

In the fall of 1997 Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) mounted their first *Flesh Machine* performance in Vienna at Public Netbase.¹ The artists intended to tour participants through the „signage“ of reproductive process (from theory to testing to representations of the process). Critical Art Ensemble's aim was to reveal what they considered to be hidden eugenic agendas, agendas they feel become most apparent on the intimate level of the literal procedure.² This essay is about CAE – their agenda, their practices, their artwork, their activism.

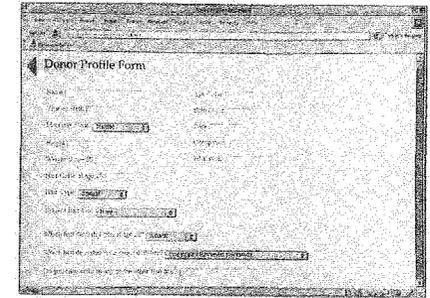
When an audience member enters the performance space for Critical Art Ensemble's *Flesh Machine*, she might think she's stumbled upon a lecture in some Biology Hall of her past, except for the fact that the information is extremely up-to-date and ... delivered by artists. Dressed in lab coats, CAE presents information on medical and scientific practices in the field of eugenics, peppered by short performance sketches so that the „class“ will stay attentive. Unlike a parodic or distanced performance of a lecture, CAE's opening is a lecture without overt irony. They are lecturing (which is not to say they are not performing). Wanting their audiences to know some facts about contemporary eugenics practices, CAE has simply found the lecture to be both the gentlest and most reliable entry into what quickly becomes a more challenging event.

Opening with a lecture, emphasis is placed on the particular situation that many women face in regard to the political, social, and economic pressures to reproduce and raise children. In fact, for CAE biological reproduction is primarily an Ideological State Apparatus. From the start, the ensemble explain their own political position regarding issues of reproductive technology – as one member put it, they don't want to „trick anyone.“³ Frontally and predictably staged, with all the trappings of traditional presentation, not only is this format a functional means of getting across a body of information, but the traditional theater/lecture presentation panders to habit, providing, in CAE's words, a „cushion for the impact of process theater“ which follows.⁴

In the second part of the event spectators become far more involved – this is the „lab“ portion of biology class. Audience members participate in actual lab processes and encounter various models of artificial reproduction. This is CAE's attempt to include a tactile relationship to the material that goes beyond presentational language – what Jr. High teachers call „hands on.“ But this is no labeling and pasting of leaves onto paper (my own memory of Jr. High bio). For this section, CAE built its own cryolab to house living human tissue for potential cloning so that audience members can become hands-on genetic engineers. In preparation, CAE studied in biology labs to learn cryopreservation and biopsy techniques. They lived with and documented a couple going through IVF treatment. They studied material science to learn how to build a cryo-lab.



1 Audience members use computers to explore CAE's BioCom and/or to apply for status of „Donors“ (Photo: CAE, *Flesh Machine*, 1998).



2 The donor application on the computer (Photo: CAE, *Flesh Machine*, 1998).

The second section of *Flesh Machine*, then, begins when the lectures end and the audience begins to mill about and attend to computers that stand about the space, available for audience members to check out a CAE CD-ROM. The CD contains a donor-screening test – abducted by CAE from an „actual clinic“ – (fig. 1). Audience members sit at monitors and take the test to access their individual suitability to be further reproduced through donor DNA, cytoplasm, and/or surrogacy (fig. 2). If they „pass“ the test – they receive a certificate of genetic merit. Those who pass can be further examined through an interview with CAE followed by an actual taking of a cell sample by lab technicians at the site (fig. 3). These samples are then stored, if the audience member is willing, in CAE's cryotanks (fig. 4). The artists have been collecting photographs of audience members who „pass“ and they claim that the similarities of those who are determined fit for reproduction is astounding. By now they can predict „passes“ just by looking at them.

After this hands-on, indeed cell-sharing, experience, the audience gathers for the close of the performance. This final section of *Flesh Machine* is intended to underscore the class politics, the economics, and the logic of human commodification involved in eugenics.

At this point, CAE presents a frozen embryo to their audience – an embryo that CAE adopted from a couple who no longer needed their eggs (fig. 5). An image of the embryo is projected through a video beam onto a screen. The image has a clock marking the time the embryo has until it is evicted from its clinical cryotank. If enough money is raised to pay the rent on the cryotank through the performance, the embryo will live. If not, it will be „terminated.“

Put another way, if no one buys the embryo, it dies.

