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*Tactical Media*

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## Book review of Rita Raley (2009) *Tactical Media*

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In the introduction to *Tactical Media*, Rita Raley addresses what she believes to be a credible and “strong” objection to tactical media from media theorists Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter. Since tactical media, according to Raley, “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” (2009: 6) and “absolute victory is neither a desirable nor a truly attainable object” (2009: 10) Lovink and Rossiter (2005) argue that what tactical media accomplishes is to “point out the problem and then run away” and this temporary disruption consequently assists the aim of capital and capitalists who “[thank] the tactical media outfit or nerd-modder for the home improvement”. Raley’s response to Lovink and Rossiter is that our focus should not be on “whether tactical media works or not” but on how the media projects impact social relations and by measuring their virtuosity (2009: 28-29).

Raley draws from Paolo Virno’s definition of virtuosity as a performance or activity that finds satisfaction in itself and is not focused on some kind of end result, ultimate victory, or identifiable product. Tactical media then is about opening up a temporal experiential space for political critique that leaves little of substance for capital to appropriate due to a deliberate shifting of discourse and tactics in subsequent interventions. Simply put, lessons may be learned but new ones will be continually taught. But Lovink and Rossiter’s critique still haunts the premise of tactical media. As Dan Schiller (2007) has argued, we need to begin thinking about information itself as a commodity in circulation. So even if there is no material yield from the performance of tactical media, the information produced is just as valuable and real within the current economics system as a material commodity. As a result, Raley’s suggestion that tactical media be judged on the basis of its virtuosity is not a perfect solution (and certainly not intended to be). This bind between resistance and appropriation encapsulates the struggle tactical media is simultaneously exposing and experiencing.

Beyond the introduction in which this argument and explication are contained, *Tactical Media* seeks to describe some of the critical practices and techniques of tactical media without being a comprehensive catalog. (Raley is careful to explain the book is not and *should not* be an encyclopedia.) Each of the book’s three chapters focuses on a point of political contestation—the border, war, and capital—and a tactical methodology—disobedience, gaming, and visualization.

One of the central theoretical assumptions of *Tactical Media* is that power is “nomadic” (2009: 1) as a result of the rise of postindustrial society and the dominance of neoliberal globalization and described in Gilles Deleuze’s oft cited “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (Deleuze, 1995). The first chapter on disobedience and the U.S./Mexico border serves as one of the more lucid illustrations of our altered political landscape. The physical wall serves as a vestige of disciplinary society providing more of an illusion than actual functional security. Instead, power resides in the informational networks that produce the image of the infectious foreign threat and consequently the border is conceptualized as a kind of firewall subject to flooding. Latino/a activists have devised a host of ways to expose these relations from the low-tech reworking of signage to poetic interactive storytelling. However, none of the examples Raley offers is more poignant than the case of artist Luis Hernandez whose videogame *Corridos*, which has the player drive around simulated border towns as a Mexican smuggler, was discovered

by Homeland Security agents when he and his wife and artistic partner Anne-Marie Schleiner were traveling through the Denver International Airport. The agents detained and searched Hernandez's possessions and eventually deported him to Mexico for five years because of his knowledge of so-called terrorist networks and border passageways. Raley questions why it ended up being "the game ('tactile participation') as opposed to the brochure ('rhetoric') that brought Hernandez under suspicion?" (2009: 62). Her question is, in part, rhetorical as the government clearly understands that the revolutionary threat has altered its methods. Furthermore, as McKenzie Wark and others have argued, the boundaries between gamespace and the "real world" are not easily identified (Wark, 2007).

