

# Orange Houses and Tape Babies: Temporary and Nebulous Art in Urban Spaces

By Carmen L. McClish

## Abstract

This essay argues that the disruption of the routine ways we engage with our cities is necessary for democratic activity and public participation. Building on research that examines the relationship between public spaces and democratic action, I explore temporary forms of creative street installation as interrupting the marketing pleas that have become the only authorized forms of visual art in our cities. I argue that tactics in urban spaces that are temporary and provide nebulous meanings are necessary to grab our attention and make us linger. I propose that these forms of engagement act in the same way as people performing or playing in public spaces. I specifically employ Yi-Fu Tuan's theoretical notions of space and movement and Margaret Kohn's discussion of the significance of presence in public spaces to examine the creative ways we engage with and experience our cities. I examine two activist/artist projects: Mark Jenkins' tape installations and Detroit Demolition. My analysis of these two sites demonstrates the importance of citizens engaging in their urban spaces. By creating temporary artwork that is nebulous in meaning, activists/artists are interrupting the routine ways we experience our cities.

**Keywords:** Public space, nebulous, urban, street art, temporality, novelty

## Introduction

From hundreds of cyclists crowding the streets to flash mob antics, engagement in urban public spaces has become central to participating in, and modeling, open democratic activity. Cities have notably altered in recent decades, with public space becoming progressively more privatized and controlled. Public spaces are now defined by the corporate, determined by those who pay to persuade, while those who create unauthorized street art or interrupt the flow of the market are increasingly subject to fines and arrest. Given this, those who create public art are required to disappear from the scene. Confronted with a lack of creative alternatives, inspired individuals, or playful gatherings, the options in our day-to-day life are limited to the forty-hour workweek, sanctioned leisure (including shopping), and other capitalist freedoms “of choice.” This isn’t new information. Scholars, activists and artists have been speaking out about advertising clutter, restrictions on public spaces, and civic engagement for many years.<sup>1</sup> What I contribute to this research is further consideration on the relationship between public spaces, novelty and street art. Although there has been discussion on performance and play in public spaces and how it is tied to democratic action, specifically flash mobs or social protest (Perucci 2009; Shepard 2010) there remains less research about citizens taking back public spaces to express themselves through street art.



Photograph 1 – From Mark Jenkins’ “Storker Project.” Author has permission to reprint.

As we travel through urban centers defined by marketing, we have grown accustomed to not seeing these spaces in new or imaginative ways. Everyday life involves routine, and as we move through our cities, we have expectations and our public spaces often conform to those assumptions. We expect billboards and advertisements, public installations of historical figures, graffiti tagging and chain stores. We don't expect to be walking down a sidewalk in Washington D.C. and see a baby caste in scotch tape holding a plastic ball, casually sitting on a street corner (Photograph 1). Nor do we expect to be driving through Detroit and glimpse a dilapidated house painted in a cheery orange (Photograph 2).<sup>2</sup> This type of engagement is not only unusual, it is also nebulous, temporary, and doesn't require artistic talent to create.



Photograph 2 – Object Orange's Detroit Demolition Project. Courtesy Paul Kotula Projects, Ferndale, MI. Author has permission to reprint.

This essay examines the relationship between nebulous public “art,” those moments that may startle us or force us to reengage in our urban spaces, and the participation it may invoke. By being creative in our city streets, we are practicing democracy and this is central to both our happiness and health as individuals as well as issues of cultural change.<sup>3</sup> By “art,” I do assume that not necessarily would these types of engagement be read as art in the traditional sense, however, this creativity provides something interesting in our urban spaces.<sup>4</sup> I analyze two different forms of democratic engagement—the tape installations of Mark Jenkins and the Detroit Demolition project. Jenkins' tape installations involve casting objects in transparent tape, and placing them in urban settings with the goal to surprise passersby, inviting reflection, conversation, and occasionally copycat antics.

Marc Schiller of the Wooster Collective claims Jenkins' art will "pull you out of that zombielike experience that all of us have in our cities" (Quinlan 2006: par. 7). The group, Object Orange's project Detroit Demolition Disneyland began as a commentary on the lack of attention by the city of Detroit to the decaying architecture that is scattered around the city (Photograph 3). The tactic of painting these crumbling buildings bright orange has resulted in the city tearing them down more hastily, something that the group had not predicted when they began this project. Stephen Zacks asserts, "If nothing else Object Orange has produced a new typology for site-specific art installations: art as a possible agent of demolition" (2006: par. 5). Jenkins' installations have been photographed across and outside the U.S. and Object Orange's project Detroit Demolition has been discussed as providing a model for other cities dealing with urban decay. These sites are not only temporary and nebulous but are simple, not requiring artistic talent to create and thus encouraging public participation. I specifically chose Object Orange's project and Mark Jenkins installations as neither requires artistic skill, most of us can paint, or caste an object in scotch tape. Thus, whether other citizens chose to copy cat these projects or are inspired to create their own street art, public participation is encouraged.



