

# TACTICS OF MISCHIEF

## FROM IMAGE TO INFRASTRUCTURE

### AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GARCIA

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As a video artist and through his involvement with tactical media, David Garcia has consistently broken institutional boundaries and blurred cultural registers. In this interview with *Kunstlicht*, Garcia talks about how this affinity for subversion—or mischief—came into being, and how it was influenced by the Amsterdam pirate media scene of the late 1970s and 1980s. He also touches upon *Talking Back to the Media*, a 1985 multifaceted event in which he took part, both as an artist and (co-)curator. Finally, the conversation moves to a more recent exhibition co-curated by Garcia, *If—The Media Artist as Trickster* (2017), which premiered at Framer Framed in Amsterdam, before travelling in modified form to Liverpool and Basel. This exhibition and the events surrounding it give occasion to reflect upon the media strategies of so-called alt-right movements—which relate to progressive tactical media in a rather thorny way—and on what might be done to counter such movements.

Kunstlicht (KL): You have for some time been engaged with mass media, making use of open channels and circuits in broadcast media and on the Internet. Could you perhaps tell us how you began to work this way, and about the opportunities that presented themselves in the 1980s, in the early phase of your career?

David Garcia (DG): Well, it actually goes back to me visiting Amsterdam on a holiday in the late 1970s, I believe 1978 or 1979. At the time, I was planning to go to the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, where I was accepted on the basis of the video work I wanted to be involved in. But while I was looking for a place to live in Amsterdam, I became very aware of the local pirate media scene there, and the way it made use of the very unique media infrastructure of the Netherlands.

The Netherlands was the first country in Europe to have a complete cable TV infrastructure, partly because it is all built on silt and building the infrastructure was relatively easy—plus of course the country has a long history of investing in large-scale infrastructure. The media laws, on the other hand, were really quite strict; as a local broadcaster, you did not have the right to do *anything* with that infrastructure except get a better signal and import television from outside the country. In the late 1970s, Belgian and German television programs were already available, as were the two BBCs. But then you also had a very lively pirate TV scene! Because all of those international signals were brought into the country through this parabolic disk on top of the KTA building [Kabel Televisie Amsterdam; Cable Television Amsterdam], and the pirates would send their signals up

there, pointing their transmitters to that disk when normal TV was not being broadcast — you did not have 24/7 programming in those days. In a sense, the squatters used the empty hours with no programming much in the same way they appropriated and utilized vacant buildings. I was aware of this counterculture in Amsterdam at the time, and how they were making use of pirate media, and as a video artist I was very interested in the fact that this also included television. Therefore, my interest and my earliest project, which was called *The Underpass*, was all about moving away from traditional video art in museums and galleries, and actually using the local TV infrastructure within Amsterdam to create autonomous zones, if you like, within the media landscape (fig. 1).

