

## Corporate Space, Performance and Selfhood: Googleplex Sydney

Daniel Johnston

*How might performance studies scholars analyze corporate workspaces? What role does place play in mediating individual and corporate identities? This paper extends Jon McKenzie's (2001) theorization of performance in the corporate world (part of his rehearsal of a general theory of performance) and investigates how the spaces of business interact with worker performance and conceptions of selfhood. In the corporate sphere, 'performance' might mean providing dividends to shareholders and business image-management in order to maintain the confidences of employees and the public. By analyzing the places of corporate labor, one might uncover 'topographies of self' (Appadurai, 1990) specific to business worlds and an understanding of what 'work' means in our time (McDowell, 2003). This paper uses Google's Sydney office as a case study for the investigation. I suggest that discourses of creativity, leisure and the personal are engaged in a commodification of the self in this organization. Performance itself has become a paradigm for selfhood at work. Google represents a new kind of total institution (Goffman 1961) by creating social subjects not through coercion but willing participation.*

Key words: social performance; place; human geography; total institutions



*A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.*

(Goffman, 1961: 11)

### Introduction: Corporate Performance

*On the day of my appointment, I walk down from the University through the urban environment of Glebe and Ultimo towards Pyrmont. The city rises as a towering glass landscape to the right (Sydney*

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*is sometimes known as the Emerald City). The sun is shining pleasantly and speckled light is glistening off the water of the adjoining marina. Having taken a wrong turn, I find myself passing through the foyer of the Lyric Theatre and across the street to my destination. I go around the outside of the building and notice the shops and cafes on the ground floor. Entering into the atrium, I report to the front desk and made my way to the fifth floor. There are signs pointing me towards reception - through a simple glass door. It is notable that Google itself did not have a conspicuous presence from street level.*

As new technologies and media reshape the global social landscape, corporations increasingly influence everyday lives: in public, in private, at work and through leisure. Not only do businesses ‘perform’ for the wider public; they also construct and participate in a world of customers, consumers, workers, and content producers. Different meanings of the word ‘performance’ are also employed in corporate discourse. On the one hand, businesses emphasize key performance indicators, demonstrable results and shareholder returns. On the other hand, corporations are judged by whether or not their gestures and rhetoric are convincing (McKenzie, 2001). It may well be that the new paradigm for business is performance; but this play is serious. Large organizations manage investor confidence and public perceptions by ‘keeping up appearances’ while individual workers within companies are understood as ‘performing a role’. Efficiency and effectiveness are no longer the sole measures of performance; entertainment and persuasiveness have become equally if not more important. Corporate organizations enact aesthetic performances with very real effects.<sup>1</sup> The space of work is a key aspect of this aestheticization – place reflects and creates a certain model of self.

This essay is part of a larger project investigating ‘corporate performance’ and theatricality in the corporate world: intersections between theatre and business. Here I focus on corporate space and what it can tell us about identity, especially in relation to time. Other sections of the research focus on the use of theatre techniques in business training, product launches as theatrical events, and CEO performance personas. In what follows, I argue that ‘performance’ has become a paradigm in the contemporary business world, especially for a select group of workers for who labor is more akin to leisure. The broader investigation concerns theatricality in the ‘entrepreneurial self’ and a performative ‘technology of the self’ – a way of manufacturing and sustaining social subjects in a contemporary global economy (Foucault, 1988). In this context, performance is an emblem for subjectivity in the contemporary corporate world and this may well be reflected in the workplace itself.

What role does place play in mediating individual and corporate identities? Google’s Sydney office is the case study for this paper, yet it is the seeming antithesis of place and individual specificity: it is everywhere, outside of time, always in the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin (1992) writes about the aestheticization of politics and the necessary politicization of aesthetics in order to counter the effects of this process. Here, we see the aestheticization of corporations.

background, yet nowhere in particular.<sup>2</sup> Where is Google? Is it really as spaceless and atemporal as the Internet itself? What are the concrete everyday practices of this mythical place? After all, work never happens nowhere: in any organization, work must happen somewhere. The invention of a unique web search algorithm developed at Stanford by Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, analyzing the way in which web pages are linked together revolutionized the way that we search for information (Vise, 2005). Google has many different software platforms, apps and functions such as maps, Gmail, images, videos, and news. The word 'Google' apparently derives from 'googol', which refers to the number 1 followed by 100 zeros. (And a 'googolplex' is  $10^{\text{googol}}$ ). Indeed, the verb 'to google' has become so common place that it seems to be deeply embedded within everyday life – meaning to search on the Internet and also – tellingly – to search about a specific person in order to find information about them.

