
NO MUGGING
BEYOND
THIS
POINT

Dex, this one's for you.

I love you most.

~

Don't do Poetic Terrorism
for other artists, do it for
people who will not realize
(at least for a few moments)
that what you have done is
art. Avoid recognizable art-
categories, avoid politics, don't
stick around to argue, don't
be sentimental; be ruthless,
take risks, vandalize only what
must be defaced, do something
children will remember
all their lives--but don't be
spontaneous unless
the Poetic Terrorism Muse
has possessed you.

Dress up.
Leave a false name.
Be legendary.

/22

/64

ABSTRACT

THEORETICAL DISCOURSE surrounding public art has, by and large, propogated the notion that public art speaks for specific identities and about specific communities. The lasting effect of these ideas has been the anesthetization of public's art potential to cultivate the critical engagement and active discourse necessary to healthy and robust civic life. This introductory essay serves as an exploration and critique of the terms under which the institutional interests of the federal government and the art regime has come to ideologically situate art and art practice as essential to the establishment of cohesive cultural identities and the way in which community identity has come to crystalize around a public artwork and the identity of its maker. My research into the issues and debates surrounding public art has led me to the conclusion that all too often public art functions as propagandist art when it strives to speak for or with the individuals who inhabit the adjacent parameters of its site. At the essay's end, I argue that when it comes to art's efficacy to address the political, social, cultural and economic textures and irregularities within public space, the real rich and juicy site of cultural critique and critical engagement exists not in state sanctioned public artworks but rather in the illicit practices of anonymous street artists and graffiti writers.

Public Art // What Can Art Do For Society?

THE DISCOURSES surrounding public art have, in large part, framed their subject as way by which governing institutions can encourage civic enfranchisement through cultural investment. In 1963 John F. Kennedy staked an ideological claim for public support of the arts when he asserted that, while government can never supplant the patronage filled by private individuals and groups in our society, it "surely has a significant part to play in helping to establish the conditions under which art can flourish" (Knight 1). The General Services Administration founded Art-in-Architecture's "Percent For Art" program upon this claim in 1963 and came to require that all new federal building projects earmark one half of one percent of total construction costs for the purchase and installation of contemporary works by American artists. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), founded under the Johnson administration, provided a similar service. Established in 1965, the NEA allocated substantial federal tax-based funds for arts spending at the state and local levels. Both the NEA and "Percent for Art" operated under the philosophical assumption that the dissemination of and access to art experiences - regardless of social barriers -would enrich Americans' cultural lives. Their populist approach to

With this turn in public art's institutional curatorial practice, discourses surrounding public art came to promote it not only as artworks created for and owned by the populous but as expressing the individual identity of respective sites and communities.

the curation of public space yoked together the desire to make "high" - minded ideals accessible to the "average" person with the aim of establishing a cohesive cultural identity through art practice. Yet, during the 1980's both agencies were highly criticized for selecting artworks directly out of artists' catalogues and placing those works in public spaces. To critics, such public artworks were seemingly indifferent to the specific conditions of their sites and proximate audience because they were not created in response to the environment in which they were situated. Heeding this critique, "Percent for Art" and the NEA increasingly commissioned site-specific artwork, where the interaction between the site and its art is a prime determination in the work's conception, design and execution. In time, these discourses worked to secure public art's social value as expressions of self and community identity.

Public Art // Where Aesthetic Representation Meets Community Identity

Public art's imbrication in the issues surrounding community and identity has as much to do with the social, cultural, economic and aesthetic context of any given site as it does with public art's ideological foundation on the principles of civic enfranchisement and cultural investment. With this coupling, the social values promoted by federal and state rhetoric are linked to the assumption that art can be used to represent discrete identities and thereby promote a sense of social belonging throughout society. Successful public artworks have largely been recognized by commissioning agencies and public art champions as ones whose representational qualities affirm the viewer's sense of identity. This rubric for success emerges equally from institutional discourse surrounding public art as it does from art history's evolving relationship to the role of the viewer. Throughout his career, Marcel Duchamp continually gestured towards the notion that an artwork, public or otherwise, exceeds itself in that the questions it poses and prompts are necessarily addressed to its audience. At the 1957 meeting of the Convention of the American Federation of Arts Duchamp noted that "[a]ll in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (Lebel 78). Duchamp's assumption holds the spectator as integral to the completion of the art act and, when broadly applied to art's relationship to the issues surrounding identity politics, acknowledges the artwork as holding the potential to fortify the viewing subject by protecting them from the conditions of social alienation, economic fragmentation and political disenfranchisement that threaten, diminish, exclude, marginalize, contradict and otherwise unsettle their sense of identity (Kwon 97). This linkage, however, proves problematic for public art as that its quality of being set within public space and owned by the general public opens it to a large set of philosophical, political and civic issues surrounding representation in public space.

In the 1990's and early 2000's many contemporary cultural critics and art historians colored public art in a fairly utopian gloss by framing it as a site that activates the agency of its viewers. Patricia Philips, for example, theorized that engagement with public art naturally leads to the establishment and cultivation of a deeper awareness of and sensitivity to existing social relations within its audience because it asks them to critically examine their public and private selves. Her position is founded on the assumption that public art's being of and for the public characterizes it as an active collection of formal qualities that provide a visual language through which individuals can express and explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective. This does not mean that public art seeks a common denominator, expresses some common good, or blunts the hard edges of the political, cultural or social issues it confronts. Rather, it is a "manifestation of art activities and strategies that take the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis" (Senie, and Webster 298). For Philips, what makes public art public is the body of ideas and subjects that the artwork speaks to and asks questions about. And so, regardless of whether a public artwork affirms its audience's identity and world view or stirs controversy and rage, its state of

PUBLIC ART // PUBLIC STATEMENTS

LEAVE A FALSE NAME

The conflation of artistic self-representation with political determination becomes problematic when the notion of community is taken as a homogenizing term and not understood in its diversity.

being prompts individuals to tune into and respond to the shifting contours and textures of public life.

Yet, this rosy view has been actively countered by scholars and critics who levy the claim that public art's imbrication with community identity is problematic for both community members and the artist alike. All too often in federally funded public art, the artist or artwork comes to stand in for the identity of a specific community at an institutional level. This happens, in part, because discourse surrounding contemporary art, public or otherwise, asserts the realization of politically empowered social subjects through an encounter or involvement with the artwork and so links enfranchisement with aesthetic representation. The conflation of artistic self-representation with political determination becomes problematic when the notion of community is taken as a homogenizing term and not understood in its diversity. Thus, when public art is asked to represent or depict qualities of a specific community, the diverse identities and modes of self-representation characteristic of vibrant and healthy communities are flattened and dulled. Rather than address tensions and inequalities present within specific sites, this kind of public art sidesteps these issues altogether and all too often diffuses the dissatisfaction and frustration many community groups feel in regard to the uneven distribution of existing cultural and economic resources. As Miwon Kwon notes in her book *One Place After Another*, site-specific art that seeks to articulate and resuscitate community identity effectively inaugurates the erasure of differences. She writes that, "the yoking together of the myth of the artist as a privileged source of originality with the customary belief in places as ready reservoirs of unique identity belies the compensatory nature of such a move. For this collapse of the artist and the site reveals an anxious cultural desire to assuage the sense of loss and vacancy that pervades both sides of this equation" (Kwon 55). Further, as Hal Foster notes in his book *Return of the Real*, the artist who at the fore was commissioned because of the singularity of his artistic vision and the political self-determination inherent to his artwork is at the end primitivized and anthropologized by the funding institution. Here is your community, the institution says in effect, embodied in your artist, now on display (Foster 198).

