



Words: Jesse Ashlock, Photo: Christopher Jones

"This is the hammer that killed John Henry," goes one version of the traditional "Spike Driver Blues." "Won't kill me, won't kill me, won't kill me." Inspired by the Bunyanesque legend of John Henry, a steel-driving black man who blasted railroad tunnels through post-Reconstruction West Virginia, the song recounts Henry's mythic race against a new mechanical Steel-Hammer that threatened his livelihood. He won, but promptly fell down and died, becoming a working class martyr and symbol of technology's power to oppress human beings.

John Henry is also the pseudonym used by all operatives of the geographically dispersed anarchist engineering collective Institute for Applied Autonomy. The group formed in 1998 with the same "won't kill me" spirit of the song, responding to what it perceived as a crisis in mainstream engineering ethics, which hold that engineers are not morally accountable for problems engendered by their technologies. "We believe that you are ethically tied to the stuff you make," says one John Henry, "and you need to take responsibility for that."

Seeing so many technologies developed to autocratic ends, IAA sought to create technologies that liberate. All would have both practical and discursive functions – they'd be useful, and they'd start conversations. They began with robots, like Little Brother, a pamphleteer that disseminated subversive literature, and GraffitiWriter, a four-wheeler that spray-painted oppositional texts. The latter inspired the more recent StreetWriter, a vehicular delivery system for massive messages viewable from buildings and low-flying planes.

But robots were just one mechanism for IAA to explore its concern with "the idea of individual and collective autonomy as they relate to technology." And though practically effective, they weren't always successful in sparking conversations, since reporters often just chuckled about those "wacky engineers." "We became very conscious of building the politics into the project, so they're completely inseparable," explains Henry. IAA's next undertaking, iSee, was a Web-based application that used mapping data of Manhattan closed circuit camera locations to chart "paths of least surveillance" across the island for concerned citizens. Well underway by September 11, the project gained relevance with the ensuing governmental assault on civil liberties and surveillance industry gold rush, prompting IAA's new motto: "Now More Than Ever."

Politics became still more inseparable from technology in last year's TXTmob, IAA's most potent tool yet in the battle for collective autonomy. A free text-messaging service allowing groups to quickly organize during demonstrations, TXTmob was tested at the Democratic National Convention and put to widespread use during August's Republican National Convention. Despite service shutdowns, TXTmob proved extremely effective, offering protesters both information and a feeling of solidarity. It was deployed again for the second Bush inauguration, and was ported to Ukrainian cell phone providers during the Orange Revolution.

What's striking about IAA's projects is that while all offer degrees of real-world usefulness, they also possess something rare in technology – a sense of humor. It's part of their discursive function. As another Henry puts it, "The playfulness is dead serious, and the seriousness is very playful." That dynamism exists because IAA's engineers are ultimately concerned with people, not corporate dollars. "We have a freedom you don't have in academia or working for corporations, in that we can do whatever it is we want," explains Henry. "We determine our own destiny. The drawback is that there's no paycheck that comes with it."

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