Hacktivism? I didn't know the term existed before I did it…
An Interview with Brian Kim Stefans by Giselle Beiguelman

On Monday, Oct. 28, 2002, 10:05 p.m, Brian Stefans wrote: "Caught! I knew this would be happen…"

He had received a letter from the counsel to The New York Times Company, the owner of *The New York Times* on the Web at http://www.nytimes.com, who alerted him:

"It has come to our attention that you have posted an altered version of the home page of the September 24, 2002 edition of nytimes.com at http://www/arras.net/blair_present-dossier.htm. While the page reproduces the nytimes.com template, including the day's advertisements, it replaces selected bylines and other features with content you have supplied. Most significantly, you have substantially changed the lead article to include long and rambling made-up quotes from British Prime Mininster Tony Blair regarding the need to act against Iraq, under the byline of Raoul Vaneigem.

The editors at the Times appreciate a good parody and would not take action against it. However, the subject matter of this particular page appears to be more serious in nature. Therefore, even though we are sure that your intent was non-malicious, we must inform you that your use of the Times's name, logos and home page design and layout constitutes trademark and copyright infringement.

While we respect your efforts to make a statement, we must ask that you do so in a manner that does not violate our proprietary rights, or the rights of our advertisers. Please remove the page from public display and confirm to us in writing within the next ten days that you will not use our home page in the future in this same way. If you would like to discuss this matter, please give me a call at 212-556-1760. Thank you for your cooperation."

The event raised a debate at Ubuweb list where many of its members manifested their solidarity to Brian Kim Stefans, congratulating him for being caught. The most important objection to this position was:

"Why do all of you think Brian a hero just because he got caught by The New York Times*? Why is he to be congratulated that he got served with a cease and desist letter. (…)I think your reactions are kneejerk and quite frankly, simplistic. What makes Brian heroic is the great work he does, not the fact that he got caught doing it."* (Kenneth Goldsmith, Oct. 29, 2002)

Actually, what made Brian heroic by this time was not the fact he received the letter from *The New York Times*, but the way the affair mixed up with his artistic practices, pointing to some particularities of digital art as a field where more and more the borders between aesthetics, politics and editorial functions melt in order to constitute a transdisciplinary everyday action and attitude.

This was the point of departure of our conversation about artistic options, models, styles, books, web sites, blogs, projects that involve political issues and the role of the author today.

Giselle Beiguelman: You hacked the NYT website and now are involved in the production and editing of *Circulars*. How do you relate these practices to your poetic activities?

Brian K. Stefans: I guess it all goes through the Situationists' idea of detournement-collaging previously existing materials to create objects with new meanings that deviate from those of the original. It's also something like what I did on my project with Kim Rosenfield "The Truth Interview," for which I used her poems and "star profile"-style responses to my questions, along with clippings from magazines she had given me, and inserted them in the template from the *National Inquirer* website, combining these with original Flash applications and a soundtrack of her reading. All three projects rely not just on appropriation, but on reconfiguring of the meaning systems of other sites and cultural phenomena—ads, stories, tones, class identities, etc.—for their effect.

Basically, anything on the web is liable to collaged with something else; any project such as this one, or the five pieces of the Vaneigem series (I got my text of *The Revolution of Everyday Life* from the web) could have been the result of a computer glitch accidentally putting these texts and objects on the same web page (a Perl script could have done this also). It's certainly more possible that quotes from Rauol Vaneigem will end up in a *New York Times* web story than it is that Don Quixote will be written the exact the same way, word for word on two separate occasions by different authors (as Borges suggests), or that monkeys will tap out Shakespeare on a typewriter. My web projects "force the hand of chance" so to speak, though of course the chance aspect was most satisfied with the arrival of the email from Nancy Richman.

I didn't write any of the text for these projects with the exception of editorials for *Circulars* and the questions for Kim, but it all falls directly in a line starting with the Dadaists and Surrealists, which is this appeal to chance juxtapositions to create "convulsive" effects (to echo Breton). *Circulars* is not intended to be an artwork, at least in any strict sense (it's not a product or a performance), but I suspect that its strength is in its verbal and visual choreography, its skewed relationship to fact, and that it was produced by several authors, rather than any individual piece of content.

GB: You, as many others in our field, mix the role of editor with the artist practice and sometimes with e-business services and political use of the web. Do you think this is inherent to our media (the web)?

