

activists to cover the 2002 antiwar demonstrations, it was long relatively unknown in the Japanese activist community. It finally gained some recognition for G8 protest reporting and collaborating with the Japanese G8medianetwork in 2008.

Challenges faced by IMCs in Asia include language barriers within local collectives (e.g., IMCjp members include Japanese-only and English-only speakers) and Anglo-centrism within the Indymedia network. The latter has manifested itself technologically in software hard to adapt to Asian scripts (IMC Burma lost momentum before successfully addressing this issue on their site), including the global IMC mailing list server, and organizationally by a process for joining the network that requires a high level of English skill. A frustrated Taiwanese activist wryly signed his postings to the New-IMC list (which is responsible for accreditation), “Don’t hate the English, be English,” a take-off on the Indymedia slogan “Don’t hate the media, be the media.”

Another issue in some places (e.g., Korea) was “IMColonialism.” English-speaking activists from the global network often offered help with setting up local IMCs but sometimes went too far in taking the initiative without understanding local conditions. East Asian IMC activists tried to connect regionally, for example, through Asia-Pacific meetings, the IMC-Oceania project, and personal contacts.

*Gabriele Hadl*

*See also* Alternative Media; Alternative Media (Malaysia); Anarchist Media; Indymedia (The Independent Media Center); Indymedia and Gender; Internet Social Movement Media (Hong Kong)

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## INSTALLATION ART MEDIA

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Installation art describes artworks that the audience physically enters or that take into account the physical and conceptual relationships among objects, the space in which they are arranged, and the body of the viewer. This admittedly broad definition suggests the sheer diversity of artworks grouped under this category. Installations may employ ordinary or “found” objects; industrially fabricated materials; traditional visual art forms; organic material such as soil, blood, or food; screen-based media like film or video; the performing arts; lighting and sound design; and even scent. They may be full of sensory stimuli or visually restrained, even nearly invisible. Installations may transform a gallery’s white cube into a seemingly autonomous world or employ the social, physical, and historic characteristics of the place where they are produced, as site-specific artworks do. Some installations may invite extended, individual contemplation, whereas others spur the audience to group action.

Thus, it is impossible to speak in broad strokes about installation art. The term itself was not even settled until the late 1980s, when major museums began to commission artists to produce original works, often with very high production costs, for their galleries. Today, installation art often calls to mind large-scale, museum-based, and highly capitalized projects that require small armies of technical advisers, production assistants, and professional fabricators. However, installation art has a much longer history, beginning with some of the politicized cultural movements of the early 20th century, continuing through the unmarketable, ephemeral “environments” of experimental artists of the 1950s and 1960s, and coming into its own in the 1970s and 1980s alongside artistic engagement in feminist, gay rights, and antiwar movements.

While canonical art histories tend to downplay the ways that some installation art has furthered political goals, tensions between art’s symbolic and sensory roles and the more goal-directed needs of social movements have often complicated attempts for artists to work within groups dedicated to achieving political change. Particularly in the

Euro-American tradition, which has traditionally prized artwork for its alleged universalism and transcendence of time, place, and politics, artists are often ambivalent about “instrumentalizing” their work in pursuit of specific social aims. Some of the most successful examples of art installations in social movements have involved the politics of representation: Marginalized groups have often successfully used art in general, and installation art in particular, to demand cultural and political visibility on their own terms. Finally, the existence of a distinct genre known as “installation art” may be coming to a close, as artists today are increasingly employing varied strategies in their work, of which recognizable art objects and art experiences are only a small part.

### A Prehistory of Installation Art

Although the term *installation art* did not even exist 50 years ago, art historians have traced it to early 20th-century European avant-gardes. The term *avant-garde* originally meant a small, highly skilled group of soldiers who would explore the terrain ahead of a larger army. In a cultural sense, avant-garde refers to people and artworks that are challenging, innovative, or ahead of their time. Traditionally the avant-garde existed in conflict with established social norms and dominant aesthetics. Although some were committed to “art for art’s sake,” other avant-gardes extended their critiques to more political issues. The tension between the purely aesthetic and more politicized approaches to art continues.

The Dada movement, which arose in Europe in reaction to World War I’s colossal industrialized slaughter, is one avant-garde associated with the prehistory of installation art. Dada artists attacked the basic philosophies of the warring European empires, rejecting their official values of beauty, art, and rationalism for their inability to direct away from war. Radical experiments in music, poetry, and theater were performed at the Cabaret Voltaire, which opened in 1916 in Zurich, Switzerland, a neutral country. These performances often mined the detritus of an emerging consumer culture, obscured the boundaries between audience and performer, and engaged all the spectators’

senses—all of which would prove highly influential in installation art. Other Dada groups were active in Europe and the United States and developed techniques that would revolutionize graphic design, literature, dance, and music.

