"This Train Is Not a Playground":
Improv Everywhere and Urban Public Pranks

An Essay Presented

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.
— FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, *ON THE AESTHETIC EDUCATION OF MAN*, 1794

The conductor sounded over the PA, 'This train is not a playground.'
— TESTIMONIAL FOR "NO PANTS 2K3" ON THE IMPROV EVERYWHERE WEBSITE, 2003

<u>Introduction: Inadequately Playful Creatures</u>

On January 5, 2002, a man entered a car of the number 6 subway train in New York City. He was wearing a winter coat, sneakers, and yellow polka-dotted boxer shorts. He was not wearing pants. The other people in the subway car took notice quietly and then averted their eyes. At the next stop, another pants-less man entered the train. This time, people began to exchange shocked glances. They could not resist staring at the scene around them. At each of the next five stops one more person missing his or her pants entered the car. At the eighth stop of the ride, a woman entered the car selling pants for a dollar each, at which time each of the seven pants-less people gratefully bought a pair to cover their cold thighs. After everyone was duly clothed, they blended in with the rest of the passengers and exited the train without ever acknowledging that anything was out of the ordinary. The other passengers on the train were left in wonder, without ever learning why the pants-less people had been there.

In reality, the passengers had happened upon one of the urban pranks of the New York City-based prankster group, Improv Everywhere. The group conducts social pranks in various public sites—from city squares and corporate megastores to spaces of public transportation. Founded in 2001 by Charlie Todd, a teacher and performer of improvisational comedy at the Upright Citizens Brigade theatre,[1] Improv Everywhere's aspiration is to make interesting and positive experiences for citizens and tourists of New York City in spaces that do

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[1] The Upright Citizens Brigade theatre is an improv comedy theatre in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. Many notable comedians have gone from its stage to such places as the sketch comedy television show Saturday Night Live.

not usually provide such experiences. Over the past eight years, Improv

Everywhere has conducted more than eighty pranks, many of which have gained

the attention of the popular media. This particular prank was titled "No Pants,"

and was one of Improv Everywhere's earliest and most well-known.[2] The seven

pants-less people, the woman selling pants, and the two people in charge of

documenting the event were all members of Improv Everywhere. Everyone else in

the subway car just happened to be there, and had no connection with the group.

"No Pants" is actually an anomaly when it comes to Improv Everywhere's pranks.

Though the group typically never repeats its missions, this one has become an

annual tradition.[3] It is one of only two pranks that the group has ever repeated, the

other being Improv Everywhere's annual "Mp3 Experiment," in which I

participated in September 2008.[4]

The life of each prank begins with Improv Everywhere's founder and

organizer Charlie Todd. Though he willingly takes suggestions from any member

of the group and even from the general public, he ultimately has full control over

which pranks are executed and in what fashion. He terms the pranks "missions"

and the participating pranksters "agents" to heighten participants' sense of

engagement and excitement. He documents all of the missions on the Improv

Everywhere website (www.improveverywhere.com), posting videos, photographs,

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[2] See Charlie Todd, "No Pants," Improv Everywhere, posted on January 5, 2002,
http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants/.
[3] Due to the media hype of the event and the generally increasing popularity of the Improv
Everywhere website, the subsequent repetitions of this prank have attracted an increasing number
of people—reaching twelve hundred in the 2009 event—and have been imitated in several cities
around the country. Because of this, Charlie Todd only truly considers this first iteration to be a
true Improv Everywhere prank. The ensuing repeats constitute more of an annual festival in which
hundreds of people participate to have a good time. See Charlie Todd, "The No Pants Subway
Ride," Improv Everywhere, http://improveverywhere.com/missions/the-no-pants-subway-ride/.
[4] I will describe this event in the research design section of the introduction.

and testimonials of the pranksters—and on occasion the witnesses—about the way the pranks played out.

For the first several years, the participants in Improv Everywhere's pranks were typically limited to Charlie Todd's friends and coworkers at the Upright Citizen's Brigade theatre. As the Improv Everywhere website became more popular and the group began expending more effort on fully documenting the pranks, participation in the group grew. By 2007, Improv Everywhere had created several videos of its pranks that spread virally across the internet, the most popular of which—titled "Frozen Grand Central"—has been viewed over 16 million times as of March 2009.[5] Charlie Todd created an email list to disseminate information on how to get involved in the pranks. The list has grown so large— comprising thousands of interested people—that for several of the newer missions Todd has been able to assemble groups of people with distinctive characteristics (e.g. redheads or sets of identical twins) to create even more unique scenarios for their pranks.[6] Improv Everywhere has become a well-known and quirky part of New York City, yet still manages to surprise thousands of people with its pranks.

In this thesis, I will use Improv Everywhere as a case study not only to understand the actions of urban pranksters, but also to gain insight into the larger element of play in society. If we consider play the creative exploration of the possibilities of social and spatial interaction, we can extrapolate several questions

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[5] Improv Everywhere, "Frozen Grand Central," YouTube, posted on January 31, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwMj3PJDxuo.
[6] Improv Everywhere has been attempting to expand in other ways as well. Footage was created for the pilot of a show about Improv Everywhere on NBC, which was never aired. Charlie Todd himself is in the process of publishing a book about the pranks of Improv Everywhere with Alex Scordelis, titled *Causing a Scene: Extraordinary Pranks in Ordinary Places with Improv Everywhere*.

in relation to Improv Everywhere's pranks as acts of play. Why are people doing these pranks? How do these pranks reintroduce an element of play into city life? What can these pranks teach us about the way we interact publicly?

In response to the question "Why do you do this?" Improv Everywhere offers several reasons for conducting its pranks:

> Improv Everywhere is, at its core, about having fun…Our missions are a fun source of entertainment for the participants, those who happen to see us live, and those who read this website. We get satisfaction from coming up with an awesome idea and making it come to life. In the process we bring excitement to otherwise unexciting locales and give strangers a story they can tell for the rest of their lives. We're out to prove that a prank doesn't have to involve humiliation or embarrassment; it can simply be about making someone laugh, smile, or stop to notice the world around them.[7]

This mission statement touches on three goals of urban pranks that I will explore in more depth: transforming public space, storytelling, and reconnecting people to their surroundings. Charlie Todd and his band of pranksters believe that city dwellers are simply bored in many of the urban public spaces they inhabit daily. The group seeks out locales that are typically devoid of meaningful social interaction and attempts to transform them into playful places for a moment. In doing so, they hope to shock people into an active alertness that is uncommon in many urban public spaces.

The concept of an interlude in daily life aptly captures the spirit of the pranks, a key aspect of which is their brevity of scope. Most of Improv Everywhere's pranks only last for a few minutes, and then the agents disappear. The pranksters are not trying to change a space permanently; they just want to

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[7] Charlie Todd, "FAQ at Improv Everywhere," Improv Everywhere, http://improveverywhere.com/faq.

provide a short break in the daily routine. The "No Pants" prank described earlier provides an interlude to the lifelessness of the space of the subway. Each day thousands of people gather in subway cars, and yet the majority of them do not interact in any meaningful way while there. In the coverage of "No Pants" by *The Today Show* on MSNBC, the two anchors quipped:

Lester Holt: It's not a problem, well, it *is* a problem in New York, because you don't make eye contact on the subway, so you shift your gaze and…

Amy Robach: And you'll be staring at someone's hairy legs![8]

This bit of cheerful morning banter illustrates how Improv Everywhere took advantage of New Yorkers avoiding each other's gaze on the subway. "No Pants" shocked its witnesses into a hyper-awareness of their surroundings, breaking their commuter haze if only for a few moments.

Another important goal of Improv Everywhere is to give strangers an interesting story from a typically uninteresting locale. Though their pranks serve as brief interludes, the pranksters hope the stories of their actions will live on as anecdotes that the witnesses and their friends can tell after the fact. The pranks are designed both to entertain people in the moment and to live in the social memory of a given space, altering the meaning of that space when the people next inhabit it.

A distinctive feature of Improv Everywhere's pranks is that the pranksters never tell the witnesses who they are; there is no "reveal moment." This element differentiates them from traditional pranks, which typically have a "Gotcha!" moment. Prime examples of this are television prank shows like Allen Funt's

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[8] Lester Holt and Amy Robach, *The Today Show*, MSNBC, aired on January 12, 2008.

Candid Camera and Ashton Kutcher's *Punk'd* with their memorable catchphrases "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*!" and "You just got *Punk'd*!" Improv Everywhere pranksters, on the other hand, avoid a reveal moment expressly because they believe witnesses are left with more interesting stories if the pranks remain unexplained. When a prank has concluded, the agents disperse anonymously from the scene. Improv Everywhere believes that by not revealing its identity, it allows the witnesses of the events to actively interpret the meaning of what they saw and weave their own stories. The group claims such storytelling would not occur if the answers were laid out for the witnesses immediately following the prank.

The lack of reveal moment works differently in the various pranks, and the stories that come out of the pranks end up having different qualities. This is because even though Improv Everywhere considers all of its pranks equal, the pranks actually incorporate a range of performances and have different effects on their witnesses. Some of the pranks are recognizable as pranks to those who witness them because they are clearly out of the ordinary and resemble street theater, performance art, or familiar forms of clowning. The "No Pants" prank is a good example of this type. When "No Pants" ended, the passengers were left with a story of a group of people playing a joke on the subway by pretending to have simultaneously forgotten their pants. They recognized it to be some sort of prank. Other pranks, however, are designed not to be as recognizable, and the witnesses are led to believe they are real situations. On February 2, 2002, Improv Everywhere threw a surprise birthday party in a subway car and invited the

passengers to join in the celebration without ever telling them that it was merely a performance. At the end of this prank, titled "Surprise!", the witnesses were left with the story of the time they participated in celebrating a stranger's birthday on the subway.[9] These witnesses do not realize that the party was a prank, and so their story is—unknown to them—based on a false event. I will discuss this complicating element of some of Improv Everywhere's pranks in further detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Improv Everywhere's pranks are thus more complex than they first appear, and are designed to provide equal satisfaction to three distinct audiences. The first audience consists of the pranksters themselves, whose story is that of creating a scenario and utilizing a space in a playful way. The second audience is composed of the in-person witnesses, whose story is that of the unexplained scenario that they have witnessed. Finally, the third audience comprises online viewers, whose story comes from reading about or watching a video of the prank after the fact.

Improv Everywhere attempts to avoid victimizing anyone in its pranks. It tries not to humiliate or laugh at the witnesses, and it is does not seek their embarrassment in order to make a good story for the online audience. In this way, it tries to distinguish its pranks from traditional pranks, which typically victimize someone for another person's enjoyment. Traditional practical jokes do not consider the comfort level of the victim, focusing only on what will provide the most pleasure for a third party of observers. Improv Everywhere wants to provide

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[9] See Charlie Todd, "Surprise!", Improv Everywhere, posted on February 2, 2002, http://improveverywhere.com/2002/02/02/surprise/.

an enjoyable experience for people that is not at the expense of anyone else. Since there is no post-prank discussion with the witnesses, however, the pranksters have no concrete way to gauge whether the witnesses found the prank interesting and enjoyable. Though Improv Everywhere tries not to victimize people, it has no accurate way of knowing whether or not a person has felt victimized.

Even with all of these considerations, the first point of Improv Everywhere's mission statement is the most important: their pranks are ultimately about having fun. It was this playful attitude that drew me to the pranks, and this is where I believe the answers lie to my questions of why these pranks occur and what they tell us about our society.

Pranks as Play

Play is often considered to be a waste of time, an unnecessary behavior that expends energy that could otherwise be directed towards work. On the other hand, play and leisure are also often considered to be essential for the happiness and growth of a person. Play is frequently relegated to childhood, and yet the enjoyment of play does not die with age. There are many definitions of play, be it a distraction or an outlet for excess energy. Very often, it is broadly defined as activity that exists outside of the ordinary, everyday routine. For the purposes of this thesis, play means any activity that begins within everyday space and routine and then creatively improvises and experiments with potential ways the space can be used. This definition of play comes out of two theorists' definitions. The first is that of Johan Huizinga, who defines play as "a free activity standing quite

consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time

absorbing the player intensely and utterly."[10] The second definition is that of

Quentin Stevens, who emphasizes the interaction of play with space: "Play stands

principally in contradistinction to people's assumptions about the everyday

functionality of the urban built environment. It is a rhetorical device to focus

attention on uses of public spaces which are not practical and other than what the

spaces were designed for."[11] This thesis explores the idea of play as a tool for

exploration of and improvisation with social space.

      Play is an essential component of human creativity and well-being.

Through play, people explore the possibilities for interactions with spaces and

each other, and prevent their everyday lives from growing stagnant. However,

there has been a distinct decrease of the play element in society, the lack of which

has roused urban pranksters to attempt to reintroduce playful interaction into

social spaces. Many social critics have paved the way for the suggestion of urban

pranksters that modern individuals are not adequately playful creatures. Play

theorist Susanna Millar writes: "Unorganized activities not only occur less in

adulthood, but are actively discouraged in the community by ridicule. A prime

minister may play golf, but he must not just 'play.'"[12] Johan Huizinga, most

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[10] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, (New York, Roy Publishers, 1950), 13.

[11] Quentin Stevens, *The Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 26.

[12] Susanna Millar, *The Psychology of Play*, (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1968), 251. In the same vein, play theorist Chris Rojek claims that since the tempo of social life has increased tremendously and the variety of options for individuals is broadening, we have become more aware of what we are missing out on, and thus have a harder time experiencing those life paths on which we actually choose to embark. He writes: "Since the quality and range of choices seems to be constantly expanding, we have the distressing feeling of permanently missing out in our leisure, of not making the most of our time." Play has become not an escape from reality, but instead an

famous for his book *Homo Ludens*, emphasized that this lack of play is not natural

for humanity, and that it is an artificial construct of modernity. Huizinga's claim

is that civilization used to be not lived or experienced but instead *played*. People

approached their public lives with an imaginative mindset; they were not merely

socially rule-abiding creatures. He notes: "the play-element in culture has been on

the wane ever since the 18th century, when it was in full flower. Civilization to-

day is no longer played."[13] Huizinga sees the play element as fundamental to

humanity, and asserts that we must return to it in order for our modern society to

thrive. [14]

Several social critics blame this decrease of play specifically on the urban

environment. The urbanization of the late 19th century made cities into locations

of industry and overcrowding that offer little time or space for leisure and play.

As Clarence Elmer Rainwater notes, "Whereas formerly both children and adults

had participated in play and recreation, now they became spectators…The people

did not participate in recreation because they *could* not under existing conditions

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action that causes us to lose the opportunity to do something different. Robert Neale, a stark
advocate of the re-inclusion of play in our adult lives, writes a similar sentiment: "leisure is
threatening to modern man...[D]espite the accusation by some critics that we live in a 'fun'
society, leisure is more of a problem than a thing of promise." He writes that leisure causes
anxiety in people, for similar reasons that Rojek elicits. Chris Rojek, *Decentring Leisure:
Rethinking Leisure Theory*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), 157, and Robert E. Neale, *In
Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 13.

[13] Huizinga, 206.

[14] This draws on the changing relationship of work and play in the past few centuries. The Marxist
concept of the industrial human as alienated from her work explains that with an increase in
technological abilities, each person's work has become less individualized. As a result, work does
not represent a vocation anymore, so people stop finding personal fulfillment in it. Work has
become a means, not an end. Now that technological advances have made the overall quality of
life better, people seek to find personal meaning somewhere other than in their work. Often, they
turn to their leisure time, their play. This leaves us with a bit of a conundrum, however. If
changing trends in modern society are increasing the need for play but, as mentioned above,
decreasing the acceptability of play, it will be very difficult to find a way to bring the play element
of culture to its optimal level. See E. J. Staley and N. P. Miller, *Leisure and the Quality of Life*,
(Washington, D.C.: American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, 1972);
Joseph Levy, *Play Behavior*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

since they lacked both the physical facilities and the social organization for doing so." [15] The urban setting was found to be inappropriate for acts of play, and so the play element began to diminish in society.

The parks and playgrounds movement at the turn of the 20th century in America recognized the decline of the play element in cities, and worked to introduce spaces of leisure and play into city life. Public parks were one of the first types of leisure space integrated into city design,[16] but with the encouragement of the Playground Association of America came the construction of playgrounds for the purpose of stimulating free play for children in cities. Without designated areas for play, children were wandering the streets, finding alternate, sometimes even criminal, outlets for their playful impulses. One early impetus for the construction of playgrounds was to reduce crime, as was pointed out by humanitarian photographer and honorary Vice President of the Playground Association of America Jacob Riis in a speech at a 1908 banquet: "The boy's safety valve is his play. Sit on that, hold it down hard, and you will have trouble. Give him the gutter for a playground and nothing else, and crime will come as a

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[15] Clarence Elmer Rainwater, *The Play Movement in the United States: A Study of Community Recreation*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1922), 10.

[16] Landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted was one of the primary proponents of this movement, claiming that it was necessary for the psychological and social well-being of urban citizens to bring nature and areas of leisure back to the city. He wrote specifically of the barrage of impersonal contact that urban dwellers face every day: "They have seen thousands of their fellow-men, have met them face to face, have brushed against them, and yet have no experience of anything in common with them." Olmsted's solution to this bizarre social phenomenon was to design areas of leisure and nature that allowed for a more free and communal interaction among urban citizens. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," *Public Parks, Being Two Papers Read Before the American Social Science Association in 1870 and 1880, Entitled, Respectively, Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns and A Consideration of the Justifying Value of a Public Park*, (Brookline, MA: 1902), 26.

matter of course."[17] The park and the playground existed as outlets for play in a city dominated by work. This movement led to the construction of hundreds of parks and playgrounds in cities around the country, but more importantly it encouraged an ethic of design that recognized play as an integral part of life. From that point on, city planners made sure to include leisure spaces in their plans as outlets to the efficiency-driven atmosphere of the city.