BS: I don't think I've ever done anything that could be called "e-business" though I do seem to be a kind of mini-me Silvio Berlesconi by having everything online under the arras.net rubric—the various .pdfs on my site, the digital poetry, *Circulars*, etc. I guess

the fact that I determine the release dates of anything I do, spam my friends and listservs, etc. does make it appear to be a business—there's certainly some sort of economy involved—but I've never sold anything, and have never been particularly intent on tweaking web commerce in my work (outside of the commerce in news, of course).

I also don't think web work is inherently "political"—to ride on such a belief just leads to often lukewarm, incoherent postures, the position of dissent through glitches, that I don't quite understand. However, the web does seem the most obvious place to enact political desire, to favor a political vision in public, and I don't want to be prescriptive about how that's done. It's certainly quite easy to steal anything from the web and integrate it into some other project, theft itself being a political act, but one could then suggest that all words are "political" because they can end up in a politicized poem—Kenneth Goldsmith's new book Day would then be political art. Some writers would claim that, of course, but I tend to think that, though the web is inherently social, political efficacy—impossible to measure, a holy grail of sorts—would depend how specific one is in deterritorializing or framing a work (including its plagiarisms) in order to foreground its social mechanisms.

I guess your question is whether a web artist has to wear many hats, be a designer, etc. Certainly it helps. I programmed computers long before I was a poet, but some artists thrive by commissioning work from programmers, visual artists, etc. I find that one stumbles upon more useful mistakes when doing the work oneself, though at some health risks—most of my projects ended when my cartilage just didn't seem able to go on. There does seem to be some element of bureaucrat involved in every web project, even one done solitarily, as there are so many components that have to coordinated, none of which feed directly from a moment of "inspiration" like in a lyric poem—hence, one is jumping around to different stations, from computer to computer, having to brush up on the latest standards and software , which all strikes me as unromantic and bureaucratic.

GB: Let's go back to the beginning. When did you get involved with web writing? Why?

BS: It's a probably oft-repeated story of being a grad student (in English at the CUNY Graduate Center) in 1996 or so, having given up computer for poetry in my teens, then discovering that there was a huge interest in the humanities in computer technology but that it all seemed pretty wrong-headed—the claims for hypertext seemed misguided or overstated to me. I knew I didn't want to be an academic, and was very much involved in the NYC poetry scene, mostly with writers of the "Language" ilk, an experimental American "school" of poetry that started around the early seventies in the wake of Vietnam. So it made much sense for me to try to reconcile my two lives at that point, my past as a programmer and present as a poet.

I was never much of a theorist (or at least don't feel a need to conclusively map territories of possibilities prior to making art, as much as I cherish ideas), so I just jumped right in, learned rudimentary C++ , wrote some poems that way (I describe one in detail in *Fashionable Noise*), then got on to the web with the first manifestation of arras.net. Eventually I picked up on Director and Flash etc. and got involved with people like

Kenneth Goldsmith, whose ubu.com was relatively young then though quite well-known and richly populated, and later with the ubuweb listserv. Kenny— who can have the air of a NY gallery owner— was a huge supporter of my work early on and gave me a space to show prior to arras.net.

I think the reason I went into digital poetry was the general belief that artists are responsible for exploring new ways to experience the world, that this is an exciting thing to do, that art must be "convulsive," not something settled. Artists must force the paradigm shift, to put it a bit grandiosely. I was a big reader of Ezra Pound when I was younger (though never bought the Chinese ideogram argument); he placed a high value on the "innovators" in poetic tradition, as opposed to the "diluters"—yecch, I didn't want to be one of those.

I still believe that poets, especially when they're young, should try to explore as many avenues of creativity as possible, if only so that as they grow older and their insights, desires, etc. grow more complicated there will be a larger set of tools available to work with. This is my approach to poetry as well— learn, even master, the forms and rhythms, sestinas, sonnets, language-salads, etc. since they'll come in handy someday even if useless for now. Unfortunately, technology on the web turns over so frequently that I can't imagine being a grandfather and trying to push out work on Flash 5 with anyone being particularly interested, though of course the Fisher Price pixelvision phenomenon (in which a discontinued toy video camera became a fetish item among video makers because of its quirky pictorial qualities) could be repeated in digital art. And as jodi.org proves, yesterdays bit-map is today's fashion statement.

GB: Who are your favorite artists, poets and web artists?

