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Battle Code

GENE McHUGH ON GUY DEBORD'S GAME OF WAR AND THE RADICAL SOFTWARE GROUP

Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord playing the Game of War, 1977.

IN APRIL OF THIS YEAR, an original silver-plated edition of the Game of War, a military-strategy board game released in 1977 by the founder of the Situationist International, Guy Debord, was displayed at the "Form as Strategy" exhibition in New York at Columbia University's Temple Hoyne Buell Center for American Architecture. Installed alongside it was an online multiplayer game called Kriegspiel, designed this year by the Radical Software Group—a loosely defined New York–based collective of artists and computer programmers perhaps best known for its research into applications of tactical media theory. The pairing seemed reasonable enough: Kriegspiel was, in fact, RSG's adaptation of Debord's game for the digital age. Upon hearing of the juxtaposition of the original game and RSG's version, however, a lawyer for Debord's widow, Alice Becker-Ho, sent a fax to the Buell Center demanding that the institution "suppress any connection" between the computer game and Debord's work. The Buell Center complied, moving Kriegspiel into an adjacent room and replacing curatorial texts that had suggested a link between the two games. Claiming that copyright was held by the Debord estate, Becker-Ho's lawyer also threatened Alexander R. Galloway, a founding member of RSG and an associate professor at New York University, with legal action for distributing the game online. (The game is still available, however; Galloway maintains that Kriegspiel "does not violate the intellectual property rights of any third party.")

While the threat of legal action against artists—particularly those distributing a game to a relatively small number of theory junkies and game nerds—is hardly desirable by any standard, one can nevertheless sympathize with Becker-Ho's frustration. Debord, after all, defined his bête noire, spectacle, as "not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." For Debord, the force of spectacle had transformed real, directly experienced social relations into images of those relations. Operating at a level that transcends visual and aural perception, spectacle triumphs over humanity as it transforms "real"

