

Disruption of the Broadcast

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ABSTRACT

While the mainstream media largely dominate the discourse and narrative of the daily news cycle, we have, since the dawning of the Web some twenty-five years ago, seen this tight grip of control loosening at an increasing rate. The emergence of citizen-journalism via the blogosphere in the early 2000s, followed by the explosive and ubiquitous presence of social media in the late 2000s, has empowered the individual in the act of distributing their *own* view of events as they unfold. The key question raised here is the following: how might the artist engage rogue tactics of journalism via the Internet to directly challenge the dominance and status quo of the broadcast media?

For the past 15 years, through networked art projects that include the US Department of Art & Technology (2001-2005), Media Deconstruction Kit (2003-2004), and The Post Reality Show (2012-), I have used techniques of media to appropriate, transform, and rebroadcast live cable news media via the Internet to amplify and distorts its contents: allowing us to view the broadcast in a new way, revealing its hidden mechanisms of control, a détournement that jolts us out of the sensationalism of media and its seductive hold on our gaze. In contrast to the citizen journalist who brings unreported events to the light of day, the artist's reportage here takes shape as a disruption of the media broadcast, attempting to expose its effects of disinformation by *shocking* the viewer out of obedient assimilation of its contamination.

INTRODUCTION

“The role of the media ... forces us to ask what kind of a world and what kind of a society we want to live in, and in particular, in what sense of democracy do we want this to be a democratic society?” – Noam Chomsky, Media Control [1]

The artist is stereotypically cast as an isolated figure, a lone wolf sequestered in the quiet solitude of his or her studio. But today, artists are plugged in and wired, like everyone else, such that the torrent of news and information that lights up our screens in such overabundance often finds its way into the artistic process. And conversely, with the emerging tools of the Web, self-publishing blogs, and social media, artists are increasingly engaged in reporting news and opinion, becoming their own media outlets, distribution centers, and independent news feeds. In this sense, the new media artist uses technological means to take control of media information and broadcast it according to their own perspective.



Figure 1. The Underground Studio Bunker from The Post Reality Show, 2011, Photo © Randall Packer

While the mainstream media largely dominate the discourse and narrative of the daily news cycle, we have, since the dawning of the Web some twenty-five years ago, seen this tight grip loosening. The emergence of citizen-journalism via the blogosphere in the early 2000s, followed by the explosive and ubiquitous growth of social media in the late 2000s, has empowered the individual to distribute their own view of events as they see it: anyone with a laptop or even a mobile device might become a broadcaster transmitting an alternative glimpse of the world and its crises. Arab Spring and other recent revolutionary political movements have been catalyzed by independent journalists and millions of citizen activists using social media via the global networks to report on events in the heat of the moment.

The key question raised in this essay is the following: how might the artist engage tactics of independent journalism and forms of artistic mediation via the Internet to directly challenge the dominate narrative of the mainstream media? If we consider Gene Youngblood's critique of the mainstream media as a source of contamination, in which the media intentionally manipulates the news in order to alter the public's perspective – even its sense of reality, perception, and judgment – how might the artist disrupt the broadcast with critical and aesthetic intent to undermine these effects of contamination by exposing the media's practices and replacing it with an alternative narrative of their own?

Through performance and online projects that include the US Department of Art & Technology (2001-2005), Media Deconstruction Kit (2003-2004), A Season in Hell (2005-2010), and The Post Reality Show (2010-present), I use techniques of media to appropriate, manipulate, and rebroadcast live cable news media via the Internet in order to amplify and distorts its contents: transforming the broadcast as a newly constructed narrative, revealing its hidden

mechanisms of control, a détournement that attempts to jolt the viewer out of the sensationalism of media and its seductive hold on their attention. By exposing the message of disinformation, the viewer is shocked out of obedient assimilation of its contamination.

I also actively use blogging as another form of broadcasting, or what I refer to as “artistic reportage,” through online projects that include: WetheBlog.org (2003-2004), [The Blog Chronicles of the Secretary @ Large](http://TheBlogChronicles.com) (2005-2007), and my current long running blog site, [Reportage from the Aesthetic Edge](http://ReportagefromtheAestheticEdge.com) (2005-present). These projects have provided a platform for critically examining the news and transmitting my own opinion, as well as documenting the artistic process behind this critique, thus offering a medium to record, archive, and communicate ideas and observations that interpret unfolding social and political events from the artistic perspective.

In this “hyperessay,” a form of online writing with extensive linkages to my blog writing and Websites, I will discuss my role as a creator of the broadcast, a disruptor of the broadcast: exploring how the artist might subvert the mainstream media and its manipulative coverage.