Photograph 3 – Object Orange's Detroit Demolition Project. Courtesy Paul Kotula Projects, Ferndale, MI. Author has permission to reprint

The interruption of routine in our everyday lives is significant. David Pinder argues that these forms of engagement include, “telling stories about cities ... ways of sensing, feeling, and experiencing [these] spaces differently ... contesting ‘proper’ orderings of space to allow for something ‘other’ to emerge” (2005: 386-387). Tony Perucci contends that moments that require meaning making “enact interruption, event, confrontation, and bafflement as a form of direct action” (2009: 1). He posits that these types of “ruptural performances” disrupt the habitual ways we engage in everyday life. I argue that forms of public installations that are nebulous in meaning act in the same way as startling public performances. That is, a flash mob activity in Grand Central Station provides a similar break from our routine as a giraffe constructed entirely out of scotch tape precariously eating trash out of a tree on a Washington D.C. corner (Photograph 4).



Photograph 4 – Mark Jenkins’ Street Art. Author has permission to reprint.

Temporary public art grabs our attention, if these artworks invoke curiosity we may then linger, questioning what we see. This provides the opportunity to envision our everyday environment in new ways. This is not inconsequential; there is a direct relationship between aesthetics and democracy. I understand that our participation in culture is centered in our freedom to be creative, if the only form of public art is advertising, and if we are limited in what we can create in our cities, our civic participation is being restricted. That is, the consequence of “a polity that degrades or ignores the aesthetic” is not a “degradation of the concept of freedom, but also a reduction in actual freedom” (Docherty 2006: x). By examining Jenkins’ tape installations and Detroit Demolition, I demonstrate the significance of urban art as temporary, nebulous, and accessible to the general public. Before discussing Pinder and Perucci’s analysis in terms of my own, a more thorough overview of space, place, time, and public space is necessary. Through the argument posed by Margaret Kohn that public spaces require *presence* and the notion of the relationship between space and *movement* as outlined by Yi-Fu Tuan, I analyze two different sites of temporary nebulous public street art.

### **Presence in Public Spaces**

Until recently public space has often been discussed in terms of argument. Margaret Kohn contends that democratic theorists have specifically focused on “the value of speech rather than the importance of space” resulting in the public sphere as “an abstraction” (2004: 80). A good example of this is the notion of Deliberative Democracy, which is built on Jürgen Habermas’s Ideal Speech Situation. Deliberative Democracy understands the public sphere as based in arguments that are sincere, truthful, and based in the desire for mutual understanding. Kohn posits public space as not about *argument* but about *presence*. She employs the example of a homeless person: “They do not convince us by their arguments. Rather, their presence conveys a powerful message. They reveal the rough edges of our shiny surfaces” (2004: 81). The presence of something new disrupts city spaces that are restricted and structured around calls to consume. The presence of anything unfamiliar within increasingly controlled public spaces provides a valuable way to reevaluate the possibilities of engaging in the public. The homeless as a presence in public spaces is significant not only in “revealing the rough edges” but also in the fact the homeless occupy space as a place. The meaning the homeless have of where they “live” creates what we consider space as place, according to Yi-Fu Tuan.

Tuan’s research on the differences between space, place and time is helpful in identifying why public spaces are significant to us as individuals and as a culture, specifically through his focus on space, place and *movement*.<sup>5</sup> Given my interest here in how these projects may interrupt routine ways we experience our cities, the idea of movement is central. These ideas are not only important in understand-

ing the relationship between how we move between the familiar places of our lives to the potentially more open-ended possibilities of public spaces but also demonstrates our relationship with novelty and routine. Space is understood by Tuan as “a common symbol of freedom in the Western world” (1977: 54). We have a sense of space because we can move; place however is a “pause in movement” (138). Thus, “space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning” (136). Tuan argues, “human beings require both space and place” (54) in that we want to move from the security of our homes to the uncertainty of public spaces. Thus, to return to the example of the homeless person, public spaces then act as both space and place for them. The line becomes blurred, as the security of place is often lost as the homeless person is chased by law enforcement from one public space to the next.