Public Art // Whose Voice Counts?

THE EXTENT OF THE CRITIQUE made available to a public artist as public commentator is circumscribed not only by institutional interests of his or her funders but also by the discourses that idealize public art's ability to increase individual agency. Contemporary critical public art discourse promotes a populous view of public art that in its best practices invites and encourages the participation of local community members in the conception and execution of public art works. Often times, public artists are commissioned not simply because of their technical virtuosity but rather because their special purchase on criticality permits them to serve as ambassador for a given community and to objectively speak to the contradictions and irregularities apparent in any given public realm. In this way, public artworks come to function as sanctioned speech acts put forward by the artist on behalf of a community speaking to, against, or for particular aspects of public life in public space. While these works may take the shape of enduring, permanent pieces or ephemeral instances, the object of their critical investigation is not so much the formal characteristics of their medium as it is the dynamic interplay that emerges between the work and its site. The dominant logic governing public art discourse all too often understands the artist less as an individual producer of discrete objects and more as a facilitator of specific situations, while the audience takes the status of co-producer or participant. The idealist impulse behind these collaborative efforts is that the inclusion of the "public" into the process of art creation will promote culturally fortified subjectivities and politically empowered social subjects. However, there are many large blind spots within this idealized view of public art. Regardless of the degree to which the artist involves those who live in and around the artwork's site, the privilege of critique is selectively offered and highly curated in public space. Federal and state agencies policing of public space coupled with their funding and commissioning of specific artists and site-specific art works in effect offers aesthetic political self-determination only to those appointed by the state or state sanctioned authorities. Even when the artist seeks to affirm the identities of subaltern constituencies by aesthetically representing them, their actions only reinforce the classic Marxist view that refuses to acknowledge the ways in which the oppression by the dominant class can actually ensure the coherence of a minority, disenfranchised group (Kwon 111). And so, despite who they speak for and in what form they speak for them, site-specific public artworks have the lasting effect of calcifying and commodifying the spectacle of critique as political enfranchisement.

Street artists, whose artworks function equally as speech acts yet are subject to persecution under charges of defacement of property, pose a rich counter example to the ways in which public art's aesthetic values and political statements are grafted onto or situated within the public spaces of everyday life. Street art is a variance of public art historically rooted in graffiti writing and as such is adamantly policed by state funded and community endorsed anti-graffiti task forces. Modern practices of graffiti writing are acknowledged as highly aestheticized forms of vandalism that revolve around the typography and letter-formation of the artist's tag as his or her identity marker. The illegal status of graffiti in the United States requires that American visual street artists and

While illicit tags and street art installations, like licit public art projects, are theoretically positioned within contemporary art discourses that link political enfranchisement to aesthetic representation, the acute dissonance between federal and state agencies' celebration of public art and their antagonistic pursuit of street artists reveals the real bounds and contours of our socially sanctioned aesthetic values.

graffiti writers mask the specificity of their identities and present their work under a pseudonym. While the cloak of anonymity requires that graffiti writers communicate amongst themselves and their closed community, the proliferation, scale and repetition of their tags within any given area establishes their work as a brand whose meaning exceeds the identity marker itself. Similarly, the stylistic, multi-media visual symbols embraced and exhibited by street artists are regarded as totems for the artist's identity and political position. That graffiti and street art are most prevalent in urban, low-income communities generally encourages and enables art and society theorists to attribute these practices to politically underrepresented and disenfranchised identities, which only further inscribes the subaltern status of its practitioners and the communities they have come to represent. This assumption fuels a circuitous logic, under which street art is under erasure because it is produced by marginalized communities and vice versa. While illicit tags and street art installations, like licit public art projects, are theoretically positioned within contemporary art discourses that link political enfranchisement to aesthetic representation, the acute dissonance between federal and state agencies' celebration of public art and their antagonistic pursuit of street artists reveals the real bounds and contours of our socially sanctioned aesthetic values.

Public Art // Public Statements

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID about the failures or successes of public art as it strives to propagate and promote solidified community identity, but very little has been said about public art that does not embody this end. Public artworks that constitute acts of resistance through some sort of visual statement do not easily fit within the dominant discourses that claim public art as either a modest antidote or grand solution to struggles over representation and political enfranchisement. Rather than reinforce the traditional feel-good political thinking about public art, these works inscribe the conditions for critique, investigation, articulation and constructive reappraisal into the geography of their sites by virtue of their resistance to aestheticizing and promoting community identity. While privately initiated public art interventions are heavily policed by the state and considered "non-art" acts that blemish private property by particular community members, their abundance and anonymous proliferation publicly expresses the artist's subjective experience. The very being of contemporary illegal street art seems to acknowledge language and artistic expression as implicated in social relations whose political demands are the consolidation of discrete identities and to turn those techniques against dominant discourses. Here, the greater concerns latent within graffiti and street art practices coalesce around and push on the cultural and social relations that yield art and art production to a sanitized existence, absent of critique or conflict, and do so by altering, augmenting, or embellishing existing public infrastructures and architectures as platforms for self-representation.

In 1956 Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman, leading figures of the Situationist International, presciently wrote that:

"*Every reasonably aware person of our time is aware of the obvious fact that art can no longer be justified as a superior activity, or even as a compensatory activity to which one might honorably devote oneself. The reason for this deterioration is clearly the emergence of productive forces that necessitate other production relations and a new practice of life. In the civil-war phase we are engaged in, and in close connection with the orientation we are discovering for certain superior activities to come, we believe that all known means of expression are going to converge in a general movement of propaganda that must encompass all the perpetually interacting aspects of social reality.*"

When applied to discourses surrounding public art, Debord and Wolman's critique gets at the very heart of the way in which propagandist thinking about public art as a vehicle for political enfranchisement not only aestheticizes community identity but anesthetizes its capacity to speak for itself. Situationist International philosophy and political action presented an apt counter-point to public art discourses in that it advocated for freely acting individuals to activate the spaces they inhabit through the construction of situations, playful social and spacial treatments that would ultimately lead to the satisfaction of individual desire, the realization of individual pleasure, and full expression of one's social identity. The Situationists created situations and détourned public space as part of a critical methodology that examined the way in which life as experienced under capitalism is alienated from itself. Their overarching objective to reintegrate poetic and

art experiences disallowed by existing society back into public space equally describes the ideologies motivating illicit street art. Like the Situationist International conception and practice of détournement, contemporary street artists reuse preexisting elements in a new ensemble, the result being the loss of importance for each detoured element and the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect. In this way, revolutionary organization and self-representation is the primary ideological contact point linking the Situationist International to contemporary street art practitioners. Public art's long utopian dream of civic enfranchisement and cultural investment is in effect lost on artworks representative of community identity, and instead is wholly given over to and realizable by artists and makers acting of their own accord and visually representing their specific political, ideological and self-interests. Stripped of the false Duchampian linkage that holds the spectator as integral to the completion of the art act and his or her identity fortified through spectatorship, state sanctioned public art can be understood as operating ideologically in the exact same way as does institutionally sited art and in service of the same economy that commodifies art for capitalist gain. The spectacular situations proffered by street art circumscribes the reality it presents, but it does not preclude the possibility of identifying a bigger and better world of chosen relations and experiences beyond its constraints. Rather, it is the site of possibility of representation in space that maintains individual articulation and recognizes each individual as part of a community that claims for himself or herself the ways and means of participation in civic life ◻

