I Love Livin' in the City

Daniel Makagon

The Chicago Transportation Authority's (CTA) elevated train system, known as the EL, consists of 8 different lines, most of which fan from Chicago's downtown district (the Loop) to the north, south, east, and west. Each car on every line features instructions for evacuating the train and responding to an emergency: LISTEN FOR INSTRUCTIONS; REMAIN ON THE TRAIN. DO NOT OPEN SIDE DOORS; MOVE TO ANOTHER CAR IF YOUR IMMEDI-ATE SAFETY IS THREATENED; EXIT AS INSTRUCTED; and DANGER, HIGH VOLTAGE AT TRACK LEVEL. A guerrilla artist has recently been altering the signs, leaving the declarative statements intact but changing the accompanying images. For example, three half circular lines in the first storyboard, which are meant to signal sound and listening, have been replaced with a single thick exclamation mark. The arrows directing an image of a passenger from one car to the next in the third frame have been flipped so that the passenger is now walking on the ceiling even though the subway car is still upright. The fourth panel has replaced an illustration of a conductor pointing toward an appropriate exit with images of tools and trash flying out the doors. And the final frame, which should show a single figure stepping from a car to the platform, has been altered to display several people walking around on the tracks (the train has been completely removed from this altered storyboard).

Because the sign does not appear to be spliced with a razor blade or exacto knife beyond possible attempts by CTA employees to

Daniel Makagon is an associate professor in the College of Communication at DePaul University in Chicago. He is the author of *Where the Ball Drops: Days and Nights in Times Square* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

scrape away some of the altered images, it is likely that the artist created a brand new sign on a computer, laminated the sign, and then installed it on the train. The creation and public display of this altered CTA sign represents the use of new communication technologies to create a performance context featuring an intriguing mix of play and cultural disruption. This blend has been the central focus of a range of public performances in recent years, and will serve as a site of analysis in this introductory essay as both a way to highlight interesting, engaging, and important urban performances and to introduce this special issue of *Liminalities* on The City.

"[P]lay is performative, involving players, directors, spectators, and commentators in a quadrilogical exchange that, because each kind of participant often has her or his own passionately pursued goals, is frequently at cross purposes," argues Richard Schechner. "Once play is underway, risk, danger, and insecurity are part of

playing's thrill."[1] As I have discussed elsewhere,[2] this playfulness has been a feature of cultural disruption throughout history. However, the sheer quantity of do-it-yourself (DIY) activities in recent years has created a new landscape for alternative cultural practitioners, who seem to be motivated by a range of social, political and economic goals. The availability and portability of new communication technologies contributes to the speed with which these performance actions can take shape, further allowing performers to re-imagine spectation, participation, and the use of the city as a site to create and stage a variety of playful tactics.

In 2003 the artist collective Glowlab organized the first Psy-Geo-Conflux at ABC No Rio in New York City. Psy-Geo-Conflux brought together "artists, social scientists, philosophers, urban provocateurs and spelunkers, and even traditional geographers, in an entirely accessible venue—public space."[3] Part event and part conference, the 2003 sessions included public sound art, alternative walking tours, gallery exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and games. Many of these activities made use of communication technologies that offered a critical lens through which participants could contemplate urban public life and performance. One game that stands out is Sharilyn Neidhardt's *Human Scale Chess Project*, which used cell phones to enact a public performance that modeled alternative uses of public space. Neidhardt's "cellphone-directed chess game happen[ed] in real time with humans acting as the pieces" on an 8 square block grid in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn that functioned as the chess board. Players engaged in an actual board game of chess, which Neidhardt used as the basis for her street game. "As they move[d] the pieces from square to square on their board, I call[ed] the corresponding humans on a cellphone to tell them which intersection to walk/ride/move to," says Neidhardt.[4] Her urban game is an extension of a larger interest in chess (e.g.,

---

[1] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.

[2] Daniel Makagon, "Accidents Should Happen," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24: 4 (October 2000): 430-437.

[3] Bryan Zimmerman, "Public Notice," *Village Voice* (May 7-13 2003) excerpted from http://www.villagevoice.com on 13 November 2006.

[4] http://glowlab.blogs.com/psygeocon/2004/02/participant_27.html

Neidhardt coordinates weekly chess sessions open to beginners and experienced players); but we can also read her Brooklyn street game as a performance interrogating the effects of the grid in urban design. *Human Scale Chess Project* questions how different individuals navigate the streets (are we pawns or queens?) and how technologies influence our movements through the city.

