

**ON THE CURRENCY
OF SOMATIC
ARCHITECTURES
OF EXCHANGE:
AN INTERVIEW
WITH NEW MEDIA
ARTIST RICARDO
DOMINGUEZ**

**BY
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Ricardo Dominguez is the co-founder of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and a former member of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). He is also Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at UCSD, where he is Principal/Principle investigator at Calitz's b.a.n.g. lab, which has recently started testing the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), in development for the past four years. This tool consists of a GPS system with a walking algorithm that provides poetry to immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border as it guides them to water caches in the Southern California desert. While the TBT may remind some of locative media, a trend in new media art using distributed geospatial information systems to connect users with their environment, this project goes far beyond the usual high-budget urban spectacles for the creative class. TBT is a geo-poetic intervention that aims to save lives, a performative gesture interpellating the borderlands as sites for ethical exchange rather than violent death.

Dominguez is steeped in the tradition of tactical media—a set of practices adopted by transnational net artists and media activist groups in the early 1990s, and still inspiring practitioners who wish to destabilize the status quo. The b.a.n.g. lab team is carrying on this tradition, and its social justice orientation. The team is comprised of two tactical media pioneers—Dominguez and Brett Stalbaum, who developed the virtual sit-in software called Floodnet, for the Zapatistas of Chiapas—plus poet and Latina/o studies scholar Amy Sara Carroll, and a new generation of activist researchers who share a background in IT, critical theory, art, and social activism, including Micha Cárdenas, Elle Mehrmand, and Chris Head, among others. Moreover, b.a.n.g. lab is not just about DIY media and code. Their acronym stands for “bits.atoms.neurons genes.” and points us towards multiple inquiries into the relationship between capitalism, technology, and the body—what Dominguez calls a “somatic architecture.” Somatic architectures are bodies perceived at different scales. They are sets of machinic parts—wetware components, technology, socio-cultural, subjective and affective components—connecting to external social, techno-

logical, and economic architectures. Somatic architectures are also conceived of as sites of exchange interfacing with systems of production, or in some cases, introjected interfaces incorporated into contemporary systems of production. CAE's work on power dynamics in techno-capitalism helps us understand this concept further. We can think of b.a.n.g. lab's aesthetic inquiries as pertaining to three kinds of capitalism: virtual, genetic, and particle. Virtual, or digital, capitalism thrives on the circulation and commoditization of information; genetic, or clone, capitalism emerged from genetic engineering and the patenting of life; and particle, or nanotechnology, capitalism extends these two systems of production, accumulation, and ownership enclosures to the smallest atom-based realities. It is at the nano-scale that technology becomes imperceptible, causing interfaces to disappear or be introjected by a somatic architecture. Work at b.a.n.g. lab, then, is not limited to facilitating virtual sit-ins or destabilizing the notion of, or the spaces around, borders, but extends to the development of new modes of inquiry into the somatic architectures that are embedded in all three layers of capitalism, including the atomic dimension of nanotechnology's particle bodies and the introjection of interfaces. Against this background, Dominguez and his partners in crime (indeed, they have run into multiple problems with institutions, the police, and surveillance agencies) are constantly gauging the currency of their tactical media, and the value of creating alternative currents of exchange.

In November 2011, I met Dominguez in Toronto, where he presented the Transborder Immigrant Tool at e-fagia's Digital Event'11. Our conversation quickly veered towards the role of affective interventions in opening up spaces where

new, transversal approaches to political problems can emerge. In this interview, we discuss affective currencies and alternative currents—or flows—of exchange along an ethics driven by aesthetic encounters. I started by asking Ricardo about virtual capitalism, a system in which processes of accumulation and exchange are predicated upon controlling and channeling the effects and affects of circulating information. Specifically, what potential do ethico-aesthetic encounters hold to subvert and resist the mechanisms of biopolitical control (the use of political power to indirectly control our lives and subjectivities) feeding information capitalism?