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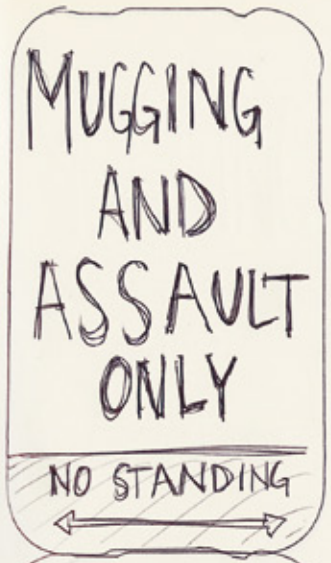
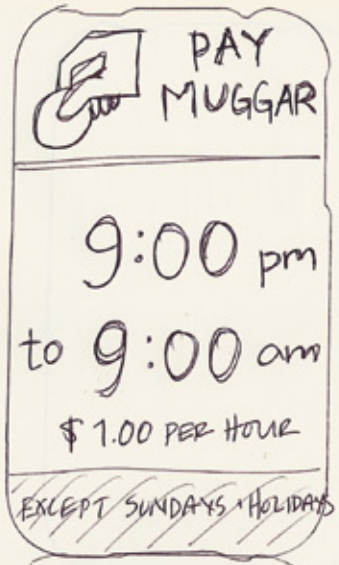
NO RIGHT TURN ON RED 7AM-6PM
NO MUGGING BEYOND THIS POINT
WESTMINSTER ST
TD
TD Bank
NO MUGGING

PROJECT OVERVIEW

NO MUGGING WAS a collaborative public art project that sought to humorously draw attention to the existence and prevalence of urban crime in Providence, Rhode Island. Working within the established visual language of municipal sign systems, my collaborators and I created and installed 12 street signs in Downtown Providence that were near replicas of "No Parking" signs. However, our détourned and slightly mischievous signs read No Mugging: Here to Corner, No Mugging: This Side of the Street, No Mugging: Beyond This Point, and No Mugging: Between Signs. We hoped that our signs would catch the attention of Providence's residents and visitors and their curious existence would inspire a moment of pause and reflection within their viewers about urban crime. Much to our surprise, the signs garnered greater attention than we ever expected. Providence's Channel 12 EyeWitness News and ABC 6 News featured stories about our illegally and anonymously installed signs and the Providence Journal published images of our signs in their newspaper and on their Facebook feed. This coverage precipitated a series of comments on various social media sites as well as an internal e-mail debate amongst RISD Digital + Media graduate students. The interpretations of and reactions to No Mugging activated a broad set of discourses that overtook the project's original intent and instead focused on the social value of art and the role of the artist as enfranchised community member. This section serves as a small archive that tracks the project's arch and captures some of the discourse and debate it generated.

