

DISRUPTING YOUR SOCIAL CRUISE CONTROL

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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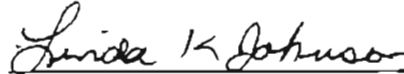
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Professor Stephanie Cunningham, Department of Visual Arts and Art History, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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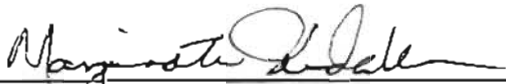
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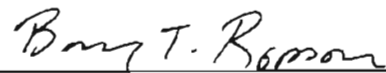
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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis is intended to disrupt society's social cruise control. The goal is to make people stop and think, even if only for a brief moment, about the social conventions that guide and control their daily lives. People become disconnected from one another and their environments through repetition, apathy, and a general obliviousness toward shared moments. Making people more attuned to these moments—essentially creating an opportunity to take a brief pause—is a step toward reconnection. Social conventions are unique in that they can exist without the consent of the involved parties; the existence of the convention is enough to demand conformity. While it is possible to find graphic design projects that offer some degree of interactivity to draw people into a relationship with a space, projects that encourage social relationships through acknowledgment between people are rare. This thesis will explore ways in which design acts as a catalyst for disruption, while also encouraging interaction and dialogue.

## DISRUPTING YOUR SOCIAL CRUISE CONTROL

|                                                               |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS.....                                    | 1  |
| Public Behavior and Habits .....                              | 1  |
| Proxemics.....                                                | 1  |
| Concept of Social Cruise Control .....                        | 2  |
| INTERSECTION OF DESIGN AND CULTURE.....                       | 5  |
| Social Context of Design .....                                | 5  |
| Design Authority and Responsibility .....                     | 7  |
| Different from Street Art and Advertising.....                | 8  |
| Designing for Social Exchange and Relational Aesthetics ..... | 10 |
| DESIGN IN PUBLIC SPACE.....                                   | 12 |
| Conceptual Art.....                                           | 12 |
| Emergence of Public Art.....                                  | 12 |
| The Interventionists .....                                    | 15 |
| HUMOR IN DESIGN .....                                         | 16 |
| Humor through Message .....                                   | 16 |
| Capturing an Unsuspecting Audience .....                      | 17 |
| Surprise as a Tool of Disruption .....                        | 17 |
| THESIS WORK.....                                              | 19 |
| AREAS OF DISRUPTION.....                                      | 21 |
| Elevator .....                                                | 21 |
| Public Transit.....                                           | 23 |
| Airplane .....                                                | 25 |
| Urinals (in Public Restrooms).....                            | 27 |
| ATM Machine .....                                             | 29 |
| CONCLUSION .....                                              | 32 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....                                            | 33 |

## EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

### *Public Behavior and Habits*

Contemporary life provides a wide variety of moments of social interaction that must be negotiated; this fact is particularly true for strangers who are forced into physical proximity. Usually, people resort to a kind of polite *pas de deux*, choreographed by conventions they would be hard-pressed to explain the origin of. Have you ever been on an airplane and felt like you were fighting for the armrest space? Once you have finally conquered it, you refuse to move your arm, regardless of discomfort, to avoid losing your spot. Have you ever been in an elevator and felt awkward staring aimlessly ahead while surrounded by other passengers? Maybe you spoke briefly to request the pressing of a button but, otherwise, rode in complete silence despite being only inches apart. These common public situations are the catalysts for this thesis: the brief moments of contact in day-to-day life in which one's space is negotiated by another's and strangers intimately cross paths.

### *Proxemics*

Sharing public space forces people to interact with others. Most people feel uncomfortable, and some may even feel socially violated if someone stands too close, talks too loud, stares too long, or talks on the phone too loudly or openly. Proxemics, the study of personal space and people's perception of it, examines human patterns and determines how people will interact in a given space. Proposed in the 1950s by researcher Edward Hall, proxemics is concerned with the study of the use of space and the various differences in that use that can make humans feel either more or less comfortable. Thus, proxemics is focused on patterns of movement and behavior used to avoid uncomfortable situations and protect personal space. It plays an important role in interpersonal communication, including many factors for which people

continuously adjust their use of space, such as color, eye-contact, facial expression, smells, body warmth, gender, the number of people involved, subject matter, goals of communication, cultural differences, and so on.<sup>1</sup> For example, people tend to avoid eye contact if they feel that someone is too close, and they may even put distance between themselves and others they feel are too close.

Unspoken rules help to govern actions and behavior in society. These unspoken rules, known as *social conventions*, guide and control people's actions without their giving much thought to these moments or to those around them. According to Barbara Becker and Gloria Mark, in *Social Conventions in Collaborative Virtual Environments*,

Social conventions have been described as normative rules of conduct based on ethic imperatives . . . [A]ccording to this, social conventions are accepted by group or community members even if they have the opportunity to behave in a different way.

Social conventions not only determine how to behave within a group, but furthermore, they define some behaviour as incorrect. Following this, they guarantee the stability and consistency of a social system.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, social conventions serve as a basis for common communication. Regardless of people's efforts to avoid these uncomfortable situations, life is filled with socially awkward moments. The purpose of this thesis is to expose such social conventions, interject dialogue, create disruption, and provide commentary on these moments. The goal is to give visual form to the thoughts and questions already taking place in people's minds during those moments when people are on cruise control, acting and reacting based on learned and experienced conventions.