The relationship between aesthetics and democracy is reflected in freedom and space, specifically “having the power and enough room to act” (Tuan 1977: 52). Tuan’s analysis frames space as freedom, place as “a calm center of established values,” and time as “recurrent phases of tension and ease” (118). Space does suggest the future, and uncertainty and surprise are characteristics of the future. He suggests that what will provoke us to reflect on experiences we have are those events that are “untoward” (131). The pull between tension and ease is “the movement that gives us a sense of space is itself the resolution of tension. When we stretch our limbs we experience space and time simultaneously – space as the sphere of freedom from physical constraint and time as duration in which tension is followed by ease” (118). Routine is not celebrated. Our significant experiences lie in the “potential for surprise” that are “characteristics of the future and contribute to a sense of the future” (127). Both Jenkins and Object Orange can be read as commenting on the future, as being “untoward” or surprising, and as having that uncertainty and creativity that should center urban spaces. I am not assuming that the interruption of routine by either Jenkins or Object Orange is always pleasant (Jenkins’ tape creatures could be read as more trash along the cityscape. Detroit Demolition could be seen as drawing more negative attention to an embarrassing issue for the citizens of Detroit). Whether the response is positive or negative, though, it does interrupt the routine ways we experience our cities, and whether the reception is positive or negative, both of the projects are “nebulous.”

Object Orange paints decaying abandoned houses bright orange to create something interesting out of something ugly. Jenkins’ has stated that his tape casting work is a reaction to the only visual content of cities being “updated” with any frequency – advertising. He, however, also positions his tape creatures on public monuments, as he understands that “authorized” public installations are also “dead” or static. I understand both of these projects, with diverse agendas and aesthetics, as “strangeness in the commonplace” (Thrift 2004: 53) and “producing some degree of free play in apparently rigid social systems” (43), as Nigel Thrift argues are the basis for Michel de Certeau’s tactics. For Jenkins, hanging a tape

installation involves being a disappearing rebel, which is also a tactic of the group, Object Orange. Given the prevailing philosophy that all public spaces are bought and sold, those who engage in their cities must use the tactic of getting in and out quickly to avoid the possibility of citations and arrest. I am generally employing the term tactic as that which, “is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep” (de Certeau 1984: xix). Jenkins and Object Orange don’t keep what they win but what is central to both of these activities is their impermanence and nebulous.

## **Tape Babies**

To create tape installations, Jenkins casts baby dolls, stuffed giraffes, ducks and other objects in transparent packing tape. He provides directions on how to make your own tape sculptures by wrapping an item in cling wrap, covering the cling-wrapped object in packing tape, releasing the object inside by using a box knife or scissors, and then finally taping the shell back together (Jenkins 2008). Jenkins started creating his tape art with the goal to surprise urban dwellers and to offer a critique of static public spaces, both in terms of advertising but also as a commentary on permanent public installations. His project has inspired copycat works by teenagers and graduate students, as well as art teachers in Kansas and Long Island who have employed tape casting in their classes (Quinlan 2006). Jenkins states that the value of street art is to stimulate the environment, noting:

The only visual content that’s updated with any real frequency is commercial advertising spaces. This is why the ephemeral nature of street art is so essential – because it creates a visual heartbeat in the city by people who are living in it, rather than just marketing to it. But what does the city do with these works? They remove them as quickly as possible and threaten to put the people who make them in jail. (Sudbanthad 2006: par. 19)

Jenkins’ tape pranks “come at you out of nowhere one day when you’re walking down the street” (par. 18). The impact of this moment can be seen in the many photos revealing passersby reactions to his tape art – reactions ranging from curiosity and reaching out to touch the object, to laughter and conversation (Photograph 5). Jenkins understands his street art as more about “anarchy in the collective sense” than democratic action per se. He states that the goal of his installations are to play with “social conventions” (Jenkins 2010).



Photograph 5 – Mark Jenkins’ Street Art, “Meter Pops.” Author has permission to reprint.