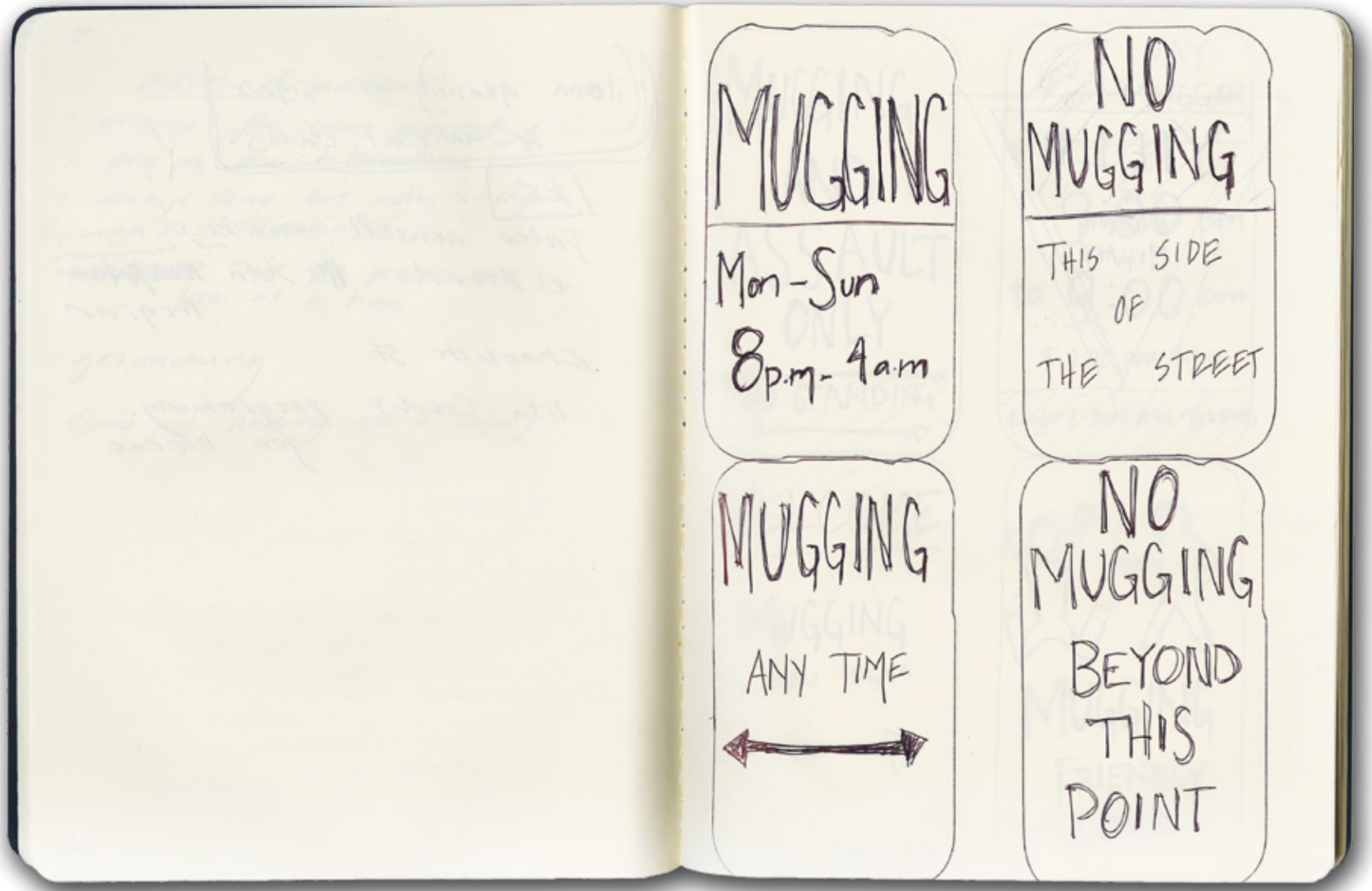

YIELD
TO
ONCOMING
MUGGERS


MUGGING
AND
ASSAULT
ONLY
NO STANDING


PAY
MUGGAR
9:00 pm
to 9:00 am
$1.00 PER HOUR
EXCEPT SUNDAYS + HOLIDAYS


WELCOME
MUGGING
BETWEEN SIGNS
THANK YOU


MUGGING
FRIENDLY
ZONE


MUGGING
Mon-Sun
8p.m-4a.m
NO MUGGING
THIS SIDE OF THE STREET
MUGGING
ANY TIME
NO MUGGING
BEYOND THIS POINT

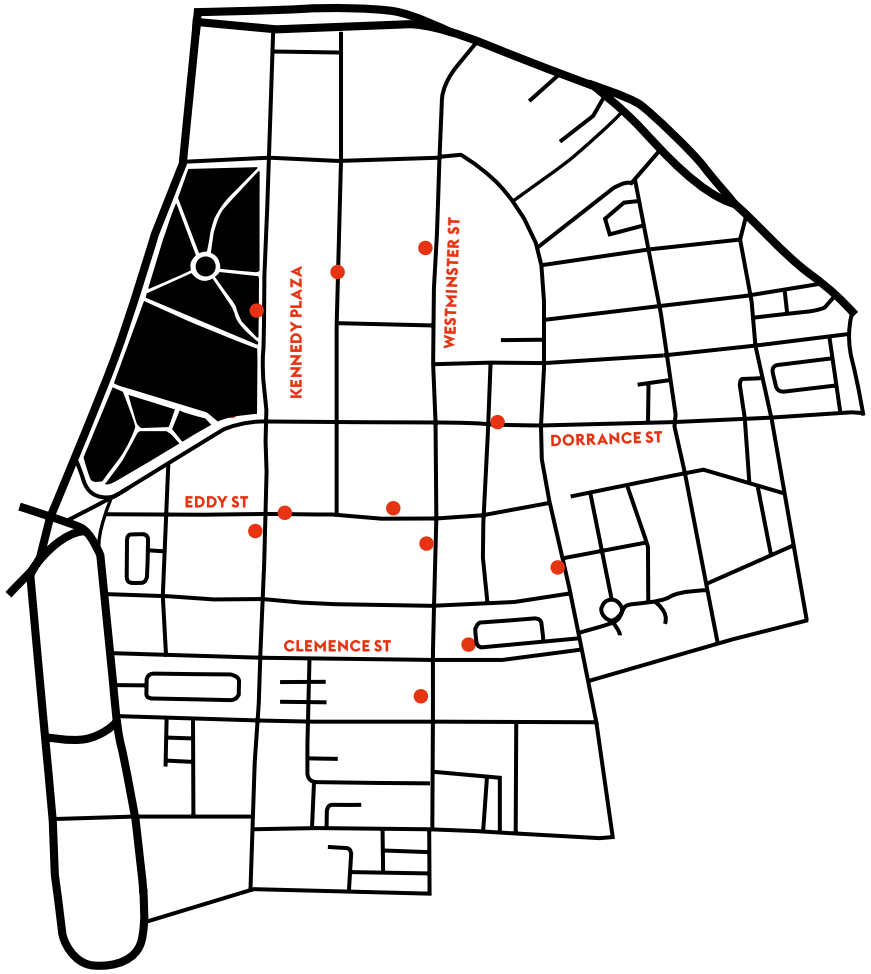

NO MUGGING
HERE
TO
CORNER


NO MUGGING
BETWEEN
SIGNS


NO MUGGING
THIS SIDE
OF
THE STREET


NO MUGGING
BEYOND
THIS
POINT

On March 3 at approximately 2:00 pm me and my collaborators installed 12 of our No Mugging signs on existing municipal signposts thoughout Downtown Providence. This map plots their locations.



No Mugging was quietly installed on a Sunday afternoon without interruption or interference by local police or city officials.

12 signs were clustered in constellation in and around Downtown Providence's Kennedy Plaza.


NO PARKING ANY TIME
NO PARKING
TAXI STAND TOW ZONE 6PM TO 7AM
NO PARKING
LOADING ZONE 7AM TO 6PM
NO MUGGING
HERE TO CORNER

The signs remained in place for 4 days before they were featured on various local media outlets and deinstalled by Providence's Department of Public Works.

EYEWITNESSNEWS
WEDNESDAY
MARCH 6 2013

Three days after No Mugging was installed, the signs were featured on Channel 12 EYEWitness News. Reporter Adam Adamson tells this story.

JENNIFER MOBILIA | NEWS ANCHOR:
New at 6:00, an illegal street sign is causing quite a stir in Downtown Providence.

MIKE MONTECALVO | NEWS ANCHOR:
It showed up out of no where, but looked like it was professionally installed.

JENNIFER MOBILIA | NEWS ANCHOR:
However, the city says they had nothing to do with it. It reads "No Mugging" from "Here to Corner" and stands in the middle of Kennedy Plaza.

MIKE MONTECALVO | NEWS ANCHOR:
EYEWitness reporter Andrew Adamson is in the newsroom with more.

ADAM ADAMSON | REPORTER:
There are stop signs, crossing signs, and parking signs. But have you ever seen a "No Mugging" sign? That's exactly what we found in Downtown Providence on Tuesday. We took a closer look to see if people got the message.

Signs, signs, and more signs all around Kennedy Plaza. But none grabbed people's attention like this one with the message "No Mugging: This Side of the Street."

JONATHAN ANGILLY | PROVIDENCE RESIDENT:
When I saw that sign it looked real. It looked absolutely 100% real and when I saw it I thought that it had been put up by the city, you know, to bust chops.

ADAM ADAMSON | REPORTER:
But it wasn't the city. We checked. Public Works is in charge of putting up signs in Providence. They tell us it was put up illegally by an unknown person.

ED ROSE | PROVIDENCE RESIDENT:
Some one took letraset sticky-tape and letters and just put it all together, that's all. Somebody with a lot of skill and more time on their hands than they really needed.

ADAM ADAMSON | REPORTER:
Folks seem to think that who ever put up the sign may have done it as a joke. Others say the goal was to get across an important message about mugging in the city. But will that message have an effect on people's behaviors?

TAREA SCOTT | PROVIDENCE RESIDENT:
Because they already know that the cops are down here, the cops are right back there. It's not going to bother them, they are not going to care.

LEE JOHNSON | PROVIDENCE RESIDENT:
If it stops one person from being hurt or someone from having their money taken, if it has that effect for one person, then it was worth the ink.

ADAM ADAMSON | REPORTER:
Providence Public Works plan to take down the signs today. They are worried that it could send the wrong message and confuse people who are trying to look at other signs. In the newsroom, Andrew Adamson, EYEWitness News.

RISD DIGITIAL
+ MEDIA
RESPONSE
THURSDAY
MARCH 7 2013

HI NUPUR AND EVERYONE,

Congrats on your project and the attention that it's been receiving. It is always exciting to see my classmate's work and its especially amusing to see documentation of their work on ABC.

However, I've been thinking about this piece and I am a little bothered by it. I am curious about the social politics of this piece. I feel that this piece calls for stronger policing of Downtown Providence, but none of the artists involved have a vested interest in Downtown Providence aside from the fact that CIT is Downtown. I feel like this piece calls for more public spending (on police) by anonymously shaming local citizens and police, by snidely telling them their culture is not safe enough. I feel the piece proposes gentrification and class segregation/stratification. I feel maybe a more critical and socially sensitive attitude is possible. Does the artist's anonymity shield them from their own identification in the class-politics of Downtown Providence? How would this identification complicate the public discourse surrounding the piece? I feel that the true meaning of the signs is "don't mug RISD students" or even worse "keep crime outside of the Downtown area where CIT is, keep crime in the impoverished areas on the outskirts of Providence where it belongs." I don't think that this piece necessarily intends to promote class warfare, but at the same time I think in some ways it is very complicit with the thinking that often accompanies it.

Just my thoughts, maybe these are already things that have been considered in making the piece.

Best wishes,
Matt

DEAR MATT (AND EVERYONE).

Thank you for your acknowledgement of our piece and the media attention it has received. And thank you for sharing your feelings and thoughts about the piece with us and the rest of the D+M class. One of the many intentions we set for our No Mugging project was to inspire discourse about crime and the attendent social conditions that enable crime to occur. And so we are glad that you took the time to put forth your ideas and feelings on this very topic. You raise many interesting and productive points and we'd happily make space to talk with you more about the project either one-on-one or with the rest of the class.