This multi-national IT giant holds a reputation for unusual workplace environments. My interest in the topic was sparked when I came across a clip from a travel program tour of the 'Googleplex' – the name given to Google's headquarters – in Mountain View, California: "home of the most extreme office perks in the country [...] one giant funhouse".<sup>3</sup> With in-house gyms, swimming pools, massage rooms, sleep-pods, café-style micro-kitchens, games and recreational areas and a free cafeteria, Google seemed to be a prime choice for thinking about a new type of corporate space drawing on design vocabularies of leisure, play – and as I argue – performance. The Google office is the subject of a recent movie, *The Internship*, as the company has become an object of public fascination – part techno-mystical mythology, part curiosity sideshow.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Google, creativity, leisure and the private sphere are directed towards a commodification of the self in its organization.

The obvious direction for investigating identity and the workplace from a performance studies perspective is to turn to the concept of 'performativity' – the idea that performances change the world and that social subjects are created by a series of acts and behaviors that precede them. These performances are given by the cultural world, reiterated by the individual, and passed back into social discourse (Richards, 2001). Performativity also derives from the philosophy of language and 'speech act theory' in which posits that words can do much more than describe the world; they change the state of affairs in it.<sup>5</sup> The words of a marriage ceremony perform the un-

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<sup>2</sup> For an interview with the interior designer of this space and images of Googles Sydney workplace, visit <http://www.indesignlive.com/articles/tv/the-futurespace-of-google#axzz2giwIMm00>. URL (consulted October 2013).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8wqS7VKAcw>. URL (consulted October 2013). Also see Crassey (2010). For an analysis of the Mountain View Googleplex in terms of 'informational culture', see Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2010).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, I wonder whether the wider theme of making technology company films has become a sub-genre itself with *The Social Network* and *Jobs*. On the wider development and increasing power of cyber culture, see Turner (2006).

<sup>5</sup> See 'The Performance of Language: Linguistic Approaches' in Carlson (1996: 56-75).

ion in reality. One might even apply the dramaturgical model of identity presented by Goffman (1959) that sees human behavior as ‘framed’ and potentially ‘keyed’ to new contexts. But to study Google using such conceptual framework would require an in-depth ethnographic study of everyday work practices that is beyond the scope of this article. In focusing on the workspace itself I am borrowing from human geography in emphasizing the deeply intertwined nature of the relationship between individuals and the spaces they inhabit (Casey, 1996; Cresswell, 2004). Elements of Google’s workplace design present a strong message about and to employees themselves as the organization presents carefully stage-managed appearances accessible to the wider public. The space is iconic of the staff and brand of Google and, as I argue, the social identities of those that inhabit and are created by the space.

The relationship between performance and organizational power is one aspect of the exploration of performance presented by Jon McKenzie’s (2001) *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. While rehearsing a general theory of performance, McKenzie notes the ‘liminal-norm’ in performance studies whereby the field gravitates towards practices intertwined with ritual, transformation and physical states of transcendence (2001: 23). Yet it is not entirely clear that performance studies should only concern these heightened states – performance permeates the strata of human life. McKenzie advocates a form of

resistance [that] destabilizes this formation through pockets of iterability, self-referential holes in which [the] outside is turned inside. Such pockets are located not only at the limits of social formations but also at their very core (2001: 25).

McKenzie also signals the different senses of ‘performance’ from aesthetic and cultural performance to technological performance, organizational performance to discursive performances of power, ideology and knowledge. He reflects upon how the word ‘performance’ is used in corporate discourse, and in particular, the playful conflation of different senses of the word. In fact, the senses of the word ‘performance’ are blurred in corporate contexts (2001:5-7); for McKenzie, the different layers in its meaning seep into one another. These strata are also interspersed in the Google workplace, as I will explore.

In what follows, I describe my office tour in some detail and offer some critical analysis of space, time and performance in the workplace. For the purposes of this essay, I will draw perspectives from human geography and sociology. Edward Soja’s (1996) concept ‘Thirdspace’ is particularly useful in understanding the combination of real and imagined space in this environment. I also consider Michel de Certeau’s (1984) ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ in the practice of everyday life – how individuals have the capacity to use spaces in unique, non-standard and subversive ways. And finally, I turn to sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1968) study of ‘total institutions’ with particular reference to the spatial features instantiated in this office. I will suggest that a new model of organizational power is apparent at Google in that the company utilizes and creates identity and individuality by means other than explicit coercion.



Figure 1. Exterior of The Googleplex Sydney (Workplace 6). Photograph: Daniel Johnston.

