

curbed concepts

by

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Abstract

Outlined is a series of interventions created to activate public and semi-public spaces. This supporting document touches on the social and environmental impetus for these efforts. I present a sketch of the theory and methodology behind my project; I draw from relevant concepts such as Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle and Chantal Mouffe's agonistic politics, and explore the agency of public space. Over the course of my project, I have conceived of ways to re-envision materials, spaces and infrastructures otherwise neglected or misappropriated. The interventions that compose this project can be seen as open and ongoing experiments. These works present possibilities and provisional alternatives.

Research Questions

- How can my interdisciplinary art and design practice activate public and semi-public spaces?
- How can such interventions engage others around social and environmental issues relevant to these shared spaces?
- What are some materials, spaces and infrastructures that are misused, underused, or wasted within our urban environments, and how can these be reconsidered?

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This Thesis is dedicated to all these friends and loved ones.

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This document delves into the theoretical and critical underpinnings of my Thesis research and methodology. It supports an interdisciplinary project composed of interventions; a series of works created to activate public and semi-public spaces. My continuing goal is to engage around ecological and social issues in the urban environment. Opening, highlighting and interrogating agency within these shared spaces is central to this aim. I look for materials, systems and infrastructures that are misused, underused or wasted. I present possibilities, provisional alternatives. From within the metropolis, I draw attention to some of the underlying concepts that influence dialogue and actions, ones that shape our surroundings and consciousness. We must insistently challenge fundamental perceptions of public space, question how we both use and form the urban milieu. Offered are ideas for the city, ones that others are free to contemplate or ignore, use or adapt.

Before focusing on individual interventions, this paper pulls on several threads that run through the entire ongoing project. My work is influenced by the overlapping fields of art, media and design, but also draws from discourses beyond these areas. We look at some of the political and conceptual formulations behind my interdisciplinary practice, those approaches inseparable from my methods and practice-based research. I expand upon the impetus and rationale for my project. We travel from the general to the specific. Subsequently, more considerations are discussed when I describe particular works in the series. But first, let me share more background and context.

Post Entry

Consider this a disclaimer: While I believe in taking positions, I regard all positions as subject to dialogue and evolution.

If meanings are not given or guaranteed, but lived all the same, it follows that they can be challenged and changed. And this is so not just for authority figures. If meaning is a matter of social convention, it concerns and involves all of us.¹ (Belsey)

My conceptual approach with this project is very much related to poststructuralist and deconstructivist theories. Critical and cultural theorist Catherine Belsey offers a lucid and concise summary explanation of poststructuralism². I have found her reading of its main theories both match and further refine my own interpretations, and so I reference her text in this paper for both brevity and clarity. Poststructuralism is not a single unified theory. In Belsey's account, the work of such notable figures as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and even Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek are all included in one way or another, and have influenced my own perspective. As Belsey points out, not all who are labeled as poststructuralists sit comfortably under its umbrella, and some outright dispute the connection. Nonetheless, there are tendencies that by degrees link their different positions together, and it is these that I draw upon.

At its core, poststructuralism is concerned with signifying systems – language of all kinds, including symbols and images. It is a refutation of the idea that any instances of language have an innate or fixed meaning. Absolutely no absolutes. No indisputable authorities. Yet decisions still need to be

made on a frequent basis. So how are we to act? Belsey notes that Derrida's deconstructivism begins to address this question of action.

[...] if values emanate from language, and language divides the world differently from culture to culture, there can be no appeal to a universal, grounding reality. The will of God might or might not exist but, as history has shown, it seems in practice to be a site of considerable struggle, since both sides claim it for their cause. [...] Something similar goes for reason and nature. They are often cited, in the event, as supporting opposite points of view: feminist and anti-feminist, gay and homophobic. ¶ Can there be, then, an ethics of deconstruction, an ethics without metaphysics? Derrida's own work is skeptical, but also, he insists 'affirmative'. [...] Values not only have a history, they also differ *from themselves*. They can therefore be changed in the future, if not in the light of a fixed idea (or Idea) of the good, at least in the hope that the trace of an alternative inscribed in them might one day be realized. Derrida calls this way of thinking 'messianicity': not the promise of a specific messiah, who would fulfill an individual scripture, Christian say, or Islamic, but the hope of a different future 'to come' (*avenir, a venir*). [...] Deconstruction, then, is not incompatible with moral or political choice.³

As this text shows, it is not necessary (or advisable) to base actions on the false premise of any inherited or static final authority, whether secular or not. Choices should be made while remaining aware of the mutability of meaning and values. Our decisions can only ever be made with an incomplete understanding in the present, but this does not eliminate the need to make them. It is a profoundly un-deterministic view, and so does not negate responsibility. Derrida's deconstruction can be read as hopeful towards the possibility of different futures, and thus affirms our potential to effect such change. I will come back again to how poststructuralism and deconstructivism influence my work, but before that, I explain more explicitly the thrust behind my own choices, my motivation in pursuing this project.

The Situation

By now my incredulity towards grand-narratives⁴ should be apparent. I believe there is no legitimate position from which to claim ultimate Universal Truth. In spite of this, I do trust there are *circumstances* that involve all human existence. Our shared biology and presence on the same planet are ready examples. These might be considered meta-*conditions* in contrast to problematic meta-narratives. The difference here is the acknowledgment that these meta-conditions, although they affect all, can be experienced and perceived in perhaps equally valid, but different ways by others. Also, most, if not all, meta-conditions are adaptable and constantly changing. There is still no predetermined, intrinsic stance of rightful or final authority. We have the capacity to affect some meta-conditions whether to our detriment, benefit or somehow in between, but often not by plan. Indeed, many detrimental meta-conditions are human created.

Much of the impetus for this project comes from an acknowledgment of massive threats to our very existence. Take your pick: global warming, war, nuclear weapons proliferation, the devastation of life supporting resources; unfortunately the list goes on... My work is also formed recognizing that political, economic, ecological and social issues are inextricably tied. I see the need to challenge the current hegemony and present different possibilities, no matter how small or local.

Alongside my own experiences and perceptions, I look to theorists who appreciate the connectedness of our global situation. One such theorist is Guy Debord, founding member and key thinker of the Letterist and Situationist International movements. His seminal 1967 book, *Society of the Spectacle*⁵

presented a grim, but not hopeless, appraisal of our shared condition⁶. Essentially, the spectacle is what he labeled the dominant hegemony, an evolved form of which still reigns today. It is the system brought about by industrialized capitalist society, which disconnects us from “real” life. On surface, it is the world in which images, visual representations, rule. All is separated, yet grossly unified under this common separation. It is the world of urban alienation spread global. Signs reign over the signified. Yet this is merely the most pervasive and superficial manifestation of the spectacle. At root is consumer culture: the unbalanced supremacy of the capitalist market economy. The spectacle is constantly changing, nullifying any sense of a coherent past or future and the possibility of shared history.

“No one today can reasonably doubt the existence or the power of the spectacle”⁷. In 1988 Debord returned to the concerns of *SOTS* with *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Here, Debord states that in the intervening twenty years since *SOTS*, his theory of the spectacle has not only been verified, but has actually grown in importance as much as the spectacle has in strength. Far from shifting his position, he reaffirms and expands on the original. “On a theoretical level”, Debord felt that he only needed to “add a single detail to [his] earlier formulations, albeit one which has far reaching consequences”⁸. Previously, the power of the spectacle was manifest in two major forms, but now there was an even stronger third. The first was a *concentrated* form, centralized above all around ideological dictatorships. The second form was *diffuse*, embodied by the “Americanization” of the world through commodity culture, and proved more robust than the first. Interplay and competition between these first two forms produced the third; the *integrated* spectacle:

For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien. When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality.⁹

Thus, there is no longer a position outside the spectacle, even if we do not label it as such. Where do we go from here? He is all too convincing in his depressing description of the spectacle's near total fusion and ascendancy over human existence. Not only does the spectacle degrade quality of life, but on multiple fronts it also threatens our species' very survival: not least by perpetuating ecological ignorance and vast environmental destruction.