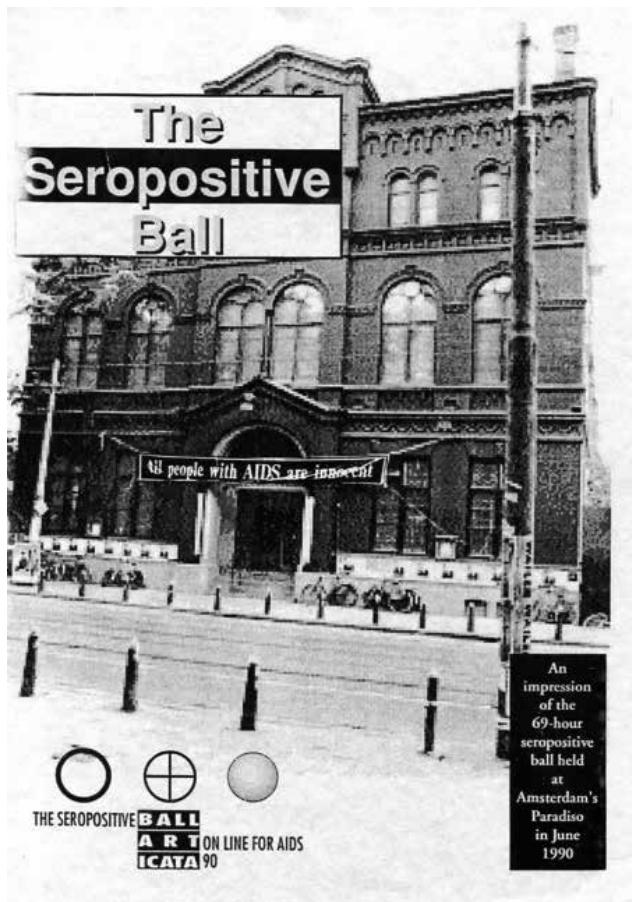


↑fig. 1 Still from *Underpass*, a registration of a project organized by Lous America, Henk Wijnen, Annie Wright, and David Garcia in 1983. Courtesy of David Garcia and LIMA, Amsterdam.

KL: So when you moved to the city you noticed that the physical, technical infrastructure was there, but that — apart from the squatters — the existent cultural forms were lagging behind? You have mentioned media laws, the legislative infrastructure so to speak; how important was this to the development of the Amsterdam pirate media scene in the 1980s?

DG: Well, in those days the Dutch tradition of the *zuilen* [the pillarization of society] meant that it was very important to divide the media diet proportionately between the different broadcasting corporations, to represent everyone equally, from Catholic to Protestant or even Buddhist — everything had to be divided up in a very strict way to make sure that none of the stakeholders in society felt left out. This may sound

enlightened in some ways, but it also meant that the regulations around television at the time were very strict; it implied an incredible sense of constraint and restriction around Dutch media at that time. There were very strict rules concerning the use of cable television, with the sole exception (which only came later, after the pirates had already been active for some years) of public access TV and local channels, which really started to proliferate afterwards. KTA then devolved into a sort of *stadstelevisie* [city television], licensed by *Salto*, which made it possible for many people to participate by making their own programs. Around that time, you had all sorts of madcap projects emerging, from *Rabotnik TV* to *Kanaal 0* (which I was involved in) and *Park TV* and the *Hoeksteen* — various kinds of experimental forms of television, from the unwatchable to the interesting, were exploding on local television. I am not saying the audiences were very significant, but the specific atmosphere of freedom in Amsterdam at that particular point in time did spawn many influential and interesting things, like the theorization of tactical TV, projects like *Artists Talking Back to the Media* and later on *Next 5 Minutes*, and *The Seropositive Ball*, which was an HIV/AIDS-related project (fig. 2).



← fig. 2 Cover of the proceedings of *The Seropositive Ball*, which took place over sixty-nine continuous hours from June 21 - 24, 1990 at Paradiso in Amsterdam. Heleen Riper, David Garcia, Patricia Riemens (eds), Center for Innovation and Cooperative Technology, University of Amsterdam.

KL: Can you tell us more about *Talking Back to the Media* from 1985?

DG: As for *Talking Back to the Media*, which I co-initiated with artist Raul Marroquín; around this time, a critical postmodernism was emerging, especially in the United States — what later became known as the Pictures Generation. Most important at the time, I think, were the feminist artists; people like Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Jenny Holzer. In different ways, they were all providing a counterblast to the Pop artists of the 1960s — people like Warhol and Lichtenstein, whose approach to the mass media was intrinsically celebratory. Raul and I recognized that a school of media artists had re-exploded after Pop, artists that were far more critical and political in intent, and therefore more interesting to us. We sought to capture that moment, but also to use the nature of Amsterdam to do that in a new way. The character of Amsterdam, as a very small city, offered an opportunity; through all the channels of mass communication (including television, radio, the cinema, and posters), we were able to produce an event that would be scaled up sufficiently to actually compete with mass media. We could engage on the level of the entire city, to allow for a viral molecular insurgency to emerge, to actually have a significant impact (fig. 3). The aim of the project was to deploy the major artists of this critical post-modern movement and give them the whole city as a platform to operate on — it was a key curatorial innovation in that sense, which, by the way, I do not think has been sufficiently recognized in the recent documentary on *Talking Back to the Media*.<sup>1</sup>

The rise and rethinking of curatorial practice in itself, I think, can already be seen in the work of artists at that time. There was a presentiment of the direction that the curatorial would take, especially in recent years, when even the term curating has become a part of everyday language and people speak of curating their Facebook page! This sense of artists taking on curatorial authority and responsibility was taken up at that very moment, even whilst the figure of the curator was being conferred greater importance. It's interesting that neither myself nor Raul, the two initiators, were invited to speak in that documentary — it was a kind of *coup d'état*, if you like, the curators re-appropriating the project, airbrushing or photo-shopping out that it was an artist initiative, and that it was in fact all about artists taking control. I see it as a missed opportunity for portraying *Talking Back to the Media* with sufficient accuracy and scholarship.