### The Sydney ‘Googleplex’: Come and Play

Through several contacts, I made enquiries as to whether it might be possible to conduct research about Google’s Sydney office.<sup>6</sup> I was met with positive response initially, though it needed to be passed through management for permission. I had wanted to shadow a worker for a day to get a sense of the office space as it was experienced in the everyday work environment. This request was rejected; in its place I was offered a tour. I accepted hastily. Recently, cyber security had been in the news at an international level and indeed, Google’s Sydney office (in a different one to that which I visited) had been hacked.<sup>7</sup> Under no circumstances was I to take photographs in the

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<sup>6</sup> One might debate whether the Sydney office should be termed a Googleplex given that the office is on two floors of a building shared by other tenants. The term is, of course, a portmanteau of Google and complex. I would go on to find out that such tacking on of Google to another term is commonplace and part of the conceptual *modus operandi* in the organisation.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/it-pro/security-it/australian-google-office-building-hacked-20130507-2j416.html>. URL (consulted October 2013).

office and I would need to be with my contact at all times. (I'll call her Mary-Ann.)<sup>8</sup> I was forming an impression of corporate space as secured space, separated off from public access, a place of closely guarded information, knowledge and power.

Even before I visited the building itself (situated in Pymont on the western side of the CBD) I was able to visit virtually. At the opening of the building in 2006 journalists were invited through and I was able to find publicity about the event. Of course, these tours were staged for the media, but provided some useful images to imagine what the space might be like. On Google Maps I observed the performative event of the employees playfully engaging with the 'street view' camera in a flash-mob-style 'happening' in 2011 (obviously they were privy to advanced notice of its arrival). My Google searches of the Sydney office returned information about *Workplace 6* (which houses other companies such as Accenture management consultants) and boasts its green credentials and environmental awards, while also marketing itself as a venue and commercial space.

The immediate surroundings of the building lend an air of entertainment and leisure – with close proximity to Star Casino, The Lyric Theatre, Foxtel entertainment, and various media and advertising quarters. The locale stands apart from the city itself and looks on, bordering onto Darling Harbour (a tourist precinct) and hosts a luxury boat mooring enclave. (This borrowing of performative place has resonances in the Mountain View Googleplex, a converted sound stage of a film studio). The space itself seems over-coded with performance (see McAuley, 1999; and Carlson, 1989).

The first thing that struck me upon entering the reception area, was a distinctive 'living wall' with the name 'Google' nested within greenery growing from the back wall behind the front desk.<sup>9</sup> This was one of many gestures towards the environment that I noticed: perhaps, we might say that it Google is nested in the ecology of modern life, having attained a seeming state of 'naturalness' in our interaction with the world. I reported to the staff member behind the desk and she asked for the name of my contact and requested I sign in while gesturing to the side. I was expecting a paper sheet or folder upon which to sign, but all that lay to the side was a computer, of course. I entered my name and the name of my contact; ticked a field indicating that this was a social visit (as opposed to a business visit) and it printed out a nametag. When I went to type my name into the computer, I realized that I had made a mistake of not capitalizing my name. But there was no mouse to use – my options had been limited. So I printed out the tag as it was. There was a message indicating that I was not permitted to take photographs inside and that if I should hear any confidential information I was not to pass it on. I needed to consent to this restriction and with one further click I was in.

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<sup>8</sup> Mary-Ann was the name that the White Rabbit used to address Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. Indeed, the slightly surreal workplace felt a little like Wonderland – undoubtedly the desired effect.

<sup>9</sup> A living wall is a vertical garden constructed by hanging plants, flowers and greenery on a wall.

Sitting in the reception area, I looked around at the walls and spaces surrounding me. There were meeting rooms on all sides with frosted glass walls and doors, creating both continuity with the adjacent spaces and yet being closed off. Indigenous Australian words / place-names and their translations were imprinted on the semi-transparent walls – a reminder of the traditional owners of the land. (I have to say that I was surprised to see such an acknowledgement, but later wondered about the purpose of such positioning for foreign visitors and performing ‘Australian-ness’.) One of the adjoining spaces was the ‘upside-down’ room – a meeting room with conference call and screen facilities – with a table and chairs stuck to the roof (giving the effect to the people on the other end of a video conference that you are standing upside down). The slightly zany effect seems indicative of Google’s projected sense of playfulness and humor, together with a slightly self-deprecating attitude towards the Australian office of the global corporate: ‘We don’t take ourselves too seriously’ (or so they would have the world think).

Mary-Ann soon arrived and we had a quick chat about our common friends, children, holidays-away and before I knew it, the tour had begun. She began with what seemed to be a standard spiel about ecologically friendly aspects of the building (having printed out the official route upon which visitors were to be led – ‘making sure that we get in all of the highlights’.) But soon, we chatted about the micro-kitchens and how Mary-Ann used the spaces, which ones were her favorite and the health benefits and dangers of such easy access to food. There were many of these kitchens around the office spaces and each was equipped with a professional coffee-machine (staff received free or subsidized barista courses) and an assortment of snacks, breakfast materials and beverages. At the core of Google’s philosophy seems to be this idea of taking care of staff creature comforts with the hope of higher productivity and creativity. Alongside the kitchen was a games area apparently popular on Friday afternoon, according to my guide. Various consoles and gaming accessories lay across the space and the electronic tones of a pinball machine in the background completed the ambience.