What did Debord seek to accomplish by publishing such grim appraisals? It seems a mistake to regard his project as wholly pessimistic. One must keep in mind the evidence of, and his purported success in, maintaining an oppositional position from *within* the spectacle. He held onto the possibility of some radical change.

I do not fully subscribe to Debord's veiled utopian vision, despite his laudable condemnation of authoritarian ideologies. However, I tend to agree with his formulation of spectacular society and hold hope of my own. Frequently, I return to Debord's work directly; as a preliminary evaluation of humanity's systemic woes, and a malleable framework that remains highly pertinent today. I was born in these spectacular times and have witnessed the hegemonic force of the spectacle evolve since Debord's death in 1994. It is helpful to be aware of the workings of the spectacle in order to both navigate and *combat* it. For this reason I still find his diagnosis of our ailments

extremely valuable, though I do not accept without reservations his prescriptions for recovery. Two important contentions with which I do concur, are that any solution must be both patient,¹⁰ and contain within itself the mechanisms for ongoing self-critique. More than twenty years have past since *Comments*, and theories of the spectacle need to be expanded and updated again; it is toward other theorists and my own perceptions I turn to better grasp what has changed.

Pragmatic Optimism

Regarding our environmental and social threats, I have spoken to many who have adopted an apathetic, defeated attitude. They argue that it is too late for change, that the damage is already done, and that our species will not survive indefinitely regardless. I believe we cannot yet know whether it is too late to curb our perceived trajectory. We should not give-up on possibilities to make things different both in the present and future. It is what we have to work with. Call it pragmatic optimism.

Environmental author Paul Hawken supports such an outlook. He is aware of the threats facing humanity, but emphasizes that there is still hope to be found. Hawken outlines where he finds this prospect in *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming*¹¹. He presents a theory for how a wide range of efforts made by diverse groups and individuals with different ideologies can be considered in aggregate as a decentralized and amorphous ‘movement’ unlike any other. Social and environmental issues form the linking threads. Hawken offers a survey of various contemporary and historical players in this movement and makes

the case that optimism for our species' survival is found in these combined efforts. Art and design play a critical role, but are not the only perspectives required. Again it is in a combination of multiple narratives, rather than through the domination of one, that strength and resilience is found.

Cultural theorist Brian Holmes tells a similar story, but concentrates more on art in *Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World*¹². In this text, he draws connections between historical movements such as the Dadaists and the Situationist Internationals, through punk, and do-it-yourself (DIY) tendencies, all the way up to protests co-coordinated online and actions recent as 2004. Though the 'inherited' cultural link between some of these movements is tenuous, I agree that there is a shared counter-hegemonic drive and evolution of tactics that loosely joins these groups together towards common cause. Currently, the global domination of capitalist hegemony and its ramifications are the predominant shared concern. Some of the tactics he outlines are ones I use or which have influenced me in some way. For example, affinity for DIY approaches can be seen in my unsanctioned direct interventions, encouragement of participation, and repurposing of salvaged materials.

Regarding Materials

With all my interventions, material choices are an important consideration. These are critical signifiers and contribute to the conceptual content of each individual work. There are also reasons for my choices that are shared across the project as a whole. My minimal use of new/virgin resources reveals opportunities to reduce or repurpose waste from our consumer culture. This is a significant concept that I attempt to promote in much of my work. In their

highly influential book, *cradle to cradle*¹³ William McDonough and Michael Braungart, endorse a related idea for designers with their central mantra “waste equals food”. They promote the idea that all of the materials that go into making a product should be fully and equally reusable when that product is no longer needed, or better still, that the product will benefit the environment throughout its entire lifecycle. With my project, I make use of common materials that have not been designed in such an ideal fashion. The waste of consumer culture equals food for interventions.

Under the existing paradigm of manufacturing and development, diversity—an integral element of the natural world—is typically treated as a hostile force and a threat to design goals. Brute force and universal design approaches to typical development tend to overwhelm (and ignore) natural and cultural diversity, resulting in less variety and greater homogeneity.¹⁴

This drive toward homogeneity is symptomatic of the dominant capitalist hegemony in which immediate financial gain is privileged above all. I use ubiquitous materials from this system to instead increase diversity, to show their potential and reveal other ways of using resources. My research is often practice-based as I experiment with such materials both in the studio and through works installed in public space. Using inexpensive and post-consumer materials also creates an economy of means that may make it easier for others to participate and carry concepts forward. Such a subversion of the usual wasteful consumer cycle has political connotations which conflict with the hegemony of corporate capitalism as it operates today. How do I situate the political facets of my project?

Politically Agonistic

My use of the term *political* in this paper takes on a broad definition, and does not only signify ‘career’ politics. It includes politicians, parties and institutions, but refers more to the wider political underpinnings of society.

I do not see the relation between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields, art on one side and politics on the other, between which a relation would need to be established. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. [...] From the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order or in its challenging and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension.¹⁵

The above quote, from political theorist Chantal Mouffe, is a statement with which I entirely agree. There is an inextricable relationship between aesthetic and political practices. In particular, we can always understand art and design as either supporting or opposing a dominant hegemony, a prevailing ‘symbolic order’. This still does not imply meaning is fixed. Nor does it follow that art is always created with political awareness or intent, but rather that it has political connotations regardless. In line with views of theorists such as Michel Foucault¹⁶, power relations are forever at play even when not consciously measured. And again, none of this pretends only strict binary positions are possible, except in the most simplified and aggregative sense. Relationships are complex, operating in multiple and evolving fields. Like Mouffe, we need to acknowledge the varying degrees to which political positions manifest.

The real issue concerns the possible forms of *critical* art, the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony. Once we accept that identities are never pre-given but that they are always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed, the question that arises is the type of identity that critical artistic practices should aim at fostering.¹⁷

So what then do I seek to foster with my critical interdisciplinary practice? What are the particular political dimensions of my project? Chantal Mouffe's essay, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*¹⁸, continues to be of use in answering these questions. She speaks directly to the relevance and issues surrounding the types of creative activism I pursue. The political formulations in her paper are not only ones that I share, but are the most well developed articulation of these views I have read to date.

Mouffe's essay is based on the type of 'radical democratic politics' that she and fellow political theorist Ernesto Laclau argued for in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*¹⁹. More specifically, it focuses on how her model of 'agonistic pluralism' applies to artistic activism in public spaces. The concept of 'agonistic pluralism' is one that she previously developed in chapter 4 of *The Democratic Paradox*²⁰. It is necessary to briefly delineate this model prior to further reflection on its relevance to my own work:

[...] artistic practices could contribute to the struggle against capitalist domination but this requires proper understanding of the dynamics of democratic politics; an understanding which I contend can only be obtained by acknowledging the political in its antagonistic dimension as well as the contingent nature of any type of social order.²¹

What differentiates Mouffe's approach of 'agonistic pluralism' from other democratic models is her refusal of utopian schemes, frameworks which fail to recognize the impossibility of final, stable or equitable consensus without exclusion. She identifies the intractable element of antagonism in our pluralistic realities. Instead of a problem to be ignored, or one that can be overcome, antagonism is a vital component of healthy democracy. It is an intrinsic characteristic to be openly admitted, if not embraced. Once accepted,

this model influences how oppositional positions might be construed. In outlining agonistic pluralism, Mouffe distinguishes the concept of an ‘adversary’ from that of a violent enemy:

[...] no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, [an ‘adversary’] is somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question. [This] does not entail condoning ideas that we oppose or being indifferent to standpoints that we disagree with, but treating those who defend them as legitimate opponents.²²

Thus, this model demands a level of respect towards contrary opinions, yet also stresses the need for open contestation. Mouffe arrives at the concept of ‘agonism’ by first demarcating this category of ‘adversary’. Consequently, antagonism can be discerned in two forms. One form is *antagonism* proper, while the other is the *agonism* as offered in her pluralist framework.