There was, however, an aspect of your response that concerned us, and we'd like to share that concern with you (and more broadly with the rest of the class because we feel that it speaks to a point to which we all ought to be vigilantly aware). When we read your response, we noticed that you assumed the nature of our politics, positions and intentions and structured your argument in part on those assumptions. The danger in assuming and not asking the nature of another's politics or perspective is that it constructs an unequal discursive scenario where one party claims a knowledge over another which the other party did not endorse. For the record, we do not think this was your intention. We point this out simply to highlight how easily (and often unintentionally) our assumptions can skew a discussion's baseline from one where each party freely offers and owns their input to one where one party's agency is circumscribed or debased.

We look forward to any and all conversations that may emerge from our work.

All best,
Nupur, Jen and Gefeng

HI GUYS,

I want to say first that I think the piece has been super-successful in generating conversation around these issues, and think it's rad that it's gotten so much publicity.

I do have some issues, however, with your response to Matt. I wanted to share my thoughts because I've talked a lot with Nupur, Jen and Matt about this piece. The assumptions Matt made about the politics of the authors, etc. were legit assumptions based on the content of the piece itself. That doesn't necessarily mean that those assumptions align with the intent of the creator; once you put a piece in public, you obviously lose some control over how it's received. Also, some relatively basic assumptions about what it means to be a student at RISD (RISD is a relatively privileged community, most of its students are by nature temporary residents of Providence, and RISD students for the most part don't enjoy getting mugged) support his argument but aren't necessary to it. The piece also invites the viewer to make these kinds of political and social assumptions even if you don't know anything about its authors. I don't think Matt meant to debase your point of view in any way, he even acknowledged that many of his concerns may have already been considered by you, the authors of the piece, in making it. I also know that you did consider many of the social and political issues surrounding the piece when you were making it. However, I think he did raise some provocative questions that I feel like you dodged in your response by claiming that he was undermining your agency as creators. The issue I have about this kind of response is that it can stifle the kind of free and public discourse that I feel is so crucial to the kind of discussions we want to be having at RISD, but so rarely do have, in part because we are afraid of stepping on each other's toes (NOTE: I do not think this was your intention in your response to Matt, just that it can be one of its unintended consequences). I know these kind of conversations can happen because we have them in smaller groups all the time. I don't think he meant any disrespect to any of you, and I hope we can separate our thoughts about each other's work from our feelings about each other.

Anyway, in conclusion I think the piece is super-interesting and I also thought Matt's response was really valuable, and I hope we can continue the conversation.

Elizabeth

HI EVERYONE.

So based on previous emails, we think it's a good opportunity to offer up what we think is a big take-away from this discussion and that is the question of authorship in public art pieces. Matt's response to our No Mugging project was what it was based on the fact that he knew our identity. This knowledge effected his read on the work's meaning and/or intent. As makers of these signs we were fully aware of how the dialogue surrounding the piece could have/would have changed if we revealed our identities. Two foreseeable ways, amongst a host of unforeseeable ones, could have been:

- the one that Matt states, which is the classist argument, one of the privileged RISD student
- the other is framing the piece within an art context

We agree with Elizabeth's statement that once an artwork is situated in the public realm the 'authors' of the work lose not just some but almost all control over it. We intentionally retained our anonymity because we did not want our identity, or more precisely the assumptions about our politics and/or positions attached to stereotypes surrounding our identities, to be part of how our signs were read. Because of this, the dialogue put forward in various media has showcased a broad set of reactions to our signs. Their audience has responded to them as something curious, something strange, something absurd, something productive, and something unproductive.

Responses have included:

- Given the design language of the signs, some people thought the state put them up - which of course prompts the question of why would the state put up No Mugging signs that allowed mugging on the other side of the street, or on the other side of the corner, etc?
- Some people reacted to them as an obvious joke.
- Some people reacted to them as a comment on urban culture.
- Some people reacted to the state for wasting taxpayer money, which is clearly a frustration that comes from RI's current economic situation.
- Some thought it was an art project.

We'd like to mention that the intent of the project was neither to make a snide comment about the police/ the people who live in Providence nor was it an attempt to secure the safety of the area around CIT. In fact, it wasn't an attempt towards security at all and rather was an attempt towards generating dialogue. We were not speaking only as RISD students who don't want to be mugged, yet we knew that if we released our identities the project could have been read according to stereotypes/assumptions about what it means to be a RISD student. And we thank you, Matt, for pointing that out.

We also think that Matt's comments bring out questions not only of ownership and class, but also of belonging. We wonder what is the threshold of belonging? When is it that someone is considered part of a community and can legitimately speak to the issues that community faces? Up until what point is someone considered an outsider and given no voice or franchise in the political life of the physical and social space they inhabit? At what moment is one allowed to have a stake in a community? And as artists, when are you granted the permission/authority to make works that are publicly situated and when are you not? What do we make of the social protocols that govern whose voice counts where, when, and in what form? And how might

we go about blurring the boundaries of those protocols or changing them outright?

This, for us, naturally leads into the question of authorship. We wonder, how and why is it important, and/or not important, to know the identity of the artist(s) responsible for a public artwork? When, as an artist, are you part of the community in which your work is sited and when are you an outsider? How, when, and why might an artist have the right to create works like this?

These are just some more thoughts we'd like to add to the discussion based on the previous emails and our thinking about public art in general.

Please respond if you feel like this is a discussion worth having.

Many Thanks,
The Signmakers

PROJECT ANALYSIS

NO MUGGING WAS AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: how can humor be used to address crime here in Providence? As me and my collaborators approached this project we fully acknowledged the grave and enduring trauma produced by crime, yet we felt that the mechanics of humor provided us an apt platform to interrogate the kinds of crime associated with urban environments and to prompt discussion about urban safety. Our investigation into local crime reports revealed the prevalence of theft, assault and mugging in and around Downtown Providence and spurred us to think about its social-spatial conditions and the semiotic ways in which crime is policed there. We were intrigued by the proliferation and redundancy of signs in Providence's Downtown district, and how, when considered in constellation, these signs revealed both the order and disorder latent in the city. Our thinking about signs as a control tactic countering urban disorder and danger came to theoretically underpin our project. At the same time, we were inspired by the Situationists International and their theory and practice of détournement, in which pre-existing elements are placed in a new ensemble as to drain off the original sense of each autonomous element and to organize a new meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new

scope and effect. While this technique was part of a portfolio of strategies employed by the Situationists to critique the whole of life under capital, we appropriated the principles of détournement to examine the logic of control and behavioral influence expressed by municipal sign systems.

For us, No Mugging played upon the absurdity of creating mugging free zones as a way to activate awareness and discourse around the issues surrounding urban safety. While we expected Providence's residents and visitors to take note of our curious signs, we did not expect the scope or gravity of the response they generated. The Providence Journal, EyeWitness 12 News and ABC 6 News all ran stories about our anonymous and illegal signs three days after we installed them on the streets surrounding Kennedy Plaza. A large thread of comments accumulated on The Providence Journal's Facebook page, with respondents generally acknowledging our signs as somewhere between a critical art project and a humous public prank and supporting them as a creative public speech act about urban crime, though some did admonish us for mis-applying our efforts and causing a disturbance in people's ability to read the other signs populating Downtown Providence. The signs were eventually taken down by city authorities, but the coverage they received on various media outlets broadly expanded their audience to Rhode Island and South-Eastern Massachusetts residents and encouraged a broad spectrum of debate surrounding the role of anonymously created and installed public art.