Around the corner was the ‘Tech Stop’ IT support section. Unlike many organizations where you might log an IT service request online, the irony here was that you could just turn up with your computer and have it fixed on the spot (in physical rather than virtual form). To the side of the room were various cables and pieces of hardware that employees could borrow if needed. The effect was something akin to a collective or co-operative commune.

We moved on into the office-space proper and one of the major features of the entrance was a series of ‘teardrop’ meeting booths (semi-circular with continuous seating around the edges). The décor was in a modern boutique traveler’s hotel feel. Around the corner (or curve) were smaller meeting spaces with television and conference-call facilities. Both of these areas were not fully partitioned off from the surrounding areas, maintaining the open-plan feel of the space. Of course, there were various computer outlets on the walls and facilities for charging and connecting

equipment. The two floors of Google in the building had similar layouts and replicated the areas above or below.

Nearby, there were small nooks almost like cubby houses or enclosed bunk beds where employees could crawl in to work privately (presumably on their laptop). Again, this evokes a home-like environment: perhaps creating the feel of typing on one's laptop on the bed late at night. In conversation with Mary-Ann at this stage, we talked about a subtle semiotics of working at one's desk where wearing headphones was the equivalent of a 'do not disturb' sign. These spaces simulate the comforts of home. In developing Pierre Bourdieu's term 'habitus', Edward Casey writes about 'habitation' – activating ways of being and moving in an environment that is a predisposition in the body (Casey, 1996). These homey spaces, places of comfort, entertainment and recreation are inviting particular bodily responses of informality.<sup>10</sup> Google is recoding habitation of the work environment.

Later in our conversation, Mary-Ann and I talked about the 'private self' of the 'Googler' coming into the workplace – sharing details of home life and non-work activities with colleagues. There is a sense that this work environment is a continuation of self – with Google added on. A new Googler is called a 'Noogler'. An ex-Googler is a 'Xoogler'. A gay Googler is a 'Gaygler'. (Apparently, Google employees have a float each year now in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.) The declension follows on with each root 'self / identity', generally with the –'oogler' added on. And when I asked whether the term Googler was actually used in everyday interaction, I was surprised that she said yes. The two main worker groups housed in this office are the software engineers and the sales and marketing team. Mary-Ann commented that members of these respective groups have very different personality types.

Along some narrower corridors on the outside of the building were further meeting rooms with frosted glass walls again to maintain flow of natural light throughout. Mary-Ann explained that these were more for internal meetings rather than casual external business. Each of the rooms was named after an internet 'meme' such as 'ceiling cat' and 'Lovelace'.<sup>11</sup> (This was particularly interesting to me, because it was evidence that the internet was finding manifestation in the physical space of the office as I will elaborate below. In a sense, Phillip Auslander's (2008) term 'mediatization' is evident in this spatial gesture – when new technologies change the way that we see the world (although here, it is not television, but the Internet).

Mary-Ann told me that sometimes workers at the second Google office which was around the next inlet of the Sydney Harbour often preferred to use conference call facilities for meetings rather than coming over – especially on rainy days. Google provides bikes and scooters that allow employees to make their way between the offices but there was some resistance in practice – people preferred to stay within the

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<sup>10</sup> On the blurred boundary between work and home in contemporary life, see Conley (2009).

<sup>11</sup> A meme is an image or video that spreads across the internet, usually containing comical and satirical content and often changed or altered by different users to inflect the original purpose or context. The word itself comes from Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*.



office precinct. In fact, there was very little reason to leave the building at all. I asked whether workers used the nearby parks and open areas but Mary-Ann said, ‘not much’. She explained that if she worked in the CBD there would be shops and other things to do, but because there really wasn’t much else around this area, people tended to stay in.

Moving up to the top floor, we entered the ‘Tree House Library’ - a retreat to get away from the office into a private space to read or nap. Mary-Ann said that this was her favorite place. There were signs up to remind us to be quiet. Someone was reading over in the corner so we talked in muffled tones and made our way quickly through the room. The décor reminded me something of childhood nursery or a display in the children’s section of a public library, with a large ‘wooden-puzzle-like’ tree in the middle. To one side, there were shelves of books that Googlers were free to borrow. Again, the ‘co-op’ feel was reinforced by the idea that staff themselves donated books to the library and there was no formal borrowing system.

The heart of the complex was the cafeteria called ‘The Esky’ – a quirk of the Australian office (an esky is a portable cooler-box often associated with barbeques and leisure-time) and perhaps another example of localization of space here (it is an Australian invention). Outside there were vistas looking out over the city skyline with resonances of the scenic outlook of a high-end restaurant. In fact, this is a very ‘Sydney’ aspect of the place – the city is obsessed with real-estate prices and harbor views, where place is about the conspicuous display of status and prestige. But rather than being a point at the apex of the city looking down, the Google office sits slightly outside, and looks towards the city. On the other side of the building are the new Fairfax publishing offices (distributors of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, magazines and other publications). Mary-Ann said that the Fairfax employees can see into the Google offices and when she is selling advertising space to them, they would often quip that it never looks like anyone is doing any work.