KL: This kind of historical reframing brings to mind the process by which art is recuperated by the museum. Artists that were making work on television for television, for instance, risk having their works completely decontextualized when shown on a screen in the museum gallery. Even strategies employed by artists come to be used by museums. How do you think the reification of art by the museum impacts these practices? Can they still be subversive in the same way they used to?

<sup>1</sup>  
*Het Lumineuze Beeld - Talking Back to the Media: De Nieuwe Media Expositie*, from the serie, *Iconische Tentoonstellingen van de 20e eeuw*, ArtTube.nl, dir. Els Hoek, Rosa Boosten, Margita van Vugt, 2017. Accessible through: <http://arttube.nl/series/iconische-tentoonstellingen-van-de-20e-eeuw>.

TALKING BACK TO THE MEDIA is een manifestatie waarin kunstenaars, filmmakers, fotografen, theatermakers, geluids-, video- en affichekunstenaars reageren op de massamedia.

**FOTOTENTOONSTELLING**

1 tot 30 november: Aorta, Spuistraat 189, 13.00-18.00, behalve maandag.

**KUNSTENAARSPOSTERS**

verspreid door de stad.

**VIDEOFESTIVAL**

2 t/m 4 november: Time Based Arts, Bloemgracht 121.

**VIDEOPRESENTATIES**

5, 12, 19 en 26 november: Time Based Arts, Bloemgracht 121, 21.00 uur.

**KABELTELEVISIEPRODUKTIES**

10, 17, 24 en 29 november: via de Amsterdamse Kabel, 21.00-24.00 uur.

**FILMFESTIVAL**

14 t/m 20 november: Kriterion, Roeterstraat 170.

**THEATERPRODUKTIE**

15 t/m 19 november: try-outs, speeldata 16-30 november: Shaffy Theater, Keizersgracht 324.

**KUNSTENAARSGESPREKKEN**

2, 3, 16 en 23 november: Stichting De Appel/Rijksacademie, Stadhouderskade 86, 16.00 uur.

**GELUIDSPRODUKTIES**

21 en 28 november: VPRO radio, Hilversum IV.

**EINDMANIFESTATIE/LIVE KABELUITZENDING**

29 november: Shaffy Theater, Keizersgracht 324, 18.00-02.00 uur

Aanvangstijden van de onderdelen staan

vermeld in de programmafolder die verkrijgbaar is op bovengenoemde adressen en bij het Amsterdams Uit Bureau.

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Talking back to the Media is een concept van Joëlle Caron, Bas Warrégaard, Ulfom Corsten, Aart van Beurvens, Selma Kurnitska, Sander J. de Ruyt, Rob Perre, en Renate de Vis.  
Aorta, Stichting De Appel, Kriterion, Shaffy Theater, Time Based Arts, en VPRO-Kabel zijn betrokken in deze manifestatie.

fig. 3 Schedule of events that details the various facets of the *Talking Back to the Media* manifestation, which took place the full month of November, 1985. Flyer invitation, archive of LIMA Amsterdam.

DG: I am actually not so critical of these kinds of things. I think there is a very important role for museums in our lives, as public spaces, as spaces that have the resources and infrastructure to organize history in different ways—I do not think that they are automatically malign. If institutions and museums that seek to innovate learn some of the lessons of projects like *Talking Back to the Media*, and seek to think about video practice not only in terms of large piles of hardware, trying to turn it into traditional sculpture; if they actually try to commission artists to make work for TV and try to rethink and re-categorize what was happening, to use their resources to put all of this on a major platform—for me, that is a sign of success rather than of failure, and I do not necessarily see it as a land grab. Rather, I see it as a progressive development in the evolution of the institution of the museum.

