

SPACE INVADERS

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The (counter)public sphere: theoretical foundations

In "Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Nancy Fraser addresses the unequal power relationships between different publics and describes how this leads to the formation of "subaltern counterpublics". These counterpublics are formed by those that have views, lifestyles etc. that are not accommodated within the dominant notion of what is public sphere. The counterpublics serve as a common ground from where these groups operate.

"Public Space Invasion" aims to create a counterpublic. We are questioning the way the infinite corridor is used on one hand as a venue for advertising but also as a public space in general. The projections we create stand to form a contrast to the projected advertisements in the infinite corridor. Politically incorrect slogans like "recycling sucks", "eat more meat", "smoking is awesome" intend to reveal the falseness of the projected advertising language. But we are not merely projecting the slogans but we are acting them out in the space itself by carrying boards with slogans as well as other descriptive posters through the actual space which we seek to address.

Familiar/foreign: psychogeography and mapping

Our point of departure was a brainstorming session in class about psychogeography and the idea of displacement/space swapping: what happens when something familiar is taken from the space you occupy, or when something unfamiliar suddenly shows up? What happens when you swap one place for another? More realistically, what would happen if you took all of the local newspapers (the ones distributed in plastic bins on the street for free) in one neighborhood and swapped them with the local newspapers of another neighborhood? How would people react? This type of displacement – where you're disturbing the balance of familiar/unfamiliar, is a type of irritant in your natural environment. The next question we asked was what would we displace – what defines a space? With respect to time, what happens in your absence? How does a space change over the course of a day and why does that change occur?

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The Infinite Corridor: space and non-space

One of us remarked that he would walk through the Infinite to class, and end up in class without remembering how he got there. And it's a trait endemic to those passing through, because they're doing exactly that: passing through. MIT students are notorious for their love of efficient paths; paths so efficient that one can walk blindly down a straight shot while thinking about something else. The Infinite thus loses its identity as space, instead becoming a linear path between two places. How could we get people to be aware of the space that they're occupying? We wanted to take a piece of the Infinite and displace it in space and time. In the Infinite, there's already a blank space above the doorway between Buildings 3 and 7, on which advertisements are projected. As part of the space of the Infinite, it's ignored by passersby. Accordingly, a new projection could interrupt the awareness of those passersby – specifically, a projection of the Infinite itself.

Our original idea was to tape 24 hours of traffic through the Infinite and project that into the advertisement space. But it wasn't enough to have just the traffic – we decided to add a foreign element into the projection, by carrying posters through the Infinite that could only be seen in the video projection. The foreign element would be an irritant – a displacement of the ad slides that would be an involuntary, uncontrollable participatory act by passersby, as the projection itself would be our imposition on those passing through. Instead of having the actual ad slides on them, though, the posters would have subversive slogans on them, like “smoking is good,” “sheep,” “recycling sucks,” etc. We soon realized that taping for 24 hours was both unnecessary and a technical problem (with the data storage and labor required to change the camera tape at the right time, in addition to security concerns about the camera). After doing test footage, we found a site for taping on the second floor of Building 10; the site that was taped was a stretch of hallway in Building 4, the adjacent building.

When we started thinking about projecting, we ran into some technical issues. Once it became clear that the advertising slide area would be prohibitively difficult and expensive to procure, we had two options: projecting over the ads, or onto a part of the Infinite itself. Projecting onto the Infinite would introduce a foreign (moving) object into the field of vision of passersby, so we projected onto the wall of Lobby 10 on a Thursday evening at 5pm (to avoid light pollution problems), after having taped at 10am on the previous Wednesday morning. Originally, we wanted to tape and project for several days, in order to allow for the possibility that some passersby might introduce their own foreign, involuntary interventions into our intervention, but time constraints made this part of the project impossible.

Taping made it apparent that we were very noticeable in the traffic flow because of our arms being up in the air. Though we got many questioning looks, few people actually bothered to ask what we were doing, which illustrated both people's desire to pass quickly through the corridor, but also the degree to which they're used to foreign objects in their environments. Projection got a much more marked reaction, with people stopping to watch the projection, and asking about what it was. For those waiting for friends in Lobby 10, the projection was something to watch while they waited – an amenity. However, for a student group occupying tables near the projection, it was an annoyance because it overlapped their part of the public space, inciting a minor conflict about whose space it was, at what time (after 5pm, Lobby 10 is completely public, so the tables for student groups can no longer be scheduled).