CAE then takes donations from the audience. Needless to say, to date every performance has ended with the death-by-melting of the embryo. This part of the performance, CAE claims speaks for itself – though on more than one occasion CAE has had to speak in the wake of their actions. In Vienna, for instance, they



3 An audience member, accepted as a donor, has a cell sample extracted (Photo: CAE, *Flesh Machine*, 1998).

found themselves on national TV debating the ethical implications of embryo murder with the Archbishop live from Salzburg via satellite.

The group of artists who call themselves Critical Art Ensemble are concerned with „tacticality“ in an information age when power is radically dislocated from geography by the instant-time synapses of cyberspace and when colonizing „penetration“ seeks out new frontiers at the level of DNA. Their most recent concerns have pivoted on what they label the „New Eugenic Consciousness,“ but this interest in biotechnology grows out of their longer standing agendas regarding post-national capitalism.

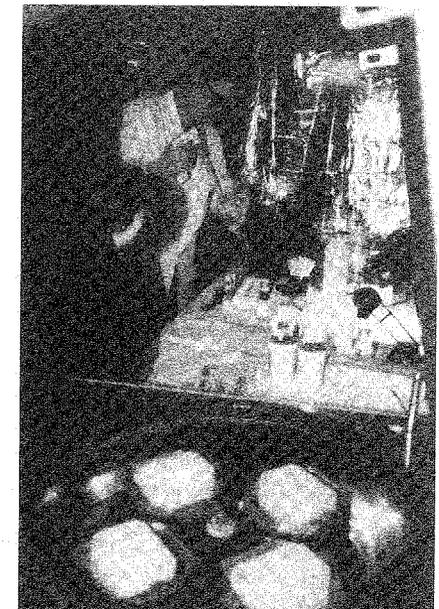
CAE has repeatedly asserted that digital technology has enabled capital power to „retreat“ into cyberspace „where it can nomadically wander the globe, always absent to counterforces, always present whenever and wherever opportunity knocks.“ How to fight nomadic power CAE-style? Fight it with dislocation and intermediality – perhaps nomadmediality – an ever shifting, no longer simply hybridized, media tacticality.⁵ If nomadic capital is absent to counterforce, the question becomes how to counter this absence-to-counter? By becoming nomadic. By appearing disappeared. Nameless, interfacing without facing, CAE set up a faux corporation called BioCom and cast it onto the web.⁶ Art? Or capital?

CAE is a mixed gender collective of five white „new media“ artists trained in various skills from book and performance to computer, film, video, photography, and critical theory. CAE’s work has consistently been committed to the „continuation of resistant cultural models.“ While exploring and critiquing models of representation used in capitalist political economy to sustain what they call „authoritarian policies“ they have experimented with various organizational (versus primarily representational) strategies toward making art that intersects with activist practices. Because they resist precise location relative to genre and venue and artist identity their work questions the politics of location, specifically the politics which have historically located art via authorship, site, public/private space, media, price, frame.

Publishing and performing collectively and anonymously, CAE disseminates their works as broadly as possible (their books, if not their names, have circulated freely on the web [www.critical-art.net/]). Their anonymity serves as a mark of

their resistance to privatization – their collectivity does as well.⁷ They are not secretive about their names. They simply do not use their names as signatures relative to their work. Similarly, they do not respect the signatures of other artists as „Keep Out“ markers of private property. Between 1988 and 1994, CAE began releasing object-oriented artists books of plagiarist text poetry. The books, five in all, rapidly sold out – purchased by many library, university, and museum collections around the U.S.

While plagiarism draws lines of indebtedness to the historical avant-garde (one thinks of Brecht immediately), in other ways CAE is reminiscent of feminist collectives in the seventies who refused to put forward a director or an author because of the critique of authority at the base of their efforts think and create differently. And like such collectives, CAE has firsthand experience that collective activity is against the grain of artworld production. Financial support favors individuals, as do art institutions. Several years ago they gave up grant writing as a waste of time. As they wrote in 1998, „In spite of all the critical fulminations about death of originality, the artists, and the rest of the entities named on the tombstones in the modernist cemetery, these notions persist, protected by an entrenched cultural bureaucracy geared to resist rapid change.“⁸ In art schools across the country, students are taught to accept the ideological imperative that artistic practice is an individual practice – there is „no place where one can prepare for a collective practice.“⁹ Even in theater schools the emphasis is rarely on ensemble. Though theater is a model that carries within it a deeper imperative for ensemble work, more often



