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*Wonder:*
*The Technological Explicit, the Contextual Specific, and an Offering to the Inexplicable*

We move through our lives as our bodies move through spaces: both public and private, bound up and boundless, erupting with signs and signage both overt and subliminal. These spaces help narrate the paths our lives take, in a vastly complex network of corresponding texts. Such texts can take many forms, all in some way partaking in theoretical projections of the social imaginary: the physiological body and its spatial relation to surrounding facades are one huge source of textual instruction on conduct within the collective social strata. Another, perhaps larger informant on behavioral conditioning is the performative ritual of civic engagement, wherein an exchange takes place between large institutions, collective surrounding people, and the public spaces through which both move. A layered language of persuasion is employed as the institutions intend to legitimize their hegemonic positions in these spaces, across both time and space. These extravaganzas are also usually accompanied by a host of visual cues meant to prompt the "wow" factor, including large-scale temporary constructions, architecturally spectacular assemblages, and sensorial experiences of overwhelming scale. Historical examples include the World's Fair, Universal Expo, and International Exposition. These systems of civic exchange, and their function as a practice of naturalization into the public space for the institutions they represent, are a ripe

opportunity to open a dialogue questioning the make-up, positioning and orientation, and audiences of such spectacles in space. We will investigate how and why such dialogues may be opened, the responsibilities of artists in such dialogues, and the position of technology in the initiation of such exchanges.

**Compositions of the Systematic**

The structure of an institute is not composed to recognize discrepancies of message within their own propaganda. This is not a rebuke to the composition of such systems, for their construction arguably necessitates a unified front, on message and on point. Such unification is understood to be intrinsic to nature of these messages, that its strength is so infallible that no dissent is imaginable. This is part of the hegemonic structure of these bodies. Governments, large non-governmental organizations, committees of all shapes and sizes, and educational bodies constitute some of the largest constituents of these systems of unification. Anything done on their part to confront any supplementary or alternative narrative to their perception of their "public" ultimately reflects their own point of view, for any assumptions made as to the needs or opinions of the "public" are a massive generality made from the constructs of a specific position. The public is such a complex structure composed of such a myriad of times, contexts, individuals, influxes and conduits that there is no singularity when speaking about the public. The public cannot be known. Just as there are a multitude of disparate rates of the march of time, there are different rates of exchange. Is there such a thing as the sharing of space? Do our individual rates of movement, of thinking, protract the very idea of a shared and public space? We cannot lay claim to answers to these questions. Our idea of

a public space, of a city, is entirely different from those living in cities with different social strata. We cannot know what constitutes a public in unknown places, but we can raise question with the idea that a "public" is common the world over. Though it may be true that some deductions can be made regarding sets of influences on the composition of a public, such as schools of thought relating to urbanism, architecture, and urban psychology, all such disciplines are modes of conjecture. Even these schools of thought admit that processes of urbanism, collective memory, and the cumulative affect of the cityscape are ever-changing. A question in such a case: is any public art merely a hyperbolic reflection of specificity, regarding the individual and/or the collective constraints of any civic space?

If self-criticality cannot by definition be included in institutional displays of relevance and control in public space, then the responsibility for that criticality falls to the intended audience of civic display by the introduction of a discursively open sphere. This sphere would include a space for questioning, an opening for the possibility of alternative narratives. The key point here is that this discursive dialogue would not be initiated by the assertion of an opposing viewpoint, but by a voice, work, text, or action that induces the fallibility of the institutional message through the mere suggestion of skepticism. This is the niche in which we call upon the artist to bring about a space of openness, wonder, and inquisition. It is the place of art to bring about, not an agenda towards a explicit purpose, but an opening that can bring about an informed dialogue that reflects the very complexity of what we may term "the public."

We need to suggest what public art can be. We would like to share our questions. We question those "artistic interventions" that are executed for political purposes. We

question work that is made as part of an agenda that seeks a specificity of message, and a particular conveyance that should not be considered to fall under the public domain or represent the social construct of what ought be considered public art. By the same token, we question artistic production that is constructed as part of the pro-status quo agenda, to further the specified ends of a delineated body, political or otherwise.

We recognize that our call for artists to open a truly discursive space a introduces a host of additional questions, not only about the make-up of that "public" of which we speak but also the definition and role of artists and art, and by extension the tools of production, otherwise known as technology.

**The Technological Explicit**

The technological explicit is a set of expectations generated and maintained by the ideologies expounded within systems of social exchange, being the device which contains the idea of progress, and progress being the comfort and security with which we navigate space. It is a governance that allows us to move through the narrative of our lives with a certainty that progress is the engine of the American frontier.

