Let Freedom Ring
(My Cellphone)

SOMEBODY’S WATCHING YOU ‘Camera Room, New Mexico,’ a 2007 by David Taylor, shows a room full of monitors trained on the U.S.-Mexico border. It is one of many works to be displayed during the ‘Covert Operations’ Exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art.

Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0’s artistic and political statement recalls the independent burn of Founding Fathers

BY GARY SINGH

THE ARTIST
COLLECTIVE
Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 can’t seem to do anything without causing problems.

Nearly 30 years ago, EDT member Brent Staab was finishing his master’s in the CADRE Lab for New Media at San Jose State University. We were in the same classes together and have been friends since. At that time, EDT was version 1.0 and Staab was up shop in Room 233 of the Art Department. It was in that room that he coded in part the FloodNet Java applet, a “conceptual artwork of the net,” which, designed in solidarity with the Zapatistas, helped briefly bring down the Mexican government’s website.

Subcommandante Marcos, the performance-artist-spokesman for the Zapatistas, was calling for new independent media to join the revolution. The World Wide Web was only a few years old, so terms like “cyberattack” and “electronic civil disobedience” were not household concepts yet. In SJSA’s Art Room 233, surrounded by SGI machines intended for computer animation classes, Staab designed FloodNet, a fantastically low-tech art project built to replicate civil disobedience by enabling thousands of people to intentionally flood a website, a DoS attack that acted as a virtual sit-in. FloodNet caused international controversy; as the web being so new had not yet been used for mass political protest. Of course, as this was all going down, predictably, no one else in San Jose seemed to have any idea it was even happening. Everyone was too busy watering their lawns and watching Swindell. Nowadays, EDT is “version 2.0” and the artists involved—Micha Cardenas, Amy Sara Carroll, Ricardo Dominguez, Elie Mehrmand and Staab—have company in practicing the most American of idealistic civil disobedience. And just in time for the nation’s birthday, a new exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art brings together a generation of artists who, through their work, address such travesties of justice and express independence.

Art Attacks

The first phase of Covert Operations: Investigating the Known Unknowns came above ground June 30, including works by EDT 2.0, Harun Farocki, and collaborators Anne-Marie Schleier and Luis Hernandez Galvan. The second phase goes public in August.

Claire Carter curated the show’s debut at the Sotomayor Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona, just last year, and when sitting down with the participants, she realized they weren’t just a bunch of bohemians inspired by the crumbling government and its failed policies. They were actually functioning like journalists.

“One of the reasons I found them so compelling is that they were digging for information that was demonstrable. In this world of doubt, they were digging for their unknowns and hidden agendas and security decisions that are hidden from the United States public.”
using democratic means to get at information that should all be addressing publicly. And I just found that extraordinarily compelling. On the surface, they're all dealing with different issues in our post-political world. 

Ricardo Dominguez, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, was nearly expelled from his tenure and fired for his participation in the EDT.2 project, conceptual art project that explores the relationship between art and technology. The project had been halted by the university in 2002 due to concerns about its potential impact on privacy and security. Dominguez was later reinstated, but the controversy continued to simmer.

The EDT.2 project, called Transborder Immigrant Tool, is designed to allow cross-border migrants to communicate with their families and loved ones while they are on the move. The tool uses a combination of technologies, including GPS tracking, cell phone coverage, and social media, to create a network of support for migrants.

Transborder Immigrant Tool was developed in collaboration with the Border Angels, a non-profit organization that helps migrants and their families by providing them with information and resources. The tool was launched in 2012 and has been used by thousands of migrants to communicate with their families and receive support as they travel through the desert.

Just as the NGOs had done. As a conceptual art project, however, they weren't interested in the technology behind the tool. Transborder Immigrant Tool could actually be implemented in practice. The challenge was getting the software into people's hands, since organized crime basically controlled the border crossing.

Stulbaum said: "One of the first things that people (human smugglers) often did was take people's mobile phones away, if they had them, because they wanted to be completely in control of the immigrants they were guiding into the country."

That was 2009 and the project has changed quite a bit since then. Many migrants now have mobile phones. The project of helping immigrants cross over into the country now involves text messaging, smartphones, and many familiar technologies.

Unfortunately, it was only a matter of time before the right wing echoed chamber began to misinterpret EDT.2's art project — one designed to help people find water — as something intended for food play. Suddenly appeared in the Orange County Register and the San Diego Union-Tribune. Conservaive candidates like Glenn Beck began to hyperbolize the project, attacking EDT.2 as they were aiding and abetting terrorists. No one in the echo chamber seemed to have an art school experience, so they didn't understand that EDT.2 was implementing what French groups like the Lutteurs and the Situationist International referred to as 'stupid acts of deconstruction' — that is, the intentional disintegration, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, twisting or other methods of turning a capitalist system against itself in order to produce new, hysterical constructs. And, forget that the phones were never actually given to any migrants. That didn't matter to the critics.

Stulbaum reiterated that the phones were conceptualized for short-term navigation purposes only, which highlighted failed policies on both sides of the border.

"There are GPS devices you can go into the Best Buy in Tijuana if you want one — or you can actually design your own long-distance, overland navigation," Stulbaum said. "We're not designing it for that purpose, so it's a bit of a reality check, your concern that the phone was going to be used by the Drug Cartel."

The trouble didn't end there. Aside from the FBI investigating the project, the California Attorney General's Office took up the cause of migrant rights and eventually decided not to strip him of his tenure.

**DIY Surveillance**

Covers Operations artists question the ways in which the government monitors people's behavior around the clock. Hasan Khan's work is the direct result of this experience with the FBI after they erroneously placed him on their terrorist watch list in the year 2002. During the vast expansion of federal power immediately following the attacks, Elahi was stopped at the airport and interrogated about his activities on or around September 11. Despite handing over his electronic communication devices, Elahi spent six months under investigation and sat through dozens of interviews and polygraph sessions. The experience drove him to thoroughly document his entire life and activities via his website, basically preventing government surveillance by doing for them.

In the exhibition, multiple-chapter video projections and installations will include live feeds from his website, documenting his movements in obsessive detail, just as the regulatory bureaucracies at the University of Maryland, Elahi used to stalk in the Art Department at JUIC. In still other cases, the work of artists like Diva Taylor and Jenny Perlin addresses specific examples of US government surveillance on American citizens. In the words of the artist, Patrick and Tymon Simon likewise pry into the dysfuctional US intelligence bureaucracies and their tortured handling of specific black sites.

All in all, when Covers Operations debuted at the Seattle Museum of Contemporary Art, nothing in the show really shook the political order, but much at all. No one interpreted the show as a bunch of left-wing cranky artists. Carter says everyone seemed surprised that no media interest emerged in what's generally referred to as the most conservative city in the state.

"What I've had no problem seeing is that people consistently say that there's a kind of libertarian bent to the artwork," Carter said. "People were really shocked that it didn't cause controversy in Seattle because, 'Oh, Arizona's so conservative.' A lot of reporters from New York were just completely baffled as to why this wasn't hugely controversial.

Just to explain to people that this is really about transparency and government accountability. And that those are all pretty libertarian positions in a lot of ways."