RICARDO DOMINGUEZ

The basic concern with exchange and currencies, as we began to imagine it in the 1980s with Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), was that there appeared to be a space in which technology was becoming ubiquitous as the primary mode of exchange. The social body was part of the exchange, and "data bodies" were accelerating the level of anonymous connectivity, primarily around the lift-off of virtual capitalism to a degree that was unprecedented compared to the time between the 1950s and the 1970s. So, the issue of real bodies became an important component in defining interventions into this accelerated mode of exchange. To me at that time, the performative matrix of what I call "the somatic architecture" was to think out the ethics of the body, not only as embedded in time and space, but also as a site defining the ethical exchange of the telematic—the data body. There was a sense at that time that this extropian body, a trans-body lifting off into the virtual grid, was the predominant manifestation of the fluencies and fluctuations of currency. Test-

ing the ethical domains of the exchange, of somatic architecture versus the data body, we began to see that the exchange rates of a body were dependent on the data body, not on its qualitative structure. Could you go into a bank, sans any structure of the data body (your social security card, your credit card) and just look at the person across the desk and say: "I'm a good person, my mom is so and so, can you loan me a thousand dollars?" The question of what is the currency that allows the exchange of sustenance for whatever purposes of a somatic architecture was clearly shut down, and the body itself was no longer part of this expanding virtual capitalism.

We wondered how we could swerve or drift in a direction wherein the body itself became a switch that would disturb that currency and flow, create another current of exchange that was unexpected, and discover what gestures could allow that to happen while retaining an awareness of the digital side. So, the structures of our interventions first defined what sort of actors could participate in switching that current and currency, because current, as an electrical circuit, and currency have a similar kind of circuitry going on at the same time. It became clear then, that the body had to interact with this telematic space, this cyberspace, but that the flows of exchange had to be reconsidered in terms of an ethics that was driven by an aesthetic encounter. And this, in the 1980s, was the very definition of cyberspace, especially as defined by science fiction writer William Gibson. His definition was that the exchange in this new space, wherein the somatic structure of the body was going to be plugged in, unplugged, or somewhere in the middle, was going to be defined by how the body would both interpellate it, introject it, manipulate it.

The novel *Neuromancer*, where the word "cyberspace" was brought to the foreground or assembled for the first time, offered us a way to imagine a somatic architecture of exchange that was emerging, and the different types of bodies that would participate in it. The first body offered is one in negation: Case, the hacker-cowboy who hates the body because it can no longer neurally link into cyberspace—the space of control, command, code. This is probably the core type of body that virtual capitalism really wants: one with a total disregard of the ethical, in an aesthetic space as the key point of exchange. The next type of somatic architecture is the cyborg Molly Millions. Even before Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, the female body in *Neuromancer* is not rejecting the potential ethical-aesthetic issues as women within a certain kind of politics of cyberspace. But her choice is to introject the technology; the cyborg body is multiplied in strength by being able to see a wide range of scales of reality in cyberspace. Molly Millions is the other choice offered in this virtual capitalism: the body introjecting the technology.

In this virtual capitalism with its binary exchange system, a question is brought to the foreground: if indeed there are only two modes of agency, disappearance of the body (the cowboy) and armoring of the body (the cyborg), what happens when one encounters the bunker of informatic politics, the circuit board that allows for the exchange of information outside the control of those two potential agents? What is the politics of this shut-down if the hacker cannot break its security code, if the cyborg woman cannot enter the physical building even with her technologically armored body? How can one access that informatic political system to accomplish what one perceives or imagines as

the politics of a cyborg or hacker community?

