A Case for Boston as a Liquid not a Solid
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One often thinks of "identity" as something essential, a *thing* that is rock-hard and solid.

Individuals seek to "find themselves" through therapy, work or play, and communities

strive to represent themselves through art projects, political initiatives or policy. The

assumption is that one should craft a *solid* identity in order to establish legitimacy before

the law, the family, the nation, and so on. The identity project grounded in "solidity" has

been at the core of many of the political practices advocating equal representation of

people marginalized by their gender, race, sexuality and other defining characteristics.

Many such "solid" identity projects have happened in Boston. For example, in recent

years, the Fort Point Artists Community has been engaged in organization and activism

to retain their right to stay in the neighborhood despite rising rents and gentrification. In

1998, Krzysztof Wodiczko's acclaimed work "Bunker Hill Monument" helped to solidify

the silent struggle against murders in the Charlestown neighborhood by projecting

testimonials of mothers of murdered children onto the monument.

These projects seek *thingness* – that solid status that we attribute to things – as a way of

conferring legitimacy onto certain phenomena and making people pay attention to issues

like cultures of silence and artists' rights.

But I'm not going to be talking about any of those projects today.

Why not? They are certainly worthy examples of site-specific community art practice in

Boston. But I am more interested in the proliferation of projects that do exactly the opposite: projects that favor fluidity and leakiness over substance and containment. This paper makes a case for the city of Boston as a liquid, not a solid. This means that, when thinking about identity, the complexity of something like a site, place or city requires a kind of artistic interrogation that is radically different from the law or the monument. It necessitates the collaborative construction of a liquid identity: fluid, dispersed, provisional, temporary. Leaky and destabilized at every moment. Simply put, life escapes the solid. It always already exceeds the weight and mass of that which purports to symbolize it or represent it, whether through art, policy or statistics.

Four projects completed in the past year in Greater Boston interrogate the city in such a manner. These projects fit variously under terms like "new genre public art", "psychogeography", "locative media", "new media", "community-based art", "performance research" and "interventionism". Borrowing from diverse disciplines, these projects operate through collecting data from a particular site, creating performative interventions that include the public as participants, and developing archives of their materials. In contrast to site-specific work that remains at one site, these projects are durational, performative, and distributed in both space and time. They make use of digital technologies for affective and communicative purposes. The projects discussed in this paper are: Sifting the Inner Belt: a year-long collaboration between six artists and community organizers to explore the South End neighborhood; Corporate Commands, an on-going research project by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things that analyzes corporate messaging in Boston's public spaces; Glowlab: The Open Lab, an exhibition-festival presented at Art Interactive in Central Square in Fall 2005; and Itinerant: a site-specific project by Teri Rueb commissioned by Turbulence.org and shown at the Judy

Rotenberg gallery and the Boston Common during the Boston Cyberarts Festival 2005. The goal of this kind of work is not to "represent" the city of Boston, nor to bring particular issues to light, nor to make a portrait of a particular community therein, but rather to address the notion of place as a fluid, complex ecology.

Let me also be clear in this paper that I am speaking from the inside – I am an artist, arts professional and practitioner, and I have been involved in all of these projects in various capacities from artist to curator to producer to participant to collaborator.

Case Study #1: Sifting the Inner Belt (2004-5), By Jeremy Liu and Hiroko Kikuchi, with Jeremy Chu, Catherine D'Ignazio, William Ho, Natalie Loveless, and Kim Szeto.

Sifting the Inner Belt was a year-long, site-specific social performance and research project that consisted of a series of performance interventions and research projects in the South End neighborhood in Boston with an emphasis on creating emotional, conceptual and physical bridges between the Boston Center for the Arts (BCA) and the Berkeley Street Community Garden (BSCG).

The "Inner Belt" refers to the ill conceived and never completed highway project from 1948-1971 that would have created a highway around downtown Boston and between the South End and Lower Roxbury. The Berkeley Street Community Garden sits on land that was taken for construction purposes for this project.

For a year, the artists and community organizers involved in this project "researched" the

neighborhood in iconoclastic ways ranging from performance art to cooking to soil

testing to participating in garden governance. The final exhibition in the summer of 2005

at the Boston Center for the Arts' Mills Gallery included numerous projects: a series of

performance events, site-specific installations, video projection, podcasts, blogs,

photography, and written documentation. Due to time constraints, I will discuss one part

of this project, a monthly practice called "Bridging Performances".

