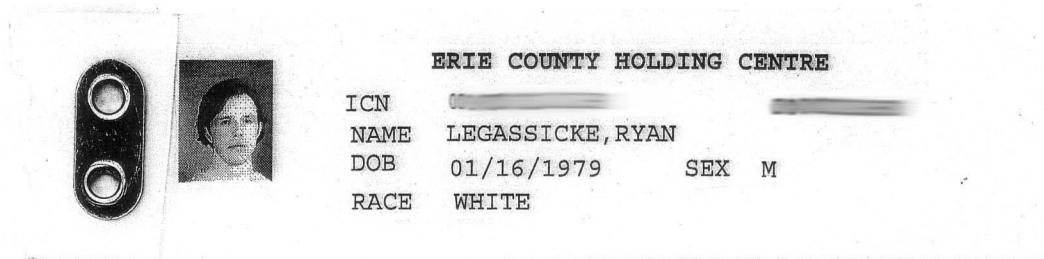


No Trespassing / Space Available

By



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We live in an increasingly over-planned and predetermined society where our experience of public space has become regulated to the point of becoming outlawed. My current project examines contemporary urban cities and makes connections between our shared aesthetic experience and the idea that we are becoming progressively more disconnected from ourselves, each other, and the places that we inhabit. This has involved working with traces of architecture and domestic objects that have become obsolete or no longer needed. I am interested in the effects of the presence, absence, and at times denial of human activity occurring outside the dominant ideologies which regulate our culture. This results in a practice that can be seen as part public performance, part artwork, and part document. Through the use of found objects, sculpture, photography, and drawing I expose tensions and contradictions between the actual and the virtual; public and private. The work is a way to question and test those boundaries. I use a combination of objects and images, positive and negative space to emphasize how this affects the way we mentally and physically experience the present through the memory of the past. I am interested in how the re-appropriation of public space as a phenomenon has entered into our collective consciousness and how it functions in contradiction to the idea that our lives are becoming ever more predetermined. The work attempts to set up paradoxes and comparisons within these modes of communication that describe moments in time while providing a way to experience ourselves becoming involved in those moments.

The whole world, everything that surrounds me here, is to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible diverse sea of garbage. - Ilya Kabakov

Over a century of what we think of as progress in the Western world has actually resulted in numerous industrially based cities becoming technologically outdated and therefore obsolete. It has been a slow and devastating catastrophe that has perpetuated a confused state of anxiety and an overriding sense of loss. The result has been a decrease in population and as a result a surplus of industrial, commercial, and residential buildings. This phenomenon has led to the development of the term *shrinking cities* and describes such urban areas as Manchester / Liverpool, England, Halle / Leipzig, Germany, Detroit, Michigan, and Buffalo, New York. In an essay by Philipp Oswalt from the exhibition catalog *Shrinking Cities*, he outlines connections between social space and physical space and that “social problems are reflected in the crisis of physical space in shrinking cities” (Oswalt 13).

In 2007 the mayor of Buffalo, Byron Brown, released a plan to demolish 5000 abandoned structures over a five year period. The reasoning behind this decision was that these buildings, many homes that have been repossessed by the city on back taxes, have been neglected to the point where they are beyond repair and are no longer habitable, and therefore should be demolished. He describes the plan as “an accelerated, aggressive, and comprehensive city-wide attack on the dangers and blight of vacant structures” (Brown 1). Rather than developing a strategy to attract new residents, Brown addresses the high vacancy rate problem by removing the number of vacant structures, and in the process significantly altering the landscape and physical makeup of Buffalo.

Demolition today has gained a hitherto unknown quality: it is an end in itself.

- Philipp Oswalt

Vacant lots in urban cities function as a trace of what was there before, the history of the site in a physical sense, and as a record of the social circumstances that led to the need for the building to be demolished without an idea for something to replace it. They appear as physical voids in the landscape whose new purpose has become a reminder that the city is shrinking. The prevalence of No Trespassing signs further testifies that these spaces are out of bounds and unavailable, even though they lie dormant and serve no utilitarian function. Is this the future of post-industrial cities such as Buffalo? Landscapes fragmented with holes, voids, and other non-spaces which are no longer needed and also no longer usable? Furthermore, this aesthetic of fragmentation results in making cities harder to know, and what Frederick Jameson describes as resulting in the increased feeling of alienation, a feeling that is directly proportional to the mental unmappability of local cityscapes (Jameson 415).