Raley drives this point home further in the second chapter about virtual war when she states "gaming scenarios and other simulational narratives have acquired representational authority and the cultural knowledge they produce has the authority of the 'real'" (2009: 70). In this revised mediascape "the division between 'here' and 'there' matters little in the global battle to control the message and to stage the definitive media event, the definitive attack on the global network" (2009: 69). The chapter provides an excellent overview of the varied efforts by tactical media artists and other political groups who struggle against the dominance of U.S. and other western powers in narrativizing war. To accomplish this overview Raley juxtaposes readings of more well known examples like *September 12* and *dead-in-Iraq* alongside some less exposed but nonetheless profound work by John Klima. The strength of all of these examples is in Raley's contextualization evidenced by her humorous explanation of how a mediocre *Battlefield 2* machinima produced by a player named SonicJihad (who happens to be a Moroccan Dutch twenty five year old man with advanced degrees) attracted the attention of Congress. The game, which attempts to show the perspective of Jihadists affected by the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, was dismissed as boring and unoriginal by the fan community. However, Reuters journalist David Morgan and lawmakers erroneously deemed it an example of Islamic radicals modifying games as propaganda for terrorist efforts. As Raley points out "there is a disjunction between the importance ascribed to video games and the misinterpretation and sheer misreading of them, and the irony lies in this disjunction" (2009: 76). This is a disjunction that cannot be ignored in our understanding of tactical media. Even as the U.S. is considered to be on the technological bleeding edge of warfare (whether traditional or networked) there is still a fundamental misunderstanding of many of the technologies driving changes. Nonetheless, SonicJihad's production is still effectively used by the U.S. government and media to drive home the paranoid post 9/11 imperialist message.

The final chapter, moving away from more representational media like videogames, theorizes how tactical media has turned to the visualization of information as a political tool. The central example used is Lisa Autogena and Joshua Portway's *Black Sheds: Stock Market Planetarium* "which uses real-time market data to visualize the market as an astronomic system that is both complex and adaptive" (2009: 110). Works of visualization utilize the object of critique (e.g. flows of capital) more explicitly demonstrate what Raley terms an "interpretative" (2009: 117) mode that is less about traditional disruptive activity and more about appropriation and reflection. Interpretation is a potentially more dangerous form of tactical practice as it forces the artist to operate within the logics of that which is under critique. Thus projects that visualize capital are participating within a discourse of the dematerialization and naturalization of capital while simultaneously fighting for the exposure of this rhetoric. The battle between tactical media's interest in materiality and the dematerializing and naturalizing discourses of power and capital serves as a fitting conclusion since this conflict underlies the previous two chapters and introduction.

Raley's survey of tactical media is an important and timely contribution to digital media studies as scholars, artists, and activists work to understand the future of progressive politics. *Tactical Media* should provide plenty even for scholars of education who are interested in alternative forms of politicized public pedagogy achieved through radical forms of artistic praxis. However, I believe that *Tactical Media* is most useful as a guidebook for the design of future successful interventions in the wake of recent political movements that have attempted, at least in part, to articulate and mobilize themselves through "new" media. As I am writing this review in the summer of 2009 the uproar and subsequent protests over the controversial Iranian election still trend highly on Twitter but there is a growing concern over the ultimate effectiveness of the tools of social media to provide any real tactical importance beyond mere reportage or an illusory consumptive and spectatorial mode of participation that has little to do with activism. Furthermore, the Critical Art Ensemble's rallying cry that "the streets are dead capital" (qtd. in Raley, 2009: 1) forces one to reconsider whether the protests themselves lack the appropriate channels to apply political pressure, especially when combined with the unprecedented worldwide anti-war protests in the months leading to the Iraq invasion which went largely ignored by the Bush administration and popular media.

With those issues under consideration, I think the sheer size of the Iranian protests and the attention they've drawn reveal that the streets are not entirely "dead," especially in parts of the world where these "new" media technologies have little penetration (Raley agrees citing immigration protests in the U.S. spring of 2006) (2009: 162, n. 46); however, the courageousness of the Iranian people must be supplemented by more adept uses of media that actually *participate* in shaping and expanding the critique of the protestors within the media networks that shape global political discourse. But as *Tactical Media* teaches us, whatever the answer is it needs to be a far more virtuosic solution than tinting one's Twitter icon green in a peculiar show of solidarity more akin to corporate branding than collective political action.

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## Biographical statement

*Tanner Higgin* is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Riverside. His research focuses on race, gender, and power in digital media and culture. He has published an article on race and videogames in *Games and Culture* and also has chapters in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* and *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto*.

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