BS: Oh well... my favorite poets are numerous—let's say most of the major American Modernists (especially William Carlos Williams), most writers associated with the "New York School" of poetry (O'Hara and Ashbery), a handful of "Language" writers, poets like Donne, Coleridge, Hopkins, Prynne, etc. And then of course my too-many-to-name contemporaries who appear with frequency in my blog and book reviews—and those are just English language poets. I'm not sure what Gerard Manley Hopkins had to do with "The Dreamlife of Letters"—perhaps the reappearance of certain shapes and gestures comprises the "inscape" of the piece—but I'm pretty sure that the next several years of my creative life will be in reconciling my print poetic practices with what I do on the web. Concrete poets who have worked in more conventional forms, such as Ian Hamilton Finlay and Haroldo de Campos, are particularly helpful in this case, as are artists like Tom Philips (creator of The Humument) who work with text.

As for web artists, I probably like most of what other people are into: turux.org, jodi.org, jimpunk, Yong-Hae Chang, David Crawford, all the soundtoy stuff (there's a piece called modifyme that I thought was brilliant when I first saw it), etc. I don't think I've quite determined my own sense of the digital art "tradition" but these are the groups and artists I respond to most directly. I tend to champion a few less known folks like William Poundstone and the people who contribute to bannerart.org. I consider some of the new

poetry blogs in the field of "digital poetry" like those by Brandon Barr and Jordan Davis. In general, I haven't been terribly impressed by the work of "digital poets," mostly because my standards are much higher for the field I am a part of—ditto for "Asian American" poetry. I tend to get paranoid when I feel like I'm a cog in a culture of back-slapping, which seems to me endemic in smaller art's cultures for which "supportiveness" is standard of behavior, necessary as it is. All of these artists appear on my arras.net links page, of course.

I'm really into collecting "tasteless" political humor, and am pretty convinced that most of the best "art" out there is being put together by groups of deviant teenagers doing whippets and just going at it on Director and Photoshop—the same folks who brought you "All Your Base Are Belong to Us." The weirdest thing I've come across is a blog called *Dagmar Chili Pitas*, a crazy scramble of text and design that is very astute literarily—finding that was like stumbling upon a cross between Henry Darger and Louis Zukofsky, and I wonder if I'll ever find out who wrote that stuff. (Some is included in Arras 5; the author chose to appear as "Toadex Hobogrammathon," a name which comes up 4 times in Google.) I'm also very interested in online programs that translate texts into "ebonics" or pornography, etc., like pornolize.com, mostly because it shows how technology just utterly trashes any taboos and ethical safety nets and exposes social codes. These sites make the "simulacra" of digital technology as visible to the world as a (pardon the gruff imagery) dog turd on a city street—like "a swoon that brings you to your senses," to gnarl a phrase from Charles Bernstein.

GB: Did they influence your work? How?

BS: In general, any web art work that impresses me with its simplicity and the profundity of its effects influences me, or at least frightens me. I'm interested in some conceptual projects, like the mouchette site, which is not quite "simple" (though it has a conceptual cleanliness). However, that's generally the type of thing I don't do, image laden stuff that tells a story.

I'm less interested in projects that involve infiltrating listservs and creating web avatar personas—mez might be one of these, or Alan Sondheim—since they seem too overtly saturated by "theory" (tugging on the aprons strings of deconstruction) and the writing is usually less interesting than both what you find in books and what you find on, say, *Dagmar Chili Pitas*. The surface effects can be rich and, in a sense, "timely," but the fact that digital technology allows one an infinite repetition of effects is already plainly visible in the movies and in electronic music. To make the social component of this phenomenon visible—to use that word again—needs to be explored in ways that involve idioms that are engaging as reading. I guess I'm not convinced that this work is as "post-human" as it claims to be—humanistic frames are still very present to me in the work, but are then never elaborated into the "social"—the "real" world, which has been sacrificed for the solipsistic world (or metaphor) of circuit boards. I could, of course, be looking for the wrong things in this work, and I know I'm being unclear.

Some of my work is so obviously silly and absurd that I don't want to claim they were influenced by anyone I admire, though I feel some old things, like "Alpha Betty's Chronicles," look pretty fresh to me today since more writers have taken to the web and have begun to explore language in a way that avoids the clean, sometimes vapid and commercial look of people coming out of art schools. "Alpha Betty's Chronicles" was influenced by a work by Charles Bernstein and Dante Piombino called "A Mosaic for a Convergence," which is a nice visual assay that is exhaustive of several tasteless web effects. My Director "eye candy" works are directly derivative of turux.org's stuff, and I like to think that Finlay's Little Sparta and the Toronto Research Group (Steven McCaffery and bpNichol) had some influence on "Dreamlife."