Here lies the power of Gibson's notion of cyberspace as not defined by software, hardware, or telephony, but as a *mass consensual hallucination*. What happens is that Molly and Case have to understand that the power of virtual capitalism is able to bunker itself because one is imagining it as an empirically created circuit of solid immateriality, which must be met technology to technology—and they fail. Taking into account this mass consensual hallucination, they go to a third type of body: a group called the Panther Moderns, who are not hackers; they are not deleting the body to gain control, access, or command of the code. They are also not introjecting the technology to exchange and armor. They are an agit-prop collective whose basic focus is to create 10,000 realities through physical gesturing and performativity that confuses the bunker's sense of its own reality. They create aesthetic confusion, but they do it understanding that they're just amplifying the mass consensual hallucination through their performance.

You can imagine it as a form of *teatro campesino*, offering another way for a community to envision and enter into conversation with power: by getting on stage, people being attacked by the agricultural power enslavement system could suddenly speak back, just by pretending in that space.

We began to see this kind of ethical-aesthetic component of the somatic architecture in the 1980s as part of a performative matrix that would allow us to disturb the circuits and currencies at play. We could follow the Panther Moderns and not be hackers or cyborgs—single agents trying to manipulate things—but a collective body producing multiple gestures. Part of the

project to interrupt virtual capitalism was to allow the exchange and connection between data bodies and real bodies within this notion of an aesthetically and ethically driven mass consensual hallucination. We were not seeking to gain control of the code, or seeking to introject it. Instead, we sought the aggregation or expansion of a space for those communities seeking agency.

The ethics and aesthetics that have followed—whether it's CAE, or Electronic Disturbance Theatre 1.0 or 2.0, as we like to say, or b.a.n.g. lab—are about defining a space that allows this, via the multiple bodies that have gathered in performative gestures. We are creating a poetic space that allows us to offer sustenance to these communities that have this will to agency, whether it's an activist community who has a very specific policy orientation, or if it's a hacker that wants to cross to the streets. They are allowed to envision a space where exchange doesn't have to be based on what they are naturally or unnaturally attached to. There are more choices than they might imagine just within the circuit of moving code, or technology in and of itself.

ALESSANDRA RENZI In the booklet accompanying the Transborder Immigrant Tool, you say: "Framing water-caching in terms of let-down amounts to a refusal to recount the borderlands' competing and accreting essentialisms, a US-based 'privilege of unknowing' the escalating numbers of a continental humanitarian crisis." I'd like to know more about your practice of "let-down," nourishing transitions to build upon practices of crossings and passages. What kind of possibilities does this form of sustenance open, in terms of borders and the political problems they pose?



Transborder Immigrant Tool billboard

RD This particular moment of sustenance, the play in the booklet, came about when we learned of a saint in Brazil called *La Defunta Correa*, a woman looking for her husband who had gone away to look at a mine across the desert. She takes her newborn child but dies during the crossing. The child survives, nourished by her breasts, and several days later he is found. The images of *La Defunta* are extremely moving, especially to my partner, the scholar and poet Amy Sara Carroll, who experienced let-down when seeing a child cry in a store, even after she had finished nursing our son...

I have to stop here for a moment. Thoreau, in his walking essay, hints at the globalization of a body, moving through the circuits of the world, offering exchanges not through the speed of the train or the speed of the sail, as he would say, but through the encounters that one has through walking. That walking itself offers a possibility for an ethical-aesthetic encounter that the speeds of technology cannot. We want to create spaces wherein our bodies experience a similar moment of let-down, offering sustenance to some degree. We want to occupy transversal positionalities that can connect mythopoetic spaces, political contestation, and deep somatic architecture, like that of the mother

and the child, literally participating in the language of a crossing.

One of the ways that we have attempted to work since Electronic Disturbance Theatre was to begin to think about globalization as "borderization"—borders have appeared everywhere. One question has come to the foreground for us: how can we allow this gesture to rethink different types of borders, for instance the Guatemala-Mexico border, which is far more violent and excessive than the Mexico-US border in terms of the number of disappearances and death (if one can even imagine that)? So, here is a very clear space where we ask what sort of navigational aesthetics are needed to deal with this particular border. Then, we ended up going to Spain where a long-term issue has been getting lost at sea while crossing between northern Africa and southern Spain. Part of geo-aesthetics is to understand the granular differences of these borders, the different sense of barrier that has to be walked or crossed. The temporary solution for us was to offer communities the code, what we call "walking tools." But it is the shell of a code for these geo-poetic systems, which can then be redesigned to meet the standards of navigation for those borders, by those communities who are already embedded, in trying to deal with these spaces.

