

# RTMARK

## Sabotage and the New World Order

RTMARK (<http://rtmark.com/>) was established to combat the unchecked global rise of corporate power that Abraham Lincoln anticipated with foreboding in the US.\* To accomplish this ambitious goal RTMARK harnesses and focuses the dissatisfaction of corporate workers everywhere.

The core of the RTMARK system is a database on the World Wide Web that lists projects of sabotage and subversion, as well as financial rewards for their accomplishment. By allowing funders to speculate in projects anonymously, RTMARK displaces their liability, serving the same purpose to these investors as a corporation serves to its owners.

RTMARK does not censor, and any project that fulfills RTMARK's bottom line of subversion without physical injury is listed on the site. Thus project funders and proposers effectively determine RTMARK's direction.

Right before Christmas 1993, a group of US military veterans opposed to the use of war toys posted a project and its financial reward on what was then the RTMARK electronic bulletin board, or BBS. The Barbie Liberation Organization, formed especially to fulfill the project, switched the voice boxes of about 300 GI Joes and Barbie Dolls, and claimed the veterans' reward through RTMARK.

Before Christmas 1996, a programmer fulfilled a project to add homoerotic content to a macho video game; in his new version, of which 80,000 were released, boys showered each other with kisses. Through RTMARK, he collected the \$5000 that had been offered by a New York shopkeeper as a reward.

A year later, a small record label asked RTMARK to help fund an album of music illegally resampled from recording artist Beck. Through its new World Wide Web site, RTMARK was able to find a donor very quickly, allowing the album to be produced and distributed; it is now in its third printing.

Press about other successful RTMARK projects can be found on the RTMARK site.

Through these actions, RTMARK continues to be the industry leader in financing worker-based sabotage and other activities whose mechanisms and aims fall outside traditional valuation schemes. As the RTMARK system grows, it is our expectation that we will become the funding source for many kinds of blacklisted cultural production, which will improve the quality of life for everyone.

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. As a result of the war, corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed. I feel at this moment more anxiety for the safety of my country than ever before, even in the midst of war. God grant that my suspicions may prove groundless.

U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, Nov. 21, 1864, in a letter to Colonel William F. Elkins. (p. 40 of *The Lincoln Encyclopedia*, by Archer H. Shaw, New York: Macmillan 1950.)

## Fighting the Terrorists

Have you every actually seen a terrorist?

Brazil

*Wired*, February 1998: activist cyber-terrorists bring it all crashing down. Almost: a John-Wayne type in the Pentagon saves us.

The ultimate shock of the future, this, the whole earth brought to its knees by a cold, faceless entity, destructive but aimless: nothing human about it, its only manifestation a logo, a slogan, momentum, and some vague propaganda.

In other words, corporate power.

In the techno-corporate cybercult<sup>1</sup> for which *Wired* is a sacred text, it is dogma that there are no centers, no certainties, just ceaseless flux.

But the cult of course has some tenets, among them:

- Power is no longer in government.
- The human body is no longer the ultimate creation.
- The new power is corporate and virtual.
- Computer technology will one day replace the human brain.
- Opposition to the new power endangers us all.
- It is foolish and short-sighted to deny this.

This "paradigm shift," as it is called by the self-proclaimed "digerati," has two levels: the corporate/pragmatic, that shows up in *Wired*, and the fully theoretical and abstract, decreed by the likes of Marvin Minsky, Hans Moravec, et al.

These mystical halves, which complement and depend on each other, define an instant split-level religion. The more extreme half, full of apocalyptic predictions, serves to contextualize and make more exciting the worldly assertions of the other. This latter more accessible but still privileged sanctum, constantly outlined in *Wired* and other corporate literature, is the catechism in action; it allows the cult's mostly managerial-class adherents to feel themselves part of something millennial, and—perhaps the *raison d'être* of the whole edifice—it casts their entrepreneurial amorality as exalted, and ordains it.

As in any religion—or millennial world view, such as that other equally schizophrenic one, some of whose history we find here in Linz<sup>2</sup>—opposition, implied or real, is both needed and despised, essential and unthinkable.

For the cybercult, since scapegoating is so unfashionable and no real opposition exists, an enemy is invented. "Cyber-terrorism," unlike the Jews, does not seem to have a real-world component (appropriately enough for a virtual religion), but it serves well as the shadow and

enemy of corporate power, displacing any lingering unconscious unease with the new order onto something that looks just like it but stands as its opposite, and that never needs be confronted (except by Harrison Ford, the updated John Wayne). And it taps in well to the "terrorism" that has replaced communist power as the televised enemy for culture at large.

## **Fighting the Terror**

The popular glorification of corporate power, in whatever form it takes—techno-utopianism, techno-paganism, etc.—is misguided and weak-minded at best, considering what is known about how corporations behave. In fifty years it may look like the boosterism of television, the automobile, or the atomic bomb look to us now—or it may look like certain impressive rallies burnt hard on our retinas.