Antagonism is struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is a struggle between adversaries. [...] envisaged from the perspective of ‘agonistic pluralism’ the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*. This requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as enemy but as an adversary.²³

The move towards agonism does not eliminate or try to conceal the existence of outright antagonism. Never a one-time transformation, agonism must be constantly reworked in unavoidably changing circumstances. It is through this model of ‘agonistic pluralism’ that the political dimension of my practice is best understood. The domination of the capitalist market economy, the spectacle, inhibits opposition by obscuring the legitimacy and existence of alternatives. We are left with faulty dualistic thinking, envisioning all challengers as enemies that can eventually be fully converted or eradicated. This hegemonic

imbalance works against democracy by denying opportunities for truly pluralistic debate. I seek to reaffirm such opportunities.

This is why a perspective like ‘agonistic pluralism’ [...] is of fundamental importance for democratic politics. By warning us against the illusion that a fully achieved democracy could ever be instantiated, it forces us to keep democratic contestation alive.²⁴

With this comprehension, we can now look more closely at the political thrust behind my project of activating public and semi-public spaces.

Provisional Public Space

The political nature of public space should not be ignored. In fact, it is essential to the makeup of democratic society. According to Toronto based philosopher, Mark Kingwell: “Public space is not a public good so much as an existential one—without which democratic politics is impossible since without a viable *res publica* there is no *demos*, and vice versa.”²⁵ Political identities form, and are formed by, conceptions of public and private space.

How is public space conceived in the political model to which I subscribe? How is it seen through the lens of Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism? “For the agonistic model, [...] public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation”²⁶. This speaks directly to the provisional emphasis of my project. In place of a single culminating piece, I pursue an ongoing series of interventions in public and semi-public spaces. I recognize the need to endlessly renew criticality. There is no silver bullet or grand gesture that will alone ‘save’ this world. I am not trying to make a monument that will survive the ages or declare some eternal truth. On the contrary, the original works in this

series are intentionally and inherently ephemeral. These works embrace the inevitability and uncertainty of change. According to Chantal Mouffe:

[...] to grasp the political character of those varieties of artistic activism we need to see them as counter-hegemonic interventions whose objective is to occupy the public space in order to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character.²⁷

The works in this series help reveal layers of our urban environments. By intervening directly in public, I assert agency and remind others that it is possible to use and envisage these spaces in unexpected ways. This potential first needs to be revealed for agonistic pluralism to thrive. I aim to question and draw attention to the present character of these spaces. I expose both the latent capacity and impediments for engagement and alternative use. My actions demonstrate that others can do the same, or perhaps something completely different.

Though I am passionate about my practice and the issues involved, most of my project is not overtly or overwhelmingly hostile or didactic. I believe there is a need and place for more aggressive approaches, but with my interventions I try not to immediately polarize. Excessively provoking entrenched positions can impede dialogue rather than break down barriers. Of course, some polarization will unavoidably occur, and highlighting hidden conflicts is an important embedded factor. However, I do not set out to alienate everyone with dissimilar perspectives or speak only to those already like-minded. I try to create work with multiple points of entry so that individuals with dissimilar backgrounds can access and engage with my interventions in different ways. My goal is to connect with a larger population, the pluralistic population that shapes those urban environments in which I operate. This

does not entail that I dumb-down my work, but rather that I allow for varying, non-hierarchical levels of access.

Although all my pieces highlight the public and semi-public spaces in which I intervene, I also try to draw attention to related ecological and social issues with each work. Our use of space is intertwined with these concerns. Some of my efforts are made to be more direct in communicating than others, but all leave room for interpretation. Often, I see a need for some level of ambiguity or admission of paradox that both reflects my open perspective, and frustrates attempts at closed definitive reading.

When we consider the actual, physical artwork itself, the conditions that can be discovered and responded to within it are therefore vigilance, perceptual paradox, ambiguity, ambivalence and reparative potential. These are the qualities of the artwork that alarm and stir the viewer into becoming a contributor to the definition [...]²⁸

Psychoanalyst and art critic Jean Randolph provides this insight in her *Influencing Machines* essay from 1984. It was originally included as the introduction to an exhibition of the same name. In it, she speaks to art that primarily concerns technology, but I feel this understanding can be equally applied to other forms. She continues:

[...] for without ambiguity there is no opportunity to contribute multiple and alternative interpretations. Viewers who cannot contribute subjectively to the interpretation or perception of a phenomenon cannot be in a position of responsibility, but must either submit to the authority of the work, or attempt to dominate the work by proving their power to explain it. Artworks surely could resist those kinds of relationships between audience and themselves [...]²⁹

Therefore, within the context of some of my interventions, I aim to setup signifying frameworks that are relatively open, but still engage around issues of public space itself.

Sites for sore eyes

So far, I have spoken about public and semi-public spaces, in general, as the sites and focus of my interventions. These sites will be detailed more explicitly when I describe the individual works in this series. But first, I here outline issues of site-specificity relevant to the entire project. In *The Functional Site; or The Transformation of Site Specificity*³⁰, James Meyer summarizes the distinction between a *functional* site and a *literal* site. What might be defined as a *literal* site is a singular, actual location, a physical place:

[...] the artist's intervention conforms to the physical constraints of this situation, even if (or precisely when) it would subject this to critique. The work's formal outcome is thus determined by a physical place, by an understanding of the place as actual.³¹

The *literal* site, is always of utmost significance with my interventions. The works are derived from their specific urban contexts, speaking to and through these spaces. However, with all these works I also address broader issues, and I activate spaces that share qualities with other sites to which my interventions might translate or speak directly. As with my material choices, I look for spatial infrastructures and conditions that weave throughout the urban fabric. Moreover, I am interested in how engagement is carried forward after contact with the original evanescent interventions or their documentation. All of this brings us to the concept of a *functional* site, according to Meyer:

[...] the functional site may or may not incorporate a physical place. It certainly does not *privilege* this place. [...] It is as an informational site, a palimpsest of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places, and things: an allegorical site [...]³²

As discussed, for my project physical places are fundamentally incorporated in the equation. Nonetheless, I maintain that these works can be engaged with

even if the original interventions are not physically encountered. As Mark Kingwell maintains, “Public space is not always physical, nor is it always obvious where to find it”³³. My project can be accessed in other forms through a mixture of documentation, text, and word of mouth. This does not imply that the experience will be the same. I do not try to recreate matching visceral conditions through different media or in other contexts. What I aim to provide, through documentation, are more points of entry in such a way that much of the content from the original intervention is still available. “[...] we are not dealing here with one single space. According to the agonistic approach, public spaces are always plural and the agonistic confrontation takes place in a multiplicity of discursive surfaces”³⁴ (Mouffe).