One of the qualities of this kind of work is that you don't want to parachute into spaces you don't know. We have a much clearer sense of the Anza-Borrego area in southern California: we have dealt with NGOs that are leaving water caches and have a good sense of integrated dialogue about that. Our solution was to add another form of sustenance to these spaces: code that can be manipulated. One difficulty is that there is a digital divide in terms of who can read this type of code, limiting the number of communities that can interact with it. We are now thinking about ways to develop a universal applet that would be easy to manipulate, for communities that are interested.

So, the currencies of exchange are to always be deeply reflexive of the situated condition of these spaces, though aware of the limits of one's knowledge of them, and allowing for an exchange of this code. In 2011, code is a fairly standard modality of exchange, a different sort of currency or circuit. Right now we're at the point where we are in dialogue with activists and art groups who are looking at borderization as the key exchange for globalization. One comes to the point in walking where one sees the limit of what is possible but has also created a space of mobilization for ideas that consider the kind of sustenance that activists or artists can provide when looking at these crisis points.

AR When you produce these artistic interventions you're interested in the effects on, and the affective reactions of, the audiences they reach, but also those of the institutions and the systems where your experiments play out. How do you locate these disturbances, and how do you measure institutional reactions?

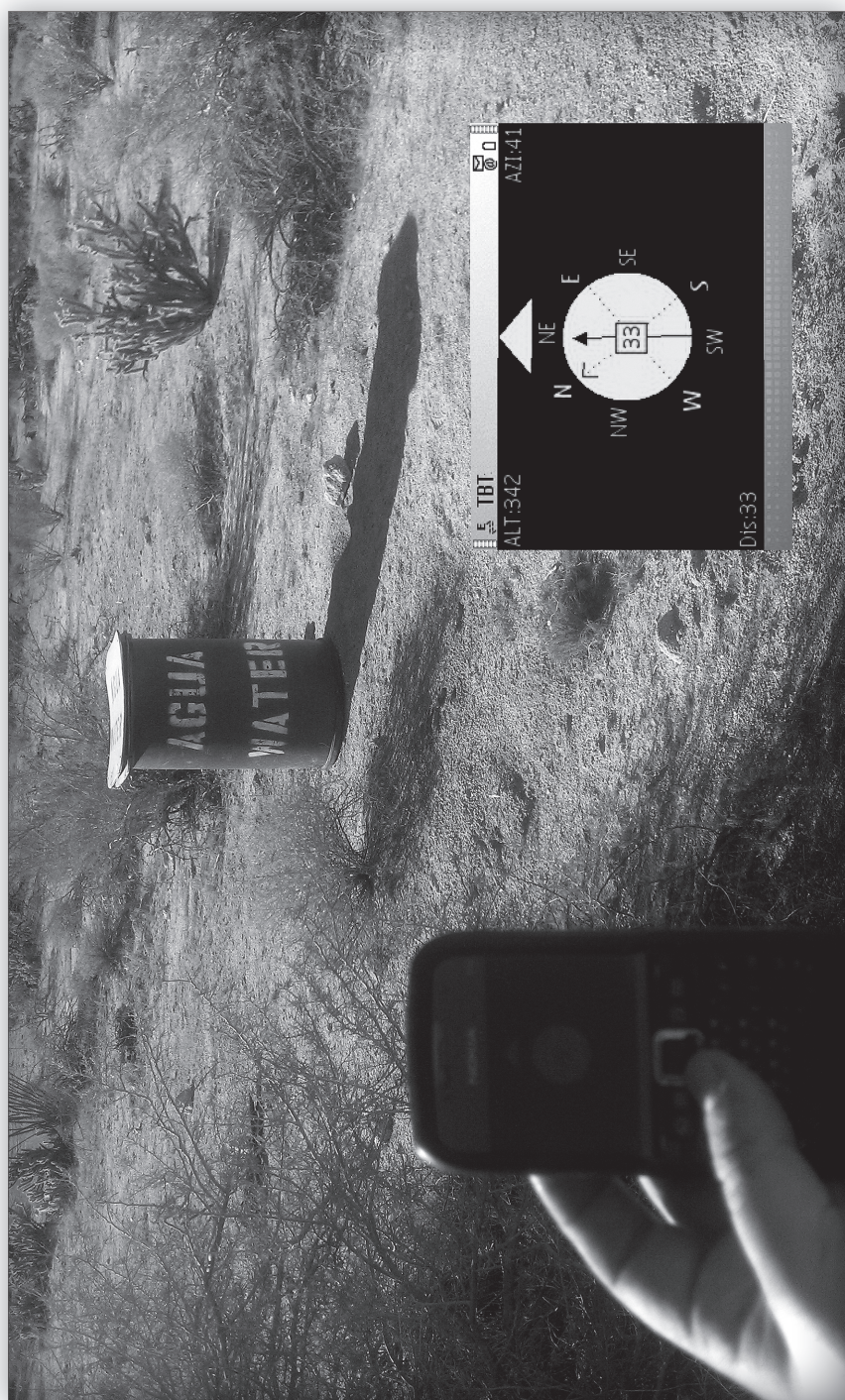
RD One of the properties of the performative matrix that establishes zones of encounter and contestation, zones of call and response, is a certain measurement of power. Often the exchange is accidental, in that one doesn't necessarily have a predictive calculus. Part of our modality is repetition and difference: we repeat the gesture within a different context. It comes through a history of continuous rehearsal in theatre, such that one can actually improvise because one knows the script quite well. Perhaps the content will change, be it the Minute Men or support for students in France, but there's a repetition of the gesture, such as, for example, the virtual sit-in. Then, one can measure how the institutions of power play out: they might remain silent, speak out angrily, use international or local law, or they might use technology itself, like the Department of Defense launching weapons of information war. They may also enter into dialogue.