On the first Friday of each month, the artists convened at the Boston Center for the Arts

to conduct a "Bridging Performance". These performances made use of the "instruction

work" form as developed in the Fluxus and Conceptual art practices of the 1960s and

1970s as a way of creating "bridges" between places and persons in the South End

neighborhood. Some performances took place only at the Boston Center for the Arts. For

example, our performance instructions for February were:

> Bridging Performance #3: Spacing
> Date: Feb. 4, 2005
> Mark the height. Collect heights from everyone walking by and
> entering the Mills Gallery on Feb. 4, 2005[1]

Using wooden 2x4's we asked over 300 visitors to the gallery to have their height

measured before they entered the space. Other performances, such as "Turn" (July

2005) involved roving throughout the neighborhood:

> Bridging Performance #8: Turn
> Date: July 1, 2005
> Choose someone on the street to follow. Follow them until they
> turn.[2]

"Turn" had us pursuing different ways of following people, including walking, jogging and

1 Kikuchi, Hiroko, and Liu, Jeremy. "Bridging Performances."Sifting the Inner Belt. 2005. 15 Nov. 2005

http://www.siftingtheinnerbelt.com/bridging_performance/index.html.

2 Ibid.

full-blown running. We traversed the South End in multiple directions over the course of two hours. In these cases, the small performative gestures of marking heights and following pedestrians are not only performance art, but are framed as embodied social research that produces temporary new connections between existing institutions in the neighborhood at the scale of the micro-.

Case Study #2: Corporate Commands (2005) by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things

Corporate Commands is an on-going project by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, a Boston-based research organization of which I am the Director. The "infinitely small things" that we investigate exist in the fabric of our social and political spaces. The Institute describes "corporate commands" as advertising messages from corporations addressed to an anonymous viewer in the imperative. These include well-known messages like "Just Do It", "Think Different" and "Have it Your Way" along with other, stranger messages such as "Be More of a Woman", and "Surrender to Creamy Galaxy". These commands address the reader and incite them to action. In the Institute's estimation, these commands constitute infinitely small mechanisms of social production that appear in our public and private spaces. While most people claim to ignore these messages, the Institute prefers to engage with them literally and directly as a way of testing the social environment.

The first part of the Institute's research project was to collect corporate commands. We created a web-based archive of commands contributed by people from around the world. "The International Database of Corporate Commands" allows users to snap a photo of a

corporate command in their locale and upload it to the site. Thus far, the Institute has collected 215 such commands.

In January 2005, the Institute started conducting "research performances" of corporate commands in the Boston area. The goal of each performance is to attempt to perform the corporate command in the space where it occurs *as literally as possible*. This means that if Cingular Wireless tells you to "Rollover", then you literally rollover, as we did in February 2005. During each performance, certain members of the Institute perform the action and others document the results through a host of methods including field notes, video and digital images. Each performance is a way of testing the social environment, producing new conversations, and asking the question "What happens when we literally follow instructions from corporations in our public spaces?"

The Institute has conducted over fifteen research performances in various locations (including malls and other quasi-public spaces) in the Greater Boston area. We have also partnered with the Berwick Research Institute and Arts in Progress to perform corporate commands with urban youth from Dudley Square. The goal of this work is *not* to start an anti-corporate movement, *not* to raise awareness and *not* to educate. What we produce from these investigations is critical engagement with corporate language in public space at the most pragmatic level: that of the body. We have very simple questions: What are corporations telling us to do? Where are they telling us to do it? What happens when we do it? Our research performances engage with these questions through a transformative function, which is to say that they temporarily transform these public spaces from spaces of implicit consumption into spaces of confusion and contestation. What appeared to be a normal day now includes people rolling on the

ground in lab coats. What is unrecognizable produces a rupture, a question, and a new

way to engage with sites that one previously thought they knew.

Case Study #3 - Glowlab: Open Lab at Art Interactive (2005)

Glowlab: Open Lab was a nine-week psychogeography exhibition and a festival at Art Interactive in Cambridge, MA, that ran from October 14th, 2005, to December 11th, 2005. Open Lab, produced in conjunction with the organization iKatun, showcased artists from the Glowlab psychogeography network (largely based in Brooklyn, NY) in addition to invited international artists. "Psychogeography" is a term coined in the late 1950's by the Situationist Internationale, a group of European artists and activists bent on hacking the built environment through the simple act of the dérive, a walking drift through the city.