KL: Earlier you mentioned the importance of a technical infrastructure for pirate television in Amsterdam, and you noted the significance of the scale of the city to *Talking Back to the Media*. Something we've observed in editing our issues on subversion in artistic practice is the relevance of a particular context to its effectiveness. Subversion is always situated so

to speak. Would you agree with that? Must subversive art always reflect on its context? Can it be removed from that context, considering that the migration of art practices into art's institutions tends to reify, and thus neutralize, these potentially subversive practices?

DG: One of the biggest mistakes artists, or for that matter anyone, could make at the moment is to believe they have any control whatsoever of what they put out into the world. I think our control over our environment is incredibly limited. One of the most vivid examples of that at the moment is the origins of many of the far-right movements in the U.S., and their emergence from the very same online message boards that also spawned the progressive Anonymous movement that was part of Occupy. The sense in which tactics can be captured and repurposed by anybody means that artists need to be quite nimble, and also quite philosophical, about the likelihood of their work being repurposed and reimaged by people who are not their allies or their friends — and may very well be their enemies. I believe it is indeed always a matter of the context in which the initiative is delivered and also a matter of understanding that artists must be able to swiftly move on, because of the strong likelihood that what they do is going to be taken over, and the meaning transformed by people with whom they profoundly disagree. In fact, it is not only likely, it is actually *inevitable*.

KL: So the (art) work is never over.

DG: Exactly, the work is never over, and reification is not so much a problem to be solved as a daily reality to manage. But what is really relevant is that the process by which it is happening is accelerating all the time. It is the era of tactics, rather than of strategies, simply because of the sheer increase of speed of these forces of reification.

KL: You've touched upon this already, but a clear example of this is the co-optation of forms of practice that clearly stem from tactical media of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Those tactics are being co-opted by what is being called the 'alt-right'. Given that you were closely involved with the tactical media project, firstly, how do you feel about this development? And secondly, what do you think is the potential for *counter* practices of tactical media today? Is it a matter of co-opting back again? Of re-appropriating the re-appropriation?

DG: Well, I will start with your first question — how I feel about the co-option. I do not feel very strongly about it, except for a sense of inevitability; anything you do will be co-opted if it is a success, and ignored if it is a failure. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Secondly, the whole alt-right phenomenon demonstrates that the tactical approach, and the power of subcultures to transform and shape the political imaginary, is

still very effective. At a point when a lot of my peers were feeling that actually those tactics were a thing of the past, and that we needed to think on a bigger scale and move into institutions, the alt-right demonstrated that this was not at all the case! I see in this a very convincing display of the continued effectiveness of subcultures to shape the social mind; in a strange way, I saw in it an opportunity to take subcultures and countercultural movements serious again.

Then, as to the differentiation of tactical media from the cultures around the alt-right and the whole fake news phenomenon: tactical media, at its most progressive, is not about seizing power in the way the alt-right is obsessed with seizing power; it is about art as a form of critical pedagogy. If you look at the work of The Yes Men, or of Michael Moore, or the various artists in our show [*As If—The Media Artist as Trickster*] it's about demystification. By contrast, the infatuation of the alt-right with Pepe the Frog and the occultist language of the meme wars—meme magic, Pepemancy, all of that terminology is centered around power (a belief in magical powers, conflated with the idea of *taking power*), the entire language is about mystification. By contrast, I would argue, the language of progressive forms of tactical media is about demystification and the empowerment of people, through self-emancipation. So, I think there is a very different politics involved, and that kind of politics is also quite visible in the different kinds of practice that emerge from various cultures. On the other hand, you could criticize the work we celebrated in the exhibition of being a kind of aestheticized politics that lacks dynamism and ambition by not being sufficiently engaged with the desire to take power. Often, we have been too interested in occupying the square, the street, and the gallery while others took the White House. If you were to be really critical of tactical media proponents, you could say that they are in love with the spectacle of protest, and shy of the responsibilities of power. The alt-right come from the other perspective; they display a deep love of power, and a readiness to take power at any cost. This is, essentially, how I would differentiate the two, and also where I would situate the strengths and weaknesses of progressive tactical media.

**KL:** Was the rise of the alt-right also what provided the urgency to make the exhibition you mentioned, *As If—The Media Artist as Trickster*, with Annet Dekker? To show work by artists that act as if an alternative reality were not only possible but already taking place?