The difference between now and the 1980s and 1990s, in terms of the work, is that then we were experimenting in creating these spaces as autonomous artists without institutional support, and the gestures were staged based on transversal coalitions and alliances. We weren't codifying, in a consistent way, our exchanges with power. Now I'm a tenured professor in an institution, and in a "hybrid laboratory," and the only way I could think that as a group we could measure these conditions was to take the dynamics of that encounter as the very property of the research. Here, the question of affect becomes one of exchange within an ethics of bodies being face-to-face, as opposed to face-to-facelessness. The somatic architecture, the geo-aesthetics, then becomes one of intimate aesthetics because you literally see the person who is responding.

We bring to the exchange institutional critique as part of the history of aesthetics. Art practices since the 1970s have been very interested in institutional critique: artists have continuously critiqued the gallery, the museum, the art market. We take that history on as the space where the affective encounter of face-to-face conversation would be about shifting the nature of the institution itself. Our exchanges occurred on several levels: the main site of experimentation was using the institutional infrastructure, which is military, against, say, the Minute Men or the French government, or a corporation. This created zones of exchange between myself, my "fully faced" power, and intercontinental legal structures. For instance, the French government sends a complaint to the Department of Intelligence Security Agency: "Why is the University of California shutting down our government websites?" DISA then contacts the university; the system administrators at UC and UCSD see the IPs coming from Calit2 and ask what is happening. Calit2 says, "this is part of our research as an institution," and suddenly an inter-institutional dialogue about the project occurs, and I am part of that circuit, watching it take place. That was test zone one: using that institution against other institutions, both micro-institutions like the Minute Men and macro-institutions like the French government. The next level was to point to the problematics of my own institution: its militarization, its funding, its corporatization. Again the work is produced by an exchange with the communities, the students protesting fee hikes and the faculty, and you target the institution itself. They start giving b.a.n.g. lab more funding for having done critical activities against them, such as electronic civil disobedience. I didn't think this would be a coequal currency,