Though the parks and playgrounds movement created leisure spaces where none had existed before, it was ultimately introducing isolated units of playful space into the city; it did not encourage play to enter into the full lives of urban citizens. Parks and playgrounds were created as outlets for playful energy, but the urban ethic was still based on efficiency and work. Huizinga would not have considered the parks and playgrounds movement to be a full success unless it was actually able to introduce a playful approach to the way people lived their lives.[18]

The parks and playground movement and Improv Everywhere both react to the lack of play in urban society, and both attempt to reintroduce it in different ways. Before analyzing the attempts of Improv Everywhere and other urban pranksters to reintroduce play into daily life, I will draw out two important aspects of play that shed light on the issues at stake in my discussion. The first considers

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[17] Jacob Riis, at a banquet of the Playground Association of America, as quoted in Playground Association of America, *The Playground* 13 (April 1908): 15.

[18] Fredrick Law Olmsted himself took issue with the products of the parks and playgrounds movement. After he completed Central Park in New York City, he declared that it was in some ways a failure, because it was not really integrated into city life. Olmsted believed that parks should be the hearts of the city, and that there should be tree-lined boulevards that serve as arteries connecting the areas of leisure. Even though Central Park is one of the most esteemed parks in the world, it still separates leisure from the rest of the city dweller's life. Alex Krieger, lecture on "Making Nature Urbane: Olmsted and the Parks Movement," Literature and Arts B-20: Designing the American City: Civic Aspirations and Urban Form, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, February 19, 2009.

play as an interlude in the everyday. The second considers the potentially

problematic elements of deception in some acts of play. Exploring these two

aspects of play will help illuminate the transformative elements of Improv

Everywhere pranks and the ways in which they may be compromised.

Play as Interlude. One of the functions of creative play is to break up the

monotony of everyday life. City spaces in particular foster in their inhabitants an

adherence to unspoken rules and routines, which ultimately creates a sort of

"lifeless" space in which very little meaningful social interaction occurs. This

lifelessness has been identified by many social theorists, whether as Marx's

"alienation,"[19] Durkheim's "anomie,"[20] or Weber's "routinization."[21] Perhaps the

most relevant observation of lifeless city spaces, however, comes from a member

of Improv Everywhere, Eliza Skinner: "Especially in New York, we all have to

create these bubbles around ourselves in order to physically be as close to each

other as we are without going completely insane. You have to have this little

membrane. It's about popping them."[22] The bubble that Skinner describes is

created by the very alienation, anomie, and routinization of daily life that Marx,

Durkheim, Weber, and many other theorists describe. By introducing an element

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[19] Marx's concept of alienation is in direct response to modern capitalism, but it ultimately depicts the estrangement of the individual from the people around her. He argues that in the modern world, the individual is alienated from her social self. See Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[20] Durkheim's concept of anomie describes the lack of social interaction caused by the modern age. It emphasizes a decrease in traditional social norms, with the community and neighborhood giving way to the lifeless hordes of people in urban spaces. See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

[21] Weber's concept of routinization refers to the way authority limits social interaction. The routinization of a space implies that unspoken limitations have been insidiously inflicted on the inhabitants of that space, ultimately decreasing their potential for creative social interaction. See Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, ed. Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

[22] Eliza Skinner, in interview with author, August 5, 2008.

of play into urban spaces, Improv Everywhere bursts this bubble for a moment, reconnecting people to their surroundings. Huizinga writes, "Play presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives."[23] Play allows us to step outside of our redundant patterns and be reminded that we can actively interact outside of the habitual consumerist cycle.

The discussion of play as short-circuiting everyday life brings up another question: what happens when the act of play is complete? It is the answer to this that distinguishes play from the similar phenomenon of festival and carnival. Festivals create temporary zones in which social boundaries are altered or inverted and people are free to act as they please. In festival, as in play, participants experiment creatively with social norms and explore a realm outside of everyday life. However, when the festival is over, the creative experimentation ends. Thus, festival serves to reaffirm the social norms that keep people in check by insinuating that they can only be broken at times and in locations explicitly designated for chaos. Play, on the other hand, has no specific spatial or temporal determinations. It has the ability to enter into our daily lives, and to stretch and reshape the restrictive social framework by means of creative experimentation. Even if the act of play only lasts for a moment, it ends up demonstrating that the status quo *can* be disrupted not only in specifically designated circumstances, but also in any part of everyday life.[24]

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[23] Huizinga, 9.
[24] For a discussion of festival and carnival, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1st Midland Book ed., translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); For a discussion of the reaffirmation of the real by means of the anti-real, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (USA: Semiotext[e], distributed by MIT Press, 1983).

The pranks of Improv Everywhere are designed to short-circuit the status quo specifically because of their lack of a reveal moment. When the prank is over, the pranksters disappear without admitting that what they did was abnormal. Since the pranks do not exist for a larger purpose (e.g. to advertise or protest), they stand outside of the bureaucratic consumerist cycle and serve as acts of play that show that the banality of everyday life can be broken. As Mark Dery, author of "Culture Jamming," observes about Improv Everywhere: "Rather than reaffirming the status quo, they dream of inverting it and by inverting it only momentarily, by destabilizing it if only for an instant, the moral of their fable is 'See? It can be destabilized and it's all in your head.'"[25] The purpose of the short-circuiting is to wake people up for a moment, with the hope that their slightly heightened awareness of their surroundings will make them more aware in future dealings with their surrounding space. Urban pranksters hope that by observing a disrupted status quo in everyday space, witnesses will recognize that it is not stable and finite, but malleable and fluid. In Chapter 1, I will discuss further the power of urban pranks to disrupt the restrictive social framework and transform public space.

Play and Deception. A complicating aspect of play is the potential for deception. Experimenting creatively often leads to make-believe play, the acting out of an imagined alternate world, which occurs in many of Improv Everywhere's pranks.[26] As I mentioned earlier, the witnesses of some pranks do not recognize the make-believe reality to be false; instead, they believe it to be

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[25] Mark Dery, in interview with author, August 19, 2008.
[26] Though many sources do not hyphenate make-believe, I will do so in this thesis for the purpose of grammatical clarity. The only time I do not use the hyphen is in the title of Chapter 2.

true. In this regard, the witnesses are being deceived. I will examine this element of deception further in Chapter 2. My analysis will draw on the discussion of the fine line between make-believe and deception, as illustrated by Friedrich Schiller in his exploration of the distinction between these two types of "semblances":

> The only kind of semblance I am here concerned with is aesthetic semblance (which we distinguish from actuality and truth) and not logical semblance (which we confuse with these): semblance, therefore, which we love just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better. Only the first is play, whereas the latter is mere deception.[27]

Schiller distinguishes between make-believe or performative play ("aesthetic semblance"), in which everyone involved recognizes it to be semblance, and deception ("logical semblance"), in which some people believe it to be reality. For all of the participants to be fully involved in an act of make-believe play, they must all be conscious of the terms of the created reality. Otherwise, the only people involved in the game of play are those in the know, and the others are just victims of deception. Quentin Stevens, author of *The Ludic City*, observes: "Play depends on conditions of free choice for all players. If a game involves deception, all players have to agree that deception/simulation is an aspect of the game (e.g. dressing up, hiding)."[28] When make-believe becomes deception, it creates an imbalanced relationship within the act. The deceivers are able to manipulate the reality of the deceived people so they have a sort of power over them. While this power may be used for good, as is claimed by Improv Everywhere, it still creates an atmosphere that does not promote the spirit of play. The element of deception

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[27] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 193.
[28] Quentin Stevens, in email to author, February 18, 2009.

in some of Improv Everywhere's pranks both generates ethical problems and complicates the achievement of the pranks' goals as acts of play.

<u>*Research Design*</u>

In order to study Improv Everywhere in the context of play and public space, I developed a multifaceted research design that included in-depth interviews with members of Improv Everywhere and other prankster groups, participant observation of pranks of Improv Everywhere and related groups, and analysis of the Improv Everywhere website, which incorporated the videos of the pranks and the posted commentaries by people visiting the website.

I spent the summer of 2008 in San Francisco and New York City doing field research and conducting twenty-seven interviews with key participants in urban pranks [See appendix for list of interviews].[29] Seven of the interviews were with members of Improv Everywhere, including its founder Charlie Todd, with whom I had three follow-up conversations. I also interviewed members and leaders of various other prankster groups including San Francisco's Suicide Club, Cacophony Society, and Billboard Liberation Front. In addition, I interviewed several authors of blogs that have documented Improv Everywhere's pranks, as well as V. Vale, author of the books *Pranks!* and *Pranks! 2*. To gain a wider perspective on the urban pranksters, I also interviewed several professors of urban

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[29] Most of the interviews were in person, but several were on the phone or by email.

design and urban psychology who have written on play and similarly transformative activities such as skateboarding and parkour.[30]

Participant observation was also a key element of my study. I participated in one Improv Everywhere prank, the fifth annual "Mp3 Experiment."[31] In this prank, over one thousand people on Governor's Island listened to the same recording on each of their portable mp3 players and followed the recorded directions simultaneously, which instructed them to do various fun activities such as giving high fives to uninvolved strangers and playing human twister. This is an annual event conducted primarily for the participants' pleasure rather than that of the witnesses. As such, it has become more of a fun festival rather than a true prank, and does not really pursue the same goals as most Improv Everywhere missions. However, it was still useful to get a taste of the group's activities in person.

To gain more hands-on experience, I participated in a few pranks of related groups, one of which was put on by the New York- and Toronto-based group Newmindspace and consisted of a "bubble battle" in Times Square in which eight hundred people came together to blow bubbles in the streets.[32] Another prank in which I was involved was a "silent rave" in Union Square in which about two hundred people came together and listened to their own music on their iPods and danced together, creating a sort of silent outdoor dance party.

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[30] Parkour is an activity that trains its participants to be able to cross a city from any two points in as straight a line as possible without allowing traditional obstacles to hinder one's passage. Often it includes climbing buildings and jumping over railings in atypical ways. I will discuss this phenomenon more thoroughly in Chapter 1.
[31] See Charlie Todd, "The Mp3 Experiment 5," Improv Everywhere, posted on October 20, 2008, http://improveverywhere.com/2008/10/20/the-mp3-experiment-5/.
[32] See Lori Kufner and Kevin Bracken, "Bubble Battle NYC 2008," Newmindspace, posted June 21, 2008, http://newmindspace.com/bubblebattlenyc2008.php.

Since the Improv Everywhere website adds another dimension to the group, in that the pranks are seen not only by the in-person witnesses but also, in a different format, by a much larger online audience, I spent a lot of time analyzing its content. The website documents the history of each prank and its thoroughness and accessibility have been integral to the expansion of the group. I did a thorough analysis of the site, going through each of Improv Everywhere's pranks and watching the videos, looking at the pictures, and reading the testimonials and public commentary. I also went through the websites of related groups. I then read through the majority of the media and blog coverage of Improv Everywhere's pranks in the past decade, and then did the same for other similar groups.

Chapter Organization

In the first chapter, I will focus on pranks and their relation to public space. I will discuss exactly in what manner the pranks repurpose public space, and how they demonstrate that the spaces in which they are conducted are typically devoid of meaningful and imaginative social interaction.

In the second chapter, I will analyze the element of deception incorporated into some of Improv Everywhere's pranks and examine how it complicates the attainment of the group's goals. I will explore both the criticisms of the deception and its justifications.

In the concluding chapter, I will discuss the ultimate aim of the pranks to inspire people to playfully utilize their freedom to its fullest extent. I will then

look at what can be gained from studying these pranks, both in how we use urban

space and how we incorporate play into everyday life.

Chapter 1: Reinterpreting Public Space

Men came and went, they passed and vanished,
And all were moving through the moments of their lives
To death,
All made small tickings in the sound of time—
But the voice of time remained aloof and unperturbed,
A drowsy and eternal murmur
Below the immense and distant roof.
— THOMAS WOLFE, "THE RAILROAD STATION," 1940

On February 24, 2007, the heart of New York City froze. It was a cold Saturday afternoon, and the main concourse of Grand Central Terminal was bustling with commuters. All of a sudden, without any impetus, the atmosphere completely transformed. The passersby paused their humdrum commute and suddenly began to pay close attention to what was happening around them. What they saw was very unusual. A man had just spilled a briefcase full of papers across the floor, and as he was bending over to collect them, he suddenly froze in place. Another woman nearby posed spooning yogurt into her mouth. Several people gathered around maps, their fingers fixed pointing at one destination. A couple froze mid-kiss. But it wasn't just a few people positioned here and there; there were hundreds of frozen people dispersed throughout the massive space. The bystanders were dumbfounded. Instead of purposefully hurrying through the terminal to catch the next train, they were suddenly hyper-aware of their surroundings. The concourse had stopped being a passageway, and had become something new. What exactly was happening nobody could be sure. Was this a performance? A protest? A cult ritual?

In fact, this was perhaps Improv Everywhere's most notorious "mission."

For this prank, titled "Frozen Grand Central," Charlie Todd gathered together 207

"agents," some of whom had been involved in many of his pranks before and

many of whom were newcomers to Improv Everywhere. They gathered in Bryant

Park and Todd detailed the plan for the mission. They then split up and wound

their way to the nearby Grand Central main concourse, where at the stroke of 2:30

p.m. on the large clock on top of the central kiosk, all 207 people froze. As

Charlie Todd had instructed, they chose believable positions in which to freeze

[Figures 1 and 2]. Since the goal was not to reveal explicitly that this was a

performance, if the agents had chosen silly or ludicrous positions, it would have

destroyed the effect. After freezing for five minutes, the agents started their

motion again for a few seconds, and then froze a second time for only half a

minute, redoubling the witnesses' surprise. Then, the agents began to move again

and all dispersed from Grand Central in a random fashion.[33]

"Frozen Grand Central" is widely regarded as one of Improv

Everywhere's most successful pranks to date. The video of the prank has been

viewed by over 16 million people since documentation of the prank was posted on

the Improv Everywhere website in January 2008. This prank inspired subsequent

freezes in over seventy cities around the world, including Rome, Stockholm,

Dublin, Barcelona, Berlin, Beirut, Tokyo, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Mexico City,

Bogotá, Toronto, Melbourne, and Pretoria, South Africa [Figure 3]. Some of the

freezes were smaller in scale than Improv Everywhere's, but many reached

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[33] See Charlie Todd, "Frozen Grand Central," Improv Everywhere, posted on January 31, 2008, http://improveverywhere.com/2008/01/31/frozen-grand-central/.

grander scales, including one in London's Trafalgar Square that incorporated an estimated one thousand people, and one in Paris that was as large as three thousand. The prank has also been mimicked in several types of entertainment. The well-known American rock band R.E.M. reenacted this prank in one of their music videos, and the high-budget television show Law & Order: SVU included a reconstruction of the prank as part of the many hijinks of one episode's criminal, played by Robin Williams. Freezing in a public space is no novel action; mimes and other performers have been doing it for centuries. Why, then, did this prank pique the interest of so many people?

One of the reasons for this prank's popularity was its incorporation of such large numbers of people. MTV's Andy Milonakis mentions this reason in an article about Improv Everywhere in *Rolling Stone*: "If I act like a retard and get a reaction, it's funny, but if eighty people do something and get a big reaction, it's *really* funny."[34] One person freezing in place may get a small reaction, but when two hundred people freeze, the whole atmosphere of the space is transformed.[35] The number of people, however, is not the primary reason for the success of this prank.[36]

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[34] Christian Hoard, "Improv Everywhere," *Rolling Stone*, October 2005.
[35] See James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York, Anchor Books, 2005).
[36] The size of the participant group *was* the primary reason for the popularity of the "flash mob," an event in which a large number of people seemingly spontaneously arrive at a given location, perform a brief pointless act, and then disperse. Flash mobs first occurred in 2003 in New York City, and become a popular fad for a few years, though have recently fallen out of the public eye. See Bill Wasik, "My Crowd: Or, Phase 5: A Report from the Inventor of the Flash Mob," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2006; Kevin Bracken, "Flashmob is Dead: First Draft," Newmindspace, posted on April 7, 2007, http://www.newmindspace.com/lens/?p=15. Though flash mobs are similar in form to some of Improv Everywhere's pranks, Charlie Todd makes an explicit distinction: "[A flash mob] is very similar to what I'm doing, except it has no creativity behind it other than people just show up and do something random that is not particularly funny and not site-specific, it's just random." Charlie Todd, in interview with author, August 21, 2008.

I would argue that the wide appeal of "Frozen Grand Central" is actually due to how well the prank transformed the space of Grand Central into something completely different from a mere commuter passageway. Every act of play transforms the space it inhabits through active, creative usage. For the most part, play is relegated solely to built playgrounds. However, when people think of space creatively, as urban pranksters do, they can transform any space into their playground. For the few minutes that Improv Everywhere conducted its prank, Grand Central Terminal became Grand Central Playground.

This chapter will explain the popularity of "Frozen Grand Central" and Improv Everywhere's other successful missions by analyzing how and why the pranks of Improv Everywhere alter urban public space. I will explore the state of urban public spaces and what it is about them to which these pranks and other similarly transgressive activities are reacting.

Pranks as the Constructors of Place

In Aimee Bender's short story "Call My Name," a woman wears extravagant gowns on public transportation in order to catch people's attention: "I bet they talk about me at the dinner table—I give boring people something to discuss over corn."[37] This sentiment struck me as I read it, and reminded me of one of the purported goals of Improv Everywhere, which is to provide people with an interesting story to tell. Does this mean that Improv Everywhere agents believe that people are in desperate need of these stories? Are they calling the citizens of

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[37] Aimee Bender, "Call My Name," *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt: Stories*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 10.

New York City boring? I passed these questions and the Bender quote along to

Charlie Todd, and he responded:

> I don't really have a pessimistic view of people, nor do I think I'm all that
> different from most people. I think our work is more focused on the
> locations—bringing color to a black and white place. Making a mundane
> place like the subway exciting…I don't think that New Yorkers are living
> in monotony. Just that they're forced to deal with monotonous locations
> during part of their day.[38]

Todd makes an important point: Improv Everywhere is not criticizing

monotonous New Yorkers, it is criticizing monotonous New York. Most people

likely have interesting and dynamic private lives. When an individual enters

certain public spaces like train stations, however, she immediately generates an

invisible bubble around herself that separates her from the others around. An

interesting dichotomy is formed: a person is surrounded by thousands of people,

and yet she is totally alone. She does not interact meaningfully with anyone for

the most part—she does not need to with signs, arrows, and automated ticket

machines directing her every move. She walks briskly to her train, sits tightly

with her *New York Post* and iPod as the stations whiz by, and exits swiftly without

a backward glance.