life into a series of mediations. ("Spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing," Debord wrote. "It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself.") Debord might well have been shocked, then, to see how much the power
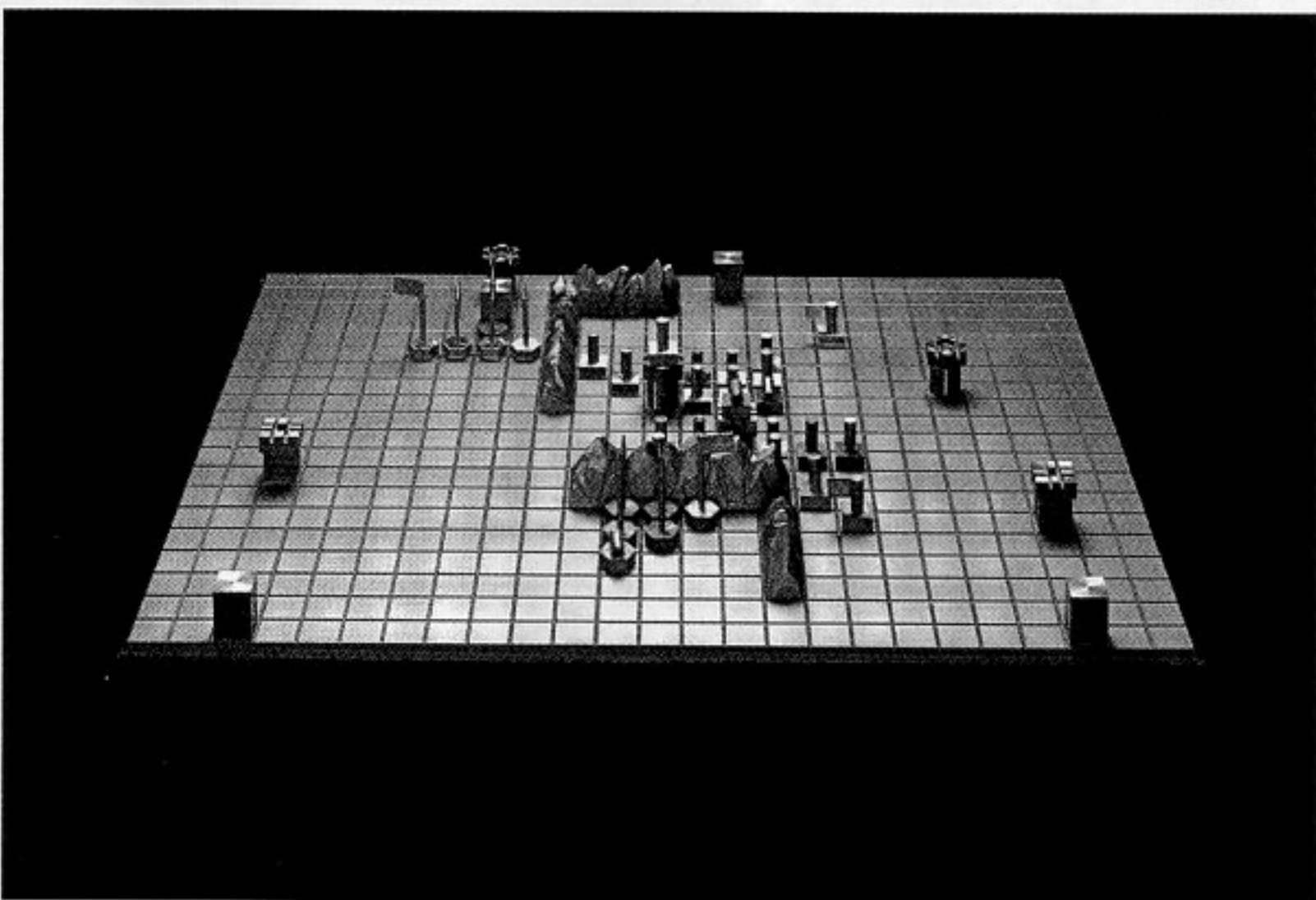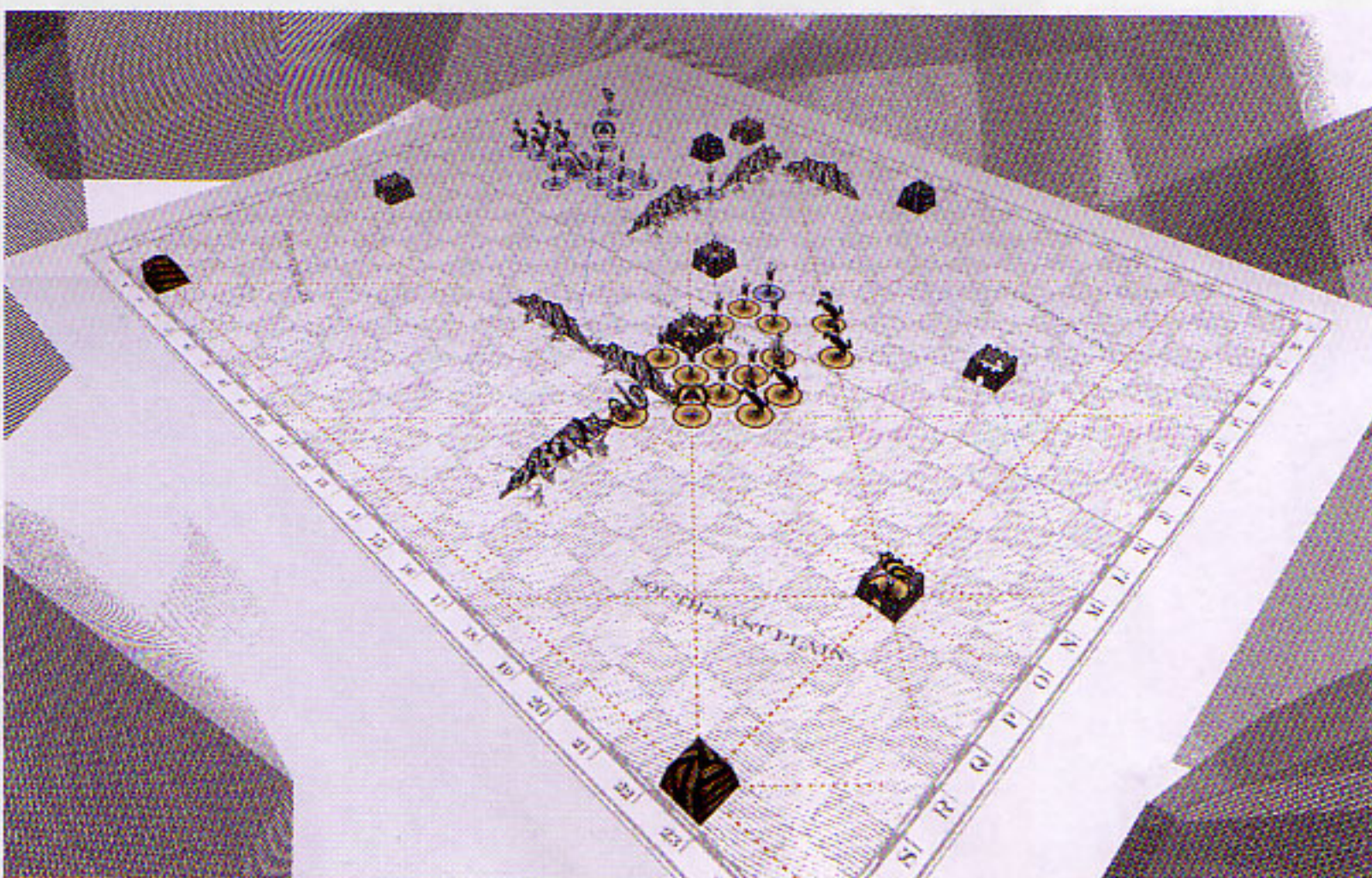

In Kriegspiel, the Radical Software Group questions the applicability of Debord's own conceptions of resistance (particularly *détournement*) in an age of networked, topological communication.