However, the movement is better characterized as cultural rather than political. Although political issues were fiercely debated in the pages of various Dada publications, relatively few artists outside of the Berlin group became directly involved with antiwar organizing. Dada’s most savage critiques were often leveled at the art world itself. In 1917, Marcel Duchamp famously entered a urinal (which he purchased at a hardware store and signed with a pseudonym) into a New York art exhibition that had claimed it would exhibit all entries. Whether offended by the symbolism or unwilling to accept an industrial object as art, the artists running the exhibition chose to hide *Fountain*, as it was satirically titled. Duchamp had exposed the exclusivity and conservatism of even the self-described avant-garde.

After the Dada movement disintegrated in the early 1920s, a former member of Berlin Dada, Kurt Schwitters, began what some art historians consider the first installation. Between 1923 and 1937, when he fled the Nazis, Schwitters slowly transformed several rooms of his home in Hannover, Germany, into a total sculptural environment he called the *Merzbau*. Using largely low-cost materials such as newspaper, cloth, wire, dead flowers, and glue, Schwitters obsessively constructed and re-constructed a highly personal artwork resembling at times a cave or cathedral and featuring intimate grottoes and shrines. Although a very private viewing experience that did not address the world beyond the studio, *Merzbau* contrasted with the European system of valuing artworks that was based on craft mastery, expensive materials, and, above all, the ability for collectors to buy and sell art objects. It would inspire later artists who became discouraged with art’s role as a capitalist commodity.

Some artists associated with Dada, especially from the Paris group, went on to work as Surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s. Surrealism also viewed Enlightenment rationalism as a root of violence and oppression, but the Surrealists more often

used traditional art media, such as painting; acknowledged a relationship to art history; and created work that was often beautiful. Surrealists were fascinated with the power of the unconscious mind and the theories of Sigmund Freud. Several Surrealist manifestos explicitly linked the liberation of the imagination with political revolution, and many Surrealists were actively involved in communist, leftist, and anticolonial political movements. The Surrealists were aware of the tensions between their political sympathies and the prestigious art venues for their work. They began exhibiting artwork in ways that they hoped would liberate the imagination and at the same time disrupt market-oriented art spectatorship and collection. In 1938, the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris brought together more than 300 individual works in a specially designed environment now widely seen as a precursor to later installation art. Paintings and sculptures were hung tightly together on walls, doors, and pedestals while found objects were strewn around the gallery. In one corner, Salvador Dalí installed a pond, complete with water lilies, moss, and reeds, beside an antique-style bed with ruffled sheets. Like later installation art, the exhibition engaged all the senses; the smell of roasting coffee wafted through the space while recordings of screaming psychiatric patients assaulted spectators' ears. To top it all off, the exhibition opening was held in complete darkness, and visitors were given flashlights to explore the space and view the artwork. The exhibition intentionally overloaded the senses and provoked the subconscious mind to overcome habitual ways of thinking, viewing, and feeling.

Another avant-garde movement, Constructivism, arose in Russia in support of the Bolshevik Revolution's official goals of social and economic equality. Constructivist artists were dedicated to finding a visual and material vocabulary for expressing communist values and producing a revolutionary consciousness. They believed that the bold, unfamiliar language of abstraction and modernism could shock the viewer into seeing the world in a fresh way, and they produced countless propaganda posters and advertisements for new, state-run enterprises. Most often identified as a precursor of installation art is Vladimir Tatlin's proposed *Monument for the Third International*, which would have stood 100 meters higher than

the Eiffel Tower. Fabricated of steel and inspired by what Tatlin described as a "machine aesthetic," the tower would have symbolized the strength of the new Soviet Union's industrial workers, even as it also provided space for the public meetings and screenings that the new citizen needed. The utopian project suggested that space could embody revolutionary values and actually produce new kinds of social relationships for the viewers who entered it—an idea that continues to inspire some installation artists today.

The fate of Constructivism highlights some of the tensions that often have complicated artists' attempts to work with social and political movements. The belief that people need to be "shocked" comes across as more than a little arrogant. Not everyone wanted to be shocked—including many ranking Soviet officials. Constructivism and other avant-garde approaches were often criticized for being too difficult for the common people to understand, too similar to Western "bourgeois" art, and too abstract to succeed as propaganda. Constructivism was eventually banned, along with any other experimental art, when Joseph Stalin declared Socialist Realism the Soviet official artistic style in 1932.