As a result of the constant flow of thousands of people avoiding each

other's gazes, many high-use urban locations like train stations have become

stagnant spaces that lack meaningful social interaction. The full meaning of a

space is generated through active usage; the actions and interactions of the people

within a space shape and evolve its meaning. The Commission for Architecture

and the Built Environment, a government-sponsored program in London, wrote

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[38] Charlie Todd, in email with author, September 4, 2008.

this in one of its publications: "A public space is an incomplete space, one that is endlessly 'completed' by the people who use it."[39] Train stations are typically spaces of pure function; people do not use them for anything but as a means to get to a different destination. They are not usually spaces of interaction, but rather efficient passageways that are not intended to encourage meaningful social relations. When a public space is not used to generate creative interactions, it does not evolve in its own meaning. Thus, for the most part, train stations remain functional passageways whose function and meaning are doomed to remain stagnant until otherwise appropriated.

This stagnation is not limited to train stations. Public transportation is an easy example of this urban phenomenon—and, indeed, subways, train stations, and airports are all sites of many of Improv Everywhere's pranks—but other spaces in cities lack meaningful social interaction as well. Spaces of mass consumerism—such as supermarkets, malls, and large chain stores—can often fall into this category. With standardized layouts and an overabundance of signage, people can consume without engaging with anyone. When entering a train station or a megastore, one easily falls into the de-individualized role of commuter or consumer. Lack of social relations and loss of identity cause these spaces to represent a phenomenon unique to the cities of the present day.

The pranks of Improv Everywhere take these monotonous, narrow-purposed locations and repurpose them for a moment. In doing so, they insert a realm of possibility into the space, expanding its potential meaning. Since a space

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[39] CABE Space and CABE Education, *Involving Young People in the Design and Care of Urban Spaces: What Would You Do with This Space?* (London: Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2004), 13.

is completed by the actions of those within it, the space becomes stagnant when those actions are repetitive and unimaginative. By repurposing urban public space, Improv Everywhere's pranks produce a realm of creativity and potential, disrupting the restrictive social framework for a moment.

Marc Augé's idea of non-place in his book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* is a useful way to frame the activities of urban pranksters. Augé asserts that when a space is devoid of meaningful social interaction, it cannot be rightly categorized as a "place," but rather must be termed a "non-place." His primary examples of non-place are spaces that aid transit: airports, trains, gas stations, and hotels. These easily fit into the category of non-place because, as he describes, "non-places are there to be passed through."[40] Another type of space that he describes as non-place is consumer space, specifically large, homogenized spaces like malls and supermarkets. Though these spaces are not purely for passage, they do serve as means to get to a different place—for example, one typically goes to a supermarket to buy food products in order to have a meal at home. A non-place serves a specific function, but does not contain an element of possibility or potential for imagination.

It is important to make distinctions among the terms space, place, and non-place. For all three, I primarily follow Augé's terminology, which itself draws from and complicates the definitions of Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Certeau defines place as a physical locus and not much more. He defines space, however, as consisting of the physical locus (the place),

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[40] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 103-4.

the people within it, and the relation between the two. He writes, "space is a practiced place."[41] Augé entertains a different definition of place. His definition refers to the idea of "anthropological place," which he deems any space (as defined by Certeau) that also has the added element of social meaning. He writes that anthropological places are "places of identity, of relations and of history."[42] From this point forward, my usage of the word *place* draws from Augé's notion of anthropological place. Non-place is thus the opposite of *place*, in that it is a space with a very limited social usage, a space where there is a distinct loss of social relations, history, and identity.

These three elements—social relations, history, and identity—are key in distinguishing *place* from non-place. By examining them, we can fully explore the meaning of non-place in the world of today. First and foremost, the non-place is a space that lacks meaningful social relations. Augé writes in his definition of non-place: "As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality."[43] A non-place is a space that is little more than architecture with bodies moving through it. Little or no meaningful social interaction occurs there, which prevents it from ever being more than a means to an end. A non-place cannot be more than a passageway unless it is transformed, even if only temporarily, into a *place*.

A second element is that of the lack of history in a non-place. Augé specifies: "There is no room [in a non-place] for history…What reigns there is

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[41] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.
[42] Augé, 52.
[43] Ibid., 94.

actuality, the urgency of the present moment."[44] Since social meaning is not

produced in a non-place, it does not hold meaning within an individual's personal

history. Each interaction with a non-place is distinct and immediately forgotten by

the inhabitants of the space; the interactions do not build upon each other. Even if

there is historical meaning about the space at large in society, if it is not treated as

such in its daily use, the historical meaning is omitted from the experience of the

daily users of the space.[45] Instead, they are focused on the interaction with the

space in the present, and allow those meaningless interactions to quickly

evaporate from their personal history.

  The final and most important element in distinguishing *place* and non-

place is that of the loss of identity within the space. Augé writes of the traverser

of non-place: "He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role

of passenger, customer or driver…he tastes for a while—like anyone who is

possessed—the passive joys of identity loss."[46] When an individual enters a train

station, the identity of "commuter" replaces her personal identity. Augé writes:

"'Anthropological place' is formed by individual identities…non-places create the

shared identity of passengers, customers, or Sunday drivers."[47] This temporary

replacement of individual identities with one de-personalized, functional

identity—a "non-identity"—restrains the creative exploration of the surrounding

space, which reinforces that space's categorization as non-place. It is important to

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[44] Ibid., 103-4.
[45] Certeau sees a distinction between the terms "spatial user" and "spatial practicer." The former implies following the routine imposed by social norms, while the latter implies actively interacting with a space and considering non-traditional ways of use. See Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
[46] Augé., 103.
[47] Ibid., 101.

note that it is only the outward persona that is replaced by that of the generalized

passenger or the customer. The individual identity is internalized in the non-place,

and is then allowed to resurface once the person returns to an anthropological

place. A space is a non-place because no individual identities interact with it, only

the non-identities of "commuter" or "consumer" that exist purely for a sole

function. The realm of possibility is eliminated from this space since only one

homogenized identity is interacting with it.

Extending Augé's analysis, the pranks of Improv Everywhere not only

repurpose public space, but actually create *place* out of non-place. As Augé

describes, non-places lack social meaning in the forms of relations, history, and

identity. The pranks of Improv Everywhere attempt to transform a given non-

place into a *place* by incorporating these three elements into the space, even if

only for a few minutes. By keeping an element of mystery, the pranks do not

relegate the witnesses to the typical role of silent audience, but instead encourage

interaction between otherwise estranged inhabitants of the space. They also

provide a memory to become part of the space's history, and a part of the personal

histories of the witnesses and the pranksters themselves. And, finally, the pranks

shock people out of their assumed non-identity of "commuter" in spaces of public

transport, and "consumer" in spaces of capitalist exchange—and back into their

individual identities. It is in these ways that pranks create *place* out of non-place.

The return to individual identities is not necessarily easily recognizable,

for it may seem that the pranks force people into the collective identity of

audience; however, since the pranksters do not admit that they are doing a

performance, the witnesses are not expected to act as a traditional audience. In conventional performances, the actors and the audience have defined roles, and the audience, having chosen their own role, is expected to remain silent and passive. Instead, the pranks of Improv Everywhere invite the audience to actively experience the play occurring in the space. They do not expect the audience to fill any particular role, and in their ambiguity they encourage the viewers to interact with each other to surmise their own meaning. Instead of inhabiting the passive role of audience member, the witnesses of the prank take on the active role of community member. Since there is no easy explanation laid out for them, they must turn to the people around them to explore what is going on.

This reanimating of identity in the pranks of Improv Everywhere brings up an important concept to help explain the workings of these urban pranks. Typical practical jokes have a prankster and a victim. Improv Everywhere prides itself in avoiding placing anybody in the position of victim and tries not to put individual people in the spotlight to be scrutinized and humiliated. However, upon close examination, it is clear that there *is* a victim in the situation: the non-identity of "commuter" or "consumer" that is created by the intended function of the space. When people participate in or witness a prank in a train station, they are separated from the collective identity of "commuter" and they inhabit their individual identities again, serving as member of a new heterogeneous community. The people are invited to watch the collective identity of "commuter" be scrutinized and humiliated by the pranksters. Unlike most traditional pranks, in which there are people who are "in" on the joke and people who are designated as outsiders

(victims), these urban pranks invite all individual people to be insiders, casting the non-identities of public spaces as the outsiders.

Grand Central as Non-Place

The argument may be made that many of the public spaces in which Improv Everywhere performs pranks cannot actually be considered non-places. A good example is Grand Central Terminal, the location of the freeze documented at the beginning of this chapter. The architecture of the main concourse of Grand Central is nothing to be ignored. There is a deep history to Grand Central and how it completely transformed midtown, and New York itself. There is so much social meaning connected with Grand Central, so how can one argue that it is devoid of it, and thus a non-place? The answer lies in how the daily usage of Grand Central Terminal, and in fact all railroad stations, has changed drastically in America over the last century. Nowadays, even though Grand Central has a history of meaningful social interaction, its daily users treat it as merely a passageway. Grand Central is lacking in social relations, personal history, and identity; it has become a non-place.

Grand Central Terminal, designed in 1913 by chief engineer of the New York Central Railroad William J. Wilgus, quickly rose to great heights in the following several decades. Its architecture matched its glory; the main concourse's vast columns and constellation-coated ceiling made a perfect backdrop for the emotional welcomes and farewells that were taking place on its platforms. It was considered the "gateway to the continent," and it was through its

doors that one was able to travel nearly anywhere one wanted to go in America.[48]

During World War II aviation technology advanced significantly and once the

war was over, those advancements were quickly applied to the commercial travel

industry. As a result, in the 1950s the mode of travel that most defined America

shifted from train to airplane.[49] The passion-filled farewells were now taking

place in airport terminals. Grand Central began to really feel the depletion of

customers.[50] It cut back its long-distance routes, and there were even discussions

of its demolition, though ultimately it was saved by new monetary sources from

selling the air rights above the terminal building and selling advertising space

within the main concourse. Billboards overlaid the walls, and any remaining

visible architecture was shrouded with the layers of grime that had not been

addressed in decades. Grand Central was still standing, but it was only a shadow

of its former self; it was truly not "grand" anymore.[51]

In 1977, William Middleton wrote of the decrepit, advertisement-ridden

state of Grand Central: "it is not difficult to imagine a renewed role for a

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[48] See John Belle and Maxinne R. Leighton, *Grand Central: Gateway to a Million Lives*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).
[49] In 1945, about 75% of people traveled between cities by means of the railway system. Ten years later, the amount of usage of trains and planes had become almost equivalent. Lorraine B. Diehl, *The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station* (New York: American Heritage Press, distributed by Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 142.
[50] At the time, however, Grand Central still existed in people's minds as the heart of New York City. In 1958, Thomas C. Schelling did a study in which he asked people to what location they would go in New York City if they were trying to meet someone but didn't know where to go. The overwhelming answer was at the information kiosk in the center of the main concourse of Grand Central. Surowiecki, 91. As written in the *New York Times* article published after a recent renovation: "Back in 1962, no one would have believed that Grand Central would end up a mere commuters' hub instead of the point to begin and end 1,000-mile journeys." Anonymous, "Gateway. Haven. Universe. Grand Central," *New York Times*, Oct, 3, 1998, Op-ed.
[51] A more explicit example of the decline of American railways can be found in the story of New York's Pennsylvania Station, which followed the same decline as Grand Central, but was ultimately demolished in 1963 and replaced by the unwelcoming tangle of tunnels and waiting rooms that makes up the current underground station. See Diehl, *The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station*; Hilary Ballon and Norman McGrath, *New York's Pennsylvania Stations* (New York: Norton, 2002).

renascent Grand Central. Perhaps the main concourse can again assume its place as a public hall for New York City. Or perhaps a restored Grand Central can assume new public roles in place of those that have ended."[52] Many people had high hopes for the reintegration of the historic building into city life. The city eventually showed its own confidence in the building when it funded a $200 million renovation of the building in 1998.[53] The articles written directly after the renovation were optimistic, making such grandiose statements as: "Grand Central Terminal celebrated its rebirth yesterday as a lustrous train station that ranks as a destination in its own right."[54] Indeed, the terminal was physically restored to its former magnificence. The zodiac-covered ceiling sparkled with its new fiber-optic lighting, a redesigned staircase now mirrored its elder counterpart, and perhaps most importantly the walls stood proudly advertisement-free.[55] Grand Central had taken its shower and was ready to start a new day.

As a part of the festivities celebrating the re-opening of the Terminal, choreographer Stephan Koplowitz was commissioned to reproduce an installation that he had done twelve years prior. The piece, titled "Fenestrations," consisted of dozens of dancers weaving their way along the catwalks behind several enormous windows that flank Grand Central's main concourse. Koplowitz said of his original piece: "I was inspired by the walls of the building and the homelessness

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[52] William D. Middleton, *Grand Central: The World's Greatest Railway Terminal*, (San Marino, CA: Golden West Books, 1977), 142.
[53] Susan Sachs, "From Gritty Depot, A Glittery Destination; Refurbished Grand Central Terminal, Worthy of Its Name, Is Reopened," *New York Times*, October 2, 1998, Section B: 1.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

that infused the place."[56] It seems surprising that the presentation chosen to celebrate the renewal of the space was initially inspired by the ambience of displacement that pervaded its atmosphere. Koplowitz elaborates in an interview he gave soon after his installation was performed: "That terminal is one of the grandest spaces in New York, but it's a place we go to get somewhere else. This gives us the opportunity to appreciate it for what it is."[57] Koplowitz was attempting to make Grand Central a "home" for a moment, to try to stop people from their constant motion through the space and to get them to become aware again of the space as an actual *place*. The city was doing everything it could to make Grand Central mean something again.

Yet, after all of the money and labor, Grand Central has not returned to what it used to be. The architecture is certainly sparkling and advertisement-free again, and that must not be discounted. However, the architecture of a space is not enough to make it into *place*. It is the active usage of the space that completes its meaning. As a New Yorker, I have spent my life passing through Grand Central, and that is all it really is to most New Yorkers: a passageway, a means to some other end. Thousands of people rush through the building every day, avoiding each other, and thinking only of making their next train so that they can get home in time for dinner. Jeff Scher, a filmmaker with a blog on the *New York Times* website titled *The Animated Life,* wrote as an addendum to his short movie about

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[56] Stephan Koplowitz, as quoted in Susan Josephs, "CalArts dance dean creates site-specific 'Fluid' movements," *Jewish Journal* (June 12, 2008), http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts_in_la/article/calarts_dance_dean_creates_site_specific_fluid_movements_20080611/.
[57] Stephan Koplowitz, as quoted in Andrea Menotti, "All Aboard!: Stephan Koplowitz Does Windows," *Village Voice*, October 12, 1999, Dance section.

Grand Central: "It's like an epic ballet with a cast of thousands — most of them oblivious to the grandeur of the event, focused on navigating their way to somewhere else."[58] For most commuters in their daily lives, Grand Central is just another passageway. They do not stop to contemplate its tumultuous history or its astrological display on the ceiling. They keep their faces forward, making sure to avoid contact with the thousands of people around them in an effort to get out of Grand Central and into their real lives as soon as they can. In this way, they are treating Grand Central as a non-place. What is so interesting about this is the wild contrast between the grandeur of the space and its usage. Grand Central has magnificent architecture and a powerful history, and yet somehow so many thousands of individuals can scurry through it without so much as an upward glance. This odd dichotomy of history versus usage shows that even beautiful, historically significant spaces can be non-places if they are treated as such.

Perhaps William Middleton was right three decades ago. Perhaps the best way for Grand Central to function in the changing New York City is to change its own function as well. Railroad stations just do not represent American pride and prosperity as they did a century ago. Now is the time to find new ways of using such a beautiful space to its fullest potential. Koplowitz attempted to briefly do this with "Fenestrations," and in many ways, that is what Improv Everywhere tried to do with "Frozen Grand Central." As JC Cassis, one of the many recurrent participants in Improv Everywhere pranks, described it:

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[58] Jeff Scher, "Grand Central," The Animated Life Blog, *New York Times Online* (October 10, 2007) http://scher.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/10/grand-central/?scp=1&sq=%22the%20animated%20life%22%20%22jeff%20scher%22%20%22grand%20central%22&st=cse.

As for why the repurposing of public spaces is happening now, well, because it has to keep happening, because the public spaces will always default to being what they are again until someone comes along to temporarily repurpose them again. There's endless opportunity and obligation on the part of creative people to reimagine spaces and then leave them as they were for the next person who comes along with a new idea.[59]

In some ways, Improv Everywhere is doing its duty as a creative entity to reinterpret Grand Central. Charlie Todd sees the world through the eyes of a prankster; whenever he discovers a space that is being treated as a non-place, he sees it as an opportunity to make something of the space again, to promote social interaction in a new and creative way.

Prankster as Social Skateboarder

In my analysis of play as a creator of *place*, I have found there to be a unique and illuminative parallel between pranks and the urban phenomena of skateboarding and parkour. These two activities take the given urban architectural environment and re-imagine its function. By using a space in ways that were not originally intended, the skateboarder and the *traceur* (practitioner of parkour) create new meaning for space that does not embrace its creative potential. The following analysis of these activities will give insight to the discussion of urban pranks and their relationship with public space.

Skateboarding was invented on the west coast of America in the 1960s as an alternative to surfing when the waves were not suitable. Just as surfing requires the constant interaction between the body and the surface of the wave, skateboarding requires a constant interaction between the body and the surface of

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[59] JC Cassis, in email to author, November 13, 2008.

the pavement. With the invention of the "ollie"—the lifting of the front end of the skateboard to allow for the board to rise off the ground to various heights—a whole new array of opportunities were presented to skateboarders. The sport stopped being limited to the pavement and began to include the actual architecture of the streetscape. Staircases, railings, and benches all lost their status as obstacles and instead became new sites of experimentation.[60] As skateboarder C.R. Steyck said in an interview in *Skateboarder* magazine: "Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential."[61] Through the new lens of skateboarding, the city was suddenly transformed into a landscape of endless opportunity.