### *Concept of Social Cruise Control*

People go through their day on cruise control, encountering the same environments and individuals with little acknowledgement of each other or their surroundings. People walk around in their own little bubbles, barely acknowledging those around them or lifting their heads from their phones or various technological gadgets to engage in the world around them. Technology does allow for remarkable things like communication through elaborate global social networks, more

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Sheppard, "Proxemics," University of New Mexico Computer Science, <http://www.cs.unm.edu/~sheppard/proxemics.htm> (accessed August 13 – November 21, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Becker and Gloria Mark, "Social Conventions in Collaborative Virtual Environments," <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/154/Workshop/Becker%20Social%20Conventions%20in%20Collaborative%20Virtual%20Environments.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2011).



efficient work and play, and access to vast amounts of information in minutes. However, the effect on humans' face-to-face social skills is an evolving dynamic. People's minds tend to wander when they are familiar with their surroundings. The human mind becomes complacent in everyday routine environments, taking them for granted while also freeing up mental attention to consider other things. The viewer is then able to recognize more significant factors like change. When someone's routine visual environment is altered by an interruption or an anomaly, it demands that the viewer acknowledge it in order to determine or negotiate its purpose. These moments of negotiation provide the impetus for the viewer to engage in an experience or a dialogue or, at least, to question the moment based on his or her expectations. By using design to disrupt the familiar, I set out to trigger the change necessary for awareness. This change creates the potential for exchange with others experiencing the same disruption. While design can be and often is a method of creating visual order and structure for information used to communicate a commercial message, it can also serve to disrupt and to raise questions.

Graphic design is communication design, yet designers sometimes forget that communication flows in two directions. The endless streams of messages populating day-to-day life are monologues rather than open-ended dialogues. This thesis sets out to create a dialogue, not necessarily a verbal dialogue, but rather a questioning, an awareness of the situation, a conversation that occurs when encountering such situations. By giving visual form to these inner thoughts, the intent behind this thesis is to spark dialogue and interaction or, at least, an acknowledgment of the surrounding environment. While the designed pieces themselves cannot enter into a dialogue, they do seek to create situations that might cause people, possibly even strangers, to interact or, at the very least, acknowledge each other. While all design hopes to grab one's attention and capture a few moments of time, less often is it intended for the sake of noncommercial dialogue or pure contemplation. The most powerful design transcends apathy and indifference to elicit a viewer response, reaction, or interaction. The goal of this thesis is to use location, surprise, and humor to engage the viewer in a discourse that analyzes and questions social conventions.

*Operation Elevator* was launched in April of 2010 as a test project on creating dialogue and encouraging interaction within public spaces. Elevator rides are awkward moments in shared public space. An unspoken set of rules govern the elevator ride: face the door, avoid eye contact, do not make conversation, and do not make physical contact. In this close proximity, eye contact or simply an acknowledgement of each other's existence can seem painful. To challenge this convention, four signs were created and installed in various elevators to test their effects on the riders and to challenge riders to "rethink the ride." The goal was to make people stop and think about the social conventions that direct their daily lives or, in this case, the unspoken rules that govern their presence in an elevator. While there was no specific desired outcome, the main goal was to cause the riders to question their interaction within such a small, intimate, yet public space. It was interesting to watch people "interact" with the signs: Some did not even see them, some would look at the sign and continue to ignore the other passengers, some would look around as though to confirm that others saw the sign as well, and some would speak either to question the sign or start to engage the other passengers in dialogue. Regardless of the degree of reaction—a pause with corresponding facial expression or an exchange with another passenger—the project made riders consider the moment. This project and the results prompted me to think about how design can be used to ask people to be privy to, think about, and question the world they live in and the priorities and conventions that govern them.

## INTERSECTION OF DESIGN AND CULTURE

### *Social Context of Design*

Graphic design does not exist without the context of society. “Talking about contemporary design practice draws us inevitably into a wider social discourse. Design is not an abstract theoretical discipline—it produces tangible artifacts, expresses social priorities and carries cultural values.”<sup>3</sup> The language of design is made up of the signs and symbols that evolve from the culture in which they exist. Designers cannot separate their work and their message from the social context in which it evolved and in which it is received and from the ultimate purpose that it serves. According to Jodi Forlizzi and Cherie Lebbon in *From Formalism to Social Significance in Communication Design*, “A designed message communicates by effectively ordering and representing the common visual language of society. Therefore, it possesses great potential for affecting viewers. In its most powerful form, communication design can inspire the viewers to change behavior by generating knowledge, taking action, or creating an experience.”<sup>4</sup>

Kristina Niedderer, in her Ph.D. thesis titled *Designing the Performative Object: A Study in Designing Mindful Interaction Through Artefacts*, researched design as a means for creating mindful interaction through the use of objects in social contexts. While her research focuses more on the function of product design, the overall concept of fostering interactivity, awareness, and reflection through design is addressed and further enhanced. Her project *Social Cups* consists of a series of five cups (resembling champagne glasses without the stems) that will stand only when at least three of them are connected. No cup stands alone. *Social Cups* explores the social interaction that occurs when the cups are used while allowing the user to become aware of this

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Howard, “A New Kind of Dialogue,” in *Looking Closer 4*, edited by Michael Beirut, William Drenttel, and Stephen Heller (New York: Allworth Press and The American Institute of Graphic Arts, 2002), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Jodi Forlizzi and Cherie Lebbon, “From Formalism to Social Significance in Communication Design,” in *Design Issues* 18, no. 4 (2002), 4.

interaction and reflect upon its direct and symbolic meaning. While her project focuses on how human beings relate to other human beings through the mediating influence of designed objects, this idea can be expanded to include experiences, activities, or services, all of which can be integrated to generate new meaning for what design is or can be. While Niedderer's project also serves to create a dialogue and to comment on the very social interaction that it suggests, the ideas exist independently and are not dependent on location. The pieces continually carry the same meaning and context due to the function of the product. The body of work in this present thesis also uses design to disrupt, spark dialogue, and interaction but is different in that the intersection of message, place, and timing is essential to the event.

