

## Human and Unhuman

T'ai Smith

**McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory*.**

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 240 pp., 8 b/w ills. \$19.95

**Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene**

**Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of***

**Networks.** Minneapolis: University of

Minnesota Press, 2007. 256 pp., no ills. \$57, \$18.95 paper

Defrocked Situationist Ralph Rumney: "It is now sport, not painting or sculpture, which defies the limits of the human, which offers a sense or image of wholeness, of a physical idea, which no honest art can now repeat." Nor, need one add, can writing.

— McKenzie Wark

It should come as no surprise that a theory of gaming and a theory of networks were written at the height of a war without ends. Especially since, as Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker point out, the United States military increasingly deploys networks of infowar to fight so-called terrorist networks, and it fashions new games for the training of soldiers and managers alike. Here and now, as McKenzie Wark proposes, "The game is an exercise in negotiating protocols to gain access to more and more of the network" (W, 139; Wark's book is unpaginated; the number here and in further citations from his book indicates paragraph number rather than page). These two media, which we have seen grafted together in the past ten or so years, are the sites through which our current social, technical, and biotechnological relations are performed.

Wark's *Gamer Theory* and Galloway and Thacker's *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* are thus synchronized to the present moment. For not only do they analyze the specific formal operations of networks and digital games as distinct media of our time, but they also examine these forms' theoretical underpinnings—what *The Exploit* authors refer to as their "political ontology." Each book considers what Wark calls the "military entertainment complex," or what Galloway and Thacker call the "networked sovereign"—the strangely "unhuman" identity that presently rules and makes rules. And each explores the limits of subjectivity,

agency, and being within an "algorithmic," networked-gaming culture where control is distributed among protocols and passwords. Most important, in spite of the seemingly abstract, "atopic" quality of their objects, which otherwise occupy a "placeless, senseless realm" (W, 21), each book addresses the lived effects of those network-game spaces. Rather than rely on by-now-shopworn definitions of cybernetics as metaphysical systems, these authors address the enactment of gamespace battle in a free-market society (or in the streets of Baghdad); networks are analyzed as "life forms" that are at once "social, cultural, economic, and genetic" (G&T, 127).

Addressing the potential political efficacy of new media structures, each book rigorously questions all suggestions that "horizontal distributions" or even the concept of "play" are necessarily democratic or, as some art-world people might still hope, vestiges of Dada-like alterity.<sup>1</sup> According to Wark's *Gamer Theory*, which updates a situationist critique of spectacle for a world run by gaming, "Play is no longer counter to work. . . . The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life" (W, 16). In *The Exploit*, which extends and challenges Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's controversial diagnosis of modern forms of power, Galloway and Thacker insist that "because both empire and the multitude employ the distributed network form . . . a decision has to be made: we're tired of rhizomes" (G&T, 153).<sup>2</sup> Neither the distributed network form nor the realm of free play necessarily equals freedom. In making these points, both books aim to reevaluate the efficacy of everything from critical to postmodern theory for a global-political practice today.

Despite the striking similarities of content and their proximity in publication dates, it would nevertheless be imprudent to equate these two books.<sup>3</sup> There are differences, and they primarily involve the question of method as a function of style. Wark's *Gamer Theory* is written as a set of somewhat tangential musings or storylike reflections on his experience of playing digital games and playing theory, whereas *The Exploit* bears a strangely nonhuman voice, with each passage shaped like a set of algorithmic codes

for analysis and action: "Today, to write theory means writing code" (G&T, 118). One cannot begin to discuss these two books without commenting on the unorthodox styles of their writing, which are more than byproducts of or framing devices for their arguments. What *The Exploit* stages is a questioning not only of the ontology of networks but of subjects and agency: the human and the "unhuman" or the "unhuman within the human" (G&T, 154). Although its authors use "we" throughout the text, they propose that the named subject may have little to do with the network's power. By contrast, Wark's theory of gaming is presented from the perspective of the *subject-gamer*—or rather, the "gamer as theorist," who, in gaming, makes theory. Wark may draw attention to the loss of disciplinary spaces like sculpture or painting, but he nevertheless writes from within a modern paradigm of subjects and subjectivity, where gamer-actors are social beings who enact certain gestures with their thumbs. As we'll see, the different approaches to subjectivity bear crucial consequences for thinking anew about both global-political practice and whatever remains of an avant-garde artistic practice.

Before I fully plunge into the theoretical ramifications of their arguments, it seems only fair to provide details about these rich and provocative texts. For both books are invaluable resources for those reconsidering the topicality and viability of artistic practice and artistic subjectivity within contemporary culture, newly understood as shot through with the vectors of networks and games. As Wark proclaims: "The artist is now the insider who finds a new style of trifling with [rather than playing] the game. The artist as outsider is dead, for there is no outside from which to signal back across the border" (W, 98). If the artist as a human, named subject-actor still exists, it may only be as the manager of networks, the owner of copyrights and patents, or as the one who "trifles" with or exploits the rules of the game.

Each chapter of Wark's *Gamer Theory* provides a well-crafted set of paragraph-length notations or aphorisms on a range of video games (from *The Cave*<sup>TM</sup> to *SimEarth*) as allegories for philosophical categories or moments of thought. Each of the nine chapters, all with twenty-five paragraphs each, is