Parkour is an activity in which its practitioners aim to be able to cross a city from any two points in as straight a line as possible without allowing traditional obstacles to hinder one's passage. It came about on the outskirts of Paris in the late 1980s, and has become highly popular among young adults in metropolitan areas around the world. Often described as urban gymnasts, *traceurs* scale the urban landscape without much regard to petty obstacles such as railings, walls, or even buildings.[62] The urban architecture becomes a sort of jungle gym not to be passively lived in but to be actively climbed upon.[63]

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[60] See Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

[61] C.R. (Craig) Steyck, as quoted in Carlos Izan, "Aspects of the Downhill Slide," *Skateboarder* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1975): 29.

[62] See Maria Daskalaki, Alexandra Stara, and Miguel Imas, "The 'Parkour Organisation': Inhabitation of Corporate Spaces," *Culture and Organization* 14, no. 1 (2008): 49-64.

[63] Parkour is also sometimes known as free running (and its participants free runners), although the latter is sometimes differentiated by being more about improvisation and elaboration rather than speed and fluidity. Both activities, however, share the same aim of using the city architecture for movement rather than stagnancy. Paula Wasley, "Spring Forward," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 35 (May 5, 2006): 8.

What skateboarding and parkour have in common is the way they repurpose urban architectural space. Rather than buildings and pieces of street architecture existing as obstacles for movement, they become accomplices. Each individual piece of architecture used by a skateboarder or a *traceur* is used in a completely different way than it was intended. *Thrasher*, a popular skateboarding magazine, wrote of professional skateboarder Christian Hosoi: *"Most people think handrails are for those with mobility problems. Christian Hosoi says they are for ollie nose grinds."*[64] What the actions of skateboarders and *traceurs* point out is that there is nothing inherent in the nature of the handrail that mandates its use as an aid for the unbalanced. While that may be the socially understood function of a long metal rail placed alongside a staircase, it works just as well as a ramp for a skateboard. Skateboarders do not limit themselves to the social norms that restrict the functions of architecture. They ignore these socially determined rules and use the architecture as they see fit.

One way of understanding the transformation of space is that the skateboarders and *traceurs* actually introduce the realm of possibility to these spaces. When skateboarders and *traceurs* re-imagine the purposes of urban spaces, they are freeing the spaces from their limiting, socially defined functions. An article on parkour published by several scholars from Kingston University in London discusses this concept:

> Jumping offers free runners a sense of freedom from pre-defined perceptual routes and regimented experiences. Buildings become nodes of creativity towards an ever-changing range of routes and possibilities.

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[64] "Shudder Speed," *Thrasher* 11, no. 11 (Nov 1991): 50, as quoted in Borden, 192.

During *parkour* activities, spaces acquire new use, becoming a liberating
rather than restricting element in human experience.[65]

Just as the *traceurs* free themselves from their limited existence as city dwellers,

they also free the spaces from their own limiting definitions. Instead of restricting

motion, buildings can now aid in enhancing motion. Instead of restricting the

function of a space, the architecture can now actually give its inhabitants the

freedom to explore a whole new landscape of possibility.

Part of the way this interaction affects the transformers of the space is that

it changes the way they see and think about urban space in general. Iain Borden

writes in his book *Skateboarding, Space and the City*: "skaters consider

themselves to be 'one step ahead of the pedestrian or static eye.'"[66] The typical

city dweller, or pedestrian, sees urban spaces for their socially defined functions

and nothing else. Skateboarders and *traceurs* see not only the artificially

determined purpose of a space, but also a whole range of possible purposes for the

space that may or may not have yet been put into use. In my interview with Mark

Dery, author of "Culture Jamming," he discussed parkour and its participants,

saying: "It's all in the mind. You and I see an abandoned building blackened by

somebody torching it to make money. They see Mt. Everest waiting to be

scaled."[67] It is this expansion of the scope of the *traceur*'s vision that allows her

to experience the city in a more liberating way.

In analyzing the relationship that skateboarding and parkour have with

urban space, it becomes clear that the pranks of Improv Everywhere interact with

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[65] Daskalaki, 56.
[66] Borden, 191, quoting "Scary Places," *R.A.D.* 82 (December 1989): 23.
[67] Mark Dery, in interview with author, August 19, 2008.

space in a similar manner. Just as skateboarding points out that it is merely social convention that a banister must only be used to aid balance, urban pranks point out that it is merely social convention that a train station must only be used to provide passage for commuters.

Similar to the way skateboarding and parkour transform how their participants see city spaces, pranks allow their participants to view the city differently as well. In my first interview with Charlie Todd, the founder of Improv Everywhere, he discussed this: "People who do the kinds of things that I do have to look at the world like the skateboarder looks at the world."[68] He provided an example from a time when he was walking past a store complex bordering Union Square Park in New York City that is dominated by nearly one hundred floor-to-ceiling windows. In one of them he noticed a girl dancing with wild abandon. He did not just see in that window a girl enjoying herself; he also saw the potential for a much larger transformation of the space. In his subsequent prank titled "Look Up More" he filled all of the windows of that complex with dancing people on display for all the passersby in Union Square to see [Figures 4, 5, and 6].[69] The prankster sees not only what the typical city dweller sees, but also the potential for playful transgression that exists in each space. Gary Warne, one of the founding members of the San Francisco Suicide Club, a prankster group from the 1970s, wrote about some of the group's antics, including climbing the San Francisco-Oakland bridge: "The bridge was obviously a jungle gym made to

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[68] Charlie Todd, in interview with author, August 21, 2008.
[69] See Charlie Todd, "Look Up More," Improv Everywhere, posted on March 19, 2005, http://improveverywhere.com/2005/03/19/look-up-more/.

climb rather than drive over: the cars just using it for the in between times."[70]

When one places the lens of the prankster over the typical pedestrian eye, one

sees in a space not only its limitations but also the potential ways to break away

from them.

Unlike the skateboarder and *traceur*, the prankster adds the layers of

possibility not just purely for herself. The fact that the prank repurposes urban

social—and not architectural—space means that it, unlike an act of skateboarding

or parkour, intends to affect other people directly. Though communities may be

created around them, skateboarding and parkour are distinctly individual activities

that focus on the relation of the solitary body with the urban landscape. In

contrast, one of the primary goals of Improv Everywhere is to give uninvolved

people an interesting story from a space out of which stories do not usually arise.

The prankster brings her imagination to a space, and in doing so, provides a

salient experience not only for herself, but also for the witnesses of the prank. In

adding this layer of imagination for people who come into contact with the prank

both directly and indirectly, the prankster changes the meaning of the given space.

Another distinction between skateboarding and pranks is that the latter

must be more than just mere transgression for transgression's sake. It must

necessarily incorporate an element of comedy or intrigue, even if it is only

indirect. Johannes Grenzfurthner, of the Austrian prankster group called

monochrom,[71] discussed the social norms that restrict public spaces:

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[70] Gary Warne, "Carnival Cosmology," San Francisco Suicide Club,
http://suicideclub.com/chaos/chaos.html.
[71] The name of the group is intentionally not capitalized.

> People have a blueprint in their mind for how to use a certain public space. You can't shit on the streets. People are not aware that they have rules in their head for every little space they go to. …[Pranking is about] trying to analyze the environment you're working in and trying to find the glitch in it. It's a lot about observation. What's this thing that you shouldn't do here. And then again, an interesting thing you shouldn't do here, because of course you shouldn't shit on the floor, but what message does it transport? [72]

The prankster's goal is not just to break the social rules of a space, but to specifically find the glitch in a space that, when revealed, can open up a world of possibility and imagination. In a *New York Magazine* article about Improv Everywhere, Charlie Todd complicates that sentiment a bit: "You don't regularly see things in New York that make you go, 'Wow, that's awesome.' You don't see humans interacting in a way that takes you off guard and makes you smile. You see a guy taking a shit on the sidewalk."[73] Defecating in public is certainly a means of transgressing social norms and changing the purpose of a space. Instead of a sidewalk, the defecator has turned it into a toilet. However, Improv Everywhere's pranks necessarily add a layer of reflexivity that comments on the space they are in. They point out that there is nothing about a subway car space that prevents it from being a birthday party space. By utilizing humor and play the pranks spark imaginations rather than reinforce the need for functional limitations of space.

Taking the comparison between skateboarding and pranking a step further, it is clear that the two activities can both be seen as reactions to non-places as defined by Augé. Like pranksters, skateboarders and *traceurs* take spaces lacking

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[72] Johannes Grenzfurthner, in interview with author, July 14, 2008.
[73] Charlie Todd, as quoted in Brian Thomas Gallagher, "Prank You Kindly*," New York Magazine*, June 12, 2008.

in meaningful social activity and reanimate them; they make *place* out of non-place. The Kingston University article about parkour demonstrates this idea: "the example of *parkour* illustrates how 'non-places'…are transformed into landscapes with a sense of purpose and aesthetic/experiential potential, through this radical inhabitation."[74] Augé's non-places are spaces devoid of social meaning, where the potential for the space is limited to the specific function defined by the architects and urban planners. Parkour and skateboarding add the element of possibility and potential to the non-place, giving it social meaning and turning it into a *place*, even if only temporarily.

Impermanence and the Theory of Moments

An important aspect of Improv Everywhere's pranks is their definitively temporary nature. The pranksters only re-imagined Grand Central for a few minutes. Once they and the people who witnessed the prank left, it went back to its oddly dichotomous nature of beautiful architecture and functional usage. Skateboarding and parkour act similarly in that they only repurpose architectural spaces for a brief moment. Johannes Grenzfurthner discussed this impermanence:

> People always try to find a certain way out of this highly structured everyday life. To have an escape for maybe four or five minutes—it's like a wormhole going out. But the wormhole is like a wormhole detour. It doesn't bring you very far. It just shifts reality for a couple of degrees and then you flip back.[75]

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[74] Daskalaki, 51.
[75] Johannes Grenzfurthner, in interview with author, July 14, 2008.

The wormhole was successful, but the detour ultimately brought everyone back to the same old path. So, the question remains: is a prank worthwhile if it only changes a space's nature for a moment? Iain Borden observes:

> Well, it depends on whether we should always be seeking to change things permanently or not—if this were the case, then we probably wouldn't bother to do very much in our lives, as nothing is ultimately permanent. What does matter is, on the one hand, the sense of being alive and the real lived quality of that life—so in this respect 'temporary' changes are just as valuable as 'permanent' ones. [76]

As is clear when studying the history of Grand Central, the way a space is considered can easily change. With the rise of the airplane, train stations stopped being considered *places* of national pride, and instead became function-driven non-places. If an attitude toward a space is not reinforced, it will disintegrate over time. What is to say, however, that an attitude that exists for ten minutes is any less valuable than an attitude that exists for ten years?

Another way to understand the play element of urban pranks is to see them as generating salient "moments" for both the pranksters and the witnesses. The idea of the *moment* is a way of clarifying the meaning of play as an interlude in daily life. The pranks of Improv Everywhere qualify as generators of *moments* for all of the people involved. The pranks pull people out of the everyday for a short period of time and allow them to see play as extending the possibilities of action and interaction in the spaces they inhabit.

Henri Lefebvre writes of the transformative power *moments* in his book *Critique of Everyday Life.* He writes that *moments* are experiences that break out of everyday life and cause us to become more conscious of our social lives. In

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[76] Iain Borden, in email to author, October 16, 2008.

many ways, *moments* are the peak experiences through which we remember our lives. The *moment* is necessarily temporary; the heightened consciousness that comes along with it cannot last in the same form, but it can change the course of our lives and how we view our surroundings.[77] The most important aspect of Lefebvre's theory is his claim that *moments* add an element of possibility to the everyday. He writes: "The moment is an impossible possibility, aimed at, desired and chosen as such. Then what is impossible in the everyday becomes what is possible, even the rule of impossibility…We will call 'Moment' *the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility*."[78] The *moment* transforms people's perceptions of their lives within the everyday, allowing them to see the possibilities that lie hidden.

Lefebvre's idea of the *moment* is directly connected to the theories of Guy Debord and the Situationist International based in the 1960s. This group's writings have inspired many urban prankster groups, as was made clear to me in my interview with John Law, a founding member of the Cacophony Society, a San Francisco-based prankster group created in the late 1970s. Law asserted: "Improv Everywhere may not understand their historical precedents, but the influence is there."[79] Though Charlie Todd had never heard of the Situationists or of prankster groups inspired by them when he founded Improv Everywhere, they nevertheless set the stage for his pranks. Formed in 1957, the Situationist International was a group of artists and political agitators who believed that

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[77] As the Baker's Wife sings so poignantly in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*: "Let the moment go. Don't forget it for a moment, though." Stephen Sondheim, "Moments in the Woods," *Into the Woods*, Original Broadway Cast Recording (New York: RCA Victor, 1987), Track 15.
[78] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, (New York: Verso, 1991), 347-8.
[79] John Law, in interview with author, July 23, 2008.

society was losing its cultural reality and becoming pure consumerist "spectacle."

In this new reality, individuals were losing their autonomy and being swept up in

the trance of advertising culture. People did not have to take their lives into their

own hands anymore; everything they needed to know was laid out for them in

television sitcoms and subway advertisements. The Situationists claimed that in

order to short circuit this capitalist stupor, we had to break out of our redundant

daily cycle and make something happen ourselves.[80] In this way, autonomous

creativity was highly important to the Situationists, who decried its absence in

contemporary social circumstances. As Kalle Lasn observes in his book *Culture

Jam*: "The creativity of everyday people, which consumer capitalism and

communism had weakened but not killed, desperately needed to find

expression…To the Situationists, you are—everyone is—a creator of situations, a

performance artist, and the performance, of course, is your life, lived in your own

way."[81] The Situationists believed that in order to break free from the hold of

consumerism, people must become again the subjects of their own lives and

reclaim their agency.

Most importantly, the Situationists were strong proponents of creating

"situations," for which they are named. These "situations" are virtually the same

as Henri Lefebvre's *moments*, as Lefebvre explains in an interview:

> They more or less said to me during discussions—discussions that lasted
> whole nights—'What you call 'moments,' we call 'situations,' but we're
> taking it farther than you. You accept as 'moments' everything that has

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[80] See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
[81] Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*, 1st ed. (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999),
101.

occurred in the course of history (love, poetry, thought). We want to create new moments.'[82]

The Situationists believed that the majority of our existence consists of a dull haze of everyday life and we define our lives through peak "situations." By creating these temporary experiences that contradict or exist outside of everyday life, one can enrich one's life to its fullest extent.

While the temporary nature of contemporary urban pranks may be what allows them to remain transformative, there is an element of these pranks that is more long lasting. Even though they exist only for a few minutes, the memories of the pranks remain in the minds of people who witnessed or participated in them. Iain Borden observes:

> One could argue that something more long-lasting (if not 'permanent' per se) is being changed in spatial appropriations—and that is the attitudes, ideas and lives of those participating. …the permanent changes are not manifested physically, but they are very much manifested in the lives of those involved.[83]

There is a definite permanent aspect of socially transgressive activities such as pranking and skateboarding. Though the physical act of pranking does not exist as permanently in Grand Central as the act of commuting does, it does exist in the memories of the people who have come in contact with it.

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[82] Henri Lefebvre in interview with Kristin Ross in 1983. Full interview published as Kristin Ross, "Henri Lefebvre on the Situationist International," *October* 79, Winter 1997. Guy Debord, the father of the Situationist movement, worked side by side with Lefebvre on their theories for several years. See Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
[83] Iain Borden, in email to author, October 16, 2008.

Transformative Stories

The events of the prank are not the only spatially transformative parts of

the equation. The story of the prank that remains in social consciousness is

similarly transformative of the social conception of a space. Michel de Certeau

wrote about the power that narrative holds over the definition of space:

> In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called
> *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor'—a bus
> or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse
> and organize places; they select and link them together; they make
> sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.[84]

Even if the prank itself does not last for longer than a *moment*, it does have an

enduring affect on the space it inhabited for that short time. Though the pranksters

in "Frozen Grand Central" dispersed as if nothing had happened, the experience

still remains to this day in the social consciousness of those who froze, those who

witnessed the freeze, and those who have heard about it through other means

(internet, television, word of mouth, etc), in the form of the anecdote they

continue to spread. By telling the story of "Frozen Grand Central," people are

widening the social conception of what can happen in Grand Central, expanding

the limit of social action in that space and opening up a new realm of possibility.

Debord discussed the "situations" constructed by his group in a similar

light, referring to them as "'breaking the old syntax,' and replacing it with a new

one. The new syntax carries the instructions for 'a whole new way of being in the

world.'"[85] People have fallen into a strict linguistic and bodily syntax in which all

of their ideas, actions, and behaviors are based. In a sense, this syntax acts like a

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[84] Certeau, 115.
[85] Guy Debord, as quoted in Lasn, 107.

script for their lives. Debord, in an effort to keep a sense of novelty in life,

promotes the disruption of this syntax. In order to keep people actively involved

in the creation of their own life paths, they must constantly be breaking and

reforming the societal syntax, never allowing it to settle into the dull script of

daily existence.

While discussing the power of stories, Charlie Todd told me of a woman

who witnessed the first "No Pants" prank. She was recorded by the solitary video

camera that was documenting the event [Figure 7]. In 2007, five years after the

prank had occurred, she discovered the Improv Everywhere website and saw the

documentation of the prank. She posted this comment on the website below the

video:

> Hey, that's me! I'm the girl reading The Rape on [sic] Nanking. Your
> mission totally worked, because I have been telling people the story about
> the time I was on the subway and all these guys without pants got on for
> years now. And now I have video proof that it happened![86]

In telling me this story, Todd was most excited about how this woman had shown

that the stories he generates actually matter to people:

> I like to say that the stuff that we do gives people a good story to tell, but
> here's somebody who for five years was unaware of what we did and is
> kind of affirming that by sending me an email saying 'Oh my God, I've
> been telling this story for five years!'[87]

This woman left the prank with exactly what Charlie Todd wanted her to have: a

story that she couldn't explain and that she thought about every time she entered

the subway. Todd explained that a reveal moment would have ruined this desired

effect: "If that day on the train, we had said 'We're Improv Everywhere, this has

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[86] Kate, comment on "Video Vault: No Pants (2002)," Improv Everywhere, comment posted on
June 6, 2007, http://improveverywhere.com/2007/05/22/video-vault-no-pants-2002/.
[87] Charlie Todd, in interview with author, October 15, 2008.

been a prank,' it would have been a much less interesting story. She would have been much less compelled to talk about it. It wouldn't have affected her as strongly."[88] Improv Everywhere argues that by avoiding the reveal moment they allow the story to remain pristine and long lasting.

