course vehemently opposes this, not only on anti-Cold War principles but also on the anti-uselessness principles that they spelled out in this essay.

The next essay, "Human Sacrifice in Rational Economy" goes over the claim that there is always a human price to economic activity, despite how far removed and ignorant of this the consumer is. To illustrate this point, CAE cite their favorite problem involving human sacrifice. They, in fact, argue that free access to gasoline-powered motor vehicles comes with a blood price of 50,000 human lives each year, the number of people who die as a result of motor vehicle crashes yearly. While arguing that this is unacceptable, CAE outlines their rationale for why society accepts these human costs as natural and unsurprising. They cite the example of societies that actively practiced human sacrifices, noting that these were performed to give citizens the illusion of control over unalterable forces. Indeed the motivations for today's human sacrifices are similar, but the actual cost in terms of lives is much more carefully hidden from the consumer. Critical Art Ensemble suspects that consumers would be more reluctant to purchase cheap goods if they knew how much pain, suffering, and death went into making them.

Finally, "Addictionmania" goes into detail about the fallacies inherent in the current stigmatization of addiction. Instead of treating addiction as a curable disease, CAE argues that addicts are portrayed as impossible to redeem completely, as the seeds of addiction are almost completely unremovable. However, instead of arguing that addiction does not affect health, they argue that health is not necessarily the optimal state for people to so attached to. They argue further that the medical industry abuses the instinctual human fear of death and promotes the state of being elderly, a state that is both unproductive and costly. The price of medical treatment is extremely high and the cult of living longer as opposed to living better keeps the medical industry afloat. CAE argue that addictions are only stigmatized because they give the individual a far less healthy outlook, granting the individual greater pleasure than they would have been afforded otherwise.

Electronic Civil Disturbance has aged well. Though the specific technologies it criticises are fairly obsolete, the overall structure of the societal machine in which we reside has not drastically changed. CAE's commentary on the nature of power in the modern era still rings true, as does their assertion that public space is at best a misnomer. The slacker luddite is more omnipresent than ever, with multiple procrastination tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other site at h/er disposal to make productivity an even loftier goal for the overseers of corporations worldwide. Technology has continued its expansion into realms of even more meta-uselessness according to CAE's definition, with gaming console devices doubling as media players and mobile phones becoming handheld computers, swiss army knives, and macro lens

cameras adding feature creep that will be used by less than one percent of people who own the device. The tradition of human sacrifice continues, though the state works hard to hide it. People still live in abject poverty for the convenience of first world consumers and lives continue to be lost in the name of personal independence and motorway freedom. Finally, the span of addictions that society has come into contact with has increased tenfold. Not content with addictions to drugs, food addiction, sex addiction, social media addiction, gaming addiction, and other maladies have come to the fore, emphasizing the wrongness of engaging in behaviour that society deems less than useful. Finally if one wishes to see the epitome of CAE's emphasis on electronic disturbance to the state, one must simply look to Edward Snowden and his surveillance leaks in the summer of 2013. Now that is electronic civil disobedience.

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