US DEPARTMENT OF ART & TECHNOLOGY (USDAT)

“To prevent undue wreckage in society, the artist tends now to move from the ivory to the control tower of society.” – Marshall McLuhan [2]



Figure 2. The USDAT Headquarters from The US Department of Arts & Technology, 2002, Photo © Randall Packer

Like many artists, my response to the news of September 11th, 2001, as the shock of this cataclysmic event reverberated throughout the world, resulted in artistic action. As a resident of Washington, DC, I had a front row seat on the unfolding crisis and the government's dangerous response to the so-called "war on terrorism." My response was to found the US Department of Art & Technology (USDAT), establishing a virtual government agency here in the nation's capital as a performance work, declaring myself as its Secretary. The intent of this project was to articulate an alternative vision of the crisis from the perspective of the artistic lens: a declaration of the role of the artist as a mediator on the world stage, an alternative perspective on critical issues of cultural and political divisiveness. The USDAT project, which took place between 2001 and 2005 during the first term of the George W. Bush Administration, was an artistic response to a radically shifting political landscape.

As we know, the aftermath of September 11th brought with it a culture of fear, exacerbated by government officials determined to use the mainstream media as its mouthpiece of propaganda. Specifically, Fox News became entangled ideologically with the Bush Administration, echoing and amplifying its drumbeat of war and apocalyptic hysteria over the fictitious weapons of mass destruction. Many artists, like myself, felt that it wasn't sufficient to idly stand by watching the government spin out of control, tightening its grip on security (particularly in Washington), and employing the right wing media as its media arm to frighten the nation and distort its view of reality. I felt compelled, rather, to use USDAT as a force of resistance by establishing a model for change through artistic work and interventions that challenged the disinformation broadcast by the mainstream media.

MEDIA DECONSTRUCTION KIT (MDK)

"Television can no longer be what it has been for half a century: a place of entertainment or the promotion of a culture; it must, first and foremost, give birth to the world time of exchanges." – Paul Virilio [3]



Figure 3. CNN from the Media Deconstruction Kit, 2003, Photo Collage © Randall Packer

By 2003, the US Department of Art & Technology evolved into a collaborative, “collective agency,” bringing together an international staff of artist-activists to collaborate on new works. One of these projects, the Media Deconstruction Kit (MDK), was a collaboration with Wesley Smith (Under Secretary for Radical Militancy), which involved the appropriation, manipulation and re-broadcast of live cable news as a real-time system of counter-propaganda. According to staff member Trace Reddell (Under Secretary for the Bureau of Pharmakogeographical Surveying), the MDK “diverted [mass media] from its current roadmap to manufactured similitude through an hallucinatory recycling of composted media content.”

During the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City, timed to coincide with the third anniversary of September 11th, we installed the Media Deconstruction Kit in an exhibition at the LUXE Gallery in NYC, The Experimental Party Disinformation Center. The Experimental Party was a project under the umbrella of USDAT, involving a collective of artists that included Mark America, Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky, Jonah Brucker-Cohen, among others. The Media Deconstruction Kit was projected as a remix of FoxNews, manipulating and transforming live broadcast coverage from the Convention floor, located just a few blocks away at Madison Square Garden. This disruption of the RNC transmission suggested the changing nature of television as a one-way paradigm in the digital era, in which software systems enabled the artist to take control of the cable feed through the real-time breakup of the signal and subsequent alteration of its meaning.

WETHEBLOG.ORG

“I am a revolutionary so my son can be a poet.” – Remix of Thomas Jefferson [4]



Figure 4. Website banner from Wetheblog.org, 2003, Photo Collage by Jeff Gates (used with permission)

In the early 2000s, a force of change in online new media was developing into a powerful revolutionary platform for alternative journalism and artistic reportage, the blog, a tool that provided artists, writers, and citizens their own media channel: a new form of participatory democracy and freedom of speech. It wasn't long before blogs evolved well beyond individual feeds and commentary as distribution tools for independent media networks such as BuzzFeed, DCist or Gawker. The extraordinary potential to reach a global audience had enormous import for those of us who turned to the blog to broadcast our voices through alternative media.

We saw the emerging technology of the blog as the perfect vehicle to communicate the USDAT vision, to give voice to the artist as an agent of change, a medium to author a collective message that challenged the War in Iraq. In early 2003, just before the beginning of the Iraq War, a group of Department staff members led by Jeff Gates (already a seasoned artist-blogger) and myself authored WetheBlog.org, with its artist-driven mantra: “In Order to Form a More Artistic Union.” Additional contributing staff-artists included noted new media artists and writers Mark Amerika

(Director of the Office of Freedom of Speech), Patrick Lichty (Director of the Bureau for the Dissemination of Metastructures and Media Metaphors), Kristine Styles (Under Secretary of the Bureau for Surveying the State of Art and the Medial State of Mind), and several others.