The sort of demonization inevitable at the end of the hype, delirious as it may seem, may (conceivably) portend a real challenge to the notion of constructive sabotage, especially if "we"—those who do not buy into the techno-corporate cybercult, and who fight the system it worships—are at all successful.

But what is really frightening about the cybercult's fanciful enemy is that it points up the total lack of an actual one. Since corporate power has indeed become globally ascendant, as the "digerati" assert, the lack of a real opposition is frightening.

RTMARK was created in 1991 to help remedy this situation. Our first task was to examine the special conditions to which the lack of resistance might be ascribed. The history of RTMARK can be seen as an evolution in our thinking on this matter.

In approaching the problem of opposing corporate power, we immediately had to acknowledge that corporate power is different, essentially and perceptually, from the government power against which there is such a long and varied tradition of resistance. Corporate power is alien and faceless, a disembodied, unlocalized, inhuman force that constantly thrusts itself upon us, but has only a multitude of seemingly dissociated aims and no position we can count on, or against which we can fight. Its horror can't even be named—"kafkaesque" may be close, but neither it nor "orwellian" will really do, because in Kafka and Orwell the nightmare forces ostensibly emanate from a malevolent or amoral government, not from countless disembodied entities that, like wraiths in a video game, can never conceivably be destroyed all at once by any weapon, ideological or physical.

Luckily for the activist, the flexibility of corporate power, its lack of a center, comes with a price: it has no brain. It may be as tenacious as a virus, but it also has the intelligence of one: mechanical, soulless, miniscule. It is very easy to attack, and unlike government, it usually reacts to attack by mutation—which makes for its durability, but also gives protest unprecedented power to achieve immediate results.

This mutating quality led RTMARK to settle on widespread, individually-conceived product sabotage as a likely method of combating corporate power. With a sustained barrage of attacks, it was reasoned, substantial changes might be effected. The changes might not be permanent, but the barrage could be.

In order to position itself as a permanent fixture rather than as an interim solution, RTMARK decided to model itself on corporations, i.e. not model itself at all, and define itself only by logos and slogans. The pronouncements in this paper, earnest as they are, do not define

RTMARK; RTMARK is defined by the way it is perceived and used, and our only face is our graphics, sound bytes, and occasional products. Thus RTMARK, like a corporation, is positioned to adapt and mutate as conditions necessitate.

It is easy, given the discouraging mutability of corporate power, the impossibility of determining a single characteristic or creed that defines it, to fall into the trap of choosing to believe that it is relatively benign. Since so little is really known about it, almost all hypotheses seem equally valid, and it is easiest, after all, to accept the most pleasant. In this case, the most pleasant is that the shift of power from governmental to corporate represents an improvement. Since governments are often quite bad—we know this, because of the Nazis and because anti-government protest has told us this for at least hundreds of years—it stands to (unexamined) reason that what remains after the evaporation of government will be good.

The desire to see corporate power as benign, even in the face of all evidence, is understandable. Since this desire renders the fight against corporate power difficult, even with the machinery in place, RTMARK decided, in 1997, to shed its veil of secrecy and attempt to act as a nexus for perceptions and insecurities about corporate power and the struggle to fight it. RTMARK was also spurred by the publicizing of another group's large reward for the year's best act of "creative sabotage," which we perceived to indicate a need for a public anti-corporate presence.

We began by allowing previous RTMARK workers to speak with the media, and by replacing the dial-in system with a web site (<http://rtmark.com/>). While this change has not dramatically increased the number of actions RTMARK has been able to sponsor, it has allowed RTMARK to publicize them in a manner that would have been impossible before. In at least two cases, this has resulted in widespread coverage that probably would not have occurred otherwise.

By becoming more public, RTMARK has also come to serve as a sort of public space where anti-corporate activists can meet each other online. If we judge our success at this as a corporation might, using typical benchmarks, we come away quite encouraged. In the eight or so months since our move to the Web, our site has received nearly twenty thousand visits, and several ongoing collaborations have resulted from our matchmaking efforts. And we can only assume that some of those who see the RTMARK site or read about RTMARK in *The New York Times*, *Spin*, *Entertainment Today*, *The Village Voice*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and dozens of other media outlets the world over, will find their own ideas sparked; the steady stream of project proposals we receive would support this conclusion.

Considering RTMARK's long-term aim of establishing a permanent and significant opposition to corporate power, however, we are forced to acknowledge that our successes so far have been rather modest. Given the timescale, we continue to believe in widespread individually-conceived sabotage as a means of fighting the hydra that is the corporate, but must admit that even our shift to a more public mechanism has at best barely begun to effect the indomitable resistance that has always been our agenda.

To determine our next course of action, we have turned our attention to a system that might be inhibiting the critique of corporate power at a more mechanical (rather than illusory) level: the stock market. By interesting nearly everyone in corporate welfare through ownership of stocks or mutual funds, corporations have created a conservative majority whose bottom line is the same as their own, consciously and unconsciously: what's good for GM is good for me

<sup>3</sup>. The media's positioning of economic news in the boldest headlines helps extend the effect beyond those who are wealthy enough to own stock.