This conflict is often replayed when artists work with campaigns for social and political change, which sometimes want artists to spread their message engagingly and understandably. Politically sympathetic artists, especially those trained in Europe or the United States, are often concerned that nuance and subtlety will be lost in the process. Often, like the Zurich Dadaists, artists are more interested in critiquing the underlying structures of belief that they see as producing the social conditions they abhor than intervening directly to change those conditions. This tension has produced a subtle but important difference between "activist" and "critical" art.

### Critique or Activism?

Western aesthetic theory has evaluated artwork on narrow assumptions, usually ignoring the very specific cultural origins of these assumptions. Works of art were to be beautiful, without being merely pretty, and certainly not cute. Good art was autonomous of context, specific knowledge, or any special relationship to the audience. The best

art was believed to be transcendent and universal: A masterpiece would be so judged in any time and place. Clearly, artwork produced within a social movement could clash with these assumptions. An artwork addressing injustice may very well not be beautiful. A play written for an activist organization is not autonomous, and a poster addressing a topical or local issue may not aspire to be universal. Although these assumptions have been roundly rejected, most recently by feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial criticism, they remain so deeply rooted that they continue to influence even their critics.

The notion of artistic autonomy has been particularly persistent. Cultural theorist Theodor Adorno provided one of the most influential Marxist defenses of artistic autonomy when he criticized political artists for presenting didactic, propagandistic work that oversimplified political complexity, debased the intelligence of the audience, and opted for a tidy dualism of good and evil. For Adorno, artistic autonomy could be repurposed for liberatory ends, a way to perpetually interrogate society, to ask the questions that unsettled one's own political allies—in other words, an open-ended “criticality” over a topically specific “activism.” Adorno argued that formal innovations were important because they unsettled received beliefs.

Meanwhile in the 1950s and 1960s, a group of young, largely male, American artists were rediscovering the work of earlier European avant-gardes and beginning to create expanded sculptural “environments” that blurred the line between viewer and participant. In the late 1950s, Allan Kaprow began to create large, sculptural assemblages composed of paper, found objects, and other low-cost materials. Over time, the assemblages required greater physical engagement by the viewer and are now seen as among the first examples of installation art. In *Penny Arcade* (1957), viewers had to move and peer around strips of cloth hung in front of wall-hung pieces; in *Words* (1962), viewers physically entered a two-room space and were asked to rearrange words painted on cardboard piece hung on the gallery wall.

Around the same time, Kaprow began to produce what he called Happenings, or loosely scripted events in which the audience was asked to perform particular tasks singly or as a group,

thereby obliterating the distinction between performer and audience. Although there was rarely topical political content to the work and the degree of participation remained controlled by the artist, Kaprow sought to physically, intellectually, and emotionally engage the viewer. He implicitly suggested that a participatory art was more populist and democratic than an art object meant to be appreciated from afar, and he traced a connection between his projects of the early 1960s and the counterculture that arose soon afterward. Like Adorno, however, Kaprow preferred art that enacted a political stance through its *form* rather than promoted a political position through its *content*.

For some artists, however, the Vietnam War, anticolonial, and Black Power movements, the New Left, second-wave feminism, and the hippie counterculture were too urgent to be ignored. By 1969—the year after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy and the same year that the Stonewall raid touched off the gay liberation movement—many artists had come to see themselves as a political force. Organizations like the Art Workers' Coalition, the Guerilla Art Action Group, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Angry Arts Against the War in Vietnam, and the Women Artists in Revolution were founded, and members often began their activism by singling out the part of the power structure that most immediately touched artists' lives: major art institutions. Over the next few years, these and other grassroots groups sponsored frequent protests, targeting museums with defense industry ties, exhibitions that excluded women and minorities, and a system of sales that enriched art galleries at the expense of artists. For many of these politicized artists, the only rational decision was to abandon traditional forms like painting and sculpture that could easily be sold to hang in a million-dollar home or become just another part of an investment portfolio.

As an art form that seemed to resist commodification, installation art proliferated alongside other developing forms like performance art, video art, process art, and earth art. New, artist-run galleries, often operated collectively, opened in former industrial lofts, church basements, and temporary storefronts. Installation art seemed to embody precisely the revolution in form that Adorno advocated. Whereas “autonomous” paintings and

sculptures existed apart from the viewer as “masterpieces,” installation art required a physical encounter between the viewer and the artwork. This dependence of the art on viewer participation was associated with a culture of openness and a politics of radical democracy.