Designers and artists have historically been concerned with the social context of design and explored the interaction of art, design, and culture. In Paris during the 1950s and 1960s, a group of cultural critics who called themselves "situationists" protested against the increasing commercial take-over of everyday life. The Situationists, like the Dadaists and the Surrealists before them, wanted to break from the idea of art and culture as separate activities and to incorporate them into part of everyday life. They criticized modern consumer society for alienating people and turning their lives into meaningless pursuits of commodities. With the goal of overcoming the mounting sense of alienation that characterized the postmodern age, the Situationists conducted open-ended experiments that involved playful constructive behavior aimed at scrambling expectations. They believed that

[u]nder capitalism, the creativity of most people had become diverted and stifled, and society had been divided into actors and spectators, producers and consumers. . . . [They] argued that capitalism had reduced life to a "spectacle" by turning all relationships into transactions . . . and that the only way to fight this was to reinvent day to day life by transforming the structure of society and people's perception of it.<sup>5</sup>

To do so, they constructed situations to disrupt the ordinary and awaken people from their customary ways of acting and thinking. They not only encouraged but also insisted that individuals should actively and consciously participate in the reconstruction of every moment.

Guy Debord, a founding member of the Situationist International, described the group's work as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 551-53.

Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a systemic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to and which radically transforms it.<sup>6</sup>

Two strategies used by the Situationists to scramble people's expectations and make them question their environment are the *dérive* and *detournément*. The *dérive* suggests that people alter their experience by changing the way they move through urban space, rather than simply altering public space. The *detournément* is a strategy used to disrupt the assumptions about how things are or should be ordered. This thesis borrows from both of these strategies by seeking to alter people's interaction while traveling through public space. My work addresses the construction of situations or ways of making people more aware of those around them and the social situations that they find themselves in on a day-to-day basis. My work is different from that of the Situationists in that their work had a revolutionary spirit and was concerned specifically with art and politics while mine is concerned solely with the disruption of everyday life for the sake of social reaction and exchange. Furthermore, the Situationists rebelled against authority while my work intentionally employs the language of authority to encourage detours in behavior and ask people to question their experience.

### *Design Authority and Responsibility*

Graphic design continually mediates contact with the visual environment, and designers are integral to the creation of the visual form given to media. The designer gives power and impact to a message through its refined visual form. The viewer learns to trust the refined form as an "official" and often paid-for message. The ability to "speak" this official language grants the designer the power to greatly influence the message and, thus, the audience. According to the dictionary, authority can be defined as "an accepted source of information, advice, etc."<sup>7</sup> A designer's choice of materials, typefaces, and imagery aid in creating an authoritative voice. For example, printed matter carries a different type of authority from handwritten matter. Handwriting

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology, Revised and Expanded* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2007), 62.

<sup>7</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/authority> (accessed March 20, 2011).

is closely associated with human agency and is, therefore, considered more casual yet easier to ignore or dismiss as a matter of personal opinion. Printed matter, on the other hand, has an inherent authority due to its professional polish and form.

The language of official institutions can also be used to imply an authority that may not exist, as is the case with this body of work. The receiver of the message accepts the visual voice of authority but may question the noncommercial content. This acceptance allows the designer to engage the viewer by subverting authority and leaving them questioning the work's intent and purpose. By appropriating the language of authority, this body of work is able to reach not only a broader audience but also a potentially trusting and receptive one. While the final reaction depends on content, context, the environment, and the individual, the authoritative voice aids in disrupting the viewer and adds to the element of surprise experienced by the viewer. My work confronts and exploits the authoritarian voice of advertising and mass media with the intention, not to subvert authority, but to use people's uncritical acceptance of the voice of authority to plant suggestions that make people more aware of their surroundings.

#### *Different from Street Art and Advertising*

Advertising frames the public environment for the purpose of selling, yet public space is not inherently commercial. According to the Public Ad Campaign of New York City:

Public space and the public's interaction with that space is a vital component of our city's health. By visually altering and physically interacting with the public environment, residents become psychologically invested in their community. Outdoor advertising is the primary obstacle to open public communications, by monetizing public space, outdoor advertising has monopolized the surfaces that shape our shared environment.<sup>8</sup>

Most messages people encounter in public spaces are advertisements. The Public Ad Campaign has long advocated that street art is a potent force for public dialogue about issues facing urban spaces. Street art reclaims and repurposes public message space. It speaks in a local dialect that may resonate with the audience in a way that a corporate message cannot. My challenge is to overcome the public's bland acceptance of visual advertising and populate the same environment

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<sup>8</sup> "Public Ad Campaign: Expanding Curatorial Responsibilities in the City," <http://www.publicadcampaign.org/index.php> (accessed July 8 - November 17, 2010).

with visual messages that both surprise and engage the individuals within that space and with each other.

Advertising tactics and traditional commercial space can be used to convey noncommercial messages. Private messages dispersed in a public space can take on the same authority as commercial messages. To test this theory, the Public Ad Campaign launched “The New York Street Advertising Take Over” (NYSAT2) to reclaim public space by whitewashing more than 100 billboards and creating art in the spaces instead. According to Jordan Seiler, founder of the Public Ad Campaign:

For pedestrians, the appropriation of public space by advertisers and artists is an interruption to the normal architecture of the city. When that interruption has no clear expectation of the viewer, the work becomes a point of dialogue and conversation between two unknown parties. It is as if a gift has been left behind to be appreciated or forgotten according to the viewer’s discretion.<sup>9</sup>

A cycle of exchange exists between the commercial and the noncommercial; the message maker is turning the cycle around by co-opting the commercial language or venue for perceived legitimacy.