Technology is necessary in order to gain the attention capital of the public domain. By 'technology' we do not mean computers, robots and lasers. We posit the definition of technology to be the New, as counterpoint to the normative. we understand the dialogues regarding technology that have been taking place ad infinitum, especially since the onset of the industrial environment of global dynamics has begun to exceed the daily expectation of normalcy. We understand that many regard any extension of the physiological to be the *technologique*, that every built object from spinning wheels to

spinning top, falls under the realm of the upward progression of the fantastic. The development of technology is not that which happens "under the hood". The momentum that makes technology possible happens in the space of social exchange. People make technology happen. The history of unsuccessful technological innovation is massive. Inventions, discoveries are made every day. But, it is their relative acceptance on the part of the massive population of people that decide whether that innovation becomes a piece of the wider history of technological development. Individual people, their habits, their inconsistencies, their indiscernible ticks, are a fundamental component of technology and its survival. This cannot be ignored. Technology presents a sociophysical point of intersection between bodies, spaces, and projected abstractions of sociological pattern. That intersection can take a multitude of forms from material culture and iconography to the speculative realism of object-oriented abstraction. Still, technology constitutes the materiality upon which ontology must enact itself, for any lack of form is pure speculation.

**Specificity of Context**

We note here that art in public places is not public art. This is a question of context. Art cannot be known outside of a highly structured time and place, which cannot be articulated through an outsider observation. We wonder whether there can be such a thing as "public art"? Once something has been given the title of 'public art' is its time already past? Does such a designation render it a relic?

In (what may be called) the public space, objects are not objects, but conduits to something invisible to an outside perspective. These objects live in the space of the

unknown. Being outside the context of the gallery, they call upon a thrilling ambiguity in which the unknown if the gateway to everything that is possible. The moment any such work is objectified, it ceases to be. In a gallery context, this relationship is extremely different. Public art and fine art are very different things.

By way of example: fine art can be globally shared. The audience through which it is distributed ascribes to a specific set of philosophies, an incredibly narrow vocabulary of explication, historicity, and import. The public domain is not simply fine art in a different realm, but takes place and is performed in an entirely different context, and thus ascribes to a wholly different set of definitive constructs. Public art cannot ever be known to the fine art world. It does not belong to that conversation. It belongs to a multitude of individuals that don't necessarily have a unifying theory. It speaks an entirely unlike language. We do not claim to know what this language is. There is nothing concrete about this language. It does not revolve simply around the co-occupation of a single space or time. Public space in which any idea of public art takes place is the collection of everything that is not communicated. Being in a public space is a dual process - an acknowledgement of others, and the unspoken sets of gestures that silently recognize the complexity of relationships delineating the very idea of 'other' against which one defines ones' self. Can public space be shared? What is the definition of "sharing" – and, in that case, can any experience be truly collective as so much of public art aspires to incite? Even if the benefit of the doubt is given, that experiences can be shared in a collective way within a space, can so fragile and disparate an experiential be transmitted to anyone existing outside this locality?

The One Percent for Art Program is well known in many iterations across the globe, having a presence in most major cities in the US and abroad. Consisting of government-mandated legislation requiring that moneys spent on state or city-funded construction projects include a certain percentage (usually somewhere between one-half of one and one percent) allocated to the acquisition, realization, and/or presentation of art works to the public. Such a mandate marginalizes whatever is included in such a program, by turning it into a subject needing philanthropic consideration by those responsible for the "real" production of capital. The program has more to do with the maintenance of a space considered "cultured" by those who pass through it. The one percent program is advertising. It is seduction. Any product that is contracted by capital-based constrains before its very execution cannot, by definition, take part in a dialogue that is fluid, dynamic, and changing. It is our argument that any such product cannot, by definition, be art, and in fact is a detriment to the perception of what art can be. We raise the question - why should such a program exist? What is the need for public art? Who purports its activation and its induction into the civic space. We do not have the answers to these questions, but believe that current structure supporting such endeavors are problematic, and wish to incite a dialogue surrounding their execution. This brings up the associated question - how can art be public? What are the parameters by which producers of such objects/experiences define their responsibility as practitioners to the audiences with whom they purport to communicate? What is the ethical role of the artist who wishes to communicate with an audience that is not privy to a specific set of vocabularies, or in fact any set of specificities? What is the role of authorship? Can there be an author to public art, or must it be considered within the body of theory that

considers performative receipt of a text an integral component of authorship? We aim to reevaluate such structures, within the contextual empathy of the social contract. How can an individual think they can understand what the public needs to see? The public art dialogue we hope to activate, it should be noted, stands in opposition to the use of aesthetic tools for political visual rhetoric. Many activists today use the aesthetic vocabulary of art to make political statements, and use art as a means to a predetermined end. This is simply the utilization of artistic language, and should not be considered in this discussion.