The idea that personal identities are tied to physical places is also a central theme in Dolores Hayden's book *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. She links personal identities as having a connection to the state of the local economy and cites French philosopher Henri Lefebvre as informing this idea: "spaces is permeated with social relations, it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations" (Hayden 41). She continues by adding that "Lefebvre also sees commonalities between tract houses, the identical suites in corporate skyscrapers, and the identical shops in malls, suggesting that a quality of late capitalist space is the creation of many identical units – similar but not *placeless* places" (Hayden 19). Thus we can now begin to understand our current economic situation as being affected and as a resulting from the cyclical relationship between the cultural ideology of a people and the physical make-up of a landscape. To imagine

the impact of an additional 5000 missing buildings becomes a frightening possibility whose total ramifications will be hard to predict. The *placelessness* of prefabricated suburban homes and identical strip malls has come back to post-industrial urban centers in the form of abandoned buildings and vacant lots. The result has an underlying sense of detachment and confusion in relation to our understanding of the history and future development of these shrinking cities.

The more intense the progress, the more catastrophic and painful the accidents, the tragedies.
– Paul Virilio (Unknown Quantity)

Another non-space or void that is a common aesthetic occurrence in post-industrial cities and is a direct result of government involvement is that of graffiti removal. The phenomenon of graffiti and street art has traditionally been classified in Western society as unwanted and something that may signify poverty and the absence of authority in the areas where it appears. Often the reaction to graffiti is to simply paint over it as a means to cover it up, but in most cases the techniques used leave a trace, failing to totally erase the occurrence of the graffiti at that specific location. In an essay from the catalogue *Beautiful Losers*, James Walmesley describes the act of graffiti as representing "... the symbolic re-occupation of [an] estranged environment" (Walmesley, 198). In this way graffiti can be seen as a personal response to a disorientating and impersonal environment whose inhabitants are seeking to renew a sense of self through the placement and public display of defiance of the dominant ideologies that have created the current cultural environment. Similarly in his book *Crimes of Style*, Jeff Ferrell chronicles the development of and response to graffiti in Denver, Colorado in the late 1980s and notes that when graffiti artists started to be publically labeled as criminals it simultaneously gave individuals who were seeking an anti-authoritative artistic community a

viable outlet and aesthetic direction. "It intrudes on the controlled beauty of the ordered environments, and compels those invested in these environments to respond to it as an ugly threat to their aesthetic domination" (Ferrell, 184). The fact that graffiti has entered popular culture and become a quasi-accepted artistic style has served to complicate the public's ability to differentiate between public art, advertising and vandalism. An example of this would be the fame and notoriety of street artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, and presently the popularity of contemporary British graffiti artist Banksy. In an article from *Time Magazine* from October, 2008, Liz Logan writes that "Unlike most graffiti, Banksy's work, if it remains, is likely to add value to the property, not least because it's considered a valuable work of art." The article goes on to report that there have been disputes over ownership of his street works and that parts of buildings have gone to auction (however, Banksy refuses to authenticate these works thus further complicating their salability in the art market.)*

This phenomenon has become an increasing problem for municipalities as they struggle to deal with the overriding ambiguity about what constitutes acceptable artwork thus allowing them to maintain a social order. The result in many cities has been that remnants and traces of graffiti have become an ever-increasing part of our daily aesthetic experience. Does painting over graffiti erase it from our memory, or is it simply a change in artistic style? In the short film *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, the solid colored shapes that are created while covering graffiti are compared to the history of geometric abstract painting, most notably Russian artist Kasimir Malevich, who reduced painting to stark geometric shapes in an attempt to remove any figurative references and focused solely on the expression of pure feeling. The film, which takes place in Portland, Oregon, includes an interview with a local government

official responsible for organizing the removal of graffiti on both private and city owned property. During the interview the official admits that the city workers who actually perform the graffiti removal work do in fact make subjective and “artistic” decisions when deciding how to effectively cover the graffiti. In a society where the majority of valued art is kept behind closed doors in museums and galleries, it is interesting that what is experienced on an everyday basis is work that is considered to be a crime or work is produced *subconsciously* by city workers who are likewise expressing their own aesthetic values simply by following orders.