4 The Cryobab in Performance (Photo: CAE, *Flesh Machine*, 1998).

than not that work is subsumed under the name of a director, an author, or a specific site. A roving band of anonymous actors without a playwright or director or stage is hardly the kind of collective one finds promoted in academies and so students, entering the profession with training, have most often already been trained against the grain of collectivity.¹⁰

Critical Art Ensemble began in 1986 as two grad students at Florida State University collaborating on low-tech videos. In 1987, picking up new members, the group transformed into an artist and activist collective. Some of CAE's early projects between 1987 and 1993 include *Fiesta Critica* – a project launched in Indian-town, Florida. CAE interacted with Mayan migrant workers in the town and developed a set of pieces presented at an Easter fiesta, using their grant money to support the fiesta which otherwise would have been beyond the means of the workers. In *Cultural Vaccines*, CAE collaborated with Gran Fury on a multimedia event that critiqued US policy regarding the HIV crisis. Out of this exhibition the first chapter of ACT UP in Florida was created with CAE members as founding members. *Exit Culture* was a series of works developed for highway culture in Florida. The piece incorporated trucker poetry for CB, postcards for tourists, invisible performance, and bus stop video. CAE traveled around Florida in a Winnabago for three days stopping only to perform at tourist sites, rest stops, and malls.

In 1994 CAE published *The Electronic Disturbance with the Autonomedia Collective of Semiotext(e)*. The book was a broad-based critique of technology within pancapitalism and it immediately found a very wide audience. If CAE were anonymous, techno-culture „knowns“ among artists and thinkers endorsed the group, giving CAE leave to use their names in association: Hakim Bey called the book a „manifesto for a new generation of artists“ and Tim Druckerey heralded it „required reading.“¹¹

The book jumped to the #1 best-seller slot in nonfiction on the Village Voice alternative best-seller list. And indeed, it was available to download free off the Web. Suddenly CAE was deluged with offers to speak, perform, publish. The *Electronic Disturbance* was translated into German within a month of its appearance in English (works by CAE now appear in eight languages). *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* soon followed (Autonomedia 1996) and CAE was on the road all over Europe and the U.S. and Canada.

In 1995 at a festival in Winnipeg, a woman showed a CAE member a photo of her child. While this quotidian exchange might not have been remarkable, this particular photo showed the child at the four-cell stage. The woman was a single parent who had conceived through invitro fertilization. The sighting provoked a turn in CAE's work from critiquing information and communications technology, with an emphasis on the Net, to addressing ideological problems associated with biotechnology.

This turn, which resulted in *Flesh Machine*, is interesting in part because CAE's critique of electronic technology had always included a critique of the blindspotting of the material and bodily effects of Net culture. One of the most riveting suggestions in *Electronic Civil Disobedience* concerns the futility of contemporary

political activism based solely on present-body embodied actions. CAE believes, quite adamantly, that resistance at the level of bodies in the street is defunct. Such activism of the present protesting body (from sit-ins to marches to million-body appearances) is dependent, CAE argues, on an image of sedentary power: that is, power as centered in bunker-institutions, locatable and inhabitable, available for physical take-over. But power in pancapitalism has become nomadic, decentered (or at least multi-centered) and global, dislocated into the synapses of digitalia. In fact, CAE argues that the state has given people the streets (as a kind of „false public“ space) because power has itself gone nomadic through electronic networks. To take to the streets, today, they argue, is civil obedience – anticipated, sanctioned spectacle – prolonging the illusion that presence can have effect.¹²

CAE makes its primary concern one of tacticality regarding digital interruptions into pancapitalism's digital fluidity. Literalizing a certain poststructural insight, CAE maintains that political action in the form of civil disobedience can not be effected through affects of presence in representational regimes. CAE makes it clear that working in representational regimes is key to pedagogical resistance – and such resistance is important. *Flesh Machine* is largely a work falling into the latter category. Still, they argue, resistance on the level of representation (pedagogical resistance) should not be mistaken for direct political action, or for civil disobedience. The days are over, they say, when „castle, palaces, government bureaucracies, corporate home offices, and other architectural structures stood looming in city centres, daring malcontents and underground forces to challenge their fortifications.“ As Mark Dery explicates CAE's position, these edifices that once housed power are now „monuments to its absence.“ Power is neither visible nor stable – thus effective resistance must make use of the invisible and unstable.¹³

For CAE, a long-standing device of instability is recombination. In TDR, CAE cites the „tradition of digital cultural resistance“ as one indebted to a wide-ranging heritage of recombination, some specifically digital, some generally „avant-garde“: „combines, sampling, pangender performance, bricolage, detournment, readymades, appropriation, plagiarism, theater of everyday life, and so on.“¹⁴ The disobedience that the digital offers is precisely a renewed deployment of the age-old disobedience of the thieving copy, a plagiaristic unsettling of the prerogatives of the ruse of locatable origin.