For nearly two years, between March of 2003 and January of 2005, WetheBlog.org took form as a collective dialogue, providing USDAT staff artists and theorists an interactive, global platform in which to respond to the unfolding news, deliver opinion, activate their voices. For nearly two years, WetheBlog.org posts focused on the Iraq War and the government’s deception, including criticism and creative writing such as: the business of war, television reporting in Iraq, weapons of mass destruction, a remix on the “Bill of Far Rights,” Bush’s “Mission Impossible” speech, Dick Cheney’s inflammatory war rhetoric, Michael’s Moore’s anti-war film Farenheit 9/11, the devastating re-election of George W. Bush, and his second Inauguration on January 20, 2005. Wetheblog.org provided USDAT with a social media feed before social media existed, a medium to broadcast an alternative viewpoint that challenged the biased and often complicit reporting of the mainstream media that was rampant during the Iraq War, offering an alternative perspective that represented the sensibility of a community of new media artists, writers, and critics.

A SEASON OF HELL

“Here are men’s memories and the ruins of their beliefs.” – Jean Cocteau [5]



Figure 5. Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child from A Season in Hell, 2005, Photo Collage © Randall Packer

In 2005, I began work on a new political project entitled A Season in Hell, a music theater project in collaboration with the Los Angeles Opera tenor Charles Lane, chronicling a mythological journey through the Underworld of America during the second tumultuous term of George W.

the war on terror; religious fundamentalism and the far-right Christian front; unfolding government controversy and scandals surrounding the weapons of mass destruction; the corruption of language, in which government officials played on the fears of the public; and the national nightmare and refugee crisis in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which took countless lives of African-Americans whose homes were destroyed in the destitute communities of New Orleans.

During this intensive period of reportage, I conducted a series of “situational tours” of pockets of darkness and turmoil in America, including: behind-the-scenes close-ups of Secret Service and security systems at the White House; the disintegration of the blue collar steel industry in the Heartland of America; the activist uprising and culture war at the President’s sleepy vacation Ranch in Crawford Texas; and encounters with religious fundamentalism in the USA Bible Belt.

After two years of extensive blogging, I authored hundreds of posts, an alternative news feed to disseminate an alternative media journal to the reader via the Internet. The Blog-Chronicles of the Secretary @ Large thus opened up my artistic process to the viewer as a living, developing, critical “uncovering” of the news, a personal narrative that directly challenged the primacy of the mainstream media. This work eventually culminated in the music theater work, *A Season in Hell*, performed at the 2010 ZERO1 Biennial in San Jose, California.

THE POST REALITY SHOW

“If we could only catch up with the wave of information... we would at last be in the now... to digest and comprehend [its] totality would amount to having reality on tap, as if from a fantastic media control room capable of monitoring everything, everywhere, all at the same time.” – Douglas Rushkoff [7]



Figure 7. Hand Gestures from The Post Reality Show, 2014, Gif Animation © Randall Packer

Following the performance of *A Season in Hell*, I turned my attention to the Internet as a medium for live performance. I transformed my studio in Washington, DC into a stage set for

broadcasting from the “underground studio bunker,” and began work on a new project as the host of the The Post Reality Show. The show provided a logical transition from the faux government agency of USDAT to a pseudo Washington media channel. With The Post Reality Show, I became the director, producer, and host of my own quasi cable talk show broadcasted live via the Internet, parodying and challenging the punditry of the Washington news culture. The show has been in development for the past six years, with workshop performances presented by the 2012 Capital Fringe Festival in Washington, DC. The The Post Reality Show has since become an ongoing laboratory for experimentation with live Internet performance, broadcast media manipulation, and the performance of embedding myself, virtually, into the unceasing news and social media flow as a critique of its seduction, manipulation, and contamination.

Research for The Post Reality Show has been documented in my current blog, Reportage from the Aesthetic Edge, using the medium to present critical observations on media culture, as well as archive the studio process of the work’s creation as an open source repository of text, image, music and video. My writing has focused on topics concerned with “post real” conditions found in the news media, politics, social media, and popular culture, including: the seduction of the artificiality of celebrity culture, the unceasing, hypnotic media torrent of 24/7 cable news, tactics that blur reality in contemporary politics; remixing the life, the ultimate fulfillment in the digital age of capturing and reshaping one’s image; the glow and glam of the spectacle, the endless repetition and hypnotic pulsation of popular media that lulls us into its intoxicating spell; and the pleasure we take in the “ever-present present” of the flow of non-stop information.