I have documented my interventions in a variety of media such as still photography, video, and the text you are now reading. Others have also documented my work of their own volition. “One of the first choices interventionist artists must make is whether they will tell anyone about their work and if they do, who will they tell – and why?”³⁵(Lacy). The reason I share documentation of my work is so that more people can engage with it, even if in a different form. As with much work that is public, I relinquish most control once an intervention has been anonymously put in place. The weather could destroy it, as could passersby, or they could add to it, photograph it or take it away. I embrace the element of chance and serendipity.

This release of control continues in other ways with the subsequent documentation. For example, there is currently a limit to how much information can (or should) be controlled once online. Images and text of my physical

interventions for this project have already spread to thousands of websites internationally³⁶. This documentation continues to make rounds in social media spheres. As a result, I have also been asked to feature the work in videos, exhibits, books and magazines. These more traditional media are easier to locate, but much of the spread is impossible to track in a comprehensive way. “What is needed is widening the field of artistic intervention, by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism”³⁷ (Mouffe).

When I present documentation of my interventions in a new context, I’m always careful to preserve criticality. Some, citing the most superficial element of Debord’s theory of the spectacle, seem to believe that aesthetic images must be abandoned. I do not hold this narrow deterministic position. It neglects what Debord posited as the root problem, namely the imbalanced supremacy of the capitalist market economy. It neglects his claim that there is no position completely outside of the spectacle from which to speak. Mouffe emphasizes this point too:

Acknowledging the political dimension of such interventions supposes relinquishing the idea that to be political requires making a total break with the existing state of affairs in order to create something absolutely new. Today artists cannot pretend any more to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities.³⁸

We are a highly visual species, and I believe conceding this realm to hegemonic commercial interests will only guarantee impoverishment. I maintain there is no innately or eternal revolutionary aesthetic. Just as there is no essential meaning in spoken language, there is no immutable meaning in signifying

images. To be sure, aesthetics and techniques employed for dissent are frequently appropriated by the dominant hegemony, but these can be expropriated in turn. This is the Situationist strategy of *détournement*, of turning the dominant power's instruments around against itself. It might be an endless struggle back and forth, but also signals the vitality of life.

PART III – A SERIES OF INTERVENTIONS

Project descriptions and results

In the preceding sections, especially those focusing on poststructuralism and agonistic pluralism in public space, I have outlined my reasons for pursuing a provisional series of interventions with different techniques and approaches rather than one culminating work. We need to constantly re-imagine public space and allow for multiple voices. The following project descriptions serve as examples. Some smaller experiments and interventions have not been included, but those that are help connect the entire series. I present these projects chronologically although most are ongoing in one way or another, so in reality, there is significant overlap.

NATURE



1. NATURE – Street View, 2009.

This first intervention in the series is one that I installed in Spring 2009. I started close to home with this piece, engaging with the Brockton Village (sometimes referred to as Bloordale) neighborhood of Toronto where I still live. Preparing in the months prior, I carefully constructed six large three-dimensional letters (4' high \times 1.5' deep \times variable width) using salvaged scraps of cardboard to spell *NATURE*. Then, before dawn on a Wednesday, I anonymously positioned this word out on the sidewalk down a relatively short stretch of my long residential street; *NATURE* was left out on the curb alongside the organic waste and recycling bins that lined the street for regularly scheduled pick-up by City of Toronto collection services.

As the sun rose, so did the people of the busy neighborhood and those passing through. How did they receive this unexpected addition?

What poststructuralism offers is, in the end, an opportunity and cause for reflection [...] the language poststructuralism puts forward [...] is more useful in prompting the uncertainty of questions than in delivering the finality of answers.³⁹ (Belsey)

Without any additional text, explanation or prior notification, the surprising arrival of *NATURE* presented a mystery. Those drawn to decipher its sudden presence could only base their interpretations on the word *NATURE* itself, on its abnormal context, physical form and material composition. The different tendencies, backgrounds and knowledge of those individuals would, of course, also have played a role in this open process. This was, in fact, a central point of the intervention. My intent was to elicit contemplation and dialogue around the meaning of *NATURE* for all who engaged with it. An important distinction needs to be made: It is not my goal to follow in the aesthetic practices of any purportedly deconstructivist architects, artists or designers, but I am

interested in some of the same foundational theories. Rather than present a particular single deconstruction of the meaning of the word *NATURE*, or of its appearance in-and-of-itself, the intervention encouraged others to formulate their own reading. It is my affirmation of the significance and plasticity of the meanings we ascribe to common signifiers that most links my work to post-structural and deconstructive thought.

I presented the word *NATURE* as something literally constructed, made by human hands and consisting of materials already processed by our machinery. The letterforms for *NATURE* were based on the two-dimensional *FF Meta Black* typeface, designed by Erik Spiekermann. One of the reasons I chose this Humanist sans-serif face was the name of the family itself: *Meta*. I was dealing with meta concepts of language and nature and so thought the *FF Meta* type family would be an appropriate choice and an aside reference for fervent typophiles (recognizing that the connection might not initially be made by even the most passionate type fanatics). Of course, the typeface was also an aesthetic fit for the project.

It was an absurd gesture: *NATURE* literally made physical and put out on the curb for disposal. Belsey's construction of language is helpful here:

Most of the time the language we speak is barely visible to us. [...] And yet few issues are more important in human life. After food and shelter, which are necessary for survival, language and its symbolic analogues exercise the most crucial determinations in our social relations, our thought processes, and our understanding of who and what we are. [...] In this sense, language intervenes between human beings and their world.⁴⁰

Our perceptions and relationships with the concept of nature, what we consider to constitute nature, are fundamental to our experience and actions in

public space and life in general. The goal was to create a site where the meaning of this loaded and evocative word might be conspicuously emphasized so the term might be (re)considered.

So what were the actual results of this intervention? I didn't know in advance whether a recycling truck would actually take the letters away. Nor did I know beforehand if anybody would remove or rearrange the letterforms. Would anyone even engage with the installation while it was still in place? As it turned out, after sitting on the curb for just over six hours, *NATURE* was eventually picked-up, unceremoniously thrown in the back of a city recycling vehicle, and crushed on site.



2. *NATURE* – *T Pick-Up*, 2009.

Yet before their formal end, the letters drew much attention and speculation. To be sure, some passersby continued on their way, likely to work or

school, apparently without more than a cursory glance. However, many people were observed to linger and stop to take photos and/or video. Multiple drivers backed up their vehicles (on the one-way street) to get another look. Other neighborhood residents spent more time still with the installation, chatting with one-another about it when opportunities arose. A few of those same individuals returned to the site on multiple occasions within the hours *NATURE* was out on the sidewalk.

Traces of all this activity were documented on video, but a great deal also occurred out of frame. As well, I did not set-up to record any audio. It was important for me to keep my documenting process unobtrusive and hidden so as to limit its interference with the experiences of others as much as possible. These points begin to highlight the difficulty of concretely measuring or presenting the results of such ephemeral interventions (where engagement with the work itself is a major part of what is being considered). Still, there were abundant signs of engagement with this intervention, a number of which I will continue to outline here. The perceptible immediate and short-term results surpassed my expectations.

Alongside a visiting friend, one resident from the far South end of the block rode her bicycle up to see *NATURE* following her roommate's suggestion (the roommate himself having chanced upon it earlier the same morning). She arrived just as the city employees were about to throw the letters into the truck. After speaking with the workers, wanting to make sure they had read the word they were about to crush (they had), she opted to take photos as they proceeded to toss *NATURE* into the truck. Once the vehicle left, I had opportunity to meet this photographer, Sara Torrie, and learned that she's a

full-time practicing artist. We exchanged contact information, and Sara later expressed interest in creating a flipbook animation using the photos she had taken on the day. Happy to hear it, I invited her to show it alongside my video of the project in the *Interduction [sic] IAMD* gallery show that spring.