A group of street artists in Vancouver launched a similar project called “The Vancouver Transit Adspace Re-appropriation Project” (V-TARP). V-Tarp set out to “reclaim the highly sought after mindspace used by corporations to communicate with the public, by collecting artworks from across the globe and installing them in the transit adspace.”<sup>10</sup> The point of this ongoing project is to create or continue the dialogue about the use of public space by covertly installing artwork in corporate adspace. The messages critique advertising and corporate manipulation. Although the local transit authority has asked them to stop and has offered partnership opportunities to create art on transit programs, the artists question whether a legitimate program will allow any true commentary on the transit adspace. Some of the pieces in this thesis use the authoritative positioning of advertising and its domination of public space as a way to reach the consumer with a far different message. Rather than critiquing specific advertising messages in the environment

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<sup>9</sup> “Public Ad Campaign,” GOOD, <http://www.good.is/post/the-good-100/public-ad-campaign/> (accessed August 13 – September 17, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Vancouver Transit Adspace Re-appropriation Project, “V-TARP,” <http://v-tarp.blogspot.com/> (accessed October 15 – November 21, 2010).

by inserting subversive messages in the manner of V-TARP, my work uses the familiar visual language or venue of advertising to introduce new messages into the public landscape.

### *Designing for Social Exchange and Relational Aesthetics*

Provoking interaction in unexpected places is one method of social disruption. Design lives in the everyday world, on the streets, in neighborhoods, in the public commercial world, and in private homes. Design helps people to negotiate their experiences with others and with their environment through refined messaging and clear visual communication. However, traditional communication strategies remain restricted to particular areas, such as ad space, printed matter, billboards, and so on. However, art and design have the power to interject moments of sociability and promote discourse in such unexpected environments where cohabitation is unavoidable.

According to French writer and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who posited the theory of relational aesthetics:

Artwork should be judged on the basis of the inter-human relations that it represents, produces or prompts. In Relational Art, the audience is envisioned as a community and the artwork is more concerned with the intersubjective encounters it produces, rather than an encounter between a viewer and an object. Through these encounters, meaning unfolds collectively, rather than individually. This theory explores design's performative dimension: its effects on users, its pragmatic and programmatic constraints, its rhetorical impact, and its ability to facilitate social interactions.<sup>11</sup>

Relational art focuses on relationships and social exchange in which the artist diminishes the distance between the art and the viewer. In relational art, the artist is no longer at the center but rather is the catalyst, highlighting everyday moments or asking the audience to consider certain things. This type of art is dependent on the viewer reacting and relating to it. In addition, it serves to break down barriers, allowing art to live and be relational in less traditional places and spaces of everyday life. Relational design "embraces constraints and conditions as opportunities not obstacles. It tends toward the reduction of subjectivity in the design process or transfers the

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, "Towards Relational Design," *The Design Observer*, November 3, 2008, <http://www.designobserver.com/observatory/entry.html?entry=7557> (accessed October 15 – November 21, 2010).



subjective to others in the network of relationships. It is only really complete within the confines of its immediate environment or context.”<sup>12</sup>

To test the theory of relational aesthetics, a Dutch city removed all of its traffic markings and signage to reduce collisions between motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians by increasing awareness among those sharing the roadway. “The driver becomes a citizen. Eye contact and human interaction replaces signs and rules.”<sup>13</sup> Directional signs epitomize works of design that symbolize a familiar set of rules. Familiarity with the system or expectations within it are precisely what prompt one to go on cruise control and operate at a less than conscious level. As a result of the removal of the signs, which changed what is familiar, drivers and pedestrians are forced to seek out other visual cues. In the absence of signs, the most valuable cues will likely come from those sharing the space.

While the theory of relational aesthetics has been criticized for its utopian standpoint and an idealized stance for provoking social exchange, the theory has value as a way to promote social exchange and interaction. Disruption lies at the heart of this body of thesis work, rather than relational aesthetics that largely focuses on the coming together of people in a specific environment to participate in a shared activity. Relational aesthetics is concerned with active and conscious participation that leads to interaction; in contrast, this work creates a disruption or intervention in a moment, thereby spurring unexpected and surprising interactivity by shaking up people’s traditional conventions and expectations. Unexpected interactions qualify as disruptions, and the hope is that this work will surprise and disrupt viewers in their day-to-day lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, “Towards Relational Design,” *The Design Observer*, November 3, 2008, <http://www.designobserver.com/observatory/entry.html?entry=7557> (accessed October 15 – November 21, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Ben Hamilton-Baillie and Phil Jones, “Improving Traffic Behaviour and Safety through Urban Design,” *Proceedings of the ICE - Civil Engineering*, 158 (London: ICE Publishing, May 2005), 43.

## DESIGN IN PUBLIC SPACE

### *Conceptual Art*

Conceptual art emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to the increasingly commercialized art world and the abundance of impersonal, minimalist work. In conceptual art, the idea becomes the main focus rather than the form, as stated by artist Sol LeWitt, “[I]n conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”<sup>14</sup> Artists in the 1960s viewed the current art scene as being too narrow and began to look to semiotics, popular culture, and other sources for inspiration to broaden their work. They challenged the idea of what could be considered art, producing pieces that challenged the traditional idea of what art should look like. During this time, artists began using a great deal of verbal content. While language was traditionally an aspect of art, conceptual artists began to use language to a greater degree than traditional formal art forms had. Conceptual art set the precedent of the idea and the performance being more important than the formal qualities of the materials.

### *Emergence of Public Art*

Changes in thinking about the nature of art itself in the mid-1960s led to the exploration of public art. Public art emerged in the late 1960s and became more widespread in the 1980s as artists began to collaborate and be commissioned for their work. Public art is concerned with the general, everyday audience and engages issues of social, spatial, and environmental concerns. Designers share similar concerns when designing for public spaces.

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<sup>14</sup> Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” DDOOSS, Asociacion de Amigos del Arte y la Cultura de Valladolid, [http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol\\_Lewitt.htm](http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol_Lewitt.htm) (accessed November 17, 2010).