but suddenly the social affective landscape of power shifts. It's never the same: at times it is armoured like a cyborg, at times it is denying its own constituent body, and other times it just becomes furious and fragile. Then we have the situation where they want to de-tenure me; they want to stop the research; they want to enter into legal battles and so, again, this allows us to really take a measure of the currents of exchange with institutional power structures.

If indeed we are shifting from disciplinary exchange culture to one of control, and then to post-control culture, what are the dynamics in that shift? I think if we were to approach them as either activists or hacking engineers, they wouldn't have had the same kind of stuttering dialogue with us because they would have understood what the dynamics are. So, with DISA, they said: "what do you mean it's an art research project?" So, suddenly this position of power wasn't about a defense of hacking. The institution was defending radical aesthetic experimentation, which was not part of the vocabulary that the DISA, or the French government, or the supercomputing people have. A different currency of exchange needed to be constructed, one in which the valuation of art was not necessarily negated but amplified in a way that wouldn't have been there to begin with. Now we can have exchanges around hacktivism and civil disobedience with these communities, without them shutting down: "you are part of the black hat currency," or "you are part of the white hat currency of exchange." We like to say that perhaps we're red hats and we're not interested in what white and black are playing out. You develop a different vocabulary, and now when I'm presented in these places, they say: "these are red hat artists," which offers a space and difference in exchange.



Transborder Immigrant Tool Concept, showing working tool and screenshot from Nokia e71.

AR Critical Art Ensemble produced an analysis of different, coexisting kinds of capitalisms. I was wondering if you could talk about them in the context of your recent work on nanotechnologies.

RD In the 1980s we realized that there wasn't a singular capitalism but that they were plural, and that the intimacy between a ubiquitous technology and the expansion of these capitalisms was going to accelerate. The question was how the different accelerations would participate in defining these capitalisms. It was evident that virtual capitalism was really a clear moment of market integration, and that once this occurred there would be a crisis of the divide between those who could access that virtual flow and those who were outside. This seemed to be a continuation of many of the motifs of capital, but now it was going to be a question, as Virilio said, of a speed politics that was outside the somatic architecture of most of humanity. We can see this in the recent economic crashes due to the speed of algorithms going faster than the market can actually understand.

The next layer of capitalism that we saw manifesting itself in the 1990s was the outcome of the tragedy of the AIDS crisis. ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was very clear that there had to be a way to confront the therapeutic state and therapeutic economies; that it was not enough to accept that something called AIDS was occurring. In fact, the currents that the therapeutic state was using as a model of therapy were really a *pharmacon*, a poison that wasn't even developed to deal with AIDS but for something else. We gained a better understanding of how to come at science from a position of epistemological equality, of how, as a commu-

nity living with people who were dying, the politicization of the disease was really marking the growth of a new capitalism called genomic capitalism, or clone capitalism, or genetic capitalism. We had to ask who had control of the body's deepest tissues, a question further necessitated by the human genome project, which started in the 1980s, and also by the patenting of diseases and seeds. ACT UP community research initiatives, which took on the very issues of creating new chemistry, new tactics, and holistic visions, seemed to us an appropriate way to intervene into that genetic capitalism. You continue to see this in the molecular revolution work that the rest of Critical Art Ensemble pursued, and led to the terrible homeland security trial of Steve Kurtz for bio-terrorism in 2004.