The projects in Open Lab were deceptively simple, playful investigations of site and the social fabric of the city. "Hello", for example, is a project by D. Jean Hester in which the artist followed particular walking routes in Cambridge and said "Hello" to every person that she passed. Hester documented the project through photos and charts, and led a group walk during which members of the public said "Hello" to strangers. Similarly nomadic, Jessica Thompson's "Soundbike" is a bicycle that laughs louder the faster you ride it. Visitors to the gallery space can check the bike out and ride it around the neighborhood. Morgan Schwartz invites participants to launch balloons with secret messages into the sky. On the "whether/weather" project website, you can track the progress of your balloon to determine whether it has been found by another person. "Boston by Chance", by Jesse Shapins and Brian House, gives participants instructions for experiencing the city through chance operations. All of these works invite the visitor to leave the Art Interactive gallery space and engage with the surrounding neighborhood.

True to their Situationist lineage, these works create situations and engineer encounters in the urban, social space of Central Square, Cambridge. As with the Sifting and

Corporate Commands projects, the projects in Open Lab proceed with an ethics of experimentation. This is not about favoring process over product, but more about thinking like a hacker: creating versions and iterations, introducing bugs, viruses and subversions into a site, publishing occasional results and then returning to experiment further.

Case Study #4: Itinerant (2005) by Teri Rueb

To experience the project "Itinerant" by Teri Rueb, you must don a pair of headphones and carry a small PDA device. As you walk through the Boston Public Garden, the Boston Common, and the surrounding neighborhood, your location is tracked through a GPS system. Your presence in various locations triggers different sounds to play. The sounds include walking noises, passages from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and spoken passages from Rueb's own writing. Each sound piece is a micro-meditation on place and displacement, territory and exile. As you walk, you pass through a sound's territory or "hotspot" and the sound begins to play. It plays only as long as you remain within its spatialized boundaries and then fades away. Frankenstein's tale is interwoven with stories of Rueb's uncle, an itinerant salesman, alcoholic and rambler who would disappear for years and send Christmas presents in July. The narrating voice changes often, and the work demands a close listening to constantly resituate yourself in relation to the narratives at play. At the same time as you are listening, your own walking takes you through the Boston Common, the oldest park in the United States, where the weekend scenery is leisurely and idyllic. "Whose territory am I in now?" I kept thinking while moving through the garden while listening to the ostracized Monster and the vagrant uncle. I watched the tourists, the families, the commuters. "And who is not here?".

Elizabeth Grosz write abouts about community and exile in her essay "Architectures of Excess":

> "Communities, which make language, culture, and thus architecture their modes of existence and expression, come into being *not* through the recognition, generation, or establishment of universal, neutral laws and conventions that bind and enforce them, but through the remainders they cast out, the figures they reject, the terms that they consider unassimilable, that they attempt to sacrifice, revile and expel."[3]

She calls these remainders "excess". And in "Itinerant", Frankenstein and the uncle are excess, cast-aways, remainders. Yet, through constant displacement during the project, the walking participant is also cast in and cast out of physical and sonic boundaries. The walker embodies excess, the "too much" that overflows, leaks and spills over into the urban landscape. While the system itself is pristinely functional and navigable, the experience of it is messy, uncertain and liquid.

All of these projects are experiments in navigating excess. Not only do they attempt to navigate the complexity of excess (A site will always exceed the so-called "specificity" of a site-specific work). Yet these projects also work to "complexify": to actually produce *more* questions, to create new connections between disparate entities, and to introduce new, often unrecognizable structures of public participation at particular sites. We often talk about places as if they were things: Boston, Central Square, the South End, the Boston Public Gardens. But places are not things and they are not solid. These projects destabilize notions of solidity in favor of a liquid understanding of the potentiality of place and its possible rupture and reinvention at any given moment.

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[3] Grosz, Elizabeth. <u>Architectures of Excess</u>. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001.

Project References:

Sifting the Inner Belt – www.siftingtheinnerbelt.com

Corporate Commands – www.corporatecommands.com

Glowlab: Open Lab – www.artinteractive.org/shows/glowlab

Itinerant – www.turbulence.org/Works/itinerant