In the most general sense, public art is simply art produced for—and owned by—the community. This notion of art is as old as art itself, dating back to prehistoric cave-painting and idol-carving. The history of art encompasses far more examples of public than private art, ranging from the frescoes and sculpture of temples and cathedrals to the commemorative statuary created for public squares.<sup>15</sup>

A conceptual artist whose work is geared toward engaging the public, Jenny Holzer has a background in advertising, which positioned her to uniquely analyze the genre using the medium as the message. Using subversive tactics, she communicates sociopolitical messages using traditional advertising venues as a way of exploiting the authoritarian voice. Rather than promoting consumerism in the manner of most advertising, Holzer asks people to think about their society and the world they live in. She believes that public space is lost to corporate advertisers and attempts to reclaim it with her socially conscious messages. Her work does not simply decorate the landscape but rather provokes public discourse and refashions the space of public signage with public sentiment.

Jenny Holzer uses text as her main medium, and one of her main objectives has been to disseminate her work and ideas within public space. According to Holzer, she “was impressed with the idea that, if a text says something out of the ordinary, people take notice.”<sup>16</sup> Her text functions as commentary on the social conditioning that exists within various environments, causing an awareness of this conditioning. Since the late 1970s, she has worked with advertising media, including LED displays, posters, and stickers, allowing her to blend into the public landscape, working both in the street and in public buildings. She is famous for her project titled *Truisms*, which consists of thought-provoking short statements of common myths or phrases on random subjects. Her truisms, such as *money creates taste*, *enjoy yourself because you can't change anything anyway*, and *freedom is a luxury not a necessity* cover t-shirts, LED signs, plaques, and so on, throughout public spaces. According to Design Boom, her work “has rivaled ignorance and violence with humor, kindness and moral courage.”<sup>17</sup> Holzer’s success as an

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Atkins, *Artspeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1997), 159.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Auping, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Universe, 1992), 21.

<sup>17</sup> “Jenny Holzer,” Design Boom, <http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/holzer.html> (accessed September 7 - October 15, 2010).

interventionist has resulted in more recent work being commissioned by cultural institutions and is now more likely to be found in a museum space than the street.

Barbara Kruger is another conceptual artist who is concerned with the communication of a textual message directed at a specific audience. She explores multiple media, but her work usually explores struggles of power and authority and social conflict. Her artwork is infused with powerful messages that engage the viewer in public spaces, such as billboards, bus stations, and other widely available places. She adopts commercial advertising imagery to comment on consumerism and power struggles with such slogans as *I shop therefore I am*, *Money can buy you love*, and *Your body is a battleground*. Over the past decade, Kruger has created numerous audio installations and immersive videos that reveal the kindness and brutality of everyday social life. She spotlights people's treatment of one another and engages her viewer by directly addressing social issues in an honest, confrontational manner.

Like the work of Holzer and Kruger, this body of work is presented in the public sphere with hopes of disarming the viewer. This body of work is created primarily for public spaces and confronts the viewer by exposing the codes and conventions that regulate everyday activity and the resulting and sometimes awkward moments that such codes and conventions invoke. Like Holzer and Kruger, this body of work also uses text as its main medium. While Holzer and Kruger speak about specific social, cultural, and political issues, this work is created for the sole purpose of disrupting and encouraging reflection and interaction. Regardless of the similarities and differences, their work and mine serve to create an experience that causes the viewers to reflect and analyze the environment around them and their place in it. "Though all design creates some type of experience for the audience, experience is rarely the primary communication goal. . . . When an experience is the goal of the agent, the design displays or exhibits particular values for the audience to consider. The audience may identify with the values or they may condemn or reject the values."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ann C. Tyler, "Shaping Belief: The Role of Audience in Visual Communication," *Design Issues* 9, no. 1 (1992), 28.

### *The Interventionists*

The work of the Interventionists, who emerged in the late 1980s, is concerned with the creative disruption of everyday life. The Interventionists use varied approaches, but the most relevant one in this case is called “Reclaim the Streets.” This classification deals largely with interventions in the public sphere. These artists trespass into the everyday world using the public streets as their canvas, hoping to reach the general public with their interventions. According to Ken Johnson, “A favorite fantasy of the art vanguard is the idea of intervention: the artist introduces something into the cultural mainstream that may or may not be recognized as art, but causes those who see it to reconsider and, ideally, to change their relationship to conventional values.”<sup>19</sup>

Alex Villar, an Interventionist artist from New York City, concentrates on matters of social space. His work is about positioning the viewer in “situations where the codes that regulate everyday activity can be made explicit.”<sup>20</sup> In his video *Temporary Occupations*, “Villar makes visible the ‘uses’ of public space. The video shows Villar ignoring the city’s spatial codes and therefore resisting their effects upon the organization of everyday experience.”<sup>21</sup> The body of work for this thesis borrows from the ideas of the “Reclaim the Streets” Interventionists who interfere in the public sphere by creating situations that force the viewer to think about the conventions that dictate their daily lives. My work uses text as the main medium rather than the visual messages used by Alex Villar and other Interventionists. The work of the Interventionist, as well as this thesis work, is more at home in the public space for which it was created.

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Johnson, “Ericson and Ziegler’s Interventionist Art at M.I.T.,” *The New York Times, Arts*, March 20, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/30/arts/design/30mit.html> (accessed November 4, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 65.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 66.

## HUMOR IN DESIGN

### *Humor through Message*

Design can incorporate humor as a strategy to awaken people or draw attention to itself. The basis of humor is the unexpected. Humor has the power to intervene, to disarm, and to demand attention. Humor creates a moment of identification with the viewer while also allowing the message to transform from a monologue to an open-ended dialogue. It makes visual communication accessible and invites the viewer to engage and help “solve” the puzzle. In addition, it creates a state of vulnerability or openness that establishes camaraderie between designer and audience—the walls are momentarily taken down while the message—in this case, disruption—is delivered

The goal of this body of work is to make a connection with the viewers by using something close to their own experiences. When people can personally relate to or see themselves within a particular humorous moment or situation, they are more receptive to the work as well as more apt to come to the desired questioning and reflection that the designer desires. According to Steven Heller, “[H]umor is the key to overriding our complex, internal security systems. Humor lowers defenses, releases steam, and excites the mind. Humor adds dimension to our experience and gives us great latitude in human affairs.”<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud felt that humor was also a window into the unconscious. He believed that humor was a way to say things that people feel but cannot openly express.<sup>23</sup> Thus, humor is a way to forge a relationship between the designer and an audience as shown by the success of numerous experiments that used humor and wit to reach and, ultimately, affect the audience.