XTREME TRUMPOLOGY

“It isn’t just about his habit of stating alleged facts that are demonstrably untrue, and continuing to repeat them even after it’s been pointed out that they’re false, though that’s part of it. It’s also about the sheer volume of unreality he delivers, as though he’s trying to drown us all in a river of bull that moves so fast that truth itself begins to seem almost irrelevant.” – Paul Waldman, Washington Post [8]



Figure 8. Donald Trump, 2016, Photo by Gage Skidmore, Wikipedia Commons

During the past year, The Post Reality Show has turned to the bizarre phenomenon of Donald Trump and the 2016 political campaign. While the election is still two months off at the time of this writing (God help us if you should be reading this essay with Trump as President), the real estate mogul turned reality television star turned political candidate is the perfect model for the post real in contemporary American politics. I have written extensively in Reportage from the Aesthetic Edge about Trump: how he has dissolved the distinction between reality television and the world of politics, between the real and the imaginary, between fact and fiction, his distortion of facts – the very definition of the post reality – by collapsing the separation between that which is real and that which is not.

In August of 2015, I began a running blog commentary on Donald Trump, XTreme TRUMPology, an analysis of how the broadcast media has lifted his campaign through extensive exposure to his reality television antics of mock self-reflection, confessionals, and personality trashing: all of which we would associate with, say, “The Housewives of New Jersey.” What has been largely missing from the media’s critique is the need to challenge and disrupt Trump’s dominance of the broadcast, which I have explored in great detail, including: Lovely Illusion, in which Trump’s mantra from his former show the Celebrity Apprentice, “You’re fired,” has transitioned into frightening declaratives of authoritarianism in his campaign; Living in a Make Believe World highlights filmmaker Barry Levinson’s warning in the political film PoliWood, that television, the most powerful entertainment medium, “may be the most disastrous invention that ever happened in the history of mankind”; In Total Theater at the RNC, I expose Trump’s showman mastery of theatrics as witnessed in his bathed-in-light-silhouette grand entrance at the Republican National Convention, invoking a Wagnerian God’s moment in the sun.

DISRUPTION OF THE BROADCAST: CONCLUSION

“We are contaminated by the Broadcast.” – Gene Youngblood [9]



Figure 9. Contamination of the Broadcast from The Post Reality Show, 2013, Photo Collage
© Randall Packer

All of the projects described in this essay represent an attempt to challenge the manufactured news narrative injected directly into our lives by the mainstream media, a narrative which constitutes, to use Gene Youngblood's words, "the contamination of the Broadcast." In his online essay, "Secession from the Broadcast," Youngblood describes media bias as a condition of broadcast contamination, a distortion of facts, or what is now referred to as "fake news." He calls for a communications revolution to disrupt the status quo of the media narrative through artistic means. I have responded to Youngblood's "call-to-action" through the alteration of the broadcast and its meaning, repackaging and redirecting transformed live cable news via my own alternative channels of blogging, social media, and live Internet broadcasting.

I have pursued an artistic investigation of media contamination by magnifying and exposing the effects of the broadcast, like a scientist looking through a microscope, revealing its hidden message, examining its contents, and replacing it with something new, aesthetic, critical, transformed. I believe that the artist functions as a mirror to society, not just for the purpose of distorting reality or playful manipulation, but to see ourselves in an entirely new way. The disruption of the toxic effects of the broadcast and the news culture in general is an attempt to jolt us out of a media-induced stupor into an aesthetic realm, an alternative narrative, which hopes to shift our attention away from the comfort of the media's message and the blind ingestion of its contamination.

In my view, the role of the artist has been to disrupt, often through shock and catharsis to the senses, to provide a new perspective on the world: whether it be breaking the broadcast and creating something that is aesthetically arresting, or intervening by inserting an alternative message. Artists have always challenged the status quo, and through the powers of virtualization and technique of media, we are transforming ourselves into journalists, faux-government officials, or the host of our very own talk show. I have always believed that the media artist can compete with the mainstream media, because we too have at our disposal advanced techniques to construct and deliver a message, and often with more cunning, sophistication, and insight than the television producers who shape the "real" news. My *modus operandi* has been to construct my own coverage of the news, as a kind of artist media mogul operating far below the radar in my underground studio bunker in Washington, DC.

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AUTHOR BIO

Since the 1980s, multimedia artist, composer, writer and educator Randall Packer has worked at the intersection of interactive media, live performance, and networked art. He has received critical acclaim for his socially and politically infused critique of an increasingly technological society, and has performed and exhibited at museums, theaters, and festivals internationally, including: NTT InterCommunication Center (Tokyo), ZKM Center for Art & Media (Karlsruhe), Walker Art Center, (Minneapolis), Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), The Kitchen (New York City), and the Transmediale Festival of Media (Berlin). Packer is also a writer and scholar in new media, most notably the co-editor of *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*. He holds an MFA and PhD in music composition and has taught multimedia at the University of California, Berkeley, Maryland Institute College of Art, American University, CalArts, Johns Hopkins University, and The Museum of Modern Art. He is currently Associate Professor of Networked Art at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.