The most potent and critical response to No Mugging, however, unexpectedly originated within the RISD Digital + Media Department, where my two collaborators are currently working towards their MFA. An e-mail exchange conducted between myself, my collaborators and two other Digital + Media students, Matt and Elizabeth, reframed the terms of the project, effectively leveraging identity politics against public artists' ability to create publicly positioned artworks that critically examine the context of their site. The exchange, to me, rehearsed the unproductive practice of critiquing the artist based on assumptions about his or her politics and identity in lieu of considering the artwork's conceptual and formal efficacy. It problematically circumscribed the terms of belonging to and with various communities and constructed and applied an identity scenario to me that I neither invited nor sanctioned. While my partners and I did our best to thoughtfully and forcefully articulate and reestablish the theoretical terms under which we created No Mugging in our response to Matt and Elizabeth, I realized only after the fact how fully the issues surrounding identity politics overshadowed and determined their engagement with our work. I am yet to understand the reason for which art critique has come to so closely consider the artist's identity in the assessment of their work, nonetheless, this experience underscored and affirmed for me the ways in which anonymous authorship safeguards the critical purchase of an artwork. In my estimation, anonymity returns the terms of the work to itself, which is exactly where they belong

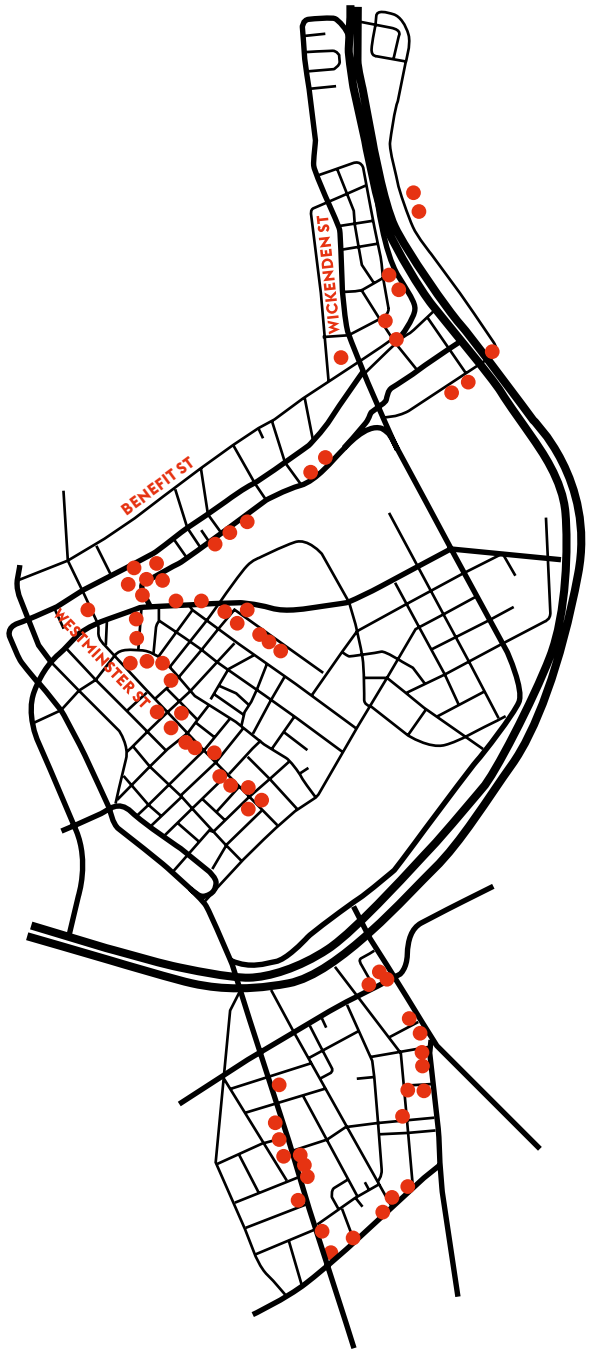
YOURS, MINE OURS, THEIRS

PROJECT OVERVIEW

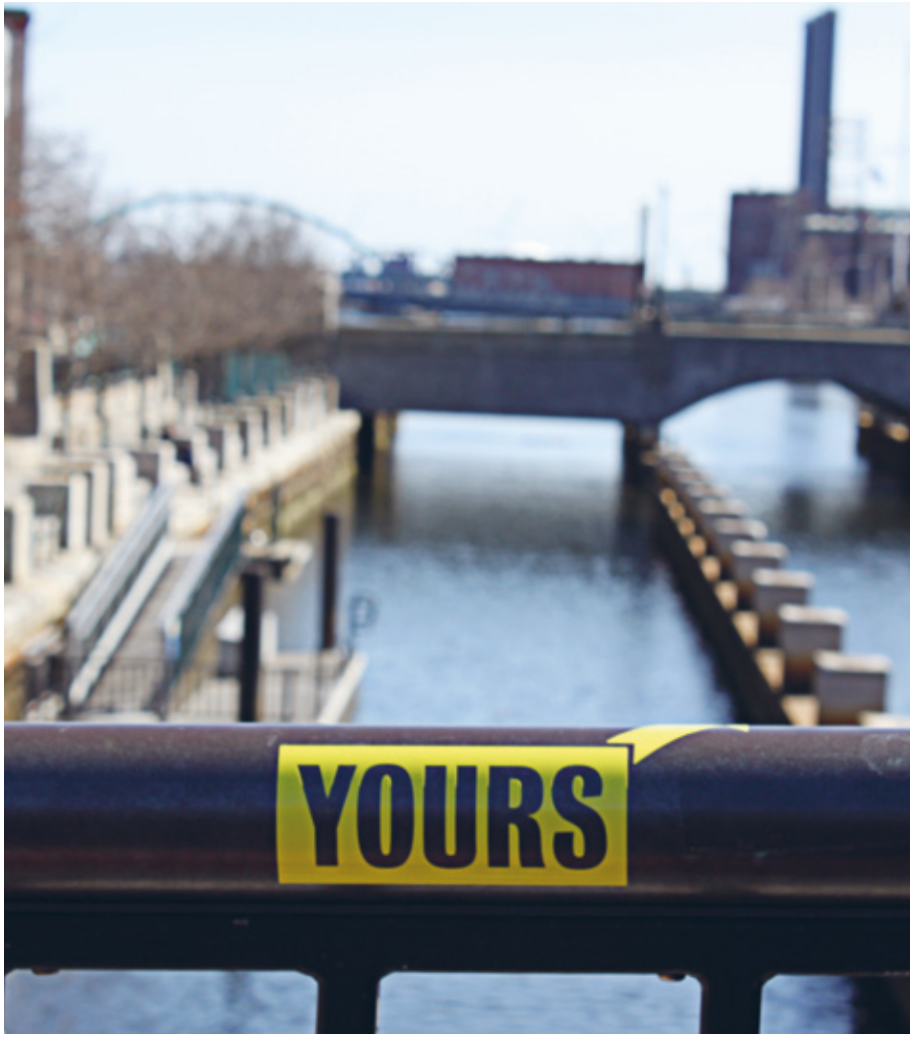
Yours, Mine, Ours, Theirs was a sticker based public art project that sought to interrogate the contours and boundaries of public ownership of public property. Working within the logic of anonymous street art, I designed and installed a series of laser cut vinyl stickers that read: Yours, Mine, Ours and Theirs and placed them on municipal architectures and infrastructural elements. Approximately 150 stickers were placed along highly trafficked streets in Providence's Downtown, East Side and West Side districts. Mid-way through the installation process, I presented the project to Re-Framing the Real, a public art research group and arts collective of which I am a member, and recorded their critical analysis of it. This section serves as a small archive that tracks the project's arch and captures some of the dialogue and discourse it activated.

YOURS
MINE
OURS
THEIRS

Between March 17 and 31, I installed approximately 150 pronoun stickers around Providence's East Side, Downtown and West Side districts. This map plots their general location.