Moreover, by the early 1970s, poststructuralist theory had begun to identify Western culture’s enthronement of vision over the other senses with a drive to impose order through differentiation, control, and domination. Installation art’s emphasis on multisensory, embodied experience implicitly challenged this. Finally, the immersive quality of installations meant that there was no single “correct” perspective from which they could be viewed; each individual viewer had his or her own unique experience of the work of art. This was in keeping with attacks against the supposed “universality” of Western culture leveled by feminist and anticolonial movements. Installation art seemed an almost intrinsically “critical” form in Adorno’s sense.

However, even during the height of the ferment, relatively few artists employed explicitly political themes or content in their work or became politically involved in other ways. Perhaps Adorno may have reinforced many artists’ individualistic impulses by giving them a political rationale to make work the art establishment would embrace.

The artists who most fully realized the potential of installation art to work reciprocally with social movements were those for whom the art world was not a safe bastion. Women, gays and lesbians, and people of color faced routine discrimination in the art world in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, and the work of these artists demonstrates that political installation art can be *both* formally innovative *and* activist. These artists used installation to liberate their own consciousness from oppression and to articulate an identity in opposition to the stereotyping and discrimination of the dominant culture.

### *Womanhouse* and the Feminist Art Program

Recognizing that female art students were often openly ridiculed and harassed by their male colleagues and professors, the artist Judy Chicago founded the first feminist art programs in the United States, at California State University–Fresno in 1970 and, with Miriam Schapiro, at the

California Institute of the Arts in 1971. Chicago and Schapiro wanted to create a collaborative, mutually nurturing and emotionally responsive environment in keeping with feminist values, in opposition to the highly competitive, individualistic ethos of mainstream art schools. The program used techniques developed by women’s “consciousness-raising” groups and encouraged students to explore the political aspects of their personal lives in their artwork.

In 1971–1972, the feminist art class took over an abandoned Los Angeles mansion slated for demolition. Under the direction of Chicago and Schapiro, 21 female students transformed the entire building into a cooperative installation called *Womanhouse*. The installation explored the gendered nature of domestic space, simultaneously challenging patriarchal ideas of “a woman’s place,” celebrating women’s bodily experiences, and proclaiming the creativity of feminine-associated art forms such as embroidery, cooking, lacemaking, and quilting.

In *Nurturant Kitchen*, by Vicki Hodgetts, Susan Frazier, and Robin Weltsch, every surface of the room was painted pink, even the appliances, to symbolize the kitchen as the ultimate feminine space. Plastic fried eggs were fastened to the ceiling and morphed into breasts on the walls to symbolize the dual sexual and caregiving roles assigned to women. As in Kaprow’s environments, visitors were invited to interact with the objects: The breasts were soft and spongy to the touch, and the kitchen drawers could be opened to reveal collaged imagery of exotic vacation locales.

Another installation was Faith Wilding’s *Womb Room*, a much more minimal environment, which cocooned the visitor in exquisite crochet work and invited contemplation. Judy Chicago’s own contribution, *Menstruation Bathroom*, confronted the viewer with a visceral tableau crammed with thousands of feminine hygiene products, many of which appeared to be used. Chicago’s bathroom was particularly unsettling to many visitors at the time, and her insistence on locating feminist politics in the bodily experiences of womanhood has been criticized more recently as heavy-handed and dangerously simplistic.

Nevertheless, *Womanhouse* was a powerful example of feminist pedagogy that transformed the lives of many of the female students. The project,

visited by nearly 10,000 people and reviewed in *Time* magazine, provided a powerful set of images and stories that reinforced the work of feminist organizers in other sectors.

### Chicano Art Movement and the Border Arts Workshop

The Chicano art movement was another artist effort that grew from a broader social and political struggle. The term *Chicano* is used to describe politicized Mexican Americans. It connotes identification with one's Mexican, Spanish, and Indigenous heritage in opposition to accepting the categories of White America (such as Hispanic) or the pressure to assimilate. The movement began in the mid-1960s when activists supporting United Farm Workers' labor struggles began producing graphics. The art movement grew quickly as both vernacular and college-trained artists used visual means to express frustration and rage at a deeply racist society and inspire others to resist.