A very rewarding outcome of this project has been meeting people, like Sara, who encountered or engaged with it in some way. In the days, weeks and months following I continue to be introduced to such neighbours I hadn't formally met before. A number of different people made an effort to find out who had created the piece, and have kindly contacted me since.

The information one neighbour relayed serves as a particularly salient example. As he woke up to see the intervention directly outside his home, this neighbour felt as though it was somehow a gesture and message personally intended for him. He continued to contemplate and speak with others about its meaning and impact in the weeks that followed. Perhaps most significantly, when we finally met, he confessed to have actually changed his day-to-day behaviour as a result. The intervention prompted him to reconsider both his and society's relationship with waste systems and the environment. He bought a green-bin for composting organic materials and has also been recycling fastidiously ever since. Although I held lofty hopes that the intervention might trigger change, I never dared to really expect such a clear effect on any individual.

Regardless of whether or not they considered the possibility that the installation might soon be picked-up and crushed due to its placement on the curb alongside recycling bins, I believe most of those who saw it recognized the intervention as ephemeral. It was an anomaly on this residential street and unmistakably made of cardboard and left vulnerable to humans, other animals

and the elements. This identification of the installation's transient character may have encouraged some passersby to pause and pay more attention to it while it was still physically available.

The relatively large scale of the letterforms also played a substantial role in drawing the consideration of bleary morning eyes. However, this same scale could also dissuade some from attempting similar projects. Despite the economy of means inherent to my use of salvaged cardboard, creation of the piece still required a substantial investment of time and space, and so is not necessarily easy to imitate. This led me conceive and pursue methods others could more readily carry forward or adapt with the next intervention in this series.

Poster Pocket Planters



3. Poster Pocket Plants — Harbord Wall, 2009.

Beginning in June 2009, the next project came in the form of an ongoing collaboration with artist and architect Eric Cheung. Our *Poster Pocket Plant* interventions introduce unexpected and improvised green spaces around the city. We create temporary planters by cutting and folding illegally pasted layers of poster advertisements. Considered an urban hack, one intention of *Poster Pocket Plants* is to disrupt this advertising, to subvert its invasive infrastructure and repurpose its mechanisms to reveal alternate possibilities. A strategy akin to Situationist détournement is perhaps more immediately evident with this project than the *NATURE* intervention because of our appropriation of corporate materials. Eric and I have each installed many planters both individually, and together for larger interventions.

The use of plants as a medium for street art allows for an optimistic interruption of existing urban space while critiquing these same conditions. The planters use the layers of material left by ubiquitous street advertisements, highlighting the absurdly aggressive proliferation of such marketing in dense urban centers.

The *Poster Pocket Plant* system also emphasizes simplicity of technique, design, and materials to promote more participation in public space. Eric and I both designed multiple versions of our planters and refined our process. The simplest conical/triangular design is one I created such that the process of its creation can be deciphered by examining a completed planter on site. In addition, I illustrated instructions for this design so that others can modify or replicate it more easily. We have made such DIY designs available through an open-source Creative Commons license. Images, templates, instructions and suggestions are all offered for free on our project website⁴¹ to anyone who

might want to try making their own planters. These are adaptable designs that can be scaled up or down with relative ease. We launched the simple blog website as a way of sharing the project with a wider audience.



4. *Poster Pocket Plants – Face*, 2009.

At first, we planted at the break of dawn to avoid crowds and keep a low profile. Soon after, we found that everyone we encountered while planting was very supportive and curious about our activities. The only ones who seem to object at all to the project (at least of those we are aware) are the companies putting up the illegal advertisements themselves. We have since worried less about being interrupted while planting, and have taken advantage of opportunities to converse about what we're doing with those who approach us while we do it. After all, one of our primary goals with this project is to share and discuss our ideas as much as possible. While we hoped that the plants would be a welcome addition, and that the project would be innately understood at some level, reactions have exceeded our expectations. We've been fortunate with the encouragement we have received to date. Some people, for example, have introduced themselves and offered to help in ways such as watering the plants in our absence.

There have been additional signs that our efforts to increase wider participation have been successful. Soon after our first plant installations, multiple local online news outlets began to post articles about the project and it has since spread internationally⁴² to countries such as Germany, Britain, France, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, and China. Individuals and groups from urban centers around the world then expressed interest in making their own planters. Through this project we met fellow Toronto artist Posterchild. Shortly thereafter, he made some pocket planters based on our designs while staying in Brooklyn, New York. I also installed some pockets while visiting friends in Vancouver BC, and they have since planted a few of their own around the city. Most recently, another couple of friends stumbled across and photographed

some more planters while visiting New York City. Again these were based on our designs, but in this case we still don't know who installed them. It has been fantastic to see this project expand outside of our own interventions.

With this series of works, I have been interested in experimenting with different forms and levels of collaboration. Collective efforts can directly foster more interaction, dialogue, and personal investment in shared environments. As mentioned, the first intervention, *NATURE*, was primarily a solo endeavor in its conception and construction, and with this second one I collaborated closely with Eric Cheung. For the next project, I was interested in taking part in a larger collaborative project, one that involved even more people at the outset.

NYSAT & Recession Survival Tips



5. NYSAT RST – *Call Yourself an Artist*, 2009.

Opportunity to participate in such a cooperative larger project soon arose in the form of the *New York Street Advertising Takeover* in October 2009 (*NYSAT II*). Jordan Seiler, of *Public Ad Campaign*⁴³, was the primary organizer of both this and the first *NYSAT* effort in which artists and activists collaborated to temporarily replace illegal billboard advertisements with artwork⁴⁴. These large-scale collective interventions were the result of the combined efforts of more than 100 people from as close as New York and from as far away as Paris, France. On the day of the actions, teams were first sent out with location maps to paint over illegal billboards with white paint. Essentially, this turned the billboards into large canvases upon which artists would subsequently work a few hours later. I took part by creating and installing artwork around Manhattan alongside fellow Toronto residents (and previous collaborators) Eric Cheung, Posterchild, and Teeth.



6. *NYSAT RST – Toxic Emissions*, 2009.

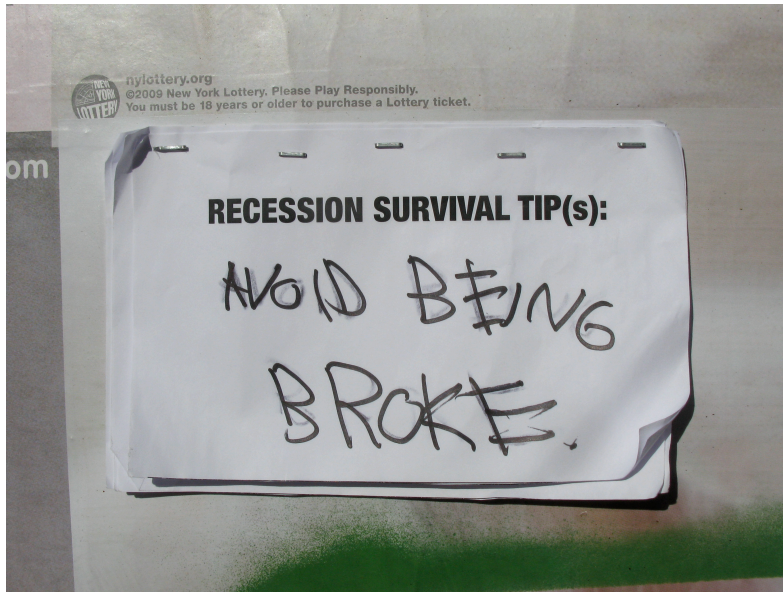
Like the *Poster Pocket Plant* interventions, the focus of *NYSAT* was on the contested public space used illicitly by advertisers. My pieces were conceived specifically for this project, its timing and location. I created a series of text based tongue-in-cheek *Recession Survival Tips*, works that commented directly on illegal ads, but also on the dire global economic state of affairs. Manhattan was a particularly appropriate space for these tips; Wall Street and the *New York Stock Exchange* sit on the island among the largest financial institutes in the world, and the system failures of the United States are particularly recognized as the cause of the world-wide economic crash. Our united project confronted *NPA City Outdoor*, a company in New York exploiting and illegally renting public space to wealthy institutes and corporations force-feeding destructive consumer ideals.