Yours, Mine, Ours, Theirs directly confronted municipal architectures and infrastructural elements to examine the boundaries of public ownership of public property.




MINE

In most cases, the pronoun sticker was quickly removed from its site, yet curiously the yellow arrow was left in tact.


OURS

RE-FRAMING THE REAL C R I T

Part way through Yours, Mine, Ours, Theirs, I presented the project to Re-Framing the Real, a public art research group and arts collective. This transcription captures their critical response to and analysis of the piece.

Jen: This is the project that I was speaking about the other day - yours, mine, ours, theirs pronoun stickers. Here are a bunch of images of them up. Nupur and I originally targeted the Downtown area,but I expanded outward from there to the East Side, West Side, and Jewelry District. One of the things that was interesting is where they stayed up and where they came down.

Liat: How difficult is it to remove them?

Jen: It's easy, they're just stickers. I've been putting them up all around town, placing them mainly on urban infrastructures. Something about access and access points interested me as did sites marked with graffiti or tags.

Aesthetics //

Elisa: Ok. Start critique. Aesthetics. I'll begin. So regarding aesthetics, the yellow of the stickers signals to me something like danger, like when you are at a construction site.

So, I am wondering about the color, because for me it is connected to danger, or something important to read. I like the fact that the text of the stickers is empty - it works a bit like camouflage. It allows the pronoun to take the texture of the place and always changes depending on the site, so sometimes the pronouns are not visible and sometimes they are visible and they adapt themselves to the place where you put them.

Brian: I kind of want the sticker to be a little more iconic than it is.

Jen: What does that mean?

Brian: You want people to start recognizing these through repetition, which you do have. But, because, the arrow is so small it does not serve as enough of a marking at a distance. Here's what bothers me: this sticker says "Theirs", for instance, and it acts like a stamp, right? You are saying this is "Theirs" or this is "Mine." You are activating a claim to a thing. But the arrow is pointing away from the thing so it diffuses the statement. And by pointing off into the distance the work of the pronoun gets away from the thing that you are putting it on. Then the question becomes what is the arrow pointing to? Is it the thing that it is on? Or something off in the distance? I guess that tension is a little diffuse for me.

Liat: I had a similar feeling about the yellow. I read these stickers like caution tape. The yellow is the same color as caution tape. It's like when you are a painter, there is a difference in when you use a color out of a tube and when you mix it yourself. I had a feeling that I really wanted this to be a color that I did not expect to see, like a color that you mixed yourself.

Elizabeth: Did you think about differentiating each sticker in some way other than just the text? Because the thing that I saw was that it was very hard to tell from any sort of distance which text it is, and what those distinctions are. I did like the empty letters, I thought that was really effective.

Jen: The choice of color was intentional because I wanted to work within the visual language of established signage systems. This motivated the choice color as well as the type - it is the same typeface that is on most signs. I acknowledge the critique that it is difficult to differentiate between the stickers from a distance. I hadn't put much thought to that so I cannot speak to that point specifically at the moment.

Liat: To me, the placements that are the most interesting are the ones where you place the pronoun stickers on objects where the arrows point off to something at a distance. Like the one where I see a visual of the sticker placed on a banister pointing towards the river. Or when I see it on the edge of a doorstep and it is suggesting something beyond the gate as opposed to it being part of the flatness of a utility box. That reads to me as more interesting aesthetically.

Nupur: It invites a searching for what is the meaning of the piece, which is not there in an explicit way when the arrow is clearly placed in orientation to an object.

Brian: So I wonder if that is what you are going to emphasize? Like more of a street sign type aesthetic where the iconography is positioned as such that you are supposed to look elsewhere as opposed to the caution tape, official things, claiming the thing that it is on?

Elisa: I agree that the yellow and the font that you decided to use participates in an official language. It would be very different if you chose to write these pronouns in your hand-writing on objects around the city. There is an authority in this.

Nupur: What you are saying about this being handwritten brings up the question of the other stickers and tags already existing on these utility structures that are never removed. There are all these music related sticker and names written on these things that never come off and then when you put a sticker that reads "Yours," "Mine," or "Ours" it immediately comes off.

Liat: But isn't that also a question of the material you are using? Isn't vinyl much more easy to remove than a sticker?

Nupur: There really isn't that much difference in effort to remove a sticker. No one has even tried to remove these stickers.

Liat: But stickers leave a residue behind.

Brian: I think that they should be real stickers. I mean why make them easily removable?

Content //

Elisa: Next. Content! Let's start again.

Brian: What the hell is content?

Elisa: Intention. The meaning. To me the choice of the word "Yours" is effective in combination with invitation and action. I feel in this project that sometimes you are proposing an action to me. I see the word "Yours" and the arrow on the banister tells me to jump in the river, I don't know why. I get this impression that you are allowing me to do something, and when you position the word "Yours" on a door and point the arrow to the handle it is like you are inviting me to open the door, saying "Here, this is yours." So there is an active component to this project, where you are suggesting that I can do certain things. I really like that.

Nupur: I just had an epiphany, because I was with you when we were putting these stickers up. So when I was walking with you, we were like "Which sticker do you want to put up? Mine? Theirs? Yours?" And we just picked one and were like okay, bam! The moment we put it up these questions would emerge about our choice of pronoun for a given place. But, for a person who chances upon this project, they are not participating in the choice of "Yours," "Mine," "Ours" over "Theirs." So I am wondering what happens when you put all four up on a thing, all of them pointing in different directions? Then some other discussion emerges because then you move outside the isolation of someone imposing an idea about possession on an object.

Liat: It could read that way, or it could read koombya. It's yours! It's mine! Its ours! Its theirs! It's all of them! It could go either way.

Brian: It seems like the obvious thing you are trying to do is to create a tension, to put the idea about "Mine" onto something that is not mine. I am thinking about placement. Urban infrastructures are okay, but an electrical box is an electrical box. I wonder if there are juicer placements?

Elizabeth: I thought that placing "Mine" on the church door was edgier because the church is supposed to be open to everyone, but in reality it is not.

Brian: Or better yet, putting "Theirs" on the door.

Andrea: Are you trying to redefine public space or question public space? Are you trying to put something up that is disturbing because is not supposed to be there? With this action are you questioning areas and the sense of belonging?

Jen: Questioning the terms of belonging is definitely as aspect of this project. Where the audience linguistically places themselves in relation to these stickers is also part of the project. Like, as an audience member, where do I place myself in the statement "Yours"? Where do I place myself in the statement "Mine"?

Elisa: But when I read "Mine" I see that as meaning the possession of the artist, the person who put the thing up. I may be making this really easy reading, but when I see "Mine" I read it as the artist saying that this thing is mine. When I see "Theirs," I imagine a power structure. So the city is "Theirs" and "Mine" is the artist. And that is why I was commenting on "Yours", because "Yours" to me opens up a whole new realm of possibility, that I can open that door or jump into that river.

Liat: I agree with that reading. When I see "Mine", I do not think about myself. I think about whomever put the sign up. I see the sign as talking to me.

Nupur: It depends on where you position yourself. Is the project for a person to chance upon and then figure out whether it is "Yours," "Mine," "Ours," or "Theirs"? I don't know if you felt this, but the moment we would stick up a sticker I would look at the relationship between the pronoun and its site and ask "How does this work here?". There was this very internal thinking that happened around the sticker, which I think is as important as trying to imagine someone else's response. What I find really interesting about the fact that you are working on your thesis right now is that you are talking about these issues and thinking through them in project sketches. So, when you walk around the city and you do this kind of tagging of these things, you are working at these questions and thinking about these things in a very practical, hands on kind of way. And I think that this kind of work is as valuable as making something for someone else.