When studying the situation more carefully, it appears that the primary reason why the reveal moment would ruin the effect of the story has to do with the ownership of the anecdote. If the agents were to reveal themselves, they would be taking away the witness' ownership of the story. Instead, it is up to the witness to attempt to explain what she experienced, and thus the story is her own; it has no Improv Everywhere branding. If she thought of the story as Improv Everywhere's and not her own, it would not hold the same transformative power over her conception of the space in the future. Thus, for the sake of the story, Improv Everywhere tries its best to avoid any reveal moments in its pranks.

Charlie Todd's discussion of the woman who witnessed the "No Pants" prank brings up an interesting element of the stories he attempts to inspire. Though the woman held the story of the prank as her own for five years, when she discovered the Improv Everywhere website, everything was explained to her. The website served as a reveal moment, and her story became branded with the Improv Everywhere name. If Improv Everywhere believes that explaining the prank after it is complete would ruin the story told by the witnesses, then why does it post the documentation of the prank on its website for the public to see?

The answer lies in the fact that Improv Everywhere is trying to amuse and inspire three audiences at once, so sometimes the group must sacrifice the

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[88] Charlie Todd, in interview with author, October 15, 2008.

experience of one audience for the sake of another. In certain occasions, the act of documenting the prank impedes the purity of the in-person experience. Chad Nicholson, one of Improv Everywhere's primary photographers, explained that he attempts to avoid interfering with the in-person experience of the prank as much as possible. For the most part, he makes an effort to keep his camera hidden, or to pretend to be an innocent bystander who happens to have a camera. However, as he explained: "I'll be subtle and an observer for the participants and for the people who happen to be observing, but if there comes a time that we just need a shot for the internet, then I will put that on top of the other people."[89] Though taking out his professional camera may alter the story the witnesses will tell, such is the curse of the group that attempts to please three audiences at once. Improv Everywhere tries not to curtail the experience of one audience for the sake of a different one, but sometimes it cannot be helped if it wants all three audiences to enjoy the prank.

Consumer Space as Non-Place

On July 19, 2003, the Virgin Megastore in Union Square was converted into a dance floor. Over the course of a few minutes, several dozen non-descript people entered the store and found their way to the row of thirty-nine listening stations on its eastern wall. Each person faced the wall of her station, quietly listening to the music available. After all of the stations had been filled up, the people all simultaneously turned around and faced outward [Figures 8 and 9]. This simple act of reversing the normal position of the station listeners caused a

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[89] Chad Nicholson, in interview with author, July 13, 2008.

large ruckus. Customers lost interest in the merchandise and began to stare at the row of silently disruptive people. The staff whispered amongst themselves, attempting to figure out what was happening. After several minutes of standing still, the row of people simultaneously began to do a simple dance, which continued uninterrupted for another few minutes, at which time the row of people at the stations dispersed one by one into the rest of the store without a backward glance. The customers and employees were left with no explanation of what had just occurred.

Though the majority of Improv Everywhere's pranks take place in public spaces like city squares and sites of public transportation, a significant number of them take place in consumer spaces, which are technically not wholly public. Though any member of the public can enter these spaces during designated times, they are privately owned and exist for the purposes of monetary exchange. Through their pranks, Improv Everywhere insinuates that these locations are similar to many urban public spaces in their lack of meaningful social interaction.

By choosing Virgin Megastore as a location for the above prank, titled simply "Megastore," Improv Everywhere indicates that this space is as devoid of meaningful social interaction as the passageways in the subway system.[90] It implies that corporate spaces are non-places as well, in that thousands of people gather together in them without actually interacting in a meaningful way. Typically, people enter spaces like supermarkets or large chain stores for the

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[90] See Charlie Todd, "Megastore," Improv Everywhere, posted on July 19, 2003, http://improveverywhere.com/2003/07/19/megastore/.

purpose of buying something to be used elsewhere. These spaces are used as passageways just like Grand Central.

A similar practice that includes extraordinary activity in corporate space is culture jamming. Culture jamming usually involves taking icons of consumer culture and altering, mangling, or repurposing them in an attempt to "reclaim" them. Though culture jamming is often denoted as a clearly political movement, unlike many urban pranks, the effect of each is often quite similar. The goal of most culture jamming is to attempt to wake people up to the consumerism that controls the majority of their actions, and to allow them to see a way of actively responding to the forces of capitalism that guide us. Kalle Lasn writes: "Interrupting the stupefyingly comfortable patterns we've fallen into isn't pleasant or easy…It shocks the system. But sometimes shock is what a system needs. It's certainly what our bloated, self-absorbed consumer culture needs."[91]

In some instances, culture jammers have explicitly shown their motivations to be comparable to those of pranksters. One of the most popular forms of culture jamming is that of billboard alteration, which consists of rewording the messages on billboards to change the meaning of the advertisement, often humorously [Figures 10 and 11]. The most prominent billboard alteration group is the San Francisco-based Billboard Liberation Front, founded in the 1970s.[92] Most people view the Billboard Liberation Front's actions, and those of most culture jammers, as being unavoidably political. Though they do take the stance of wanting to make people more aware of the

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[91] Lasn, 107.
[92] See Jack Napier and John Thomas, "The BLF Manifesto," Billboard Liberation Front, http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html.

consumerist forces that control them, the members of the Billboard Liberation Front insist that they are not trying to take down capitalism as we know it. In my interview with Jack Napier, the founder of the Billboard Liberation Front, he made this clear: "BLF is a straight ahead pranks group. All we do is improve billboard advertising, and make better messages for our corporate overlords."[93] Another member of the Billboard Liberation Front, a woman who goes by the name of Rouxben in her dealings with the group, shared a similar sentiment: "It's not that we want to take down AT&T, we just want to laugh at them."[94] Though the acts of the Billboard Liberation Front are more politically relevant than those of Improv Everywhere, they both share the goal of playing with social boundaries to make people more aware of the routinization of their everyday life.

It can be argued that urban pranks, especially those occurring in consumer space, are unavoidably political even if the intention is not as such. Pranks fit in with the larger "Do-It-Yourself" ethic that sees creating your own entertainment as inherently political in that it allows you to enjoy yourself outside of the capitalist cycle. Most of what we do each day has something to do with either making or spending money. Often, we think of our leisure time as time spent outside of this cycle, but most forms of entertainment are costly. Going to a movie, concert, ball game, dance club, or bar each costs money and adds to the overwhelming capitalist ethic of our society. However, by making one's own form of entertainment that doesn't require money to be spent, one can free oneself from the consumer cycle, if only for a small amount of time. Howard Rheingold,

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[93] Jack Napier, in interview with author, July 23, 2008.
[94] Rouxben, in interview with author, July 24, 2008.

author of *Smart Mobs: The Social Revolution*, observes: "Who entertains you is an important question economically and politically. Clearly people need and want entertainment. Do you buy it prepackaged by others or do you roll your own?"[95] By turning public spaces—and especially spaces typically used for capitalist exchange—into fields of play, pranksters are allowing themselves to imagine those spaces as existing outside of capitalism, giving them more freedom of possibility.

Though urban pranks like those of Improv Everywhere have anti-consumerist tendencies, they have faced corporate co-optation over the past several years. In a recent television commercial that spread virally across the internet via YouTube, several people start dancing in the large Liverpool Street train station in London. Then, as the commercial progresses, more people join until several hundred are dancing in unison, to the amazement of the passersby. Finally, the music stops abruptly, and the people quickly disperse into the station. At the end of the commercial, the phrase "Life's for Sharing" appears on the screen and then the logo for T-Mobile is shown.[96] At first the video is awe-inspiring, but once it is branded it loses its mystique. The people dancing may have had a lot of fun, but the motivation behind their fun was to sell T-Mobile phones, not purely to play.

Improv Everywhere itself has faced the corporate world as well. Charlie Todd has been contacted about creating pranks that integrate various forms of product placement, but he has always declined. The only type of corporate

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[95] Howard Rheingold, in interview with author, August 18, 2008.
[96] T-Mobile, "The T-Mobile Dance," YouTube, posted on January 16, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM.

sponsorship he has considered is that which allows the group to have free reign to do a prank as they normally would. Recently, Improv Everywhere conducted a prank that was used in Absolut Vodka's "In an Absolut World" campaign, which funds various artists to create pieces that represent their ideal world. Since Absolut would have no hand in planning the prank, Charlie Todd accepted the offer.[97] However, the question remains whether the play element of this prank has been tarnished by its association with an advertisement. Thus, Improv Everywhere usually avoids associating itself with anything that may make people believe the pranks' purposes are for anything other than fun. The pranks lose their transformative power when they exist to sell something, rather than purely to introduce play into a play-less space.

There often does not seem to be a big difference between an act of play done for the sole purpose of having fun and an act of play done for the purpose of advertising or protesting something. However, the latter is not in the true spirit of free play. Huizinga elaborates on this concept: "To be a sound culture-creating force this play-element must be pure…It must not be a false seeming, a masking of political purposes behind the illusion of genuine play-forms. True play knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration."[98] Even though people may have fun staging a commercial or a political protest, a

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[97] This prank is titled "Welcome Home." On July 26, 2008, Improv Everywhere agents created welcoming parties for strangers returning home from vacations at John F. Kennedy Airport. They found drivers waiting for a person to arrive, and confirmed that person's first and last names. The agents then made big signs and welcomed the person home with hugs and gifts when she arrived. For documentation of the prank, see Charlie Todd, "Welcome Home," Improv Everywhere, posted on November 17, 2008, http://improveverywhere.com/2008/11/17/welcome-back/; The prank as part of the advertising campaign can be found at "In An Absolut World," Absolut Vodka, 2008, http://absolut.com/iaaw/.
[98] Huizinga, 211.

different end motivates the play in which they engage, and so their activities cannot be considered true play.

In this chapter, I have explored how Improv Everywhere reinserts an element of play into urban public spaces to reanimate them and allow their inhabitants to see the possibilities for creative usage of those spaces. People pass through so many urban public spaces like train stations without pausing to experience them, to *live* in them. As Thomas Wolfe wrote in his poem "The Railroad Station": "Men came and went, they passed and vanished / And all were moving through the moments of their lives / To death."[99] With its pranks, Improv Everywhere jolts people out of their constant motion in these spaces and wakes them up to a *moment* of play in a typically play-less atmosphere. Instead of "moving through" such a *moment*, as Wolfe describes, Improv Everywhere encourages its witnesses to experience the *moment* and hold on to it as a story that will continually transform their conception of that space. Then, as Certeau tells us of Greece, the next time they go to the train station, they can ride the *metaphorai* home.

Having analyzed how Improv Everywhere's pranks transform public space, I will now turn to a discussion of the deceptive element of some of their pranks and how it complicates their attainment of their goals.

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[99] In the original prose that was arranged into verse, the railroad station this poem describes is actually New York's Pennsylvania Station before it was torn down in 1963. Thomas Wolfe, "The Railroad Station," *A Stone, A Leaf, A Door: Poems by Thomas Wolfe*, selected and arranged in verse by John S. Barnes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 140, originally in prose in Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1940), 48.
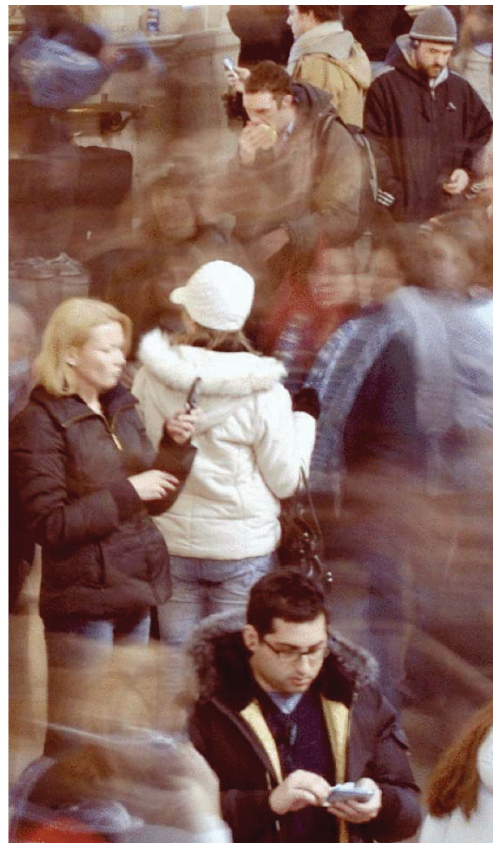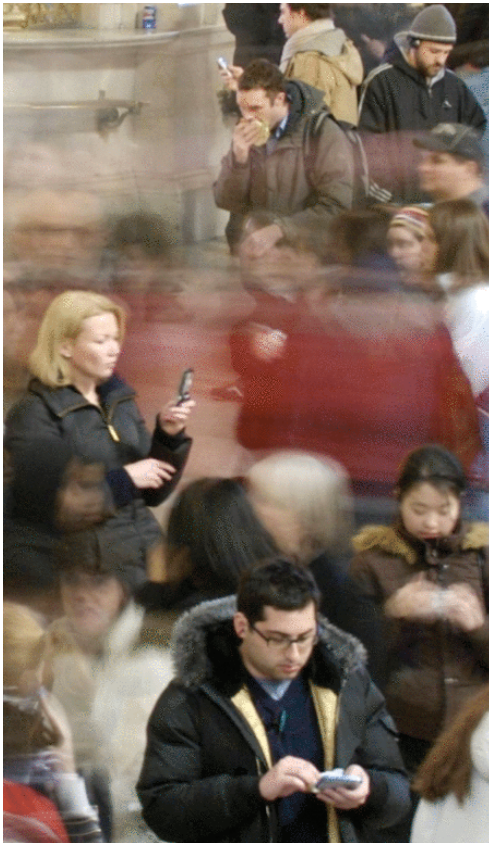
Figures 1 and 2. Two images of "Frozen Grand Central." The same five frozen agents can be counted in each photo. (Source: Chad Nicholson, 2007)
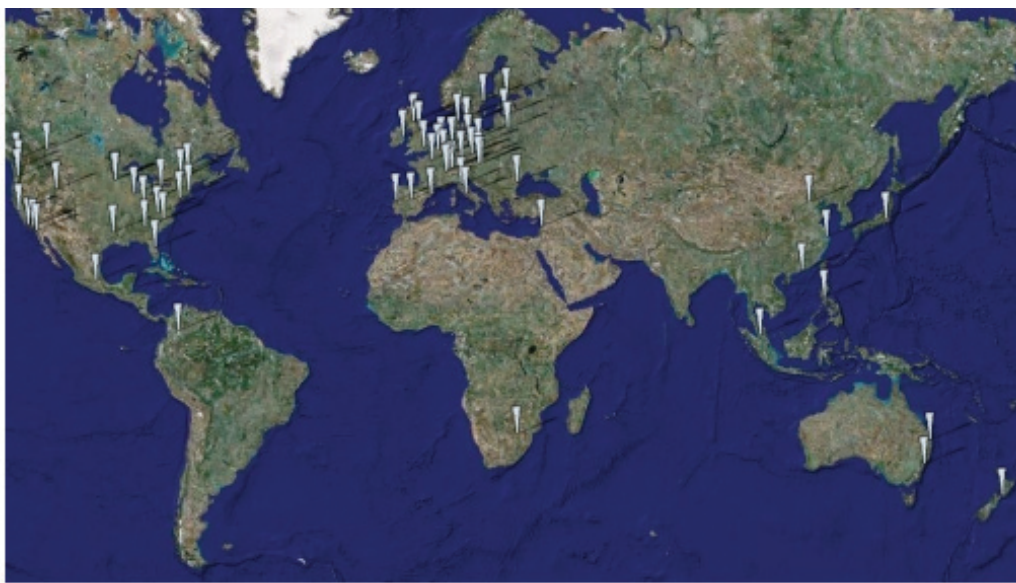
Figure 3. Map of over seventy freezes inspired by Improv Everywhere as of February 28, 2008. (Source: Charlie Todd, 2008)

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Figure 4. The entire façade of the building was filled with people dressed in black. (Source: Chad Nicholson, 2005)

Figure 5. The people in the windows simultaneously began to do jumping jacks, seemingly without any warning. (Source Chad Nicholson, 2005).