Mary-Ann asked me if I would like to stay for lunch and I was very much obliged. We made our way through the long queues towards hot food, various salads, drinks and delights. It reminded me a bit of a college campus-dining hall. Signs about healthy eating adorned the walls with Harvard University research about nutrition cited at the bottom. The kitchen itself was visible and the staff behind worked busily to replenish the buffet supplies.

We sat down outside and during the conversation that ensued I was slightly dislocated - tacking between social aspects of the visit and enquiry into my research. My connections with Mary-Ann through my wife’s mothers group and we talked about the trials and tribulations of parenthood and childcare. I wondered whether the familiar social tone we fell into was because this is the way that Mary-Ann uses the space – to meet with friends from the office – as a catch-up. She showed me a phone application (*Whatsapp*) that she uses to communicate with friends to share funny situations, comments and photographs. Again, this informal relationship with work colleagues flows over into her relaxation time – maintaining friendships that flow into work practice. Seemingly, informality was key to almost everything that I saw.

When talking to me about her husband, Mary-Ann gestured towards the buildings on the skyline where he had worked (in the banking sector) and where the childcare centers were located. The city was a kind of map of itself or a scenic backdrop for the conversation. The people we know or knew were somewhere in the forest of buildings. We relaxed back in lively discussion.

### **The Aestheticization of Work: Space, Time and Performance**

The blurred boundary between leisure and work time is without a doubt one of the most striking features of the Google office. There is no longer a Taylorist ‘clock-on / clock-off’ culture but a sustained social relationship between employees that is not always clearly recognizable as business or social activity. The daily necessities of the workers are provided within the office-space itself in order to minimize the need to leave. I did notice the relatively young workforce when I glanced around the cafeteria and Mary-Ann herself confirmed this. One wonders whether all types of worker might even be open to such commitment. But rather than implement an exterior force, the office space provides an implicit expectation of staying long hours.

In ‘Cultures of Labour: Work, Employment, Identity and Economic Transformations’ human geographer Linda McDowell (2003) suggests that for a privileged elite, work seems more like entertainment as the boundary is blurred and fractured. The dissolution of this boundary can be oppressive for some and pleasurable for others. Zygmunt Bauman notes phenomenon of the ‘aestheticization’ of work practices:

The status occupied by work, or more precisely by the job performed, could not but be profoundly affected by the present ascendancy of aesthetic criteria. Work has lost its privileged position – that of axis around which all other effort at self-constitution and identity building rotate. But work has also ceased to be a focus of particularly intense ethical attention in terms of being a chosen road to moral improvement, repentance, and redemption. Like other life activities, work now comes first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny. Its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience. Work devoid of such capacity – that does not offer ‘intrinsic satisfaction’ – is also devoid of value (Bauman, 1998: 34).

At Google, the space itself explicitly enters into a discourse of aesthetics / leisure with the games areas, hotel-like furniture, the rooftop vistas, playful décor, and informal clothing of the workers all point towards a discourse of creativity. The misrecognition of the neighboring Fairfax employees looking in (and complaint that no work is being done) is presumably because this is ‘not what work looks like’. Nevertheless, the privileged access to such work also builds upon its desirability and is reinforced not only by the Googlers, but those excluded from such ‘fun’. There is a strong tension between the real and the imagined at work in this space as it enacts its own hyper-reality.

Yet, any clear distinction between the real and the imagined might be questioned here; the actual and the virtual are not as discrete as one might expect. Edward Soja, building upon the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), suggests we revise traditional notions of space in a trialectics of spatiality consisting of ‘the *perceived* space of material-

ized Spatial Practice; the *conceived* space he defined as Representations of Space; and the *lived* Spaces of Representation' (Soja, 1996: 10). For Soja, the trialectic can be revised: Firstspace is that which is empirically measurable and mappable; Secondspace is space as it is subjectively encountered and imagined through representation and image; and Thirdspace as lived space, a different way of thinking and being. Thirdspace is practiced space rather than simply material or mental. In this way, the environment is only encountered through the inter-animation of bodies and performances; places are reiterated through practices that are an interaction of all three layers of space (Cresswell, 2004: 38). The language of Thirdspace enacts a critique of the binaries of subjective/objective, material/mental, real/imagined through the process of 'thirthing':

Thirdspace is 'a product of a "thirthing" of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning. Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...), the exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to "real-an-imagined" (or perhaps "realandimagined") places (Soja, 1996: 11).