RTMARK must be able to offer, perceptually if not actually, an alternative to the endless flow of bounty provided by the stock market. Much as the National Endowment for the Arts, even with its slim offerings, provided the illusion of an alternative to corporate systems—an illusion more important than the actual sums (and which has now vanished, along with the NEA's influence)—we at RTMARK hope to provide a similar illusory but conceptually powerful alternative to the "bottom line" of corporate power.

To effect such a perceptual change, we must create a steady stream of funding to replace the spotty financing our projects now enjoy. RTMARK has recently examined a possible means of establishing a more reliable funding stream, whose real effects, while not as important as the perceptual ones, will perhaps not be negligible either.

RTMARK's new "mutual fund" system will most likely be fully implemented by the time this article is published. Much as timid consumers can be persuaded to wager their savings on corporate stocks by means of mutual funds, in which direct contact with the stocks is relegated to "experts," so we believe that by classifying projects according to theme, risk, and so on, and taking care of the specific details of allotment, we can assuage some of the fear that might interfere with investment in specific projects. Also, it will allow all projects in a category to be fully funded, so long as the maximum project reward is available within the fund.

Moreover, we are currently recruiting "celebrity fund managers" who, having demonstrated their staying power as reliable producers of cultural dividends, are eminently suited to decide on distribution to the cultural enterprises our projects represent. By lending the power of their name to groups of projects, they might interest investors who otherwise would be afraid of the cultural risk of supporting RTMARK projects. The high profile lent by these managers will also help increase the perceived profile of the RTMARK alternative.

We have received positive responses from several of our choices for "celebrity fund managers," and will most likely have implemented this system as well by the time of publication of this article <sup>4</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Luckily for the activist, the primary reason the new ascendancy of corporate power has been so meekly accepted is probably not its facelessness, nor the stock market, but rather simply its age. It has only been a short time since the model of the corporation replaced that of government as a personal guiding metaphor, since we've stopped thinking of "fair government" in favor of "productive investment" (and since Harrison Ford replaced John Wayne). The old power regime, with all its metaphors, existed for hundreds of years, and protest had just as long to develop; the new techno-corporate mythology is still being formulated and implanted, and there has just not been time to learn how to fight it.

It may be that our current steady efforts will at some point reach a sort of "critical mass," at which time the idea of sabotage will lodge in the popular consciousness with the force necessary to effect widespread change, but we cannot count on this. Whether by the means we are currently considering, or by means we have yet to consider (and which may reach us from

the public at large), we will continue to strive to expand RTMARK's ability to combat corporate power and the ludicrous but dangerous mythologies that support it.

Until sabotage seems more natural and obvious than going to the coffee machine, RTMARK will not be able to claim real success. Until conscientious resistance is so common that corporations anticipate it everywhere, and are constantly attempting to pre-empt it with conscientious behavior, RTMARK will need to examine its methods and consider whether new ones might be more effective.

<sup>1</sup> "Something is hovering over our heads which looks like a 'cybercult.' We have to acknowledge that the new communication technologies will only further democracy if, and only if, we oppose from the beginning the caricature of global society being hatched for us by big multinational corporations throwing themselves at a breakneck pace on the information superhighways." Paul Virilio, "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!", CTHEORY, 1995

<sup>2</sup> We would not be the first to compare the techno-cult "paradigm" with that of the Nazis; see for example the discussion between Paul Virilio and Adrien Sina at <http://aleph.afuu.fr/web/aleph/COMM/lists/archi-www.96/msg00011.html>.

<sup>3</sup> After WWII, of course, the U.S. government used a similar technique for similar ends by practically giving away suburban houses to returning G.I.s, thus creating a land-owning, conservative generation, and in the process emptying the once powerful and liberal inner cities.

<sup>4</sup> We are in the initial stages of investigating another option, which we will only implement if the "mutual fund" system does not yield substantial results. This option would represent RTMARK's first-ever departure from subsisting on individual, non-organizational donations, as it would mainly depend on funding channeled through a group of cultural activists who call themselves the Cultural Terrorism Agency. The CTA taps into the resonance between cultural activist aims and those of Islamic fundamentalist groups: they both desire to oppose property (i.e. excessive, gratuitous, obscene ownership of it) and representation (in one case, of humans; in the other, of products). The CTA simply funnels the funds to individuals in North America who are engaged in these pursuits; RTMARK is discussing the ethics of accepting CTA funds, which the CTA has in principle offered. The greater availability of funds might in turn speed up the project-generation and -accomplishment process considerably, and it would substantially ground the perception of RTMARK as a solid alternative to corporate funding sources in the wake of the NEA. At this time, however, because of internal RTMARK disagreements, we will only consider this alternative as a last resort.