The phenomenon of graffiti removal can be seen as a new international public art aesthetic. It appears in a variety of recognizable forms and is experienced regularly in cities all over the world. Should the street artist of the future appropriate this accepted motif? And if this were to happen would the need arise to remove the graffiti removal? The fence cuts that I performed during the fall of 2007 through the winter of 2008 were a way to participate in this discussion and test these boundaries. I specifically I targeted fences that surrounded abandoned buildings or areas where the fence in question served no discernable function. I also only cut pieces away that had a tree or the remnants of a tree, which through an extended period of time had grown through and attached itself to the chain link barrier. Unlike other holes which appear somewhat hidden and which are typically used to enter a restricted area, my holes were specifically intended to be experienced aesthetically – including both the shape of the cut and the trace of the tree that had been living there. Similarly to the outlawed act of graffiti, should my action be seen as a crime, an act of civil disobedience? Or could it be seen as an aesthetic statement, a public artwork to be valued?

Historian Benjamin Buchloh describes democratic societies as constructing "...subjectivity as much as they determine the subject's forms of perception, articulation and interaction" (Buchloh, 70). The question of what exactly constitutes a work of art is also a central concern of Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory, specifically his writing about the dialectical subject-object relation. "The question, however, of what is and what is not an artwork cannot in any way be separated from the faculty of judging, that is, from the question of quality, of good and bad" (Adorno, 164). Buchloh describes this problem as one of *ideological interpellation*:

...sculpture is positioned within the equally mythical but more powerfully "real" dimensions of the culture industry and of spectacle, the world of industrially produced "objects" and "signs" and as such it operates in the field of ideological interpellation (Buchloh, 69).

In a catalogue essay for an exhibition by Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, Buchloh gives an example of this idea by describing Orozco's work as "articulate[ing] the paradox of having to construct sculpture as public experience under the conditions of interpellation which prohibit the self-determination integral to traditional theorizations of the public sphere" (Buchloh 87-88). Here Buchloh is also addressing the theme of *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, and looks at how artworks that have been approved for public consumption by anointed public institutions are seen as masterpieces, thus reinforcing the ideologies responsible for these choices. It also addresses the idea that artworks which are produced outside the governing ideology of a culture and made available to the public at large are seen as unwanted and punishable crimes. Ironically in contemporary urban cities it is these works (or traces of) which become part of our daily aesthetic experience and not the so called artwork, which by virtue of their importance are kept in guarded spaces with limited accessibility.

...the purpose of experimental works of art and architecture to explore and reveal what T.S. Eliot called the shadow that's falls between cause and effect – Lebbeus Woods

With the emergence of digital photography, traditional chemically based photographic techniques are less in demand and subsequently are experienced less frequently. Polaroid film, the predecessor to the instant digital image, maintains a certain kind of authenticity that digital methods lack. This medium offers the possibility of an instant authentic original that eludes the practice of creating digitally enhanced and idealized pictures of the world. There is also an undeniable object quality to the Polaroid photograph in terms of both framing and scale that for me made it the perfect means by which to document graffiti removal. Because of this I was able to conceptually finish the job by physically cutting the *painting* from the image, leaving a literal negative space void. I would later apply this same method to houses that like graffiti were identified by the city and scheduled for removal. The surface of the Polaroid was also important, as the images depicted a snapshot view of the opaque building facades, leaving what the structures contained a mystery but also leading to the subjective experience of deciding what came before and what came after the photograph was taken. The house images were shown in a grid format held in place by a found and altered domestic table; thus they would be viewed not as a flat plane, but as multisided objects around which the viewer could walk.

Space, as frequentation of places rather than a place stems in effect from a double movement: the traveler's movement, of course, but also a parallel movement of the landscape which he catches only in partial glimpses, a series of 'snapshots' piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives of them [...] Travel [...] constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape (Kaye 9).