In this sense, thirthing is also a resistant gesture rejecting ways of thinking about the world in terms of binary oppositions. At the very least, the work-leisure distinction is disrupted in temporal terms at Google. Outwardly, the Googleplex is a clear example of Thirdspace in other senses too, where the virtual world erupts into the lived experience of the workers - where *noplac*e is realized. If the world of modern communications, conference calls and smartphones collapse the distance between spaces, the social reality of *Whatsapp* becomes part of the work life of the Googler; personal communication is celebrated, not suppressed. There is a sense in which 'here' and 'there' are disrupted by means of digital communication prevalent in the work setting. The memes on the meeting room doors show a playful interaction with online popular culture where the digital becomes physical. The quirky Google-street view flash mob mentioned above encourages a unique expression of individuality rather than enforced homogeneity among the employees. The self-effacing humor of the 'upside-down room' plays also upon the national identity of the 'down-under' by turning global cultural imaginings of Australia into a local differentiation of this office. The identities of the workers are mediated by the technology that in turn enables a performative self in the space. Soja goes on to explain,

If Firstspace is explored primarily through its readable texts and contexts, and Secondspace through its prevailing representational discourses, then the exploration of Thirdspace must be additionally guided by some form of potentially emancipatory *praxis*, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious - and consciously spatial - effort to improve the world in some significant way (1996: 22).

On the surface of it, the appeal of Google's work environment is driven by this seeming heterotopia of non-hegemonic relations, and the encouragement of individual autonomy. Google itself proclaims its philosophy, in describing the aspirations of the organization and the ideal employee or social subject:

1. Focus on the user and all else will follow.
2. It's best to do one thing really, really well.
3. Fast is better than slow.
4. Democracy on the web works.
5. You don't need to be at your desk to need an answer.
6. You can make money without doing evil.
7. There's always more information out there.
8. The need for information crosses all borders.
9. You can be serious without a suit.
10. Great just isn't good enough (Google, 2013).

The list enacts a kind of 'redemptive populism' (Mitchell, 2007) whereby collective wisdom can be found when knowledge, power, and entertainment come together (critiqued by Vaidhyanathan, 2011). In Google's case, the goal of corporate productivity is enacted through a cooperative attitude towards technological innovation and organization. The shared desk spaces, 'help-yourself' IT stocks, open library and communal area of the Esky seemingly enact equality amongst staff. The *praxis* of this space is also informed by the online world itself. The connectivity of the Internet collapses space and time to empower the employee-consumer. Everywhere is a click away. The environment is user-driven rather than simply given by the corporation. In a way, the over-all aesthetic connotes 'child's play' which is not purposive and goal oriented, but exploratory and pleasurable in itself: the library is coded with nostalgia from childhood and even the color scheme of Google itself – red, yellow, blue and green; colors from the pre-school art pallet – find their way into patterns of carpet on the floor. Yet one wonders whether these are the kind of resistant practices of Thirdspace that Soja had in mind. After all, Google is widely seen as a multi-national corporate megalith with its own responsibilities to shareholders and management.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau investigates 'ways of operating' and 'doing things', including everyday life and walking in the city (1984: xi). But rather than being simply passive users of a system, de Certeau argues that there are small opportunities for unique behaviors not accountable by any strategy of a system:

As unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoveries of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the "wandering lines" ("*lignes d'erre*") drawn by autistic children studied by F. Deligny (17): "indirect" or "errant" trajectories obeying their own logic. In the technocratically constructed, written and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarkets, or museum sequences) and although they remain subordinated to the prescribed syntactical forms (temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic orders of spaces, etc.), the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop (1984: xviii).

It is difficult not to think of the World Wide Web as a model for such contemporary wandering – sometimes for the purposes of information gathering and at others of idle pleasure or ‘surfing the web’ (I’m not even sure if people even still use the term). The space of the Google office operates more like Umberto Eco’s ‘open text’ where the grammar of use of certain spaces is much more fluid and multi-purpose. The non-linear trajectory of the hyperlink presents near-infinite choice of possible pathways and an opening up of possibilities. The hot-desk system mobilizes the workers and encourages them to interact. And Google is well known for quarantining a certain amount of employee’s work-time for the pursuit of individual creative projects and innovation. The cubby-house nooks and tucked-away meeting places encourage an imaginative ‘tactics’ on the part of the Googler. Sleep is even a possibility and a pathway to creativity! One wonders whether this personalization and informality of social discourse is characteristic of contemporary life (‘You can be serious without a suit’).

De Certeau makes a distinction between the ‘strategies’ laid down by institutional powers in order to control the use of space (and other practices such as talking, reading, cooking, dwelling, and catching the train) and the individual ‘tactics’ employed by users (or as he calls them ‘consumers’). In the case of Google’s office design I suggest that tactics are transformed into strategies whereby this individualization is encouraged. Alternative ways of inhabiting and dwelling in this workspace are invited by the space itself. The unique patterns of users are facilitated and encouraged by the design. If space is organized for consumption by corporate strategies, perhaps here Google’s workplace turns the performance of the personal into a commodity. Henri Lefebvre (1991) advocates a society as civic community with collective power – play and creativity and this seems to be happening here. Perhaps there are tactics for walking or working in Thirdspace that can be developed that bring together corporate and individual interests.