Like feminist artists, Chicanas/os wanted to celebrate the popular, culturally specific visual expressions that were devalued by mainstream aesthetics. Chicano art embraced so-called low culture—the world of advertising imagery, bright colors, plastic knick-knacks, and “folk” art motifs—and created work that was a celebration of life and a nose-thumbing to middle-class White ideas of taste and decorum. While much of the art took the forms of mural painting, posters, and sculpture, many installations were also created by artists who identified with the Chicana/o art movement, especially Chicana feminists. Artists like Amalia Mesa-Baines were inspired by the tradition of home altar-making that was an important part of Mexican religious expression, often tended by women. In *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río* (1984), Mesa-Baines placed the 1940s Hollywood film star at the center of an elaborate altar festooned with lace and covered in candles and ritual objects, celebrating her as a bilingual, binational heroine, whose successful career on both sides of the border suggests cultural and personal possibilities beyond assimilation.

The Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) was an outgrowth of the Chicana/o art movement founded in San Diego in 1984 by the artist David Avalos and the Centro

Cultural de la Raza. The group, which included dozens of collaborators over the years, organized scores of events on the U.S.–México border between 1984 and 2000 to address issues of migration, binational culture, immigrant rights, and the militarization of the border. BAW/TAF sponsored and produced installations, videos, performance art, direct actions, and public dialogue that brought together artists, writers, activists, scholars, and ordinary people from both sides of the border. Their “artwork” was as much organizing experiences and discussions as it was producing objects. The BAW/TAF was less interested in “shocking” the viewer than in using accessible images, forms, and experiences to generate dialogue around pressing social issues.

### Artists and the AIDS Crisis

One of the most serious social issues of the 1980s was the AIDS pandemic, yet in the early years of the disease there was next to no public dialogue about it. The disease had claimed 30,000 lives in the United States (and tens of thousands more around the world) by the time then-president Ronald Reagan publicly uttered the word *AIDS* in 1986. In 1987, activists, frustrated with previous efforts to draw attention to and destigmatize the disease, founded the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, better known as ACT UP. ACT UP was dedicated to using direct action to end the AIDS crisis.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art invited ACT UP to produce an installation about their work. They created *Let the Record Show* in the museum's storefront window to frame the disease as a political and human rights issue, not a matter of personal failing. They featured an enlarged photograph of Nazi officials at the Nuremberg Trials, with cutouts of U.S. officials placed in the role of defendants. Each figure had a marker at its feet with a quotation reflecting a “do nothing” or “blame the victim” approach to the crisis. An LED display cycled through statistics about the disease. The installation, visible to the public even without entering the museum, was so successful that members of ACT UP created their own group in 1988 and began to produce art about AIDS exclusively. This group, called Gran Fury, primarily produced graphic art and leveraged its good relationships with major art institutions to gain access to public

spaces, such as billboards, that they never would have been able to get on their own.

Gran Fury was not the first artistic group to address the AIDS crisis. The collaborative effort known as Group Material, initiated in 1980, became known for their installations and public actions on many topics, including what they saw as the interlocking issues of AIDS, the crisis of affordable housing, and the future of democracy. Group Material's work took the form of visually spare installations that joined together documents, videos, slogans, pictures, art objects, and consumer products that revealed various aspects of the complex issues they addressed. Like the Border Arts Workshop, Group Material transformed curation—the selection of objects and programming of events—into its own form of art. Although their work was much less visceral than Gran Fury's, Group Material believed that the process of sorting through the information they presented and engaging in discussion, even argument, in the events they put on was itself a model of the democratic process that is necessary to address any political and social crisis.

### Indigenous Rights

By the 1980s, university-trained American Indian artists were beginning to receive some recognition from art institutions for work that drew on installation, performance, and video art and addressed issues of representation and politics. Native artists like Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho) used the opportunity to openly contest how American history has been told and for whom. Heap of Bird's 1990 project *Building Minnesota* consisted of 40 signs commemorating the 40 Dakota warriors executed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 and 1865 for fighting in the Dakota War. The bilingual signs, in English and Dakota, visually mimicked the look of historical markers and were installed in a historic district of Minneapolis as a reminder of the genocidal price of American "progress."