GB: When and why did you get involved with hacktivist art?

BS: I had this idea of working with several people to create an entire *New York Times* website that had every word of Rauol Vaneigem's The Revolution of Everyday Life embedded in it somewhere. I was going to try to get a friend of mine to create a Perl script such that, every day, an entire mirror site of the *Times* would be created, but with Vaneigem's text there amidst the ads and photographs. The Revolution of Everyday Life provided much of the graffitti for the May 68 revolutionaries in Paris, and I had been fascinated with the idea of a book being broken up into its component sentences and spray-painted on walls. I had been equating my own work with graffiti for a while, if only because few of my web works seemed complete enough to be anything suggesting a "book"—they were all one-offs, perhaps something more like mail art.

I did a little test of how the New York Times / Vaneigem site could look by downloading a page from the *Times* and replacing the entire story with Vaneigem, but the result was very uninteresting. It became more interesting when I replaced only the quotes, putting Vaneigem's words in the mouths of Tony Blair and Senator Tom Daschle among others, and edited the stories to be much shorter. It was really provocative when the Iraqi representative to the UN was being figured as Lautreamont, making a play on how even a diplomatic representative in a suit and tie will be figured as the monstrous "other" in a news story.

I realized at this point that I could never automate such a project, and that, at best, each page would have to be constructed painstakingly and edited for effect. So I just started sending out the individual pages as they were done. This isn't quite "hacktivism" I think—or is it? I didn't know the term existed before I did these. As with most of my projects that involve political issues, I changed modes when a particular milestone was reached— depression setting in—in this case, the Senate vote to give Bush the green light to go to war. A few months later, *Circulars* was created, with an insignia taken from Guy Debord's map of Parisian flows, "The Naked City."

GB: What do you like most on the web and on print?

BS: I love the way words look on a page, and generally am under the impression that reading online is not terribly pleasant. I like the edge of a book page and working with

text that either honors the border— healthy book margins have a profound effect on me— or which works right up to the margins. I like that books decay over time, and that books have tangible class associations—think of Jan Tschichold redesigning the typesetting for the Penguin paperback series, the Utopian gesture of that impresses me. I especially like older mass-produced books that were not set digitally.

On the web, I like that all of my work is basically ending up in a database, and can be accessed in a variety of ways. Free Space Comix, is like a big scrap book of things I'm interested in— I've never created a scrapbook in print, since I hate my handwriting, and I don't like clutter in my small apartment. I like color, and I like stealing texts and reworking them— the web is good for that.

I haven't gotten to the point in which I could program an online community but that I think is the ultimate thing— to create a culture of some sort (something like Craigslist, simple but thriving as an expression of social desire, but of course not utilitarian). I kind of think of *Circulars* as creating a culture, since I bet a lot of poets don't read the sites I (and now Darren Wershler-Henry, who has recently become a very active "author" on the site) am stealing stories from but prefer them contextualized there. It is a multi-authored, international blog, but again, it's not an art project per se. Of course, "I could never have done it with a magazine," as they say— the logic is all wrong. I liked the way websites like *Circulars* and Vaneigem (or whitehouse.org or the war editions of nationalphilistine.com) suddenly appear, like a "wildcat" gesture, via spam flooding the inboxes of everyone in someone's address book.

GB: What you can not stand on the web and on print?

BS: I can't stand that my last book, *Angry Penguins*, is still sitting in their boxes in my apartment, never to be sold or even given away, and that my first book is collecting dust in the basement of the Segue building. I can't stand that a power surge or some sort of virus could eat up everything I've ever done on the web so that it disappears from history, or that time itself will eventually render all of my work unreadable in the future.

GB: Why does it annoy you so much? You seem to be so conscious about the "digital resistance" to preservation (your grandson will not be able to check your Flash 5 pieces)...

BS: I was being a little glib in those answers— certainly, those fears don't keep me up at night, but it sometimes does bother me that the pieces will never make their presence known in the world of objects, never break in a way that leaves trails on the ground or which can be fixed by humans with crafty, careful hands. I do see internet work as "performance art" in the sense that ephemerality is built in to the entire practice— some limited group of people will experience and remember them, a bond or community could exist around this memory— but then again, it seems a waste to spend so much time trying to get some dissolve to look just right, some mouse action to flow smoothly, only to see it trashed with the new release of a Flash player. All of the Java I wrote for my poems (like "Naif and the Bluebells") is garbage now.