Nevertheless, one wonders about the potential limits of such repurposing and personalization of the Google office environment. In fact, I noticed signs at certain access-points to the office areas asking ‘Have you been tailgated?’ And in other sections leading to the open plan desk workspaces, signs read, ‘Visitors are not permitted beyond this point’. The egalitarian and open-access design of the space is belied by a subtler control and surveillance of its areas and who is permitted where. The repurposing and tactics employed by the employee-consumers are put to the use of the corporation itself and its interests – including the security of knowledge and intellectual property contained by the workplace and its workers. And ultimately, the organization is driven by targets, sales and productivity though these may well align with the interests of some employees, some of the times, the playfulness is not completely open-ended.

According to de Certeau, institutions of power also have a tendency to desire a totalizing whole – a map which encompasses the entirety of the city. He uses the example of viewing New York from the World Trade Center and the totalizing gaze of the viewer atop the observation level. The walkers on the streets below become ants moving in patterns at a distance. Yet for Google, the effect is not that of *looking down*

from a God's-eye perspective, but rather a *looking upon* the city. It is standing on the outside looking on as if from the perspective of a detached cruise-ship passenger looking at the city. I mention above how the city becomes like a backdrop to my conversation with Mary-Ann – a backdrop to the discourse. It is difficult not to think about Google Maps and Google Earth and the way they allow 'an out of body experience' of flying over the landscape while at the same time being fixed to the earth. (In fact, I even used my smart-phone to find my way to the offices!) This impossible view is democratized to a certain extent – at least to those who have access to the technology. At the same time, the very access of those viewpoints gives data about the user back to the organization itself; through such seeing, one is also being seen. De Certeau's 'consumer' of everyday life is at once transformed into the consumer of commodities – with targeted advertisements and custom marketing to individual users.

### Conclusions: Reinventing Institutions

Having considered some aspects of the workplace, we might ask what 'implicit theory of self' is at play here according to the spatial logic set out?<sup>12</sup> At Google, the self is created and performed playfully when individuals interact with the environment in a personalized way, bringing aspects of their 'private' selves into the workplace through social interactions and technology. The space is deliberately left open for users to find their own tactics of occupation. The binaries of real and imagined, work and leisure, virtual and physical are playfully undermined in this office space. Nevertheless, the performativity in operation here is not exhausted by a dramaturgical view of the self of Goffman's *Performance of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) where the individual manages social meaning through offstage spaces, rehearsal, and acting. Selfhood at Google is enabled by the systems of power operating in its workplace through a sense of play.

As mentioned in the epigraph to this paper, Goffman (1968) proposes the term 'total institution' to refer to organizations that strip back individual identity and are characterized by the isolation from the outside world they produce. Goffman focuses on asylums – with supporting fieldwork feeding into his assessments – where individual agency of the inmates are taken away and personal identity is stripped back. Other examples of total institutions include the military and the medieval monastery. In Google's case, one might say that the opposite is true: the workplace of Google encourages an abundance of personalization and informality. Unlike the inmate in an asylum who is denied a private realm, here the distinction between private and public is intentionally blurred by and for employees. At the same time, however, there is still a separation from public space – for the sake of guarding corporate knowledge and intellectual property. Mary-Ann's comments about the locale of the office being separated from amenities and shops indicates a certain 'set-apart-ness' of the Google

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<sup>12</sup> Zarrilli (1995) writes about 'implicit theories of acting' in any given performance. The extension here is that individuals also operate in everyday life with an 'implicit theory of self' or a 'topography of self' as Appaduarai (1990) posits.

workplace, reinforced by the facilities and services available inside. Everything you need is right here, so why leave?

Susie Scott's *Total Institutions and Reinvented Identities* (2012) articulates a different kind of power that can operate in an organization that is not necessarily as externally coercive as the archetypal total institution. For Scott, there is a new type of total institution called the 'Reinventive Institution' that is:

a material, discursive or symbolic structure in which voluntary members actively seek to cultivate a new social identity, role or status. This is interpreted positively as a process of reinvention, self-improvement or transformation. It is achieved not only through formal instruction in an institutional rhetoric, but also through the mechanisms of performative regulation in the interaction context of an inmate culture (Scott, 2012: 3).

Examples of these reinventive institutions include religious cults, self-help organizations, and online communities: is it not such a stretch to see Google included in this list? These institutions are sustained by the internalization of a set of ideas and expectations by its members. They create certain subjects through those ideas and the micro-practices of power they entail.