7. *NYSAT RST – Do Not Consume*, 2009.

Based on knowledge of what happened with the previous *NYSAT* action, and with some of the of our *Pocket Plant* installs, I anticipated these new interventions would not remain in place for very long. In fact, all *NYSAT* artworks were removed by *NPA City Outdoor* within hours of installation. To increase the impact of my pieces, I played with the tropes of advertising and created short, clear and easy to read *Tips* as if for a stripped-down marketing campaign. These could then be quickly absorbed at some level, although meaning could be further contemplated after the fact.

Posterchild, Teeth and I all helped each other install our works very swiftly, allowing us to put up a greater number and run into fewer problems. Instead of using paste, Posterchild and I simply used staples to hold up our paper works, a technique that proved much faster and more suitable for the expected short physical lifespan of the pieces. With some of my installs I also used a technique I had practiced while working on *Pocket Plants*, that of cutting into layers of posters to create shapes as part of the composition (flames in this case). In an effort to encourage additional participation, I made some smaller blank *Recession Survival Tip* stickers and tear away sheets that others could fill in with their own tips or commentary. Posterchild wrote on one, but I don't believe the other "blanks" I installed on billboards stayed in place long enough to allow many passersby to contribute.



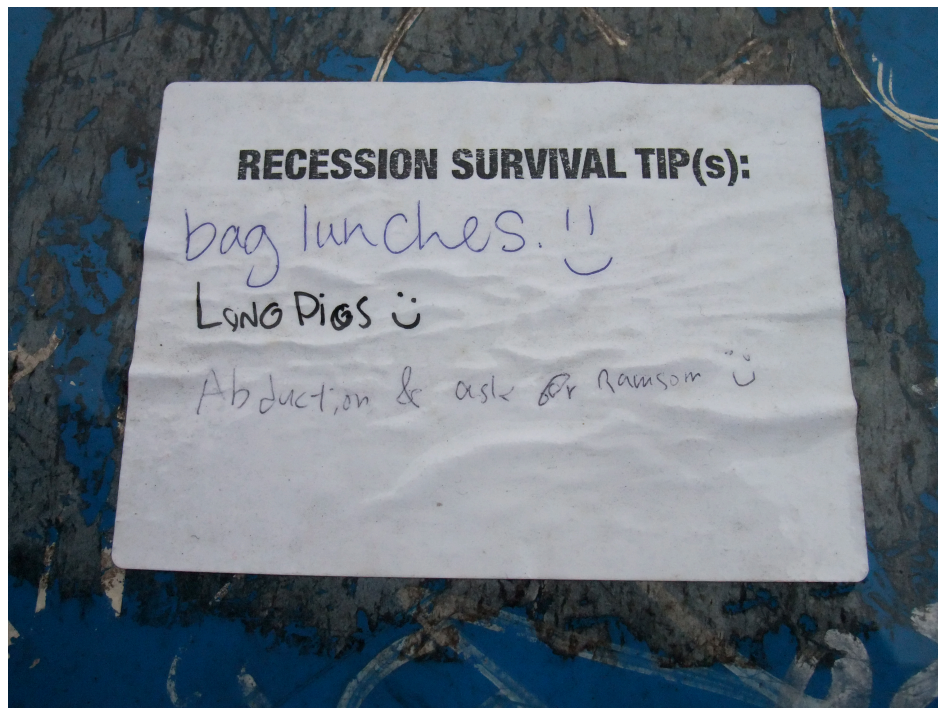
8. NYSAT RST – *Avoid Being Broke*, 2009.

As with my other ephemeral work, documentation of the pieces I created for *NYSAT II* survived and spread further afield online. The larger *NYSAT* project itself had significant impact and continues to grow, as I will outline in the *Toronto Street Art Takeover (TOSAT)* section. However, months before *TOSAT*, I decided to bring my *Recession Survival Tips* back to Toronto.



9. Toronto RSTs – *Spadina*, 2009.

Although I felt Manhattan was the ideal site for these works, I saw downtown Toronto as another suitable location, where the project would still be highly pertinent. I put-up more of the previous *Recession Survival Tip* messages and installed some new ones as well. Some of these Tips were more self-referential, and poked fun at my use of materials. While I was using minimal and recyclable materials, this project was different from the earlier interventions in this series in that I was not using salvage or waste as primary materials. However, I still re-appropriated public spaces by using illegal advertizing infrastructures. This time around, I put blank stickers on non-billboard locations too, and found that these lasted longer as result. It allowed more people to contribute messages as originally hoped.



10. Toronto RST – Long Pigs, 2009.

From these small multiples, I returned to exploring larger sculptural interventions with my next several efforts.

PARK

After *Poster Pocket Planters*, I continued to be interested in investigating ways that plants could be incorporated into my practice. In November 2009, I used salvaged turf to spell *PARK* with grass in an empty parking lot in downtown Toronto's busy core. The space was one next to a busy street, surrounded by tall buildings and other pay-parking spaces. There was a lack of plants and



11. *PARK* – Window View, 2009.

green spaces around the neighbourhood, and for some time the parking lot had been relatively empty aside from mud, waste and strewn garbage. The piece played on the dual meanings of the word *PARK*: As the act of, or place for, stationing automobiles, and as a green space generally and set aside for public enjoyment. I made *PARK* at approximately the same scale as a single parking space, and used a typeface (*again FFMeta Black*) reminiscent of pay-

parking signs in the area. My use of grass was a playful suggestion of potential alternative uses for the space. At the time, there was also an application to build condos on the site.

Joe Clement assisted me on the install, and we elected to take the calculated risk of planting rapidly during a weekday afternoon. Due to my positive experiences installing greenery for the Pocket Plant project, I expected that most passersby would either ignore or support our activity, but we still had to be cautious of the security guards in the area. We worked quickly and completed the piece without incident. After we first finished installing, an office worker came outside to inquire about the piece and communicate his support. Apparently, he and several colleagues had been watching us intently through the windows of their fifth floor office across the street. The next morning he allowed me to come up to his office and take photos from their vantage point. I also returned to water the project on several occasions during the first two weeks due to a low level of rainfall.

Grass is resilient and so *PARK* kept growing and eventually took root. Local residents, workers, and visitors to the area warmly welcomed the unsolicited addition. No one came to remove the grass, and so it survived through Toronto's cold winter under layers of snow and ice. Despite being driven over by heavy vehicles after the thaw, the piece lived through the Spring and hot Summer months. It was only when construction on the condo actually started in the Fall of 2010 that the piece was physically destroyed. My experiences with this and my previous *NATURE* project encouraged me to continue pursuing additional text based interventions.

FREE



12. *FREE – Park View*, 2009.