Often when entering an abandoned house, one is confronted by pieces of furniture and other traces of the previous inhabitants. To encounter such objects in an intimate lived space, one cannot help but feel even the slightest sense that you are not supposed to be there. The fenced-in spaces that were part of my exhibition at 1716 Main Street were meant to give the furniture that housed the images this intimate quality. The effect is close to what artist Karen Henderson has described as “collapse[ing] where you are with what you’re seeing into the same thing” (Henderson 108). The focus was not only on the images but also on the space that the work created. Artist, David Hockney, has described “...honest collage [as] deliberately putting another time there, so that the eye will sense two different times, and therefore space” (Hockney, 166). This idea is continued throughout the work as the viewer navigates through the spaces and encounters more collages of images and objects. As a negation of the act of graffiti removal, the graffiti removal images are presented backward on a shelf and facing a mirror in close proximity. The effect is that to view the “picture,” you must look through the void created by the negation of the graffiti.

“This Could Be Anywhere (This Could Be Everywhere)” – Jello Biafra

Images do not show all sides of an object that we know from experience to exist – thus they combine what we see with what we know. They continuously rely on memory, and in this case the disorienting experience of post-industrial shrinking cities. Our reaction to the problem of reconciling our personal identities within these abstracted physical landscapes can be seen as an overlap between time and perception, which often results in the experience of *déjà vu*.

Déjà vu can be described as a strange, unsettling and often anxiety ridden feeling of confusion as one struggles to piece together the present. Media theorist Paul Krapp describes déjà vu as a temporal experience, that it is “not shared and it cannot be remembered or repeated at will. It eludes recall, and at times it will produce false memories in turn” (Krapp, xx). He goes on to make connections between memory and repeated aesthetic experiences:

Kierkegaard understood repetition as the same movement as recollection, except in opposite directions: the latter is repetition backward and the former, “genuine” repetition, is recollection forward – and unless one sneaks out of life under the pretense of having forgotten something, one will live between these two poles (Krapp, xii).

Thus it appears that experiencing the repetitive voids of abandoned houses, vacant lots, and graffiti removal may trigger a disorienting déjà vu experience. “...In déjà vu, one confronts the impurity of a forgetting that fails to forget itself, a strange recollection that fails to recall itself” (Krapp, xiii).

In a catalog essay for the exhibition *Unknown Quantity*, Paul Virilio outlines a theory of the accident, or *accident thesis*, which links technological and industrial progress to the probability of unpredictable accidents and catastrophes (Virilio, 41). His idea is that as Western progress continues to speed up with ever more ambitious projects that the rate and magnitude of accidents will also increase. Could the current situation of shrinking post-industrial cities be an example of such a catastrophe? My project originated as a way to understand and comment on this idea and is interested in the possibility of reinterpreting our existing physical and social infrastructure as it relates to our continued survival. It could be described as a melancholic contemplation on destruction, futility and loss, but also an optimistic sense of opportunity and an attempt to change ways of seeing and thinking. What if we began to read all the No

Trespassing signs as actually meaning Space Available? What if we could view the current state of the post industrial city as something that needs to be preserved and remembered? Would this aid us in re-examining the effects of our shared aesthetic experience and allow for some sort of positive development in our physical and social landscape?

Suddenly, the accident is no longer unexpected; it is becoming an – a priori scandalous – rumor, in which the presumption of wrongdoing tends to win out over that of involuntary action and, yet, conversely, the quasi-certainty of willful harm is dissimulated beneath a concern not to provoke panic. – Paul Virilio

While exploring my neighborhood in Buffalo, I was astonished by the frequency with which I discovered abandoned structures and became interested in imagining what the city would look like filled with a seemingly endless number of fragments and voids. My project compares the social ideologies that result in graffiti removal with those of house demolition and vacant lots. This is then applied to the broader inter-relationship and crisis between economic marginalization and social disorientation. The fact that the exhibition of my project took place on *Main Street*, which simultaneously exists all over North America, and that the building's façade featured prominently a For Sale sign, added to the experience and overall implications of the work. The translucent nature of chain-link fence as a physical barrier, but not a visual barrier, became very predominant as one moved further into each successive space. The view of where one was prior became more and more blurred, as were other people who were simultaneously experiencing the work. I am attempting to go beyond simply identifying or commenting on the ironic failure of modernism, but to re-interpret what we are left with, an urban landscape where histories are removed, intolerance is enforced and people

attempt to resist a paradoxical space both present and absent, one that refuses unity, stability, wholeness, and identity.

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