Brian: Thinking along those lines, what happens when you consider the photography not simply as documentation of the installation of the stickers, but as documentation of the confrontation you are having with the objects you mark?

Jen: So you are suggesting that I position myself as a subject in this process?

Brian: Whether it shows your body or not, the interaction is what is important. You could put one of these stickers on a parked car, you could walk up and put one on someone's back and take the photo, you could perform these curious confrontational acts. If you take a sticker that says "Yours" and slap it on someone's back and take a picture, they turn around and pull off the sicker and are like "What? Yours?". It is a confusing semantic moment.

Context //

Jen: What's the next topic?

Elisa: The next topic is the art context, as in the relationship to other artists that work in the same way.

Jen: So, as a work of art, where is this project positioned in an art context?

Elisa: Yes.

Andrea: Are you inspired by a particular street artist?

Jen: I am inspired by street art as a form of art making outside of institutional practices and structures. So, I am interested in the statements that are possible with street art as operating mainly outside of art institutions as to opposed to within them. Here, I am thinking about the gallery or the museum or art history. Again, this is a hazy line, but I this is where I arrive at this type of work and not so much under the influence of any particular artist.

Elisa: This is equally about urban space as it is street art. This project would be different if you went out into nature or some pristine landscape and put up your stickers. The sticker form also has an urban connotation, so with this project there is a discourse about the city and an examination of urban space.

Brian: I'm thinking about what happens when you put these pronoun stickers up in a national park or something. Then the project would talk about the claiming of property and the encroachment of human development.

Liat: Also, you are doing this in Providence which is where Shepard Fairey started doing street art and he's the most famous, the most commodified famous, street artist there is right now. I wonder what would happen if you put your stickers over all the Obey stickers? Obey. Yours. Obey. Yours. Obey. Mine.

Elisa: What's happening here is that your work is in relationship with that of other street artists. They're not famous, but, your works are in dialogue.

Elizabeth: Or like on the bus sign, your stickers existed along side other graffiti.

Brian: What was the street art on that thing? It was all tags. And what is a tag other than ...

Jen: A name and a claim.

Brian: Yeah, they say it's mine. I think that that's pretty direct. But the fact that your pronoun stickers take an institutional aesthetic, rather than a tag aesthetic, makes them seems as though they are in response to the tag.

Elisa: It's as though, here, you are the power structure.

Brian: Yes. You have an expressive tag, that says in effect mine, and you are saying, no actually its "Theirs."

Liat: Also, going back to the placement of the stickers, in terms of meaning, when you see tags in tunnels or wherever, there's a way in which how dangerous or how difficult it was to get to a place creates the value of the piece and says something important about the person who created the piece. So riffing off Brian's earlier point, the ballsiness of your piece also lies in where your put your statements of ownership.

Nupur: Like the statement that emerges when you put one of these stickers on a church is different than the one that emerges when you place it on lamppost.

Liat: Yeah. If you are in the tunnel at Thayer Street or going out to some place that is hard to climb out to or hard to reach or you can perceive the danger, this gives additional weight to the piece.

Brian: I wonder if the sticker needs to be a lot bigger.

Jen: It's possible.

Brian: Do you have a variety of sizes?

Jen: Not at the moment. But that's very doable. I have a lot of vinyl.

Liat: How big are they?

Jen: They are 2 inches by 4 inches.

Brian: I know this is not context, but it would be great to just bomb the hell out of one small place, and have them everywhere, in different sizes, so that every little thing that you look down at or open has another one of them positioned in some way so that the messages are all fighting one another some how.

Nupur: This goes to what you are trying to do, where you are trying to talk about this sense of ownership, getting into the subject position of the viewer and activating a dialogue from their perspective. If there are enough of these stickers in a given space then it might get other people to think about this dialogue and interrogate their linguistic subject position.

Jen: I think this turn of conversation towards quantity and volume really brings up an astute point. The full curiosity of this project, and the act of negotiating this curiosity, emerges in volume. For example, I don't yet know what it means to have hundreds of these stickers in a four block radius and what meaning would emerge from those overlapping positions. It's very much about my own experimentation with seeing this in action. Again, in a gallery, putting something like this up is safe because it is set in a static, neutral environment. But these stickers are up in a living, dynamic environment where the response is never what you anticipate it to be. And so I think that willingness to lean into that experimentation and uncertainty is a very critical aspect of this piece.

Nupur: What I see you doing here is taking ownership over what you think is "Yours" or "Mine" or "Ours" or "Theirs". Once you make that claim, questions emerge for you. And what if where≈≈÷≈z you chose to tag began as a journey of your own? What if you left your house and interacted with the objects that compose the world that you live in? The questions that this would raise would all be in relationship to you. Because, for me, the piece is really confusing when it tries to be relational to other people who you have not met.

Elisa: This also speaks to how you put photographs about this piece together. Because if there is a journey, the photographs will tell a story. I would not like to see you in the picture, but if there is a sequence, the photos will begin to reveal how you are moving through the space and why you are putting the stickers up as you have. In this way you narrativize the project.

Brian: On a different angle, I was thinking of Yoko Ono. A lot of her work relates to this because she has these short texts, short instructions placed or imagined in different places that are meant to transform those places. You might want to go through her work and see if she has done anything similar. The one she did with the word yes, for instance, investigated in different places and spaces what "yes" connotes?

Elisa: Done! Crit over.

Jen: This was really helpful.
Thank you guys so much.

PROJECT ANALYSIS

For me, yours, mine, ours, theirs began as an interrogation into the boundaries of public ownership of public property. Over time, it blossomed into a critical investigation into the way in which street art and graffiti writing enhances, augments and responds to the social, cultural and physical aspects of its site. When I conceived of the project, I imagined that, on a conceptual level, it would work to claim "public" objects by using pronoun's grammatical aspects and affordances. I initially intended to place the stickers exclusively on municipal infrastructural elements and architectures to think through my relationship to commonly funded, publicly held property. I wagered that the bold yellow stickers would stake their claim in such a way as encourage my and my audience's sense of ownership over particular urban objects, as in the case of "Yours" and "Ours", or to deny ownership, as in the case of "Mine" and "Theirs". I found that the project's formal quality of presenting each pronoun in the sticker's negative space invited a dynamic relationship in which the sticker framed the surface of the site and placed in palimpsest an idea of ownership. The choice of which site to tag and which pronoun to use was determined instinctively as I walked though and amongst Providence's neighborhoods. I was however, strategic and specific

about tagging sites and spaces that were deeply familiar to me in neighborhoods where I strongly identified as a community member. As I interacted with, confronted and tagged the physical things that constitute the spaces I pass through daily, I became curious about the instinctual reasons for which I chose to either include or exclude myself from the physicality of spatio-civic life. What, for example, made the Providence River "Mine"? Or made a tagged bus stop sign "Yours"? What made a church door "Theirs"? And what formal and semiotic qualities made a Vietnam Veterans War memorial "Ours"?

The Re-Framing the Real Critique helped to re-orient and re-establish my thinking about Yours, Mine, Ours, Theirs. The comments and observations offered throughout the project's critical analysis challenged me to imagine the semiotic scenario that would emerge from a concentrated interplay of pronoun stickers within a tight urban radius, and if generating that scenario was ultimately of interest to me. I began to question how the sites I selected to tag expressed my political and ethical assumptions about which ones were available to receive and display anonymous public messages and which ones were not. As I revisited tagged sites, I frequently observed that the pronoun sticker had been removed yet the yellow arrow remained. This prompted me to wonder if viewers found the political tension inherent to the project offensive or unwanted or if they simply preferred the diffuse openness the arrow suggested

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