Figure 6. A crowd of passersby stop to watch the display. (Source: Chad Nicholson, 2005)

www.improveverywhere.com

Figure 7. A frame from the only video documentation of Improv Everywhere's "No Pants" mission on January 5, 2002. The camera was placed on a seated agent's lap with a magazine over it. "Kate" is the woman sitting on the right side of the frame. (Source: Agent Rosenbaum. 2002)
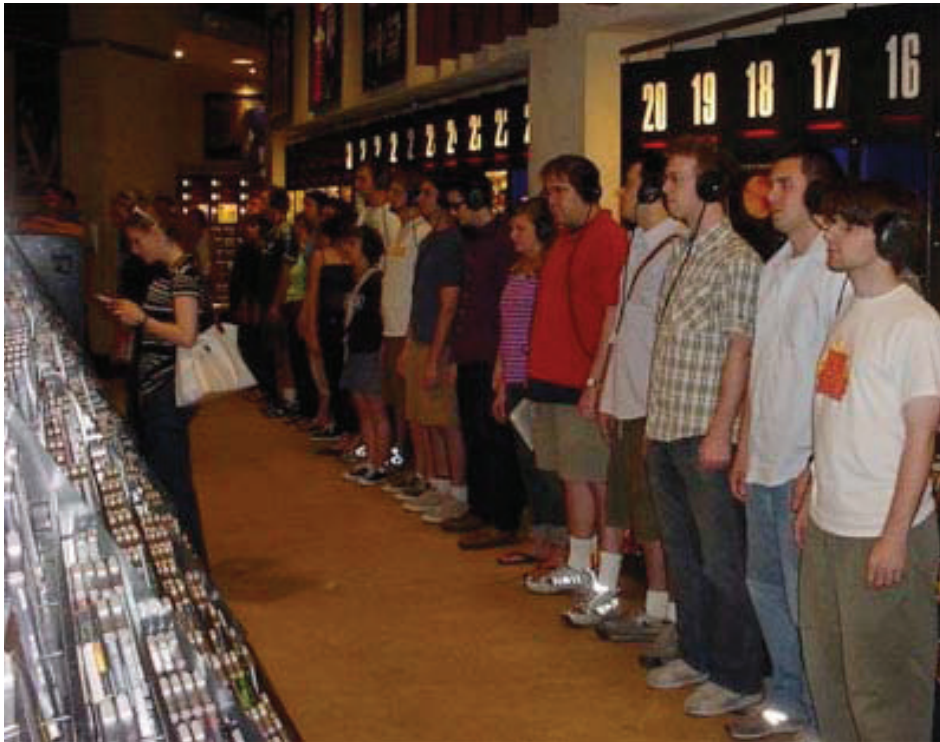
Figure 8. The station listeners all face away from their stations. (Source: Charlie Todd, 2003)

Figure 8. Typically, station listeners face the wall, on which there is the screen with the information about the music to which they are listening. (Source: Charlie Todd, 2003)
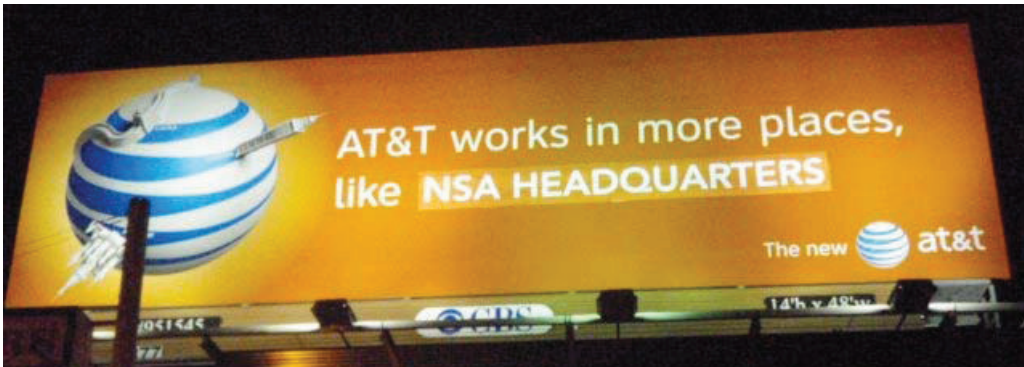
Figure 10. A Billboard Liberation Front billboard "improvement" in reference to the alliance formed between the National Security Agency and AT&T to allow for unlicensed phone tapping. (Source: Jacob Appelbaum, 2008)

Figure 11. The same billboard prior to improvement. (Source: Rouxben, 2008)

Chapter 2: When Make Believe Becomes Deception

The aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society.

— OSCAR WILDE, 1889

On June 9, 2002, one car of the number 2 subway train in New York City was transformed into the site of a romantic, life-changing event. A man entered the train car and announced to its passengers that he had met his girlfriend two years earlier on the 2 train and t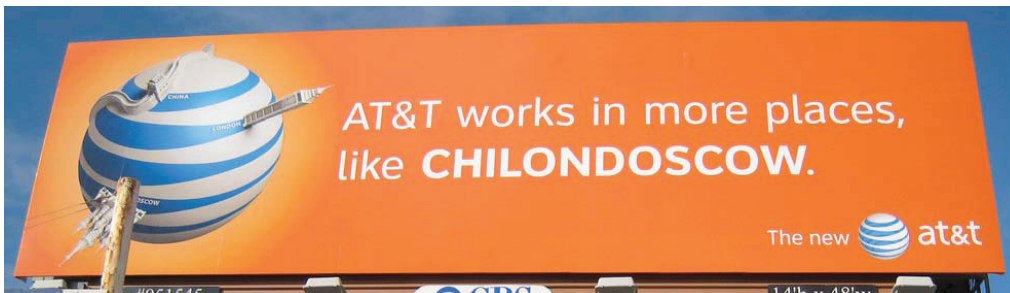hat today he was going to ask her to marry him. The subway burst into applause as the man and his friends prepared the car for the proposal. They put up streamers and handed signs to several passengers that spelled out "WILL YOU MARRY ME" and explained to them the exact moment when they should hold the signs up. A few stops later, a woman and two of her friends arrived on the train. The man greeted her and gave the signal to the passengers, who held up the signs and cheered loudly as the woman gleefully accepted the proposal [Figures 12 and 13]. After the initial moment of excitement subsided a bit, the man and his new fiancé thanked all of the passengers and gave them refreshments. A few stops later, the couple and their friends got off the train together, and the subway returned to its normal state. The other passengers on the train went home with the story of how they had just aided a young couple attain their romantic dreams.

What the passengers did not realize was that the man and woman were Improv Everywhere "agents" DMartin and JMartin [Figure 14]. In reality, they were already married, and the proposal and story about them meeting on the subway were fictitious. This was one of Improv Everywhere's earlier "missions,"

occurring less than a year after the group was founded. Titled "Will You Marry Me?", this prank is one of several Improv Everywhere pranks that include an element of deception.[100] Though the group itself does not differentiate between any of its pranks, I have found there to be a clear category of "deceptive pranks." These pranks have a different character and function than the typical Improv Everywhere prank like "Frozen Grand Central" that is clearly play. Deceptive pranks like "Will You Marry Me?" still seek to wake people up from their humdrum routines and allow them to see the public space in a new way; they still connect the witnesses with some of the thousands of anonymous strangers that surround them for large chunks of their daily lives. The key distinction is that deceptive pranks end up causing the audience to believe in a false reality. In "Frozen Grand Central," the witnesses are amazed that two hundred people coordinated to freeze in place at the same time. In "Will You Marry Me?", the witnesses are amazed that a man had the romantic idea of proposing to his girlfriend on the subway; they do not realize it was a staged performance.

In order to establish why it is important to distinguish deceptive pranks from their more forthright counterparts, we must take another look at the lack of a "reveal moment" in all Improv Everywhere pranks. Improv Everywhere agents never admit that what they are doing is a prank. In Grand Central, this meant that agents did not break their poses even when people talked directly to them or waved their hands in front of their faces. On the 2 train, this meant that the agents never told the witnesses that the marriage proposal was staged, letting them

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[100] See Charlie Todd, "Will You Marry Me?," Improv Everywhere, posted on June 9, 2002, http://improveverywhere.com/2002/06/09/will-you-marry-me/?/.

believe it was all real. The difference is that the passengers on the 2 train had no reason to believe the proposal was not real. A man proposing to a woman on a subway train, while surprising, is not completely unheard of, since people often propose in other public spaces like restaurants. However, in Grand Central, the people witnessing the prank likely did not actually believe that two hundred people had suddenly frozen in time. Since Improv Everywhere had prepared such a ludicrous situation, the witnesses all recognized that it was some sort of performance. The absurd nature of the situation actually served as an implicit reveal moment. An audience member who witnessed the "No Pants" prank wrote on the Improv Everywhere website: "As they moved around the train, constantly drawing attention to themselves, it became apparent SOMETHING was going on."[101] Though the agents would never admit to participating in a prank, the "false reality" they were presenting was so improbable that everyone could tell something was happening, even if they did not know precisely what it was. Warren Shibles terms this kind of performance an obvious lie: "When we tell an obvious lie, it is humorous partly because it defeats the whole purpose of telling a lie. Lies are usually supposed to be taken as truth. An obvious lie is a lie which is not a lie. The contradiction and deviation can cause humor."[102] In deceptive pranks, on the other hand, the witnesses leave believing the false reality to be true.

Whether the audience leaves recognizing the nature of the prank is crucial. If the witness understands the event to be a prank, she leaves thinking how surprising pranksters are. If she does not realize it is a prank, however, she leaves

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[101] Beth T., "No Pants: Reaction," Improv Everywhere, posted on January 5, 2002, http://improveverywhere.com/2002/01/05/no-pants:-reaction/.
[102] Warren Shibles, *Lying: A Critical Analysis* (Whitewater, WI: Language Press, 1985), 174.

thinking how surprising and wonderful the world is. Pranks like "No Pants" and "Frozen Grand Central" alter a person's perception of a space while still allowing her to be "in the know," in the respect that she can tell it is a staged action. Since the witnesses are included in the knowledge of the true reality, the prank does not actually function as deception. Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks, on the other hand, alter a person's perception of the space while excluding her from the truth of the situation. Though the Improv Everywhere agents are still generating meaningful social interaction in a typically mundane space, they are shielding the witnesses from the truth. The agents and the witnesses do not share a common world.

The best way of distinguishing deceptive pranks is through the lens of play. Play often includes the creation of a fictitious reality, as in acts of make-believe. In order to be included in the make-believe, however, one must recognize the falsehood of its reality. If some of the people involved believe the false reality to be true, then they are not playing, but rather are being deceived. This recalls Friedrich Schiller's distinction between "aesthetic semblance," in which everyone recognizes and embraces it as semblance, and "logical semblance," in which some people confuse it with actual reality. Schiller asserts that aesthetic semblance can be considered play, while logical semblance is "mere deception."[103] When Improv Everywhere introduces an element of play into a space and the witnesses recognize it as such, the space is transformed into a playground for everyone involved. When Improv Everywhere plays in a space and the witnesses do not recognize it as play, something different happens. In some ways, Improv

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[103] Schiller, 193.

Everywhere still achieves its stated goals: the witnesses have a fun, social experience in a typically boring, interaction-less space and leave with an interesting story. Yet the space is not transformed into a playground for them, but rather into the site of a false event, whatever that may be. In the case of "Will You Marry Me?" the pranksters construct a public romantic gesture in the non-place of the subway car, transforming it into *place* for the witnesses. However, it was simulated romance that transformed the space, not play. The subway became a romantic *place* for the witnesses, but not a playful one.

Though Improv Everywhere may not distinguish between any of its pranks, I argue that there is a significant difference between pranks that are transparently play and pranks that conceal their nature and simulate reality. Each type has a different effect on its witnesses. To understand more fully the differences between deceptive and non-deceptive pranks, I will explore the issues that arise with the integration of an element of deception.

The Prankster as Altruist and the Problems of Deception

The general public sentiment towards deception is that one should avoid it if at all possible. An important question with an often ambiguous answer is whether there are times when it is acceptable to lie. Many ethicists write that the best way to determine whether a lie is acceptable is to put yourself in the place of the deceived person and see whether you would want to be deceived. If you would be unhappy about the deception, then the lie is most likely problematic.[104]

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[104] See Shibles, *Lying: A Critical Analysis*; Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

It is the altruistic lie, however, that is the most morally difficult to define. This kind of lie can be a white lie to cheer someone up, a harmless lie to eliminate boredom, or a paternalistic lie that is in the perceived best interest of the deceived person. The white lie is highly comparable to the pranks of Improv Everywhere. The group presumes an element of boredom within the public space, and hopes to alleviate that boredom through its performances. People often believe that a lie done for the purposes of helping others is excusable. Often the deceiver determines her white lie to be acceptable because she believes that she herself would choose to be deceived in that situation. Even if a white lie passes this test, though, there is potential for it to be problematic. The liar may not be able to assess what the deceived person would consider to be positive. There is no way to accurately determine in advance whether a person would want to be lied to without revealing the deception, which makes it almost impossible to excuse a lie purely for this reason.[105]

What I have found to be the most important aspect of the discussion of the problems of altruistic lies is the imbalanced power dynamic created between the deceiver and the deceived, though most analysts of deception fail to address this relationship for altruistic or white lies.[106] Before the act of deception, the deceiver and the deceived are on the same plane; they both know the full truth of the situation, and they share a common world. Nobody is in a higher position of

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[105] See Bok, 60.

[106] Sissela Bok sporadically addresses the power relationship between the liar and the deceived though does not discuss it in depth. See Bok, 19, 88. She also does not address this relationship at all with regard to altruistic or white lies. She finds these lies to be problematic based on the idea that they may provide a gateway for more harmful lies. See Bok, 71-2. Charles Ford addresses the power dynamic created by a lie more concisely, but similarly does not expand it to fit with all of the types of deceit he lays out. See Charles V. Ford, *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!: The Psychology of Deceit* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1996), 90-2.

power. The deceiver then creates her own world and gains power by denying the deceived access to the truth of that world. Even if the deceiver believes she is creating the lie in order to benefit the deceived, she is still placing herself in a position of power over him, which could affect the way she relates to him in the future. Thus, even altruistic deception may ultimately be socially detrimental.[107]

Improv Everywhere's Justification

On October 24, 2004, a relatively unknown band from Vermont, Ghosts of Pasha, was playing a show at a small club on a Sunday night, a time slot that would usually ensure a small audience. When the time for the performance came, the band was surprised that instead of the handful of people they were expecting, the space was filled with eager faces. When they began to play, the audience responded voraciously, cheering loudly and even singing along to many of the lyrics. For all outside eyes, it would appear that each and every person was an avid fan of the band. At the end of the performance, the audience gathered their things and left the concert hall, and the band returned home, flabbergasted at the success of their seemingly doomed performance.

In reality, of the thirty-eight audience members that attended the Ghosts of Pasha concert that night, thirty-five of them were Improv Everywhere agents. They had all downloaded some Ghosts of Pasha songs and memorized the lyrics,

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[107] The most direct discussion of power and deception I have found comes from F.G. Bailey, who writes specifically of the tensions between truth and freedom in his book *The Prevalence of Deceit*. Unlike many other theorists, he does not embrace the general social morality that deception is inherently wrong. He offers a more radical interpretation of deception and freedom that I will address later in this chapter. He addresses several types of power dynamics created by lies, though he does not specifically address white or altruistic lies. F. G. Bailey, *The Prevalence of Deceit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

and they were all prepared to cheer and jive no matter what the band's

performance was like. The goal of this prank, titled "Best Gig Ever," was to give

this relatively unknown band the audience of a lifetime, the memory of which the

band would always remember fondly.[108] The element of deception of this prank is

alluded to a few times in the documentation on the Improv Everywhere website.

Agent Been is explicit about the group's intent to make the band members believe

they had a large audience of supporters in his testimonial on the website, writing

of the band's lead singer Milo Finch: "'I'm just a guy, but it seems I'm a god,'

must have been in Milo's head."[109] Improv Everywhere created a false reality that

the band had more fans than it actually did, and for all the band members knew at

the time, it was the truth.

What makes "Best Gig Ever" one of the easier pranks to analyze is that

Ghosts of Pasha discovered the Improv Everywhere website. Charlie Todd posted

a few of the band members' email responses on the website, and they were

interviewed in several magazines as well as by the popular radio show *This*

American Life.[110] Their reactions were depicted in contradictory lights in the

different media outlets. The radio interview in particular painted a fairly negative

picture, quoting Chris Partyka, the band's guitarist: "The band felt like the butt of

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[108] See Charlie Todd, "Best Gig Ever," Improv Everywhere, posted on October 24, 2004, http://improveverywhere.com/2004/10/24/best-gig-ever/.
[109] Agent Been, as quoted in Todd, "Best Gig Ever."
[110] In addition to *This American Life*, they were quoted in *Spin* magazine and on *Rolling Stone* Online. See Dave Alexander, "Making the Band," *Spin*, February 2005; David Sprague, "Joss Stone," The Week in Weird, *Rolling Stone* Online, posted November 12, 2004, http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/jossstone/articles/story/6627758/the_week_in_weird.

a big joke."[111] However, less negative responses were posted on the Improv

Everywhere website, which quotes an email from Partyka:

> I don't know about you, but I feel like I have one life to live, and I choose
> to forever believe in what I felt that night. It's my memory, and just
> because I was told it wasn't real, doesn't mean it didn't feel real TO ME.
> What do I care just as long as I had a GREAT TIME?[112]

Ghosts of Pasha then performed at Improv Everywhere's 5th Anniversary Show at

the Upright Citizen's Brigade theatre nearly two years after the prank occurred.[113]

Clearly the two groups have managed to maintain a friendly relationship despite

the initial deception.

Though many outsiders take issue with their deceptive pranks, Charlie

Todd and the agents of Improv Everywhere fully believe that what they are doing

is in fact sincerely beneficial to the people who are being pranked. One of the

primary justifications that Improv Everywhere and its supporters give is that their

pranks generate positive feelings as opposed to negative. In my email exchange

with Improv Everywhere agent JC Cassis, she wrote: "I think it does make a huge

difference that the aim is to positively affect someone's mood/day. To go out

there intending to hurt or upset people would be wrong, just as it is wrong in any

other circumstance. To go out there intending to make people laugh or be

surprised and delighted is good."[114] Though the fact that these pranks promote

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[111] Chris Partyka, as interviewed in Chicago Public Radio, "#286: Mind Games," *This American Life*, aired on March 24, 2006, originally aired on April 8, 2005.
[112] Chris Partyka, as quoted in Charlie Todd, "Best Gig Ever: Band Response," Improv Everywhere, posted November 1, 2004, http://improveverywhere.com/2004/11/01/best-gig-ever-band-response/.
[113] See Charlie Todd, "5th Anniversary Show," Improv Everywhere, posted September 30, 2006, http://improveverywhere.com/2006/09/30/5th-anniversary-show-2/.
[114] JC Cassis, in email to author, November 13, 2008.

positive moods does temper the moral issues of lying for the sake of the prank, complications in justifying these kinds of pranks clearly still exist.[115]

The more salient Improv Everywhere justification for their deceptive pranks is best summed up by Charlie Todd in his interview with *This American Life* about "Best Gig Ever":

> One of the main responses I got was people saying…'That's the cruelest thing I've ever heard.' And I really don't buy into that logic. It's an interesting thing to think about: is it cruel to give somebody the best day of their life just because they'll never have another day like that again? I don't think so. You'll always have that moment.[116]

Improv Everywhere tries to provide people with an exciting moment to remember forever. Without such moments, their lives would be dreary and uninteresting. In the quote above, Todd says that the exciting moment is more beneficial than the element of deception is harmful. By inserting an exciting moment, and thus an exciting memory, into its witnesses' lives within boring public spaces, Improv Everywhere makes both a bit less boring.