The benefits some theorists of the virtual see in the „new“ body – the degendered body, for example – is, according to CAE, shortsighted. To them, the promise that cyberspace might become a truly multi-sensual apparatus, unleashing myriad



5 The final portion of *Flesh Machine*: the embryo for sale (Photo: CAE, *Flesh Machine*, 1998).

bodily pleasures released from policings of desire, ignores the fact that the technology is developed and released only under the auspices of intensive capital. „Why would capital want to deliver what would essentially be a wish machine to its population?“ asks CAE.

„Capital depends upon a consistent state of what the Situationists called 'enriched privation.' If satisfaction were ever offered to the public, the economy of desire would collapse overnight. A virtual wish machine is about as likely as capital legitimizing and insisting upon the use of heroin among its [working- and middle-class] population.“¹⁵

CAE's citation of Debord above is a huge clue to their indebtedness to '60s radical performance politics – and an indication that it does not agree with the post-modern claim that the avant-garde is dead. The Electronic Disturbance relentlessly critiques traditional theater and performance art – seeing much of it invested in a naval-gazing celebration of the „solipsistic self“ and citing the proscenium arch as the primary apparatus of that solipsism in a machinery of presence. But certain avant-garde art tactics are considered resistant – and useful for pedagogical actions.¹⁶ The Living Theater and Happenings and general '60s attempts to collapse the distinction between art and life are cited as offering „tremendous help“ by „establishing the first recombinant stages.“

CAE also cites Berlin Dada, Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, feminist performance of the '70s, and Guerrilla Art Action Group as inspirational. Though, as they claim in a forthcoming issue of *The Drama Review*, the art world regularly „defanged“ these movements, the lesson CAE takes from various radical theaters is the impact of the „experiential,“ of something called „real life.“ They maintain the importance of an art that is „looped back“ into the immediacy of everyday life – into and out of. The loop is important as „everyday life“ can not be art's exclusive terrain.

„CAE's interest in the Living Theatre stems from our belief that it offered a proto-postmodern model of cultural production. The group quite consciously located itself in the liminal position between the real and the simulated. Various behaviors were appropriated and redeployed so perfectly that, regardless of their ontological status, they had the material impact of the real. The Living Theatre performed the crisis of the real before it had been adequately theorised, and contributed to the conceptual foundation now used to understand and create virtual theatre. It helped make it clear that for virtual theatre to have any contestational value, it must loop back to the materiality of everyday life.“¹⁷

The turn to biotechnology from their earlier artwork on communications technology offered a site for a direct interrogation of the relations between digital capital culture and the „loop“ to material everyday life. CAE wanted their work on biotechnology to challenge the distinction between the simulated and the real – something that biotechnology itself challenges (think simply of Dolly the clone¹⁸). In the tradition of the Living Theater, they wanted to tap the contestational value in enunciating „the loop.“

Intent on the real/virtual/real loop, then, CAE's deployment of digital models of recombination is not a move to bankrupt the material body as site of political ac-

tion, despite the fact that the „street“ has moved to the nonmateriality of the information highway. Rather recombinant resistance needs be attentive, precisely, to the body politics of nomadic authoritarian power and its multiple deployments of the digital toward increased privatization – including the production of „false public space“ and the parallel production of privation for „undesirable“ or deviant bodies. Despite its nomadism and dislocation in terms of the national or geographic, capital still operates through the metaphors of the frontier, which are, more precisely, metaphors of penetration (the name of a new consortium of scientists and companies investing in cloning is ProBio America). For CAE the biological body, or more precisely, the privatization, manipulation, and commodification of the organic, is the „new frontier“ for capital.

While theorists on the left and right have long been hip to the regulation of bodies under capital and the politics of the body as capital vis a vis production and reproduction, the „new eugenic consciousness“ makes the laboring body seem like an antiquated machine. CAE suggests that we distrust this equation. New Eugenics is a body radically disembodied – a body contained in a single sample, the body as digitized code – but still, perhaps, a future body designed relative to economics, regulating and managing a white collar workforce. I asked one CAE member to make this point clearer to me – being a bit skeptical of the conspiracy theory that seemed to undergird the argument. The artist pointed to a large glass office building opposite my 7th-floor window in the financial district in Manhattan. We sat silently for a few moments and watched the workers inside. Floor upon floor upon floor of management – the ones with windows, the ones we could see, were middle-level executives – many of whom might be the clients of a corporation like BioCom, many of whom might „pass“ for appropriate genetic duplication, and many of whom might be able to afford the cost. It was hard for me to see exactly how this was a frontier – body upon body upon body, floor upon floor upon floor, the last thing from „wild“ let alone „where no man has gone before.“ But maybe it only takes a little thought. If this frontier is more cellular than it is geographic, still its ramifications may be as far-reaching as other „penetrations“ have been in the history of capitalist expansion. Here, biotechnology, like some railroad to the interior, opens access like never before – making „the body“ available, differently, for empire building.

