

A Case for Boston as a Liquid not a Solid

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Is it possible to actively strive to produce an architecture of excess, in which the "more" is not cast off but made central, in which expenditure is sought out, in which instability, fluidity...act as powerful forces?

—Elizabeth Grosz, *Architectures of Excess*

[1] This essay makes a case for the city of Boston as a liquid, not a solid. The four projects presented here as case studies were completed over the last year in the Boston area. Each project makes a part of Boston *leak*. Let us think about what a leaky place might mean.

[2] Traditional Western logic reduces place to a container. Being home means being inside your house. Boston is what is inside the city limits as represented by lines and dots on a geographic map. This notion of place is *solid* in that there are clear limitations and definitions for what is inside and outside, where a place (and thus the communities "in" it) begin and end. In short, place is stable, contained, and solid. Artists who engage with place as a solid typically engage with the representation of place through mural, portrait, or image. Many valuable "solid" identity projects have happened in Boston in addition to the traditional community mural. For example, in recent years, the Fort Point Cultural Coalition along with the artists community has been engaged in organization and activism to retain their right to stay in the neighborhood despite rising rents and gentrification. Their success depends on the articulation of Fort Point as a place that includes artists. 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. This project is engaged in a "revealing" or a "making visible" of community tensions that are not apparent to those who visit Bunker Hill as a historic tourist site. These are engaging projects that reconstitute the boundaries of place and community in Boston in order to contest who is included and who is excluded from particular places. Yet, they remain engaged with place as solid because place is still conceived of as a container. What and who is inside the container may have changed but the projects are fundamentally about repositioning boundaries, not about creating on-going ways in which these places can consistently exceed their boundaries and open themselves to their outsides.



["Fort Point Artists Community" slideshow](#)

[3] The four projects discussed in this essay engage with place as liquid. They wrestle with the idea of place as mutable, temporal, and fluid. They assume that "place" is the site of excess. This is to say that instead of

being contained neatly within a geographic map or a proper noun (such as "The South End" or "The Asian Community in Boston"), place has a way of spilling over and beyond its representations. Indeed, these projects begin from a non-representational practice—their point is never to represent Boston the way that a mural represents a community or that a monument represents a silent struggle, but to produce new lived experiences of place. It is exactly in this way—through the production of encounters and experiences that complicate our understanding of place - that these projects make Boston a liquid not a solid.

[4] Let me also be clear 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.

Case Study #1 - Glowlab: Open Lab at Art Interactive (2005)

[5] Glowlab: Open Lab was a nine-week psychogeography exhibition and festival at Art Interactive in Cambridge, MA, that ran from October 14th, 2005, to December 11th, 2005. The projects in Open Lab were deceptively simple, playful investigations of site and the social fabric of Central Square, Cambridge. "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 checked out the bike and rode it around the neighborhood. "Boston by Chance," by Jesse Shapins and Brian House, gives participants instructions for experiencing the city through chance operations. Morgan Schwartz invited 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. All of these works invited the visitor to leave the Art Interactive gallery space and engage with the surrounding neighborhood.



"Glowlab" slideshow

[6] True to their Situationist lineage, these works create situations and engineer encounters. They engage with Central Square not by making a picture of it, but by creating communal experiences of it. They produce new relationships to the neighborhood that fall outside the logic of functionality (an anonymous balloon messaging system is not very useful, for example). These projects ask questions about social and temporal relationships to place: what happens when you say "Hello" to everyone you pass on the street? What happens when you don't commute but you travel by chance? How can people talk to each other across space and time using balloons? For the artists in Open Lab, Central Square was used as a mutable site for experimentation.

Case Study #2: 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.

[7] Sifting the Inner Belt was a year-long, site-specific project that consisted of a series of performance interventions and research experiments in the South End neighborhood in Boston with an emphasis on creating bridges between two places: the Boston Center for the Arts (BCA) and the Berkeley Street Community Garden (BSCG).



["Sifting the Inner Belt" slideshow](#)

[8] The "Inner Belt" refers to the ill-conceived and uncompleted highway project 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.

[9] 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, potlucks, photography, and written documentation. Due to time constraints, I will discuss one part of this project, a monthly practice called "Bridging Performances."

[10] 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 communities 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

Using wooden 2x4s we asked visitors to the gallery to have their height measured before they entered the space. Other performances, such as "Turn," 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.

"Turn" had us following people in diverse ways, including walking, jogging and full-blown running. We traversed the South End in multiple directions over the course of two hours, led by whomever we had chosen to follow. These performances had an Internet presence as documentation on the project blog and were recreated for the final presentation in the Mills Gallery where visitors were invited to perform them.