Other Native artists produced work blurring the boundaries between performance and installation. James Luna (Luiseño) is best known for his *Artifact Piece* (1985–1987), a "living installation" in which he donned a loin cloth and lay in a glass display case in San Diego's Museum of Man. The

project addressed the early anthropologists' practice of kidnapping Indigenous people and forcing them to live in displays, but it also questioned how far the museum and its spectators had moved on—especially when legal protection for sacred Native American gravesites was not yet established. Viewers expecting a mannequin were shocked that Luna's figure was alive and quite unsettled when he reversed the power of their gaze by looking back at them. Luna's piece was so influential that it was restaged in 2008 by Erica Lord (Athabaskan/Dena'ina). Her reenactment, which was presented with Luna's cooperation at the National Museum of the American Indian, brought issues of gender to the forefront while focusing attention on whether anthropologists' and museum practices had in fact improved.

### The End of Installation Art?

All of these installation artworks underscore the near impossibility of differentiating installation artwork from other forms of artistic expression. Were the BAW/TAF and Group Material curators, organizers, or artists? Were Gran Fury and Heap of Birds' signs graphic design, intervention, or installation? Was *Artifact Piece* an installation or a performance? As installation art has been mainstreamed by museums interested in introducing contemporary art to patrons who want a good show, it has become harder to find someone who self-identifies as an "installation artist." Rather than play taxonomic games, more and more artists are taking a tactical, even pragmatic, approach to their work.

The Argentinean artist group Ala Plástica (Plastic Wing) is exemplary of this approach. From 1991, the artists were active in a small town just south of Buenos Aires. It is one of the most polluted spots in the world. Rather than presenting alarming images to shock a distant audience into action, critiquing the dualistic man versus nature thinking underlying environmental problems, or producing experiences to enable people to think differently about ecology, Ala Plástica worked with their neighbors—fishermen and farmers, scientists and teachers—to create programs that work simultaneously on the level of policy and metaphor. For example *Junco/Emergent Species* (1995) was a project that reinvigorated the ability of a

particular reed to purify coastal waters. Following extensive research, the native reed species was replanted, community organizing was undertaken to secure continued local government support, and educational programming was undertaken to renew the local people's connection with the plant, which had been a significant part of Indigenous life for hundreds of years. The installation art portion of the project involved site-specific, ephemeral constructions of reeds on the site, as well as a gallery installation that presented visitors with the many layers and strategies of the project.

However, Ala Plástica believed that all of their work, not merely the portion that can be exhibited, is art. They insisted that art constitutes a distinctive mode of engaging with human and natural realities. Unlike Adorno, they insisted that this change be made manifest in results. Artists like Ala Plástica are taking installation art's promise of democracy, multisensory experience, and attention to multiple perspectives and turning it into a method for aesthetic engagement, with the physical installation only one outcome among many, and possibly not the most important one.

It is premature to declare the "end" of installation art. However, it is likely more and more artists will find ways to reinvent both art and social movements through their work, perhaps finally overcoming the impasses of art and politics that marked the 20th century.

*Sarah Kanouse*

*See also* Anarchist Media; Environmental Movement Media; Feminist Media: An Overview; Indigenous Media in Latin America; Performance Art and Social Movement Media: Augusto Boal

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## INTERNET AND THE FALL OF DICTATORSHIP (INDONESIA)

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In the mid-1990s in Indonesia, the political opposition's uses of the Internet even managed to help topple a strongman (General Suharto) who, until his unanticipated resignation in May 1998, had been Asia's longest reigning postwar ruler. He had seized power in 1965 with U.S. support and then engineered a bloodbath of over half a million opponents, real and supposed. His regime was notorious for its corruption, and his army for savage suppression of dissent, especially during its attempt to annex eastern Timor (now the nation of Timor Leste) after Portuguese colonial rule collapsed there in 1974.

In the 1990s, however, Indonesian students, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and journalists marked a new era by speeding the regime's downfall. Intense discussions about democracy and human rights were held in cyberspace and then disseminated through photocopying downloaded materials. Many militant actions were also coordinated on the Internet.

As a result, endeavoring to keep a grasp on the Internet became close to an obsession for the regime. Try as it might, the state apparatus seemed unable to predict or contain its rapid growth. The other crucial if paradoxical aspect of the situation was that in Indonesia—even up to 2010—the Internet was still free of censorship, though certainly not of political surveillance. Thus, although activists belonging to the "illegal" faction of the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) might be living clandestinely and under assumed names, they were free to convey their propaganda on the web, and even insult the head of the armed forces and the president.

This meant that notwithstanding the draconic Anti-Subversion Law, a small desktop or laptop combined with a telephone connection enabled them to speak their minds without much fear of official retribution. Their words and ideas could travel throughout the country and even beyond its borders. Many came to use a number of simple but