The Art Gallery of Ontario kindly allowed me to use its parking lot for my next installation. The lot is a fenced-off enclosure that bisects Butterfield Park and Grange Park in the downtown Toronto core. Over the years, ownership and use of the site has been highly contested. It neighbours *OCAD University* and a community center, and acts as a barrier preventing expected movement between the two public parks.

I outlined the word *FREE* by tying strings within and through the properties of the barrier/constraining structure of the chain-link fence. I used the fence as a grid to design the letterforms. Chain link fences are ubiquitous structures in urban environments and hold potential to be put to different use, if not removed entirely. Besides commenting on these structures and the site itself, I also chose the word *FREE* in reference to the public aspect of my prac-

tice. I focus on creating work that is generally free to experience and primarily encountered by accident. As well, the *FREE* piece was intended as a follow up to my previous *NATURE* intervention. In philosophy, theories about human freedom and free will have historically been posed in contrast to nature. We still debate what levels of control individuals have over their own lives, and what is predetermined (whether in secular terms or not).

Starting on a cold, late November night in 2009, installing *FREE* became something of a marathon. I tied it together over a solid twenty-four hour period, overnight and through some light rain. In the end, more than 21,663 feet of salvaged string was used – two high-tension lengths for each of the 231 points/nodes crossing the 44-foot distance between the fences, plus the letter outlines. While friends came by to help intermittently, it was mostly a solitary effort.

The *FREE* piece was left outdoors and at the mercy of the elements, animals and passersby. It survived heavy, rain, snow and windstorms largely unscathed, but was eventually cut down during the night in mid March, 2010, by persons unknown. The remains were left in place for several months more, and at the time of this writing the traces of the outlines on the back fence can still be discerned if one looks for the letters.

TOSAT & Pillar Planters

The next intervention I will discuss, the *Toronto Street Advertising Takeover* (*TOSAT*), was launched in August 2010, but stemmed from the *NYSAT II* project in 2009.



13. *TOSAT – Sticker Design, 2010.*

While in New York for *NYSATII*, I suggested to Jordan Seiler and my previous collaborators (Eric Cheung, Posterchild, and Teeth) that we try to organize a similar project in Toronto. The idea was discussed and mulled over, and several months' later preparations for *TOSAT* began in earnest. The initial organizational group was comprised of Jordan, Posterchild and myself. Representatives from the Toronto based *DuSpa Collective* and photographer Martin Reis were subsequently invited and became vitally involved in both planning and execution of the project. This would turn out to be the largest international effort of its kind. Over 90 street level ads were removed, and nearly 20 larger billboards were painted over. Again, more than a 100 people were involved by the end of the action, including the creative contributions of 60 artists and activists from around the world. While participating artists mainly installed their own works in the *NYSAT* actions, for *TOSAT* most artworks were received by mail and installed by teams on the ground in Toronto. This time artwork came from Canada, all across the United States, and countries abroad such as France, Spain, Russia, and Australia.

This project further highlighted just how related are the problems that urban centers across the globe face in dealing with invasive advertising, an insidious – and perhaps the most superficial – manifestation of spectacular society. These public actions promoted spaces of agonistic democracy in the

face of dominant corporate commercial interests with unbalanced power. While the *NYSAT* actions focused on the illegal billboards put up by *NPA City Outdoor*, *TOSAT* aimed principally for the illegal poster pillars installed by *Pattison Outdoor* in Toronto. Several months after the *NYSAT* actions, *NPA City Outdoor* ceased operations in New York City. According to its own website, the *Jim Pattison Group* is currently Canada's third largest privately held company and *Pattison Outdoor* is Canada's largest "out-of-home" advertising company. Yet despite their immense resources, Pattison continues to engage in illicit practices that affect our shared space, to which the *TOSAT* project drew attention.

For my piece, I created planters reminiscent of those of the *Poster Pocket Plant* project. This time, however, I was working on a different surface, and so formed the pockets using transparent plastic. I premade these pockets on large sheets cut to the same dimensions as the *Pattison* pillar windows (approx. 66.5" × 45.25"). I then installed the pieces on both sides of a two-sided backlit pillar using forty powerful rare-earth magnets. It should be noted that I did not use salvaged materials for this intervention, although the PET plastic used was recyclable. I also designed *TOSAT* stickers to place over all the Pattison faceplate logos so that we would not promote the company through our action.



14. *Pillar Planters – Reactions*, 2010.



15. *Pillar Planters – Looking Up*, 2010.



16. *Pillar Planters – Backlit*, 2010.

The pieces for the *TOSAT* project lasted longer than those in the *NY-SAT* actions. The *NYSAT* works were removed within hours, but these pieces remained in place for several days. We installed ground works on a Sunday evening, and most stayed up until Wednesday afternoon or early evening. It was anticipated to be an ephemeral intervention, but I designed and built my planters in such a way that the pockets could have lasted indefinitely if allowed to stay in place. It demonstrated an alternative possibility for the site and the advertising structures.

As a whole, the *TOSAT* project has widely been considered a success, and attracted much media coverage⁴⁵ to issues concerning public space and illicit advertising. Police arrested several participants during both of the *NYSAT* actions, although all charges have since been dropped. Fortunately, no arrests were made during *TOSAT*. This was the first *Street Advertising Takeover* project outside of New York, but already there is talk of more to come in cities like Vancouver and Madrid. For *TOSAT*, I was both an organizer and participant, and I hope to take part in related interventions in the future.

Next

I do not intend to represent all my interventions in a single gallery show for this Thesis project (though I may in the future). However, I will show images of these works in a visual presentation for the purposes of my Thesis defense. This defense is anticipated to take place in November 2010, at the *107 Shaw Gallery* in Toronto. It will be held in conjunction with a new solo project that I am currently working on for the same space titled *TENT: Live Like Living*. While I will not be showing this new project officially as part of my main

Thesis, it could certainly be considered an extension of the series. Again, I am addressing illegal advertising in public spaces, this time focusing on ways that condo developments are currently marketed in Toronto and related issues. It is one of a number of projects I'm exploring that continues the practice that I have developed over the course of this Thesis. For more information about this project visit refer to Appendix A, a text by Ian Carr-Harris. Images are included in Appendix B on DVD.

Over the course of this interdisciplinary project, I created a series of interventions that activated public and semi-public spaces. The focus of these continuing endeavours has been to engage around ecological and social issues in the urban environment. To do this I have repurposed materials, systems and infrastructures that could otherwise be considered misused, underused or wasted. Consequently, agency within the public realm has been revealed, but also brought into question. These interventions present possibilities for difference and provisional alternatives.

This paper has outlined why I think such efforts are necessary. The spectacle, for example, continues to mutate and grow since Guy Debord last described it, but his theories are still a good starting point for recognizing the forces that both dominate and threaten our realities. It is important to examine the lenses through which we view such a world. I have attempted to draw attention to underlying concepts that influence dialogue and actions, ones that shape our surroundings and consciousness. In this respect, my interest in poststructural and deconstructive theory is perhaps most apparent in those works where I focused on words directly (even though deconstruction is not limited to text or verbal language)⁴⁶. By highlighting particular signifiers, such as with the *NATURE* intervention, I have prompted contemplation of the concepts with which these signifiers are entwined. However, my work also reveals the working, and latent potential of other systems and spaces often taken for granted. The subversion of public advertising tropes and structures,

for instance, can open shared spaces for healthy agonistic contestation and dialogue.

With all the interventions in this series, I have attempted to include elements that can be carried on beyond my own actions. This is immediately evident in the techniques that Eric Cheung and I created and developed with *Poster Pocket Planters*. Our project quickly drew interest from people in countries all over the world, and planters based on our designs have since been spotted outside of Toronto. These methods are adaptable and have potential to be changed or improved by others. The *TOSAT* project was also part of a growing international collaborative effort to re-appropriate public spaces from invasive advertising companies. Such collective projects engage with the city on a wider scale.