**DG:** If I am really honest I would say no; we were overtaken by events. We did not know enough about what was happening on the online message boards—meme culture, trolling culture. There were scholars, however, particularly the likes of Gabriella Coleman and Florian Cramer, and most recently Angela Nagle, who were very much up to speed with that culture. But we had already organized the exhibition, which was all set to go, when we became aware of what was happening in the parallel universe of 4chan,

and of the emergence of the alt-right. We were simply not sufficiently aware of what was going on, and woke up to it very late. To compensate, we inserted various opportunities for critical discussion to highlight the new forces at work alongside the artworks, which were still strong. For example, we made sure that someone like Florian Cramer came to speak at the opening of the Liverpool version of the exhibition, enabling discussions to take place that explored the limitations of our exhibition but went into the wider world. The exhibition, after all, was still highly relevant, but the way in which hacker culture had transformed into some of the forces of the alt-right was in some ways more advanced than what we were doing (fig. 4). I do not think any of the commentary on the show, including the flattering reviews, took into account just how behind the curve we were. I am in fact rather critical of our show—I think it was a day late and a dollar short. This, however, is not to say that we were not ahead of most of our peers in the media art scene, but we were behind in terms of what was really happening out there in the socio-political sphere, which was actually much bigger and much more important! To acknowledge this, when we did the show in Amsterdam, we also did a mini-symposium at the same time. We were able to get Marc Tuters from the University of Amsterdam, who is very much up to speed on these questions.

KL: As a closing question, we'd like to ask what you think about the potential of art to be subversive at the present time—and how do you see subversive art in relation to political power?



fig. 4 Poster for the exhibition, *As If—The Media Artist as Trickster*, Framer Framed, Amsterdam, curated by Annet Dekker and David Garcia, in collaboration with Ian Allen Paul. The show went on to travel to FACT (Foundation for Art & Creative Technology) Liverpool, 2 March - 31 May 2017 and HeK (House of Electronic Arts) Basel, 21 March - 21 May 2017.

DG: I think we (the avant-garde art scene) have a tendency to fetishize transgression as though it were a good in and of itself. If the alt-right shows us one thing it is the consequence of subversive taboo busting without any moral compass. Trump's new press secretary, Scarmucci, recently called Trump the 'great disruptor', and that alone shows the way that this discourse of artistic subversion must find ways to retain its subcultural drive without losing its moral compass. It may be a good moment to re-discover and rethink Freud's notions from 'Civilization and its Discontents' in which he looks at the role of taboos protecting civilization.

What is more, art's political culture (particularly the media arts) needs to come to terms with the phenomenon of 'platform capitalism' — the way that capitalism operates since the social media revolution effectively mainstreamed digital cultures. This turned the Internet from a relatively open space into carefully managed walled gardens or discrete online platforms requiring participants to accept and internalize a shared set of standards and protocols. The cultural politics of the 1980s were very much about the politics of representation, identity, and recognition; their currency was the *image*, it was a politics of representations and counter-representations. The work of the critical postmodernists and later tactical media practitioners put these images in the service of a particular campaign. Putting art in the service of campaigns morphed into tactical media — the practitioners of which do not necessarily see themselves as artists, but as a kind of hybrid formation made up of art, activism, and experimental media. All of this was still centered around the image, but with the arrival of platform capitalism it's all about the *infrastructure*. When you go on the big social media platforms your 'choices', and what it is you get to see, are already shaped and determined by the algorithms of the platform you happen to be standing on. The image and the narrative still matter, but their shape is increasingly determined by the infrastructure, or what Alexander Galloway has called the 'protocol'. Artists also need to re-think the nature of our addiction to transgression, subversion, and disruption. The power of mischief to disrupt the consensual reality that we are presented with still remains a very powerful tool for all of us who want to retain some kind of agency; however, we must not see it as an end in itself but rather as a tight-rope where risk and high stakes are always present.

David Garcia is an artist, teacher, and organizer who has pioneered new forms of critical engagement with art and media. He has (co-)organized such events and exhibitions as *Talking Back to the Media* (1985), *Next 5 Minutes* (1993–2003), and recently, *As If—The Media Artist as Trickster* (2017). Together with Eric Kluitenberg, he co-founded the online archive [www.tacticalmediafiles.org](http://www.tacticalmediafiles.org). He is also the Professor of Digital Arts and Media Activism at Bournemouth University.