Similarly, workers at Google are not outwardly coerced into working long hours, separated off from wider society, and forced to take on a new identity. Perhaps there is something akin to the 'Gruen transfer' where consumers experience a temporal dislocation upon entering a shopping mall (Crawford, 1992; Hardwick, 2003). But in this case, the effect is not a slowing down and wandering for the purposes of making a purchase, but rather fostering a spirit of playfulness for the purposes of innovation and creativity. Alternatively, the office is like a university campus or artistic collective separated from the surrounding city – free to explore a world of ideas. At Google, the physical separation from the outside world also steps outside of everyday temporality – the worker is always connected even when not physically present. The phenomenon of the 'Googler' is self-sustained – it is how the employees choose to classify and see themselves. Of course, the recruitment process of the organization selects certain types of employee, acting as a gatekeeper and moderator of this social world. But rather than take away personal identity, Google becomes an 'add-on' – as indicated by the variety of neologisms the workers use to describe themselves. Employees are allowed a degree of self-regulation in terms of hours of work, spaces of labor, and free time to work on special projects – although these too are within limits set down by the institution itself. In this sense, the personal identities of the workers themselves are the currency and commodity – the material of trade in this elite aestheticized work culture (McDowell, 2003).

I suggest that Googlers are, in fact, the *product* of the reinventive institution. The 'product' here is both that which is produced and the thing that is sold. For the advertising sales employee, their personality is their resource, while for the programmer it is their creative skill in software engineering. The 'idea' of Google is sustained by its people (or rather their practices). The spaces and discourses of the personal open up possibilities of expression. The Googler is not fixed to one space, but is, rather in

many places at the same time through the proliferation of communication technology. In a way, the flashing cursor in Google's search page represents a cybernetic analogue of this space. Brin and Page's algorithm links webpages, knowledge, images and the entire online universe if one puts one's head in the right space: literal citations connecting elements of the network. Yet not only Googlers might be characterized as such; all users or consumers of the search engine commodify themselves by typing in the box (and this criticism of data collection is articulated by Battelle, 2005). The performance of the search is the paradigm for the self. When you google, Google googles you. The individual self enters into an economy of information.

The astute reader will begin to ask, 'who is considered to be a Googler in the organization? Are the cleaners and cafeteria workers Googlers? Are they afforded creative research opportunities?' And yet further investigation will begin to delve into the contracts of the employees themselves and their terms of employment. Rigorous enquiry might also show that the glossy appearance also includes the daily grind, sales targets, impending project deadlines and objectives, tedious programming and arduous tasks and mundane activities. Rather than single out those who are included in the organization, to what extent is Google sustained by the people it keeps out? An acute criticism of Western capitalism might even go to the Third World laborers who build the hardware, smart phones and electronic devices that allow the system in the first place. Alternatively, one might probe the ethics of this institution that allows public censorship in countries with a tenuous human rights record. Many of these concerns are raised by Vaidhyanathan (2011). Finally, it may well be that such an open-spatial structure would not function properly in all contexts. Such queries were beyond the scope of my enquiry, but further investigation would destabilize – or at the very least problematize – the popular heterotopic image of the Googleplex.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Jon McKenzie critiques the way in which performance studies is driven by the 'liminal-norm' with a focus on subversive and marginal performance practices. For him, liminality 'operates where the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative' (2001: 27). Similarly, I propose that performance studies scholars might analyze not only the marginal places of society, but also the places of everyday life – including the spaces of work – by adopting the same theoretical toolkit including space, discourse, and power through the lens of performance. The reinventive power of Google rests in its performative strategies: the subversion of formality and fixed structure to work. But the description and analysis of those strategies offers awareness, possible resistance, and repurposing of those systems of power among users (as Soja, 1996 advocates). Paradoxically, the Googleplex is an 'in-between' place too – an online liminality crucial to contemporary society. As McKenzie suggests, social centrality should not preclude such cases from the interest of performance studies scholars:

The site to study is not only the centrality of formal norms, not only the liminality of transgression, but also the interface of the between and the center, the paradoxical place where one turns into the other – the place of liminal-norms (2001: 254).



Obviously, with more extensive ethnographic field research, I would be able to go beyond a surface analysis of space and place here. I would observe the way that bodies interact with the possibilities offered by this interior architecture together with the ways in which places and bodies are ‘inter-animating’ in such a reinventive institution. Nevertheless, from what I observed the fluid workspaces connect colleagues and friends by privileging mobile practices, tactics and informality. Subversion becomes normative: the creative tactics of users are welcomed as an institutional strategy. Yet despite the aestheticized language of play in this space, such a subversion has its limits: work has to be done.

*“Do you have enough for your paper?” Mary-Ann asks. “Absolutely, it is only a short one”, I reply. Expecting a handshake, I receive a kiss on the cheek. I catch the lift down, and step out on the street.*

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