The one percent for art programs has nothing to do with art, and nothing to do with the public. Whenever there is a restriction or requirement set in place *a priori*, it can have nothing to do with the production of art. This is a continuance of a neutrality, an incoherency of the civic facade of culture. When there is an end before a means, there is no art. Is this something worth challenging? Can it be challenged? Can art truly function within such a construct? The civic space is embedded with presumptions of a reality, when in truth such realities can never be known. What responsibility does an artist maintain working within that space?

**An Offering to the Inexplicable**

As a solution to the inexplicability of "public" and "public art" we make an offering of the personal. We suggest that the majority of interchanges that do in fact take place in public are actually exchanges of the intensely personal, and thus the personal is the only way to be truly public. We do not portend to possess an ultimate truth. what we argue is that there is no ultimate. There is no knowable. There is only the personal.

Technology has been subsumed to belong in a space of consumer-oriented persuasive capital. We believe its effectiveness offers a potential to activate a more complex space: one of questioning. We call for and work toward a strategy of open-ended intervention. The arguments, the interactions, offered by the staging such interventions reveal that the producers, too, are operating in a space that is unknown. Declarations are not being thrown, but rather a dialogue, hopefully, is being opened. To stage a work in such spaces is to ask a question.

What mediums and what pursuits are we exploring to activate these questions within a dynamic and evolving social fabric? One method we employ is projection. This medium carries a complicated history, especially as publicly employed, necessitating that we navigate an ever-more complicated methodology of exchange. We work in a space of the physical conceptual, where are offerings of wonder cannot be so curtailed by the boundaries of textual definition. An example of our work that functions at the intersection of those issues we've expounded upon here is our recent projection piece, called simply "Wonder." We found ourselves graduate researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during the 150th anniversary of their founding. This fact was celebrated, on campus and around the wider city of Cambridge, in the form of the Festival of Art, Science and Technology. A semester-long celebration sponsored by the Office for the Arts at MIT, the Festival included (per the website of the Office for the Arts) "exploring MIT's unique tradition in the media arts, systems theory in art and design, and electronic music … a forum on contemporary arts and cybernetics … Hyperinstruments, sensors and interfaces … radical research on music and language, and vision and neuroscience, … [a] "robotic" opera [and] musical chandelier, launching a new era in opera production

and expression." There was also, most notably for us, the FAST Light Fest, "an all-evening celebration involving light and the kinetic activation of MIT throughout the campus, and along Memorial Drive and the Charles River."

The methodical and unambiguous tone of on-message positivism was less, we felt, than the rich conversation the population of Cambridge deserved. MIT, like most American universities, played a distinct role in WWII, the advent of the post-war Nuclear age, and the current rhetoric surrounding energy, security, and national defense. Especially in the wake of the nuclear disaster in Japan, and the host of systematic urban fragilities we walked in everyday was more complex and nuanced than the dialogues being established by this Festival. In an effort to create a space for the type of exchange we wished to see, we staged an intervention into the FAST Light Fest in the form of a projection into the steam coming off the area nuclear reactor, with this associated text by way of inspiring conversation:

> "Representation of power is an apparatus of power. The public perceives these representations, and their dependence upon the power grid for the way they live their lives is legitimized. Thus, these representations create the structures upon which the public itself is built. This creates a cycle of ephemeral and elusive strength. Institutional structures of power, and the public that both facilitates and uses such constructions, create one another. We will bring to the public the idea that the institutions upon which they depend, and which may present themselves as infallible, are fragile. The theme of the 150th Anniversary Celebration, and its Festival of Art,

Science and Technology, is light. Different groups will be staging artworks and sculptures using light around campus, glorifying the history of technology at MIT. We plan to use this framework to stage an intervention into the institutional creation of narratives around power, hegemony, and the public's right to transparent information that influences how they live their lives. Any part of the public whose normal route on the evening of the Festival will take them alongside the Nuclear Reactor will see the installation."

This is the moment that the call for all artists to intercede in exchanges between people and their spaces can be put forth.