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of audiovisual technology has infiltrated human relations. The rhetoric of hyperconnectivity trumpeted by Web 2.0 enthusiasts and the rise of social networking sites would, considered in light of Debord's ideas, represent only a devilishly clever simulation of real human connection, far too consumed with accruing social capital to have any relation to the qualitative basis of human sociality. In divorcing game-play from genuine

human interactions and locating it within a system of exchange of digital code merely *representing* such interactions, Kriegspiel—like other online multiplayer games—is in some ways the essence of spectacle, a symptom of false consciousness.

On the other hand, of course, the idea that the work of Debord, of all people, would become embroiled in an intellectual-property dispute is juicy irony. *Détournement*, that famous cornerstone of Situationism, was even defined as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble." Debord once declared, "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it." According to this reading, why should the work of the key theorist of *détournement* be immune from being detourned?

Yet it seems relevant here that *détournement* is itself, by now, a familiar concept in Internet culture. The bland YouTube mashup and the humorous photoshopping of politicians' photographs are commonplace, if not simply annoying. And at the risk of being overly schematic, one might add that the second major Situationist tactic, *dérive*, or the arbitrary drifting through urban space, has become a primary tool of online capitalism. The Internet surfer is expected

From top: Screenshot from the Radical Software Group's Kriegspiel, 2008, an online game based on Guy Debord's Game of War, 1977. Board and engraved silver-plated copper pieces from Guy Debord's Game of War, 1977.

to drift from site to site, clicking on hyperlinks on the basis of arbitrary whims, finding novel ways to spread his or her capital through the network. If we take Debord's word regarding the totalizing and nonetheless frustratingly invisible nature of spectacle, it becomes all too obvious that at least some of his strategies of countering it have been effectively incorporated into the internal logic of communications media today.

While the legal fracas over Kriegspiel at first glance points to the fact that the game finds itself somewhat uncomfortably positioned between radical *détournement* and spectacular exploitation, further reflection suggests that this binary may itself by now be a red herring. According to Galloway's own account in *Cabinet* magazine this past spring, his interest in Debord's game was piqued above all by what he viewed as the blatant anachronism of the Clausewitzian theories underlying

it and the accompanying lack of a substantive formal connection to the asymmetrical warfare that Debord himself experienced firsthand in May 1968. In lectures in which Galloway discusses Debord's game and RSG's digital translation of it, he seems primarily concerned with observing how the tactical apparatus of both the Game of War and Kriegspiel crumbles when viewed through the lens of postmodern military theorization.

One of the more idiosyncratic rules that Debord came up with demands that a player's advancing pieces remain in unbroken lines of communication with command centers, or "arsenals," at the rear of each army's forces. While this means that the Game of War does incorporate the centrality of temporal/communicative elements in modern warfare, the way in which it does so, according to Galloway, has "more in common with Napoleon's 1806 Battle of Jena than Debord's own 1968 Battle of Paris." In Debord's game, the entire network collapses if one node of the communication line breaks down. Faithful to the original, Kriegspiel similarly neglects to represent how communication has in fact been used by more recent resistance groups such as guerrilla armies, terrorist cells, and hackers unleashing computer viruses. Existing in nonhierarchical dispersion, such networked opposition thrives on its ability to sustain forward momentum and maintain communication channels despite the loss of one element in the network. Debord himself admitted that his game did not represent "modern warfare refashioned by technology," even if he also once claimed—in a text written with Becker-Ho in 1987—that "with [some] reservations . . . this game accurately portrays all the factors at work in real war." Rather than being a radical allegory of cutting-edge warfare, in fact, Debord's

game might more plausibly be seen as merely nostalgic.

Moreover, RSG freely admits that its implementation of Debord's game emphatically *does not* translate well to computer networks. Especially in comparison with video games such as StarCraft, which have far more complicated algorithms, Kriegspiel comes across as flaccid. In conclusion, then, RSG is not presenting Kriegspiel as a form of hard *détournement*, nor is it making any claims for the veracity of its modeling of war, but rather, in undertaking its adaptation, it is questioning the applicability of Debord's own conceptions of resistance (particularly *détournement*) in an age of networked, topological communication. In other words, what if Debord accurately (prophetically, even) diagnosed the cultural condition of spectacle, but misprescribed its treatment for our era? This would leave us with the time-honored question, What is to be done? If Debord's strategies of resistance do not in fact jive with our version of the society of the spectacle, what is a budding anarchist to do?

In *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (2007), a book investigating the mechanisms of control in computer and biological networks that Galloway cowrote with Eugene Thacker, the authors advocate a shift from the concept of resistance, which is described as a "Clausewitzian mentality," to "hypertrophy," which they connect to a decidedly different persona from Debord—Roland Barthes. They quote Barthes: "There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: *to retreat ahead of it.*" Seen thus, the concept of resistance implicit in *détournement* may be less effective than a "hypertrophic" forward escape through those very technologies that the Situationists would presumably have scorned. Rather than working within the system by detourning cultural artifacts and drifting through a cyberspace defined by Internet protocols, the hypertrophic user becomes a programmer, working above content in the space of code. The point of contemporary opposition, according to Galloway and Thacker, is "not to destroy technology in some neo-Luddite delusion but to push technology into a hypertrophic state, further than it is meant to go." If one accepts this argument, then RSG's detourning of Debord would serve to point to its own futility. □

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