The idea of the *moment* brings us back to Henri Lefebvre's theory of *moments*, which can be used to support Charlie Todd's justification for the deceptive pranks. Lefebvre writes that we define our lives by their most salient *moments*. The somewhat utilitarian justification that Lefebvre might make for Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks is that the benefit we gain from these

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[115] Similarly, many people make the argument that pranks are ethically acceptable so long as they remain funny. Gary Warne, the founder of the similar prankster group the Cacophony Society, notes: "If it isn't funny when it happens to them then you've got sadists instead of pranksters." However, the element of humor is not always shared with the witnesses in some of the deceptive pranks. In "Will You Marry Me?", the proposal is not funny, just joyful and romantic. Gary Warne, "Carnival Cosmology," San Francisco Suicide Club, http://www.suicideclub.com/chaos/chaos.html.
[116] Charlie Todd, as interviewed in Chicago Public Radio, "Mind Games."

transformative *moments* outweighs the harm caused by the deceptive element.[117]

If *moments* give meaning to a person's life, then the greatest gift of all is to

provide them with such a *moment*. Also, since *moments* allow a bit of the realm of

possibility to enter our sphere of everyday life, they actually pave the way for

other breaks in the everyday to occur, initiating a cycle of consciousness-raising.

Dave Hoffer, who coined the term "disruptive realism,"[118] of which he used

Improv Everywhere as an example, wrote a similar statement: "The Disruption for

the many outweighs the betrayal of the few."[119] This argument asserts that the

element of deception is not unacceptable enough to counterbalance the benefits

that people receive from experiencing this disruptive *moment*.

This justification leaves us with several unaddressed problems with the

element of deception in pranks. The first problem is that if the witnesses of the

prank were to find out that it was false, they could end up having negative

feelings because the positive reality in which they had believed was not accurate.

The witnesses of "Will You Marry Me?" were probably excited to take part in a

romantic event, and if they were to discover that their experience had not been not

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[117] Hakim Bey wrote of a similar concept, the "temporary autonomous zone," which is basically a short period of time in which a person is able to reclaim an amount of control over her life. Both he and Lefebvre describe these *moments*/zones as breaks in the everyday routine that allow us to experience life a bit more fully, even if only temporarily. Bey writes of these breaks from everyday life: "moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life." Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, (Brooklyn, NY: Automedia, 1985), 100.

[118] This term first entered the blog sphere when he created a video installment of the series "What's Poppin'" about disruptive realism. He clearly stated his definition of the term after the video sparked public interest: "Disruptive Realism is an expression presented in an everyday context that disrupts peoples [sic] perceptions about different things. Expression can mean many things and it a way it's art but it's also much more expansive a term than just art." Dave Hoffer, comment on Dave Hoffer, "Disruptive Realism" design mind Blog, comment posted on November 13, 2008, http://designmind.frogdesign.com/videos/whats-poppin/disruptive-realism.html.

[119] Dave Hoffer, comment on Hoffer, "Disruptive Realism," comment posted on November 24, 2008 in response to my comment posted on November 18, 2008.

true, they would realize that the world was actually a little less romantic than they had thought. Similarly, the band members were excited that so many people loved their music, but when they discovered the truth, they realized that they did not have as many hardcore fans as they had so happily believed. If after having discovered the truth of these pranks, the train passengers or the band members were to experience an actual subway proposal or atypically enthusiastic audience, they may distrust its veracity and suspect it to be a prank.[120]

Charlie Todd's response to this issue is that the actual reality of the pranks is no less favorable than the false reality, just different. He writes: "I seriously doubt anyone would be upset at us if they found out the proposal wasn't real. I would hope the reaction would be, 'Wow, that's cool that they went to the trouble to give me that really fun, unique experience.'"[121] If the subway riders or the band members were to find out that instead of a world of happy occurrences, they live in a world of vindictive con artists, then they would likely become less happy and more skeptical of the world. However, if they discover the truth of the prank, they will find out that the world they live in is not one of vindictive con artists, but actually a world of creative people who bring an element of play to public spaces. In this instance, the positive intention of Improv Everywhere actually may play an important factor in the ethical nature of the prank. Were the witnesses to find out that Improv Everywhere's intention was to make public space more playful, they

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[120] This can also be extended to people who hear about a deceptive prank and feel badly for the deceived people. After I had explained "Will You Marry Me?" to my thesis adviser, Kiku Adatto, she read a story in the *New York Times* "Metropolitan Diary" of three women who were asked to participate in a wedding proposal on the street. My adviser then found herself doubting the integrity of the proposal and wondering if it could have been a prank as well. See Amanda L. Webb, "Metropolitan Diary," *New York Times*, February 8, 2009, New York Region section, New York edition, A18.

[121] Charlie Todd, in email to author, February 25, 2009.

would potentially be more appreciative of the prank. This is difficult to definitively resolve, however, due to the general absence of audience feedback after the prank.

The second problem is that the deception gives the pranksters a type of power over the deceived people. In trying to awaken its witnesses to a common world of excitement and possibility, Improv Everywhere excludes them from the common world of truth, placing them in a position of ignorance. Improv Everywhere then has control over the witnesses' understanding of reality. This idea is expressed in the *This American Life* radio interview of Chris Rossen, who was thrown an unexpected birthday party by Improv Everywhere agents who insisted they knew him and that his name was Ted.[122] At the beginning of the prank, he was very resistant to their claims, but as time went on, he finally gave in and embraced the identity of Ted. In the interview, Rossen said: "I guess I felt like by assuming that identity I could have some control or some say in the situation."[123] Since the Improv Everywhere agents were so insistent that their version of reality was the truth, Rossen felt his autonomy slipping away; he had no way of controlling the situation. This loss of control was unsettling for him, and when Charlie Todd approached him about throwing him another birthday party, he strongly declined. He had felt vulnerable and powerless, and did not want to be placed in that position again. His reaction serves as a powerful indictment of the prank. Ironically, in acting out their status as Improv

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[122] See Charlie Todd, "Ted's Birthday," Improv Everywhere, posted on September 19, 2003, http://improveverywhere.com/2003/09/19/ted%27s-birthday/.
[123] Chris Rossen, as interviewed on Chicago Public Radio, "#286: Mind Games."

Everywhere "agents, " the pranksters unwittingly deprived Rossen of his agency in the situation.

Clearly this prank did not have its intended effect, and yet Charlie Todd does not feel that the prank had a flawed design. One justification is that Improv Everywhere does not ever capitalize on their position of power in any of these pranks. As discussed in Chapter 1, urban pranksters argue that the fact that Improv Everywhere pranks do not have a reveal moment allows the witnesses to own their story of the event. If Improv Everywhere were to reveal itself at the end of a prank, it would be taking ownership of the story that people would go home to tell their friends and family, thereby utilizing the witnesses' ignorance for its own benefit. Thus, having a reveal moment could actually be considered somewhat selfish, because it would be capitalizing on the imbalanced power dynamic that is created with the prank. As long as the Improv Everywhere agents do not ever act on the power they have over the deceived individuals, they feel they are not harming them. For the most part this has been the case, because though the power dynamic is created, the agents never utilize it to humiliate or ostracize the witness. However, it has clearly sometimes gone awry, as in the case of Chris Rossen.

This brings us to the third problem, which is that it is nearly impossible to predict accurately whether or not the deceived people would want to be deceived. The mindset of Improv Everywhere is that they only perform pranks of which they believe the witnesses would want to be a part. Charlie Todd wrote to me: "If it brightens someone's day, then my guess is that people would chose [sic] to be

lied to if given the choice. I know I would. Everyone is different, and I'm sure some would be weirded out by it, but that doesn't seem to be a good enough reason not to do it."[124] He judges whether a person would agree to be deceived by imagining himself in her place, which is the most he can do without ruining the effect of the deception. The problem with this justification is that though he himself may enjoy being deceived by the prank, he knows nothing about the people he is deceiving. Had Improv Everywhere thrown a birthday party for a different person than Chris Rossen, that person may have had a wholly positive reaction, and the problematic aspects of the prank would not be as evident. However, since the people being deceived are necessarily strangers, Todd has no prior knowledge about how they may react. Also, since there are no reveal moments at the end of the pranks, he usually has no way to judge whether or not the deceived people were happy that they were deceived. Though the pranks have typically not hurt anyone, it is clear in the cases of Chris Rossen and the band Ghosts of Pasha that the deceived people would not all have chosen to be deceived if given the choice.

In order to contextualize the deceptive elements of Improv Everywhere's pranks, it is helpful to look at a few other types of deception in the public sphere that test ethical boundaries: behavioral experimentation, television prank shows, and Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre. Each of these phenomena contains elements of Improv Everywhere's pranks, and each emphasizes different aspects of the problems of deception.

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[124] Charlie Todd, in email to author, February 25, 2009.

One example of public deception that parallels Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks is that of behavioral psychological research. In many behavioral experiments, it is necessary to lie to the participants in order to measure their sincere reactions. This can be very useful in understanding human behavior, so it is generally accepted that deception is admissible for these purposes. However, psychologists have come to find that it is necessary to reveal the truth to the participants of the experiment once it has concluded by "debriefing" them, in order to restore their emotional reactions to their normal state.

In my phone conversation with Harold Takooshian, a professor of urban psychology at Fordham University, he discussed the comparison of Improv Everywhere's lack of reveal moment with behavioral psychological research: "In behavioral research, the debrief is the central point, and here it's the absence. That's a fascinating question: why the ethics are so obverse."[125] Takooshian then told me a story about when he was a student of prominent behavioral scientist Stanley Milgram. His assignment was to go onto the subway and ask someone for his or her seat. This blatant norm violation caused most people to give up their seat out of shock, but Takooshian and his fellow students noticed that the people would seem very perturbed throughout the rest of the subway ride. Feeling guilty about this, he and his classmates began to hand out debriefing cards to the people they approached after the fact, and discovered that people would then become very interested in the subject of study, and the mood was lightened. It has since become widely accepted that if one performs an experiment that involves

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[125] Harold Takooshian, in interview with author, August 11, 2008.

deception, one must debrief the participant afterward to counteract any affects the deception may have on the participant's life.

When discussing the deceptive elements of Improv Everywhere's pranks, Takooshian did not see there to be any inherent problems with them as long as the deceived people are not made to feel negative. He was careful to note the fine balance of the relationship between the deceivers and the deceived people, writing: "The ideal is improvers and observers as allies, not at odds."[126] Takooshian sees them to be in league if they both leave the situation feeling positively. However, the fact that the observers leave believing a false reality only allies the two groups in terms of their emotional states, not in their conceptions of reality.

Some of the public responses to Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks on its website similarly relate pranks to behavioral research. One commenter, a self-proclaimed research psychologist identified as "mykol," wrote that a debrief could potentially make an act deception more problematic:

> Even if we expected improveveryday [sic] to follow APA ethical guidelines, the debriefing rule has exceptions. In some cases it's actually more ethical not to debrief…to me the ethics are clear—no harm was done in the first place; debriefing wouldn't help and could potentially hurt; don't debrief.[127]

Mykol points out that debriefing after a prank might not have the desired affect on the participants, and also that the institution of debriefing came about to prevent participants from potential negative psychological harm. Improv Everywhere's pranks are meant to provide a positive experience for the witnesses, and if the

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[126] Harold Takooshian, in email to author, January 24, 2009.
[127] mykol, comment on Charlie Todd, "Romantic Comedy Cab," Improv Everywhere, comment posted on March 10, 2008, http://improveverywhere.com/2005/07/29/romantic-comedy-cab/.

debrief would minimize or erase that positive sentiment, it would be going against the mission of the prank.

What mykol fails to address, however, is the fact that Improv Everywhere does not try to hide the true story from the in-person witnesses after the prank has ended. In fact, the group posts documentation of the entire prank online for public access. There is a definite potential for the in-person witnesses of the prank to discover the truth after the fact, as was the case with the members of Ghosts of Pasha who discovered the "Best Gig Ever" prank online. As I discussed earlier, Improv Everywhere does not think that the positive effect of the prank would be lessened if the witnesses were to find out the truth behind it after the fact, since they would recognize the motivations behind the prank to be positive and playful. Thus, Improv Everywhere would find mykol's comment to be superfluous.

In the end, it is important to note that while the goal of behavioral research is to achieve results with the least amount of effect on the participants, one of Improv Everywhere's primary goals is actually to affect people in a positive manner as much as possible. Would a reveal moment serve as a debrief and remove the problematic aspects of the initial deception? Or is a debrief suitable for behavioral experiments, but not usually necessary for the pranks of Improv Everywhere?

Television Prank Shows

Another example of public deception is that of television prank shows, the most notable of which is Allen Funt's *Candid Camera,* which aired on CBS from

1960-1967 and was known for placing unknowing participants into unsettling or embarrassing situations and documenting their reactions.[128] Perhaps the most notorious moment of the show is its spectacular reveal moment, caught in the unforgettable phrase: "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera.*"

One initial distinction between *Candid Camera* and the pranks of Improv Everywhere is that while the reveal moment is the climax of the show, it is necessarily omitted from Improv Everywhere's pranks. This is because the pranks of *Candid Camera* are specifically designed to entertain the viewers of the show, without considering the entertainment of the victims themselves. The show begins by emphasizing the insider-outsider nature of the typical prank. The hosts invite the viewers to be insiders with them as they embarrass the victim, placing her in the situation of the outsider. The first part of the humor for the viewing audience comes from watching the victim's initial ignorance of the truth. The other part of the entertainment comes from seeing the reaction of the victim when the prank is revealed to her. In my interview with Harold Takooshian, he defended the ethical nature of *Candid Camera*: "Virtually every person who was taped on *Candid Camera* signed the release. One person in a thousand would not sign the release. And there were good feelings afterwards. People laughed about it."[129] Takooshian also noted that there has only been one lawsuit against *Candid Camera* in its history. Clearly, the victims of its pranks did not feel too humiliated, as they were willing to sign a release form that allowed the video to be viewed by millions of people.

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[128] Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 108-9.
[129] Harold Takooshian, in interview with author, August 11, 2008.

An important distinction, however, is that the pranks of *Candid Camera* reinforce social norms while those of Improv Everywhere attempt to break them. By restoring reality at the end of each episode, *Candid Camera* reaffirms the assertion that these bizarre occurrences are merely part of a false reality that has no lasting effect. In many ways, each episode is like a festival that provides a space for extraordinary events to occur *outside* the realm of everyday life. The pranks of Improv Everywhere offer the alternative that these bizarre occurrences can actually be a part of everyday reality. In this way, it is clear that the pranks of *Candid Camera* are not acts of play. Mark Dery observes:

> At the end of the day, the moral of every *Candid Camera* story is that the eruption of the unreal or the unconscious or the suspension of social mores and the laws of social physics must be contained…A guy takes a job that is supposed to be an insurance agency, and his boss tells him that one of the job requirements is that everyone will have to go naked one day a week. The guffaw is this guy's reaction on closed camera. But we all heave an immense sigh of relief at the end when we realize that he's on *Candid Camera*, this libidinous or lascivious or unfettered reality isn't real, and we all return to normalcy. The show is about affirming that over and over again.[130]

The pranks of Improv Everywhere, on the other hand, allow the realm of possibility to enter reality and exist there in people's perception of space.

One could argue that the pranks of *Candid Camera* have more potential to humiliate than those of Improv Everywhere because innocent bystanders are made to feel uncomfortable for the benefit of millions of viewers; however the fact that nearly all of the victims of the *Candid Camera* pranks signed forms that released the videos to be aired on national television seems to contradict this to some extent. If one looks at the structure of the two types of pranks more carefully, one

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[130] Mark Dery, in interview with author, August 19, 2008.

might then argue that the television show pranks are actually less problematic than those of Improv Everywhere because they restore a sense of normalcy at the end of the prank, and the victim ultimately leaves the situation understanding the full truth.

The question then lies in whether we find this restoration of normalcy to be a positive or negative aspect of the pranks. On the one hand, the false realities created for *Candid Camera* pranks do not affect the victims for very long, as they are revealed to be fictitious as soon as the prank is over. The false realities of Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks, however, are never revealed as fictitious, so they stay with the witnesses for a much longer period of time, perhaps forever. If one looks at the restoration of normalcy from another angle, however, it could be argued that the pranks of *Candid Camera* actually reinforce the limitations of social space by representing a situation that crosses social boundaries and then making it the subject of laughter, reinforcing the social norms that keep us bound in place. The pranks of Improv Everywhere allow people to see the possibilities in the space around them instead of merely the limitations.

Invisible Theatre

A third and final example of public deception that parallels Improv Everywhere is that of Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre. Boal created a genre that he calls the Theatre of the Oppressed, which involves new ways of thinking about theatre that can actually bring about social change. In his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, he describes several different types of Theatre of the Oppressed,

of which Invisible Theatre is one that especially utilizes elements of public deception. Boal's Invisible Theatre involves staging socially salient problems such as racism or sexual harassment and then inciting arguments and discussions about them among the actors and observers, without revealing that the incidents were in fact staged.[131] To emphasize the participatory nature of the Invisible Theatre, Boal terms the audience members "spect-actors," which aptly characterizes his desire for them to be active spectators.[132]

In many ways, an act of Invisible Theatre is almost identical to a deceptive Improv Everywhere prank. Something occurs and causes the audience to become involved in an event, and then once they have reacted to or participated in the event, it ends without them ever knowing that the event was staged. In reading Boal's description of Invisible Theatre, it could almost be seen as a description of Improv Everywhere's pranks, down to the discussion of the reveal moment: "One should never explain to the public that Invisible Theatre is theatre, lest it lose its impact."[133] The only discernible difference between it and Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks is: "The chosen subject must be an issue of burning importance, something known to be a matter of profound and genuine concern for the future spect-actors."[134] The clear purpose of Invisible Theatre is to encourage discussion of certain salient political or ethical problems in a society; because of this it is not play. Improv Everywhere, on the other hand, purely tries to inspire meaningful or playful interaction in a public environment. Invisible Theatre wants to wake

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[131] Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 6-17.
[132] Ibid., 6-17.
[133] Ibid., 16.
[134] Ibid., 6.

people up to political issues, while Improv Everywhere just wants to wake people up to their immediate surroundings.

This particular difference in goals may demonstrate Invisible Theatre to be less problematic than the deceptive pranks of Improv Everywhere. Invisible Theatre promotes a very specific purpose. It encourages citizens to become more politically conscious. Rather than passively reading statistics about sexual assault, citizens can now actively discuss it because they have witnessed it in action. Improv Everywhere, however, does not promote a specific political purpose, nor does it expect a particular response from its witnesses. It just wants to wake people up to allow them to see their surroundings differently. Since the deception used in their pranks is not specifically aimed at heightening the public consciousness of social problems, then it is unnecessary.