[11] These performances consciously constructed encounters with excess—with that which was not yet known or conceived by the project's collaborators—as a means of developing a more complex understanding of the places that we were researching. "Spacing" served as a way of personally meeting over 300 visitors to the Mills Gallery or those who were passing through the BCA plaza. Performing "Turn," we traced the paths of approximately 15 residents and visitors to the neighborhood, including low-income

families, yuppies, tourists and transients. In both cases, what began as an investigation of place (as the BSCG and the BCA) led us to navigating many other places—social, economic, geographic and virtual. Both instruction performances, and consequently the sites under study, spilled out into the surrounding neighborhood, into the gallery and onto the Internet.

Case Study #3: Itinerant (2005) by Teri Rueb

[12] "Itinerant" is a site-specific project by Teri Rueb commissioned by Turbulence.org and exhibited at the Judy Rotenberg gallery during the Boston Cyberarts Festival 2005. To experience the project, 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 another narrator'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 Public Garden and the Boston Common, the oldest park in the United States. The weekend scenery is leisurely and idyllic, yet not long ago the Common was used as Boston's primary site for public hangings, which notably included hangings prompted by religious intolerance. As one moves through the garden while listening to the ostracized Monster and the vagrant uncle, they cannot help but wonder who is absent from the public space of the Common.



["Itinerant" slideshow](#)

[13] Contained within any notion of community are those who are excluded and exiled. In her essay, *Architectures of Excess*, Elizabeth Grosz calls these "the remainders they cast out, the figures they reject, the terms that they consider unassimilable, that they attempt to sacrifice, revile and expel." 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 its place, leaks and spills over into the urban landscape. While the system itself is easily functional and navigable, the experience of it is messy, uncertain and liquid. It addresses a place of unified publicness—the Boston Common—as a multiplicity, a heterogenous space of shifting boundaries, contradictory narratives and displaced persons. One is no longer either inside or outside but in a position of becoming, always on the road to the next territory.

Case Study #4: Corporate Commands (2005) by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things

[14] Corporate Commands is an on-going project by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, a Boston-based research organization whose mission is to invent and distribute new practices of political engagement in

everyday life. Corporate commands are 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 "Be Yourself Only Better."



["Corporate Commands" slideshow](#)

[15] The Institute collects corporate commands on its website. 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"—the actions of the Institute, the conversations with the public, any shifts in the way that the space is used - through a host of methods including field notes, video and digital images.

[16] 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. In each performance, we attempt to critically engage 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?

[17] Corporate Commands does not *reveal* the corporatization of public space so much as embody it, use it, and develop alternative ends (outside the logic of consumerism) that the corporate command might serve. What kinds of social encounters can be produced using the research performance as a backdrop? What might we learn from each other in these temporary communities? Who feels threatened by our impropriety? What are the social and political boundaries of the space around the command? In this sense, we use the command not as a protest, but as a passage: a way to make the consumer background of everyday life a means to reinvent everyday life itself, to reconstitute its boundaries, to have different conversations, and to stage encounters with what is alien and unrecognizable (such as people rolling around in white coats). The corporate command becomes a tool to stage encounters with excess.

Conclusion

[18] All of these projects are experiments in navigating excess. These projects work to "complexify" Boston: to actually produce *more* questions about a site, to create connections between disparate entities, and to introduce new, often unrecognizable structures of public participation at particular sites. This is what it means when a place is liquid—it is leaky, destabilized, contested and mutable. It is always in communication with its outsides. It is always exceeding its own boundaries. It is always opening itself to those whom it excludes. Each of these projects has engineered a way of encountering the excess of place, and addressing this excess without assimilation or unification (which would constitute a return to the solid).

[19] Moreover, these four cases for Boston as a liquid demonstrate a commitment to the *politics of the liquid* as the starting point for talking about something as complicated as community—how do we live together? Rather than seeking to assimilate and subsume excess under a shared sociopolitical territory or to establish separate spaces for what is not included in "mainstream" space (women's spaces, queer spaces, asian spaces, and so on), these projects allow for fluid passages and flows from one space and position to another. Rather than representing *what is*, they are oriented towards the potentiality of place, "the anticipation and welcoming of a future in which the present can no longer recognize itself." For this reason, we might use Grosz' term and call all of these projects "experiments in future living."

Project References

Glowlab: Open Lab: «www.artinteractive.org/shows/glowlab»

Sifting the Inner Belt: «www.siftingtheinnerbelt.com»

Itinerant: «www.turbulence.org/works/itinerant»

Corporate Commands: «www.corporatecommands.com»

Works Cited

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Architectures of Excess." *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001.