For the heck of it, I converted "Dreamlife of Letters" to Quicktime recently and noticed that some of the best parts, like the Oedipal "o" circle, didn't render properly at all. (In fact, there was just a long stretch of blank orange screen, which I hope would suggest to my future viewer that a plug-in failure was occurring.) So were that to be the final version of the piece—if, for some reason, no one thought it necessary to create a dependable Flash emulator—then that key moment (well, *I* think it's key) would be lost.

There are, of course, many early films that we watch without having any idea how they looked on fresh prints, running through period projectors, and in the old theaters on small screens. One just hopes that the style of decay of a digital art piece is as interesting to observe as that of a piece of celluloid— possible but not likely.). But my sense is that, like with drama, one would only be able to appreciate the work with some documentary description of what it looked like on a small 17" screen powered by some ancient hunk of junk called a G4, just like we don't know how David Garrick acted on the 18th century stage but he remains in the cultural memory (somewhere).

GB: "The Dreamlife of Letters" is very cinematic. Are movies and television important for you.?

BS: Movies are, but not television. My list of favorite directors is quite long, but on the top are Orson Welles, Jean Vigo, and Herzog when he worked with Kinski, etc. I'm not sure that I use cinematic techniques in my work unless it be what I've picked up from movie titles— this would be in "The Dreamlife of Letters"— but that certainly was not what I was trying to do.

I've always thought Godard was a very important director for web artists and poets to look at closely— I write about this in "Reflections on Cyberpoetry," in which he becomes, indirectly, the Swinburne of our age (though the Situationists, of course, pilloried him). I think the greatest development has been, of course, the advent of digital cinema— the first two Dogma films, Russian Ark, that kind of thing, blow my mind.

I was a televisions junky when I was a kid— I bought my first computer after winning a television trivia contest sponsored by a local newspaper— so perhaps I have been influenced in that I never want to be as passive a receptor as I was when I was a lonely kid tethered to the set. There's only so long you can sit in a movie theater.

GB: You have some collaborative pieces. Is your intention to question the role of the author in your artistic work?

BS: I guess I'm doing something like that, but I wouldn't want to suggest that this is a parameter of the work worth paying attention to. My sense is that many artists have gone on the record as critiquing the notion of "author" but have more or less become authors of some sort, or have fulfilled the "author function" in some other way that rendered the initial motivation moot. The more radical expressions of non-authorship— some of these crazy blogs that I've been coming across, for example, or the collaborative writings of the

SI— are bound to remain obscure unless some scholar decides to go on the trail and put the story back together, at which point they enter a narrative of the author (the SI writings under the rubric of Debord and Vaneigem, for instance). I just don't see how the author is questioned so much anymore by collaborative works; the age of romantic "genius" is long past us, now all there is left is money— you take or leave it, "author" or not. (Insert smiley emoticon here.)

The more interesting point is pseudonyms, avatar names, etc., but even in this case the trail of cultural capital will find its source. The only reason to really push a pseudonym (or many pseudonyms) is if you are doing something illegal (most of us aren't) or if you are mimicking a corporate model, like an artist's collective, which is very interesting if there is a real collective going on, with all of its attendant social aspects— more than the negation of the "author," but the "outing" of social desire. In this way, one participates as one does in a rock band, under a common name that acquires capital in its own fashion. Artists can act like hackers if they want to avoid being associated with common sources of income and capital, but unlike hackers they don't have any real control over the world's information networks, and, being vain like most artists are, will have to conform somewhat in their behavior, either by being comfortable with obscurity (and nurturing the hope that history will vindicate them) or uncomfortable and hence self-promoting, attending conferences, writing articles, applying for grants, etc.

Ok, I'm being glib again— I'm actually not cynical. I would love to do something more collaborative someday, indeed even form a group. When I first started doing web projects, I didn't want to sign my name to them even if I was the only creator involved. I invented the name Reptilian Neolettrist Graphics for my credit in a book of poetry by Stephen Rodefer that I designed a pseudo-Lettristic page for. At this point I've collaborated with Kim Rosenfield, Darren Wershler-Henry, Christian Bök and Dan Farrell (I set their books to the web), and the other authors of *Circulars*. The more busy I get with multiple projects, the less time I have to learn what needs to be done, and I've learned through my (very modest) work in theater that it's very fulfilling to work with people who are invested in a field you will never yourself master. I'm not sure what kind of collaborative work I would do in the future. It really depends on sharing a great idea and being willing to nag each other to get it done.