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<sup>22</sup> Steven Heller and Gail Anderson, *Graphic Wit: The Art of Humor in Design* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1991), 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Heller and Gail Anderson, *Graphic Wit: The Art of Humor in Design* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1991), 5.

### *Capturing an Unsuspecting Audience*

An example of the effective use of humor in design and its potential to encourage participation is the ad campaign for the World Financial Center created by ad agency Olympia and York. A series of teaser posters were created for the campaign. Each poster highlighted various locations and their proximity to the World Financial Center by using concentric circles on a map. They also introduced an element of play by referencing the children's game in which the participants "get warmer" as they get closer to the desired location. When the viewer is far away from Manhattan and, ultimately, the World Financial Center; the poster states, "You're cold, definitely cold." As the participants move closer, the posters indicate, "You're getting warmer" while the buildings on the poster are larger. The humor is based on the unexpected reference to a childhood game. The viewers find themselves in an unexpected yet playful relationship with the company before even interacting with it directly.<sup>24</sup> While both Olympia and York's campaign and this project use elements of humor to engage the audience, Olympia and York's campaign served a commercial purpose while my work serves to disrupt. Both projects use the element of relating to people by taking into account their experiences and day-to-day associations and applying the design process as a way to engage, communicate, or disrupt.

### *Surprise as a Tool of Disruption*

Another project that made use of humor is the "God speaks" ad campaign funded by an anonymous person who wanted people to think about God. This billboard campaign, which started appearing in Florida in the late 1990s, personified the voice of God with humorous statements, such as *Don't make me come down there, Well, you did ask for a sign, What part of "Thou shall not..." didn't you understand? and If you must curse, use you own name!* These messages were all signed by "God."<sup>25</sup> The campaign's humor was effective at gaining media and public attention. The "God speaks" billboards are similar to this thesis work in that they give voice to something that does not necessarily have a voice and initiate a relationship with the viewer.

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<sup>24</sup> Steven Heller and Gail Anderson, *Graphic Wit: The Art of Humor in Design* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1991), 140-141.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Reiley, *Moon Florida Gulf Coast* (Berkeley: Avalon Travel, 2008), 367.

They also use humor to facilitate the acceptance of authority (the printed text) and further it by having the authority attributed to God himself. The element of surprise serves to affect and disrupt. This project differs in terms of subject matter and ultimate goal. The messages are not religious, and this campaign is concerned with interaction by asking people to question their own personal thoughts and beliefs. Rather than personifying a supreme voice of authority, this project simply uses the language of authority to disrupt and promote social exchange.



## THESIS WORK

This body of work seeks to provoke thought and social exchange through designed messages in public spaces. It raises questions about social conventions and their role in everyday communication and seeks to disrupt the viewer's thoughts. The goal is to bring about awareness of the social conventions of shared space through graphic interventions while promoting awareness and reflection. The work uses the language of authority to help reach the audience in an engaging and trusting way while using humor to help lower people's defenses and aid in creating an open-ended dialogue.

Text is the main medium of the series. The text serves not only to engage the viewer in conversation but also to give voice to the internal thoughts that may already be in the viewer's mind. The text attempts to transform a monologue into a dialogue with its open-ended, direct, and thought-provoking statements. The tone of the text is casual but direct. This unconventional tone further disrupts by using humor as a means to disarm the viewer and clear the way for reflection. The typeface Helvetica is used for its streamlined, familiar, and neutral style. The ubiquity of the typeface eliminates the added baggage of more distinct typefaces. The design is minimal for the same reason: The context of the work serves as a large part of the message.

The bold color choices add to the disruptive element of the work. The palette for the series employs bright jewel tones. Studies on proxemics have shown that bright colors are captivating and that color can have a major impact on people's comfort level in a given situation.<sup>26</sup> These colors are cheerful and attention-getting—especially when placed in bland public spaces. While the placement of the work helps to blend it into the environment and helps convey its authoritative positioning, the color helps it to stand out and asks viewers to engage with it, resulting in their having to negotiate its purpose and what it is saying and why.

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<sup>26</sup> Mike Sheppard, "Proxemics," University of New Mexico Computer Science, <http://www.cs.unm.edu/~sheppard/proxemics.htm> (accessed August 13 – November 21, 2010).

The use of diagonals also adds to the disruptive influence. According to Interventionist Alex Villar, “An intervention is a diagonal force that bursts through a given field. It can cause a disruption, a shaking up, a rearrangement of plateaus.”<sup>27</sup> This idea of a diagonal disruptive force is literally translated and incorporated into the graphic patterns and symbols used in the work. The diagonal elements reference other visual warning symbols, such as police lines and railway crossings. The viewer is preconditioned to respond to the diagonal pattern, which therefore aids in the overall disruptive feeling of the work.

Art is traditionally displayed within gallery or museum walls, where an expectant audience seeks out the work. Design is traditionally used for commercial purposes and, therefore, usually serves its purpose outside rarified gallery walls. My work, first, resides in the public space where these moments of cruise control exist. Placing this work in everyday environments causes the dynamic of the audience to change, and the importance of time, space, and location of the design work becomes paramount. Placing the work in the public environment allows it to reach a broader audience, consisting of all types of people as opposed to only those who seek a specific type of work in a gallery. Placing the work in the public realm captures an unsuspecting audience.