Then, also in the mid-1980s, we read Eric Drexler's book on the engines of creation and the coming era of nanotechnology. This added a third layer of control on the market at the atomic scale, or close to it, so that suddenly particle capitalism became a clear site of integrating the other two capitalisms at the deepest core. It was no longer just the data body or the genomic body; it was the particle body itself that was now going to be open to trading, patenting and reconfiguration at the will of the market. The site of intervention into that exchange seemed to be one of establishing a nano-poetics that would foreground and open a consideration of nano-toxicology as the pixel, patina, and canvas upon which such a nano-poetics could be developed. So, we began to look at the products that were using nano-scale technologies, which range from baby butt lotions, to 24-hour lipstick, to fabrics. We have a favourite Hugo Boss statement that we always use: "Nano is the new black."

Because these products are unregulated, there is no mention on their labels that nano-scale technology is being used. So one of the elements of our nano-poetics is to create a systemic intervention situated on three levels. First, we're trying to intervene within nano-laboratories themselves to open this dialogue. We sniff the scientists themselves and alert them to the levels of toxicity in their bodies on a nano-scale. This then initiates an exchange of "we don't want to be sniffed, we want to be left alone" and "of course we have nano-scale toxicity in our bodies, it's a risk that scientists take to discover the new, to bring cancer cures." Since the 1980s technoeconomies have been sold as either apocalypse or utopia: the military is creating apocalyptic weapons, but we're going to create utopian cures for the diseases created. We try to intervene critically between utopia and apocalypse by shifting the dialogue towards: "it's not about the risk in laboratory, it's about what you're wearing and what your child is wearing *outside* of the lab." In fact, when you look at the economic pie of particle capitalism, the widest pie is unregulated market development and distribution of these products. When you look at the nano-toxicological research being done, it's basically a nano: you don't even see it as part of the pie. We're at the point where we are trying to have dialogues with scientists, nanotechnologists, about the regulation of the market and the areas of research. Second, we want to open a larger public dialogue, which is usually the product of gallery- and museum-based gestures. We have done street-based presentations in front of pharmacies, reading poetry about nano-toxicology. We did a series of gestures using Pico projectors in Barcelona, where we would project on people and products to discuss these issues. So

again, assembling different sorts of spaces, the streets, art spaces. And last, we're intervening in techno-spaces. This is the area I'm most interested in because there isn't enough activism happening, and I do think there's a potential for a disturbance on an aesthetic and ethical scale.

The particle group really emerged when I started b.a.n.g. lab, and our approach is a kind of triangulation of intervening in the scientist labs, in galleries and museums, and in the streets. But because of the grain of disappearance of nanotechnology in the wider discourse of globalization, it doesn't have the same affective geo-aesthetics of call-and-response that, say, immigration has, or protest in the streets around known qualities of globalization. I think at this point in time it is much easier to develop an ethical aesthetics that disturbs information bombs, that disturbs the questions and aesthetics around borders, whereas particle capitalism is still an unregarded space of critique and intervention. I think as that particular segment of capitalism moves forward people will begin to have a more coherent narrative about the issues at play. This isn't to say there aren't communities out there who are aware, who are doing preliminary and expansive investigations of these things, but in general that level of particle capitalism isn't really part of the exchange and currency of alter-globalization movements. I often say our groups, usually five in each, are like blind probes that are trying to dismantle and reconfigure an aesthetic language that might allow a space to open for other agents to begin to participate. ○

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Ricardo Dominguez is a co-founder of The Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), past co-Director of Thing (post.thing.net), and past member of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). His collaborations with artists, collectives, and tactical media groups have resulted in controversial projects, including Digital Zapatismo in solidarity with Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico and the recent *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (a GPS cellphone safety net tool for crossing the Mexico/US border) and winner of the "Transnational Communities Award." Ricardo is Associate Professor at UCSD in the Visual Arts Department, a Hellman Fellow, and Principal/Principle Investigator at CALIT2 (bang.calit2.net).