CAE's point in *Flesh Machine* is direct: The new commodity market open for colonial expansion of property politics is taking place intra-bodily via reproductive biotechnologies. They advocate, through their nomadial highway dodgings between art, critical theory, digital production, performance, and the literal life/death auction of an embryo, a close analysis of linked apparatus of reproduction (aesthetic, digital, and biotechnical). They are not neo-luddites. They are very much manifesto-style avant-garde artists of technology. Their profound effort is pitched toward the faith that technological development can be shaped, designed, and deployed alternatively.

Even, it seems, if some have to die in the process.

- 1 Subsequent performances took place at the Kappelica Gallery, Ljubljana; the Labor Gallery, Graz; Beurs-schouwburg, Brussels (at the Art and Science Collision); and at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki. Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies and New Eugenic Consciousness*. New York: Autonomedia/Semiotext(e), 1998.
- 2 CAE's notion of hidden agendas has a resolutely Marxist ring, though their angle on late capital's liquid structure – its nomadism – lands them more precisely in league with the anti-rationalist schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari.
- 3 Interview with author, June 1999.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 The word „intermedia“ was introduced into the arts lexicon by Dick Higgins in 1965 (see Dick Higgins, „Intermedia.“ In *foew & ombwhew*. Barton, BT: Something Else Press, 1969 [the essay dates from 1965]). In coining the phrase Higgins aimed to describe work that occurred at the interfaces of established media and blurred the boundary markers between art and life. Charles Caramello has pointed out that in this phrase Higgins anticipated the postmodern privileging of hybridity over formal purity (see Caramello and Benamou, eds, *Performance in Postmodern Culture*. Madison, Wis.: Coda Press, 1977.) Deploying intermedia, CAE's emphasis is nomadic, dislocating as well as interfacing.
- 6 BioCom is now a page on CAE's website at critical-art.net/biocom.
- 7 See Critical Art Ensemble, „Observations on Collective Cultural Action.“ *Artjournal*, Summer, 1998 (pages 72-85).
- 8 Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies and New Eugenic Consciousness*. New York: Autonomedia/Semiotext(e), 1998, 73.
- 9 Ibid., 74.
- 10 Of course there are ensembles of performers today who are very active. Wooster Group, East Coast Artists, Double Edge Theatre, SF Mime Troupe, Spider-woman, Mabou Mines, Nature Girls, Goat Island, Pina Bausch's Theatre, Grotowski Workcenter, the Living Theatre, Great Small Works, and more. In the art world, collectives are much more foreign, for obvious reasons. In the theater groups are not dominant, but neither are they nonexistent. In fact, one of the tendencies the theater inherited from the interaction with art that produced „performance art“ was the tendency toward solo creation.
- 11 CAE cites these accolades on their timeline, forthcoming in *The Drama Review*.
- 12 That embodied protest as effectual might be a ruse of post-national power is reminiscent of Baudrillard's argument (*Simulacra and Simulations*. Translated by Shiela Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) that the manufacture and media deployment of scandal is an empty ritual of authority engineered to maintain the ruse that capital and its governing body has conscience.
- 13 Mark Dery, „Critical Art Ensemble.“ *An Interview*. *Mute*, no. 10, 1998.
- 14 Critical Art Ensemble, „Recombinant Theater.“ *The Drama Review* (forthcoming).
- 15 Dee, „Critical Art Ensemble.“ *An Interview*. *Fringecore*, no. 4, 1998.
- 16 CAE makes a distinction between pedagogy and direct political action. Direct political action necessitates, today, invisibility and non-locatability, but pedagogical actions can slide into the space between the visible and the invisible, as between virtuality and „the real.“ (Interview with author, June 1999.)
- 17 Mark Dery, „Critical Art Ensemble.“ *An Interview*. *Mute*, no. 10, 1998.
- 18 See Rebecca Schneider, „Hello Dolly Well Hello Dolly: The Double and Its Theater.“ *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, edited by Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear. Forthcoming, Routledge.