This body of work was created primarily for display in public. One of the challenges was to situate the work in a gallery space in such a way that it provided the viewer with the experience of the locality in which it was presented. According to Joseph Thompson, Director of MASS MoCA, “Interventionist art does not always sit well in museums, produced, as much as it was, to create situations in the world at large.”<sup>28</sup> To convey the sense of the locality, I used images to help document the public moments and juxtaposed those with the actual work to give the viewer the sense of context. I wanted to display the work in a way that people could bring themselves into the situations. The work and the resulting exhibition are, therefore, meant to be self-reflective, allowing the viewers to reflect on their own awkward everyday moments and rethink how their space is negotiated by themselves and others and vice versa.

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<sup>27</sup>Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 68.

<sup>28</sup>Joseph Thompson, “Foreword,” in *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, by Gregory Sholette (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

## AREAS OF DISRUPTION

### *Elevator*



*Background image photo credit: sflovestory via Flickr Creative Commons, April 28, 2009.*

“Operation Elevator” is the original project that prompted me to think about how design can intervene and ask an audience to question its environment and the influence of conventions. Elevator rides are awkward events in common public space. When strangers are in close proximity, the social norm is to follow certain codes of behavior to avoid contact. As a result, thirty seconds of conversation, eye contact, or a simple acknowledgement of each other’s existence can be awkward.

This project set out to disrupt people’s social cruise control. The goal was to make people aware of the social conventions that guide and control their daily lives or, in this case, the unspoken rules that govern the elevator ride. The individual questioning of one’s interaction within such an intimate yet public space was the main goal. With that in mind, four signs were created and installed in various elevators to challenge riders to “rethink the ride.”

The direct tone of the signs and bold colors served to disrupt the viewers and cause them to question who is speaking to them and why. Branding was left off of this and the subsequent projects to allow ambiguity to enhance the mystery of the message’s source. “Ambiguity often has the power to disturb because it gives the imagination what it needs – an idea free of fixed associations or interpretations.”<sup>29</sup> The signs inherited a certain sense of authority because of their placement on the bare walls of the elevator, leaving viewers questioning who had placed them there and why.

The project was executed in several elevators to test its reaction on the riders. The signs read as follows: *Don’t ignore each other. Make eye contact, It won’t kill you. Is small talk always bad?* and *Do you always follow the rules? (even unspoken ones)*. The casual tone and surprising dialogue used humor to engage the passengers. I rode the elevator numerous times to observe people’s reactions. One elderly gentleman asked his wife why she thought they would put those signs in there. “They” meaning obviously someone of authority put them in there. These questions and reactions only underscored the power of authority in printed matter and people’s uncritical acceptance of the messaging populating their daily environment.

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Howard, “A New Kind of Dialogue,” in *Looking Closer 4*, edited by Michael Beirut, William Drenttel, and Stephen Heller (New York: Allworth Press and The American Institute of Graphic Arts, 2002), 34.

## Public Transit



*Background image photo credit: Mr. T in DC via Flickr Creative Commons, May 23, 2009.*

This project served to disrupt riders of public transit. People everywhere use public transportation to get to work, school, to shop, and so on. They are forced to interact with others along their trip although most are on a personal mission. Research indicates a pattern to the way people interact on public transportation; people will fill the seats in a predetermined way to ensure

the least interaction possible.<sup>30</sup> A person will rarely take the seat next to someone else or directly across from someone if there are others available. People strive to remain in their own personal bubbles as they go about their daily routines. Furthermore, familiarity blurs the background information. They pay little, if any, attention to their surroundings or others around them. They tend to ignore other passengers while using a laptop, talking on a cell phone, or reading a book, making them seem unavailable.

Public transport often features space that contains public service announcements or commercial advertisements. Changing the messaging in the space potentially results in an internal or external dialogue that disrupts the public transit ride. To do so, the ad space was replaced with messages that address the social conventions and unspoken rules of the transit ride. The goal was to engage passengers by causing them to acknowledge the situations around them, rather than just operating on cruise control in their personal bubbles. The bold colors, as well as the direct and dialogical tone of the signs, caused viewers to reflect on the social situations in which they found themselves. A dialogue may have resulted that disrupted the normally solitary activity, transforming it into a social exchange.

The social rules of public transit have many intricacies; people interact due to proximity but not too much due to social conventions. The intricacy of these conventions is addressed through signs telling passengers to *Make eye contact* but *Don't stare*, *Make small talk* but *Don't be nosy*, and so on. According to the research of Jared Thomas, a former doctoral student in psychology at the University of Victoria, “[F]ostering a friendlier atmosphere would improve the ride experience and attract more public transit customers. Something as simple as making eye contact and smiling can relieve tension in a crowded commuter vehicle.”<sup>31</sup> The signs and content served to make the passengers reflect on the social framework and conventions that governed their ride while ultimately serving to disrupt their automated routine and encourage interaction.

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<sup>30</sup> Joan Sweeney, “Elevators – No Talking, No Looking,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1982.

<sup>31</sup> Cristen Conger, “Public Transportation Passengers Avoid Getting Social: Fostering a Socially Accommodating Environment Could Attract More Passengers to Public Transit,” *DiscoveryNews*, <http://news.discovery.com/human/public-transportation-social-interaction.html> (accessed November 21, 2010).

The signs were designed using diagonal elements, bold colors, and large amounts of white space not only to engage the passengers but to further the disruption. The placement of the signs within official spaces helped to blend into the environment while the visual elements helped to make them stand out. This contradiction caused the passengers to question the signs and their ultimate purpose. These signs were installed in the TriRail System in South Florida to test their effects on the riders. When passengers would see me putting up the signs, they would assume that I worked for the authorities because of the placement of the posters as well as the professional polish of the pieces. One gentleman even said he assumed I was a psychologist hired by the transit authority to test a different type of messaging and its effects on the riders. At one point, I was also caught by one of the security officers onboard who, after assessing the situation, decided I must work for some authority and said, "This may help" (referring to the messaging of the signs and their potential beneficial effects on the passengers).