These are ongoing experiments, but not strictly scientific ones with predefined boundaries of testability (although parts could conceivably be restructured as such). It has been appropriate here to operate within a more open framework. Further research could take many forms. Collecting additional qualitative and quantitative data could provide further insight into the impact and effectiveness of particular aspects of these interventions in the future. Interviews and surveys may allow for greater feedback. I intend to soon improve and expand the online components of these projects so as to increase access and communication. Analysis of how these projects have spread online and in the media may provide useful quantitative data. However, such supplementary data collection is not feasible within the scope of this Thesis project, nor is it a primary goal. These are prospective research endeavours that I,

and/or others, may pursue at a later date.

Although I believe that these interventions have already achieved some success, I do not see any as final. There is a need to continue, and always room to improve. This project does not envision a perfect, utopian public space. There is no ultimate finish line. Rather, I recognize the importance of ongoing engagement, of an active public sphere with spaces open for contestation. More interventions are already planned, and I hope to both refine and expand those outlined above.

Endnotes

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid. pp. 90–91
- 4 Lyotard, Jean François.
- 5 Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Black and Red (1983p).
- 6 In this section, I draw from my own text in a previous essay titled “Comments on Comments” (2010) about Debord’s theory of the spectacle.
- 7 Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Verso (1998p). p. 5.
- 8 Ibid. p. 8.
- 9 Ibid. p. 9.
- 10 Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Black and Red (1983p). ¶ 220.

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- 12 Holmes, Brian. "Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World" in Sholette, Gregory & Stimson, Blake, Eds, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1545*. University of Minnesota Press (2007).
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- 15 Mouffe, Chantal. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces". *ART&RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*. Volume 1. No.2 Summer 2007. p. 4.
- 16 For an introduction to Foucault see: Gutting, Gary. *Foucault*. Oxford University Press (2005).
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- 29 Ibid.
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- 42 Below are selected examples of international print publications in which the Poster Pocket Plant project has been featured. Again, the project has also been featured on thousands of websites to date (see above).
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- 44 More details can be found online at: publicadcampaign.com/nysat/ and publicadcampaign.com/tosat/
- 45 For examples see: publicadcampaign.com/tosat/press/
- 46 “Deconstruction simply seeks to ‘upset’ elements in oppositions in order to force them into both complicity with one another and consequently into ‘self interrogation’. Deconstruction need not be limited to verbal/written language.” (Ian Carr-Harris, in correspondence with the author, 2010).

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Appendix A: Text by Ian Carr-Harris

TENT: Life-Like Living – Project Introductory Text

November 2010

“It’s Who You Are.”

(DNA₃ Sales Centre street advertisement, King & Shaw, Toronto, November 2010)

Or not – or so Sean Martindale insists is possible, and takes that insistence as the ground on which to insert a quietly provocative series of interrogations into the corporate fabric of the city. And of course there is much to interrogate. Let’s look at one instance, as Martindale does with his recent work, a series based on the marketing of upscale condominiums in Toronto. If, after nourishment, shelter is our second-most vital requirement, Sean takes aim at the urban-industrial complex – the city bureaucracies and development corporations – that has largely eliminated the possibility for individuals to supply that need themselves. The specific target of his intervention is the signage, and behind them the advertising skills, that the developers employ to elicit the emotional responses that transmute need into desire. While this in itself registers as an understandable critique of our complicity in consumer culture, Martindale lifts another veil that offers up a more troubling question: the slippery, but flagrantly illegal intrusion into our public space of those who would force our attention. Sign-age is – perhaps regrettably – everywhere, but there is legal permit driven signage, on streetcars for instance, and illegal signage for which there are neither limitations nor public gain. The problem is more widespread than one might imagine, and left unchecked (the city’s policing

is always inadequate to the task) we are helpless conscripts in a high-stakes game of Monopoly.

If this is background, the foreground is Martindale's 'liberation' of illegal signage and its conversion into a mock 'tent city', itself 'extra-legally' salted around the city – a reference to the plight of many who are excluded from the implicit right to shelter that constitutes the rhetoric of both private capital and public policy. In a comedic replay of the gambits used by the developers, Martindale divides his appropriations into both tents constructed out of vinyl condo advertisements, and sandwich-board advertisements for his tent city 'accommodations'. In a further mockery of the housing industry, Martindale turns the exhibition space that establishes the project's definition into a presentation centre for his 'development'. But in redefining an exhibition space as a presentation centre, Martindale constructs an evocative loop that ties the idea of art not only into the idea of commerce, but into the concept of representation itself – as in re-presentation. And here we enter a funhouse of possibilities, as we search for some 'original thing' that we are here to find re-presented. Can an ersatz domain be represented? Is it not merely itself a representation? Where does the infinite regress of representations end?

If Martindale's critique of both representation and real estate projects seems simply amusing, it is perhaps because we haven't sufficiently noted the casual appropriation of both authenticity and voice that lies within the slogan quoted at the top of this introduction to his work. While we no doubt consciously dismiss this and many other examples of the tactic of infiltration, it is also a staple of psychological analysis that we nevertheless absorb information and make it our own. We buy into a monthly price of \$999.99 over one of

\$1,000.00 because we want to believe there is a difference – another tactic of course at work in the promotion of condominium sales. The principle, a version of what the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser called ‘hailing’, has been cited for the inability of the Soviet Union to eliminate the traditional forms of social cohesion that stood in contrast to the state’s attempt to revolutionize behaviour. In the end, we act in profoundly different registers than we think we do, and those who know the rules win the game.

Of course Martindale is working out of a long line of antecedents. Guy Debord’s classic *The Society of the Spectacle*, for example, examined the degree to which our lives are increasingly rendered ‘inauthentic’ through the imposition of artificial needs and skewed desires such that all we experience is what has been manufactured by corporate power and state acquiescence. Theodor Adorno’s critiques of the administered society, for which in his view the aspirational motivations of utopian modernity are partly responsible, sound the same note of alarm.

But, one might ask, is it art? Tired though that question may be, one interrogation deserves another. The thing about art is that it wears a thousand faces, and one of them, evident here, is parody. There are a couple of things to be said about parody. It is immensely accessible; we know, or at least sense a parody when we encounter one. Consequently, we instinctively look for that which it questions, or interrogates, and our perception of that will be instantly and irrevocably altered – even if we seek to refute the parodic contamination. Secondly, it only works if it is focused and acutely aware of the dimensions of its subject in preparing an alternative modeling of its form, of which – given the conundra of origin inherent in form itself – there are perhaps an infinite

number. It only works, in other words, if it has the qualities of art. Is Martin-
dale's work art? Of course it is. Is it timely? It sure is. Can it succeed? Perhaps,
if we pay attention.

Ian Carr-Harris November 2010

Appendix B: Accompanying Material (DVD content)

The following accompanying material is available upon request from the Ontario College of Art & Design Library: a DVD titled “SMartindale_Thesis”. Anyone requesting the material may view it in the OCAD Library or pay to have it copied for personal use.

DVD contents include:

- A PDF copy of this Thesis document labeled “Martindale_Sean.pdf”

- A folder labeled “TENT_images” containing 37 images of Sean Martindale’s *TENT: Life-Like Living* project and exhibition. The files within this folder are labeled “TENT_1.jpg” through to “TENT_36.jpg” and “TENT_web.jpg”

All images are by Sean Martindale © 2010 unless otherwise noted.