On the other hand, the pranks of Improv Everywhere might actually be *more* socially acceptable for the exact reason that they are *not* enforcing a particular political agenda. Improv Everywhere's pranks are motivated by play, whereas Invisible Theatre's performances are motivated by political action. A quote from Boal adds to this discussion: "Invisible Theatre offers scenes of fiction. But without the mitigating effects of the rites of conventional theatre, this fiction becomes reality. *Invisible Theatre is not realism; it is reality.*"[135] It is widely accepted that certain social phenomena like sexual assault are unethical, and that there should be more active discussion in society about how to prevent them. By staging an act of sexual assault, however, Invisible Theatre makes the passengers on that subway think that they had actually witnessed a sexual assault,

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[135] Boal, 15.

when in fact what they had witnessed was a simulation. Those passengers will likely spend the rest of their lives believing that sexual assault is more common than it actually is because they thought they had witnessed it, and yet it had not been real. While this may seem acceptable, what if the moral standpoint from which the actors were coming were less ethically sound? Then the fiction could become reality for the "spect-actors," and their moral compasses could be altered in such a way that would encourage later unethical behavior. The pranks of Improv Everywhere, however, are not politically charged in the same way. The false reality they are presenting is typically a joyful one, and does not have any specifically political agenda. Thus, it could be argued that the pranks of Improv Everywhere are less intrusive in the realities of the witnesses than performances of Invisible Theatre.

Deception and the Play Element

It is clear that these three parallel examples of deception have their own unique problems. In trying to find a less problematic alternative to Improv Everywhere's use of deception, there appear to be three possible choices. The first alternative would be to do the pranks with real people as opposed to actors. For example, Improv Everywhere could find someone that actually wanted to propose to his significant other on a subway train, and then help him do that. However, doing this would make it significantly more difficult for Improv Everywhere to carry out the prank, and as in the case of "Best Gig Ever," may be impossible to replicate in reality. This would also diminish the play aspect of the prank; its

purpose of aiding a romantic gesture would preempt the purpose of introducing play into a space, thus it strays from Improv Everywhere's goals. A second alternative would be to have a reveal moment at the end of the prank to bring the deceived person back to the common world. The issue with this is that Improv Everywhere does not want to take the ownership of the story away from the prank's witnesses. If Improv Everywhere revealed itself after "Will You Marry Me?" then the story the witnesses would tell would be Improv Everywhere's story, not their own. Yet without the reveal moment, the story they tell is their own, but it is also based on a false reality. The third alternative would be to avoid deceptive pranking altogether. Improv Everywhere's goal is not to deceive, but to awaken, and that can be done successfully without deception, so it would be possible to avoid the use of deception completely in its pranks. Though these alternatives may be easier to justify ethically, they all seem to move in the opposite direction of Improv Everywhere's goals; they control playful action rather than free it.

A way to analyze deceptive pranks that may circumvent the need for the above alternatives is to look at them as using minor untruths to break down larger social lies. Henri Lefebvre claimed that everyone is already being deceived by the status quo, which functions as a sort of façade. Hidden behind this façade are the possibilities for meaningful interaction that abound in urban public spaces. If the minor deceptions in the pranks aid in breaking through the façade, they are actually helping reduce deception rather than adding more. Lefebvre writes: "The moment is born of the everyday and within the everyday. From here it draws its

nourishment and its substance; and this is the only way it can deny the everyday."[136] *Moments* exist only temporarily in their true form. However, where they exist more permanently is in the transformation of the everyday life that they instill. By denying the everyday framework, they allow people to see it a bit more for what it really is, and thus they lessen the ability of that framework to limit us. Through their use of deception, urban pranksters are actually helping people become aware of a more important truth.

F. G. Bailey writes of the freeing power of deception in his book *The Prevalence of Deception.* He makes a similar claim to Lefebvre that the social framework is held in place by large-scale deception:

> The discipline of a social framework is exercised through basic lies…They fix as 'truth' what hitherto was ambiguous and arguable, and in doing so they limit our freedom to act for ourselves, to innovate, to invent, to make fiction and fantasy, to charm, and to deceive—all those unroutinized creative things that save us from being automatons.[137]

The routinization of everyday spaces limits possibilities for action in order to promote order and efficiency. However, it makes these limitations appear to be indisputable, thus severely reducing and homogenizing the range of actions even considered by the inhabitants of a space. Bailey writes about ways of breaking out of this restrictive framework:

> We can oppose one basic lie with a different one—capitalism with communism or whatever—but that still leaves us with the same problem because it is no more the change of one straitjacket for another…Freedom comes only from injecting into the institutional bloodstream its antigens: ambiguity, spontaneity, uncertainty, irresponsibility, and—the subject of this essay—untruth.[138]

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[136] Lefebvre, 351.
[137] Bailey, xx.
[138] Ibid., xx.

A flawed option would be to replace one restrictive framework with a different one; though for a short time the shift would serve as a break in routine, the framework would ultimately just reduce the range of human action in a different way. The more appropriate way to attain freedom from social boundaries is to imbue social space with an element of play and irrationality, combating order with spontaneity. This injection of creativity can include exploring the realm of untruth, since we are currently under the control of boundaries framed as fixed "truths." Bailey would likely argue that by incorporating elements of harmless deception into their pranks, Improv Everywhere is actually taking another step towards breaking out of the restrictive social framework.

The issue with Lefebvre and Bailey's justification, however, comes back to the fact that Improv Everywhere is able to disrupt social boundaries through non-deceptive pranks as well; the element of deception is unnecessary to the accomplishment of their goals. Even though deceptive pranks may be injecting play and irrationality into the social framework, they are not allowing the witnesses to recognize that play. Because the witnesses believe the situations to be real, the restrictive social framework is not disrupted for them in the same way.

Ultimately, judging the problems that arise from deceptive pranks is a subjective process. Many people have immediate negative reactions to these deceptive pranks, being disturbed by the lies involved. On the other hand, many people do not immediately find them to be problematic, and in fact think they are ultimately helping society as opposed to hurting it. I myself have had a difficult time grappling with the ethical issues of these pranks. When I first looked at these

pranks, I subscribed to the Improv Everywhere mindset that the exciting *moment* and the awareness of reality given to the deceived people are more beneficial than the deception is harmful. In analyzing the situation in depth, however, I have found it difficult to fully justify Improv Everywhere's deceptive pranks, especially in light of the fact that they can successfully achieve the same goals without the use of deception. The fact that some of the people deceived by Improv Everywhere's pranks have not felt wholly positive about the situation speaks to the fact that when dealing with deception, it is easy to miscalculate what effect it may produce.

Though I may not be able to make a definite ethical judgment, I can conclude that deceptive pranks fail to achieve Improv Everywhere's goals as well as its other pranks. Deceptive pranks do provide an interesting experience in a typically uninteresting space, and they do encourage meaningful social interaction where there usually is none. In this way, deceptive pranks create *place* out of non-place just as non-deceptive pranks do. However, deceptive pranks do not conduct this transformation by imbuing the space with the element of play. The pranksters themselves are playing, but since the witnesses do not recognize the prank for what it is, they cannot perceive the playful experimentation with social boundaries happening in front of them. With non-deceptive pranks, Improv Everywhere opens up people's eyes and allows them to see public space for its potential, just as the pranksters do. With deceptive pranks, on the other hand, Improv Everywhere does not let its audience share the view.

In my analysis of Improv Everywhere, I have found that its pranks reinsert an element of play into urban public spaces in order to disrupt the routinization of everyday life within that space. The pranks remind us that the meaning of a space is completed by the actions of those who are in it, and allow the inhabitants of a given public space to see for a *moment* the possibilities that lie beyond the social limitations inflicted on that space. Through active, playful experimentation with socially implicit boundaries, the pranks transform non-place, which is deficient in social relations, history, and identity, into *place*. With the introduction of an element of deception, however, the impact of the pranks is altered. Though deceptive pranks still disrupt routine and transform non-place into *place*, they do not do so by introducing an element of play. The pranksters themselves are playing, but the witnesses of deceptive pranks do not recognize the element of play involved. They believe the false realities created by the pranks are true, and so are not included in the field of play. For the witnesses of a deceptive prank, their routine is disrupted by the false reality itself, not by an element of play. As such, they will not leave the prank with a broadened recognition of the playful possibilities in urban public spaces, and so they remain restricted by the social boundaries of those spaces.

Figure 12. Passengers help out with the proposal. (Source: Charlie Todd, 2005)

Figure 13. Passengers happily cheer for the newly engaged couple. (Source: Charlie Todd, 2005)

Figure 14. The "newly engaged couple," in reality Improv Everywhere agents JMartin and DMartin. (Source: Charlie Todd, 2005)

Conclusion: Everywhere Can Be Your Playground

Freedom is like taking a bath—you have to keep doing it every day!
— FLORYNCE KENNEDY[139]

Improv Everywhere's pranks respond to a specifically urban dynamic. Cities are locations of efficiency, and as a result every urban space has its own designated function. This compartmentalization has limited the uses of different public spaces, and has lessened the creative interaction with space in cities. With so many people using spaces exactly as they are prescribed, the spaces grow stagnant in their limited functions. They become purely means for people to achieve some narrow goal and then to move on to a more meaningful space. It is important to note that the restricted functions of a given space are often kept in place not by enforced regulations, but rather by the social status quo. You probably would not get fined for doing a cartwheel in a train station, but you probably would receive surprised or annoyed looks from people around you. This dynamic is particularly ironic because, with the high density of people in public spaces like train stations, chain stores, and even street corners, there are many opportunities for varied social exchange, and yet there are also strong social norms that restrict them. The everyday status quo of city life has sucked the possibilities out of city spaces.

When it comes down to it, Improv Everywhere's pranks are about freedom. City dwellers are free to do so much in urban spaces, but social

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[139] As quoted in Audrey Bilger, "Laughing All the Way to the Polls—Do Female Politicians Need a New Punch Line?", *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 30 (Fall 2005): 51.

conventions keep them from doing so. V. Vale, author of *Pranks!*, laid this out for me in relation to Improv Everywhere's activities:

> Really, the central issue we're grappling with is that mysterious word known as 'freedom.' How free are we? Are we free to do this but not that? What are the boundaries and why do they exist? How can they be challenged and possibly pushed back so that we have more territory we can live in? Why are we fenced in to this little circumscribed conceptual mental prison? This is a daily war against ideas, words, images, slogans, everything that makes us think smaller and practice less free than we have the potential to be.[140]

This last statement, that we *think smaller and practice less free than we have the potential to be*, is key; it expresses what is taking place in the urban public spaces of today. Restrictive social norms first shape our thoughts. When we think of the possibilities for action in a space, we think only of those prescribed by the status quo; we "think smaller." Then, since we do not even recognize the different possibilities in the space, we only act within our designated limitations; we "practice less free." There is so much potential for our involvement in a space, and yet it is hidden by the routinization of urban life. Improv Everywhere member JC Cassis wrote in an email: "Really, we're free to do any of the things that [Improv Everywhere] does in public spaces at any time, it's just that we almost never take advantage of it."[141] The pranks of Improv Everywhere show people that the social framework can be disrupted to let the realm of possibility flood in. By breaking the boundaries that social norms have created in public spaces, Improv Everywhere demonstrates how to *think larger* and *practice more free* in public space through the medium of play.

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[140] V. Vale, in interview with author, July 23, 2008.
[141] JC Cassis, in email to author, November 13, 2008.

The most powerful historical example of ignoring the limitations of social norms is that of the court jester. The court jester has appeared in various forms in civilizations across the globe. He holds a distinct role in the structure of these societies. Nominally, this role is to provide humor to the ruling classes, but in actuality, he serves to break social norms in ways that no other person in that society can. Paul Birch said, "People will always focus on the humour element that's inherent in the concept of the Jester; no matter how many times you explain that the main role of the Jester is to challenge. The humour is just the tool."[142] Through the guise of humor, the jester could say jarringly truthful things without getting into trouble. He was the only person in society who was allowed to play freely with social boundaries in any context.

The jester was not only able to break social boundaries for himself, but he could open them up for other people as well. Beatrice Otto writes in her book *Fools Are Everywhere*: "The jester can turn the world on its head, making people see the ultimate insignificance of many of the things they hold dear, perhaps showing them their priorities from a different angle or a wider perspective."[143] Because of his special role in society, he had the freedom to say things that, disguised as humor, could actually awaken people to realities they typically ignored.

One of the most interesting elements of the role of court jester is his identity. Unlike most people, who alter their behaviors and thoughts when they

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[142] Paul Birch, as quoted in David Firth and Alan Leigh, *The Corporate Fool*, (Oxford: Capstone, 1998), 124.

[143] Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 99

enter different spaces and situations, the court jester never had to change the way he acted. He was the one person not limited by the social boundaries and conventions that kept the status quo in place. Beatrice Otto writes: "Most people move, speak, and dress differently in a formal situation than they would at home. A jester would not. He would be consistently himself without adapting to external ritual requirements."[144] However, what Otto fails to point out is that though the jester had more freedom of thought and action than the majority of the population, he did not have freedom of identity. He was not "being consistently himself" in different social situations; he was being consistently a jester. A shroud of humor always masked his personal identity. He always had license to act in any way he would like in any situation, but he always had to embody his depersonalized role of court jester.

In the pranks of Improv Everywhere, the agents act similarly to court jesters in many respects. They freely ignore the status quo of public spaces, and use humor to awaken people to the social boundaries that restrict them. As the jester does, the Improv Everywhere agents *think larger* and *practice more free* in public spaces than the majority of the urban population. Their relationship with identity, however, is quite different from the jester's. Because the pranksters never reveal to the witnesses of the prank that they are part of a coordinated prank group, they uphold the (truthful) claim that they are urban citizens just like everybody else. If someone were to ask one of the pranksters for her name, she would likely give it freely; what she would not admit is her position as prankster. Improv Everywhere demonstrates that you do not have to abandon your identity

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[144] Otto, 262.

and wholly inhabit the role of court jester to play with social boundaries; play is for everybody.

After this discussion of urban pranks and their attempts to reintegrate a play element into everyday public life, there still remains the question: what can be done to aid their cause? One starting point is the design of urban public spaces. For over a century, city spaces have been designed to serve specific, compartmentalized functions. Though aesthetics play a part, the efficiency of the space is typically the most important factor. Variety of use is rarely considered. In extreme cases, when urban citizens use a space in a way unintended by its designers, the space is altered to discourage that activity, a prime example of which is anti-skateboard ridges added to public benches [Figure 15]. In order for a space to become *place*, however, it must encourage meaningful social interaction through imaginative and experimental ways. We must always remember that space is a malleable entity. Space is given meaning through active usage, as Quentin Stevens points out in *The Ludic City*: "playful 'uses' of public space cannot be predetermined; they are defined through action, just as desires themselves can arise through action."[145] Instead of being designed purely in terms of function, spaces should be considered "nodes of creativity,"[146] as they are when pranksters and other playful people interact with them.

Ultimately, I have found that what Improv Everywhere is doing at the turn of this century is a variation of what the Playground Association of America and the parks and playground movement were doing at the turn of the previous

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[145] Stevens, 216.
[146] Daskalaki, 56.

century: creating playgrounds where none existed before to allow for free play. The Playground Association was successful in establishing assigned locations for children to play within the city. Improv Everywhere attempts to expand the reach of play beyond specifically designated zones. It tries to transform urban public spaces from fields of restrictions into realms of possibility for playful and imaginative interaction. In response to the conductor's remark "This train is not a playground," Improv Everywhere insists that a train can indeed be your playground—and that, in fact, *everywhere* can be your playground.

Figure 15. Anti-skateboard ridges embedded in the design of benches in Zuccotti Park, a public square in the Financial District of Manhattan. (Source: Author's Collection, 2008).

Conducted in person unless otherwise noted

Scott Beale, author of LaughingSquid blog and former member of the Cacophony Society – July 8, 2008 *(Phone)*

Hans Bernhard, co-founder of Austrian prankster group UberMorgen – July 24, 2008 *(Video Skype)*

Iain Borden, author of *Skateboarding, Space and the City* – October 16, 2008 *(Email)*

David Calkins, member of the Cacophony Society – July 10, 2008

JC Cassis, member of Improv Everywhere – November 13, 2008 *(Email)*

Chicken John, prankster and former member of the Cacophony Society – July 6, 2008 *(Phone)*

Maria Daskalaki, author of "Parkour Organisation" and principal lecturer at Kingston Univerity in London– November 26, 2008 (*Email)*

Simone Davalos, member of the Cacophony Society – July 10, 2008

Mark Dery, author of "Culture Jamming" – August 19, 2008

Johannes Grenzfurthner, founder of Austrian prankster group monochrom – July 14, 2008

Anthony King, member of Improv Everywhere and artistic director of the Upright Citizens Brigade theatre – August 6, 2008

Rob Lathan, member of Improv Everywhere – August 7, 2008

John Law, former member of the San Francisco Suicide Club, founding member of the Cacophony Society, and co-founder of the Burning Man festival – July 23, 2008

M2 (a.k.a. Michael Michael), former member of the Cacophony Society and co-founder of the Burning Man festival – July 21, 2008

Jack Napier, founder of the Billboard Liberation Front – July 23, 2008

Chad Nicholson, photographer for Improv Everywhere – July 13, 2008

Howard Rheingold, author of *Smart Mobs* – August 18, 2008 *(Phone)*

Rouxben, member of the Billboard Liberation Front – July 24, 2008

Sandwich Girl, member of Cacophony Society – July 24, 2008

Sean Savage, author of *cheesebikini?* Blog, first recorded user of the term "flashmob" – July 10, 2008

Joey Skaggs, prankster and author of the Art of the Prank blog – July 14, 2008 *(Email)*

Eliza Skinner, member of Improv Everywhere – August 5, 2008

Quentin Stevens, author of *The Ludic City* and urban design professor at University College London – February 18, 2009 *(Email)*

Harold Takooshian, urban psychology professor at Fordham University – August 11, 2008 *(Phone)* / January 24, 2009 *(Email)*

Charlie Todd, founder of Improv Everywhere – August 21, 2008 / September 4, 2008 *(Email)* / October 15, 2008 *(Phone)* / February 25, 2009 *(Email)*

Andrew Wright, member of Improv Everywhere – June 26, 2008

V. Vale, author of *Pranks!* and *Pranks! 2* – July 23, 2008

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