#### *Airplane*







Riding in an airplane subjects an individual to endless possibilities for awkward moments. People are forced to sit incredibly close to strangers and have to disrupt fellow passengers just to go to the bathroom. People are also intimately subjected to others' smells, noises, habits, and so forth. An uncomfortable and awkward aspect of the airplane ride is the lack of personal space. Perhaps the most uncomfortable part of this lack of personal space is the sharing of the armrest. Many unspoken armrest battles have occurred on an airplane: who should get it, how to claim it, how to compromise or share the armrest, and so on. This situation is one of those moments in which there is forced, usually unwanted, interaction between two people with many unspoken rules and thoughts surrounding it.

To address the awkwardness of the situation and to acknowledge its presence, I decided to add messages to the actual armrests on the plane. I wanted not only to make the fellow passengers think about these little battles they engage in but also to give visual form to some suggestions on how to resolve such an issue. The goal was also to bring an element of humor to the situation, opening people up to a potential for interaction. Splitting the armrest in half and labeling it "mine/mine" blatantly reminded people of the fact that it is a shared space, which demanded their attention, required acknowledging the other passenger, and fostered a compromise. The text saying "First one here wins" takes a slightly different approach by



referencing the concept of “survival of the fittest”; whoever grabs it first, gets to use it. I executed the project on three different flights, and in each occurrence, people either chuckled to themselves or commented on the messaging and started talking about all the awkward moments that they encounter. On one of the flights, I was caught applying text to an armrest by a flight attendant. The flight attendant not only asked me to leave the text saying that it was humorous, but also preceded to talk about awkward moments that he encountered in his daily life.

*Urinals (in Public Restrooms)*





Although, for obvious reasons, I personally am not in tune with urinal etiquette, I was reminded countless times of this awkward moment when discussing my thesis with males. While this project focuses on urinal etiquette, I believe the same rules apply for the stalls in a ladies' room as well. When faced with the decision of which urinal or stall to occupy, it would appear to be obvious to allow the most space between people as possible. One would think that this rule would be just as apparent as the unspoken rules of the public bathroom: no talking, no touching, no singing, and no looking. However, apparently, it is not. Apparently, men—and women, at times—pick urinals and stalls that are just a little too close for comfort and ultimately create an extremely awkward forced moment of interaction.

To disrupt the bathroom users as well as address the issue, various signs were placed in local bathrooms in South Florida. The signs read *Every other one*, *Eyes straight ahead*, and *Keep personal space personal*. The signs helped to reiterate the unspoken rules of public restrooms to help alleviate potentially awkward moments. Again, bold colors were used to serve as a disruption and forced people to acknowledge and negotiate the signs' presence. The signs were placed directly above the urinals in public bathrooms so that users could reflect on the social conventions that guide bathroom use while, in fact, using one. The humor in adding such dialogue to the bathroom experience also aids in disrupting the viewer's cruise control while also

potentially initiating an exchange between fellow bathroom goers. The signs were installed in various restrooms throughout Broward County. The feedback I received was that the signs definitely made men aware of the space issues inherent in the bathroom and caused them to think about the numerous awkward moments they've had in public restrooms

### *ATM Machine*





*Background image photo credit: Jeremy Brooks via Flickr Creative Commons, April 9, 2010.*

Withdrawing money from a public ATM machine can be a tense moment when multiple parties are not paying attention to the accepted and unspoken rules regarding proper behavior during such a transaction. Because of the personal and financial nature of depositing or withdrawing money and the risks inherent therein, using a public ATM machine can alienate people from those around them. If people notice someone standing too close when they are using the ATM, they will often times feel paranoid or even give them a look asking them to give them more space. Alternatively, some people will not even attempt such a transaction as long as somebody else is present.

To help alleviate this potentially awkward moment and comment on the personal space issues inherent while attempting an ATM transaction, an area was designated for the ATM user by creating a large semi-circle area of diagonal lines on the floor surrounding the ATM machine. The message *Back off* was placed at the edge of the circle to speak directly to the potential

intruder. The direct, almost offensive, tone of the phrase makes its point while bringing a humorous quality to it. The message seems to be coming from the ATM users themselves rather than a polite message that would seem to be a more appropriate tone coming from a bank. The use of diagonals further enhanced the disruptive nature, making it impossible for people to ignore. The unexpected look and tone aid in the disruption for all parties involved and bring awareness to the situation and those involved. This project was executed at local ATM machines in Broward County. People passing by took notice of the piece and I overheard some discussing awkward moments they've had when withdrawing money.



*Photo credit: Rick McCawley, April 4, 2011.*

## CONCLUSION

My intent for this thesis project was to disrupt people from their cruise control through daily life. Each of the projects were executed in the real world to test their effects on viewers. I used the language of authority and people's uncritical acceptance of it as a way to reach a more receptive and trusting audience. While all reactions were different, each of the projects asked people to question their expectations and become more aware of their surroundings. By researching proxemics, relational aesthetics and the history of disruptive works in art and design, I have a better understanding of how design can ask people to question their surroundings, the messages that populate it, and who is speaking to them and why. The projects contained within this thesis and the resulting reactions have inspired me to explore work that relates to everyday life and that makes people question the social conventions that guide and control their daily life. While many graphic design projects strive to make people interact, not many do so for the pure sake of disruption or contemplation. This thesis explored ways in which design can act as a catalyst for disruption to encourage interaction and possibly spark dialogue. This thesis also explored design's social context and how designer's can use humor and people's own experiences to create a dialogue, rather than a monologue, with their audience.

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