Software designers Michael Sharon and Dan Melinger have also used cell phones as tools for urban performance in ways that combine the public, the private, politics, and play. They created a program called Socialight, which "leaves virtual Post-it notes, called sticky shadows, in specific sites around the city."[5] The virtual Post-it appears on one's cell phone as a text message. For example, a pedestrian who has the Socialight program on her or his phone will receive a message when walking on 16th Street between Irving Place and Park Avenue South in New York City. The message informs the cell phone user that independent filmmaker Robert Pietri was arrested on that block during the 2004 Republican National Convention. The notes can range from everyday personal histories like Pietri's to more (in)famous historical events in the city (e.g., when approaching the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire or the location of Malcolm X's assassination a message will appear on one's phone with an address and details about the incident).[6]

Socialight uses the cell phone's global positioning system (GPS) to link specific sites, a message about that site, and the user. GPS has been a powerful tool for a variety of DIY public performances, from the coordination and implementation of flash mobs to independent cartography projects. For example, Mapchester is an open-source map of Manchester, England that was created in May 2006 using data

---

[5] Richard Morgan, "Post-Its for Passers-By," *New York Times* (13 November 2005) excerpted from http://www.nytimes.com on 12 December 2005.

[6] It's important to point out that most people now use Socialight to highlight good restaurants, places to shop, and bars to hang out. In other words, the program has transformed from a technological apparatus to learn about (public) history to just another medium to enact our consuming selves. Even with these changes, the program is still important for my discussion of DIY performances because the early uses of the program demonstrate the possibilities of such technological innovations relative to the politics of play.

gathered by 40 individuals, most of whom "were new to OpenStreetMap and to GPS." Participants recorded data while walking the streets, which led to a focus on the "the central area of the city within the inner ring road."[7] OpenStreetMaps are created because people with technological skills and an understanding of the politics of cartography want to work with others who are interested in writing the city. As both a material practice and symbolic action, this collective cartographic performance challenges representational ownership of the city. "Most of the maps that you come across on the internet or in your home are protected by very stringent copyright laws," writes Fletcher Robinson, about the rationale for the OpenStreetMap project. "These rules stop the maps from being used in unique and unexpected ways, stifling people's creativity and imagination."[8]

This DIY cartographic project, electronic Post-its, Human Scale Chess Project, and the re-fashioned CTA sign expand our sense of urban public performance. If we think about performance as "expressive behavior intended for public viewing"[9] then we want to ask where, when, and in what context that expressive behavior is staged. Similarly, the viewing might occur on multiple fronts, expanding notions of staging and audiencing. Urban public performance can happen in the streets; it can be re-presented via text, sound, or (moving) image on a Web site, cell-phone, or iPod; or it can be enacted through an official media outlet (e.g., *New York Times* or *Village Voice*). Regardless of the medium, the projects I cite here share a desire to expand our sense of what can occur in the city's streets, how we learn about the city, and the ways in which individuals and groups can challenge a performer/audience dualism in urban public performances. The use of low-cost and everyday technologies combines with elements of play to facilitate this re-imagined city.

---

[7] http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/index.php/Mapchester

[8] http://www.fletcherrobinson.myby.co.uk/osm/OSMintro.pdf

[9] Jan Cohen-Cruz, "General Introduction," *Radical Street Performance,* edited by Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

Of course, my description of the street as a site to stage and/or re-stage a range of playful public dramas is only one way to consider performances of and in the city. The specific stages can be extended to provide some broader sense of what it means to live in a city and how we come to know the city as a material, symbolic, and sensual formation. Collectively the contributions to this special issue of *Liminalities* ask us to consider a renewed interdisciplinary interest in urban performance. The articles in this issue blend ethnographic encounters, theoretical texts, and creative projects.

The issue opens with Cristina Moretti's exploration of competing performances of memory in Milan's public spaces. Luke Dickens then examines post-graffiti in the context of a free art event staged in London by the Finders Keepers Crew. The third article comes from erin daina mcclellan, who analyzes the dialectical tensions of spatial and platial rhetorics as reflections of and opportunities for sense-making in Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square. Next, Joan Faber McAlister considers two recent films, *Disturbia* and *Little Children*, which provide a subversive portrait of life in the suburbs, challenging the suburb's safety and security to the city's danger and deviance. Anders Lund Hansen's short film, *Space Wars*, shows New York City as a site of competing public symbols and material struggles to claim spaces in the city's streets. Then Richard Jones and Christina Foust turn their attention to the ways in which consumerism is constituted performatively within and by urban redevelopment of the 16th Street Mall in downtown Denver, Colorado. Next, Stephen Rohs examines the "Orange riots" of 1870 and 1871 in New York City, arguing that these public performances simultaneously reflected different historical imaginaries and the formation of Irish community in New York. David Eshelmen presents an excerpt from his play, *A Taste of Buffalo*. The selection focuses on the lure of prosperity and the sacrifices smaller cities make in order to succeed in the shadows of global cities. Finally, Renee Human analyzes the city bus in Lexington, Kentucky as a site of urban communication.