On an excursion to hang a couple of tape babies in Franklin Park in Washington, Jenkins recalls a confrontation he had with a homeless man. At first this man was angry with Jenkins being in “his space,” as this area is often a camping ground for the homeless, later the conversation turned to the tape sculptures. After an extended conversation, the man determined that Jenkins must want a wife and family (and this is why he chose to make and hang these tape babies). At this juncture, Jenkins offered the installation up for critique, and the homeless man proposed that they needed to be facing each other, like brothers. Jenkins states of the experience: “we ended up leaving on good terms, handshakes and even a hug. I offered him a couple bucks but he refused, and leaving, he said, ‘let no man scare you from what you love,’ and he pointed to the babies” (Sudbanthad 2006: par. 12-

13). Whether or not this homeless man's interpretation of why Jenkins was creating and hanging tape babies was accurate (Jenkins states it is not), the more interesting point is that the nebulous nature of these installations allowed this conversation to occur, which provided both an unexpected moment for the homeless man and for Jenkins. However, if the homeless man had encountered the tape babies after Jenkins had left the scene, he would be left to contemplate this on his own. Either way this would be a meaning-making opportunity. <sup>6</sup> Tuan's discussion of space and place is important here. Most of us wouldn't be outraged if we found someone hanging a sculpture in a public area. However, if we came home and Jenkins' was winding a tape baby around the front door of our house, our reaction would probably be quite different. We expect our "places," such as home to be stable, well defined and routine. The importance of public spaces is that they don't have these characteristics. We need to move between the routine and the novel. Of course, when you are homeless and the street is your place and space, your security and sense of entitlement shifts.

The implication of unauthorized public art is the possibility of "being nudged slightly more awake" (Pinder 2005: 393), which may cause "initial bewilderment" and then "enjoying the moment" or not enjoying the public art, either reaction is still an interruption of habitual experiences of our cities (383). Jenkins' tape installations, such as his tape babies or his "meter pops" do this, they require passersby question these activities and provide a moment of possibly seeing Washington D.C. in new ways. Jenkins argues that living in Washington is the perfect environment for tape interference because the city is "sterile – dead." Jenkins contrasts his pieces to institutionally authorized public art, stating:

I think memorials, monuments, and other publicly commissioned sculptures, for the most part, just sit there. It seems to me their purpose is to last and last, forcing the city with them into the past instead of the present or future. I sometimes interface my pieces with these types of sculptures just to sort of rejuvenate them back to the present. (Sudbanthad 2006: par. 18)

Jenkins claims that after the unveiling of authorized art it soon becomes "familiar and loses the punch" (par. 18). Tape installations have appeared in all sorts of urban and rural settings, from West Virginia to New York City to Rio de Janeiro, gracing billboards, hanging from old buildings, or adorning sanctioned public sculptures. They cling to traffic signs and old statues, play with trash in alleys, and have even been seen riding atop taxis. Recently Jenkins' street art has appeared in museums, he states that moving his installations into a gallery is,

just a place to sell stuff or show it off like butterflies dead and pinned. Of course you could buy the work and put it on the street yourself, so it still does have that same potential energy. But whereas putting something on the street that takes me three days to make is much different than paying five or ten thousand dollars a piece and doing the same. (Jenkins 2010)

Jenkins' photographs some of the reactions to his installations and these recordings show moments of meaning making. In urban environments that are in the

service of commerce, to be jostled by something as odd as a tape baby holding onto a street sign is a reason to stop and question: Why? Who would create a tape baby? What's the point?

## Orange Houses

While tape installations provide unusual moments of interruption, Object Orange's project disturbs the visual horizon of decaying architecture with an almost comical, almost beautiful bright orange house. Detroit Demolition, like Jenkins' installations, presents that moment of "initial bewilderment," which provides a disruption of our routine as we move through our cities.

Detroit Demolition is an urban renewal project aimed at bringing attention to the many abandoned, decaying houses in Detroit – a shrinking city long marked by "white flight," urban sprawl, and consequently abandoned buildings in various states of decay. Jerry Herron describes the relationship to Detroit as the humiliation of history: "The most historically representative city in America: the one place that everybody can agree on by agreeing they no longer want any part of it" (1993: 13). But not everyone has abandoned Detroit. Object Orange's project demonstrates that citizens in Detroit are demanding more of their politicians and are involved in rebuilding their city.

In Detroit, city workers mark abandoned houses scattered throughout the city with an orange "D" for demolition. But despite these markings, many of these houses have sat in their deteriorating states for many years. Activists have addressed this situation by painting these homes "Tiggeriffic Orange," a color from the Home Depot Mickey Mouse series. Every square inch of the exterior is covered in the bright orange paint. After two of four houses that were painted were quickly torn down, an anonymous Object Orange participant wrote an article posted on *The Detroitier*:

From one perspective, our actions have created a direct cause and effect relationship with the city. As in, if we paint the house orange, the city will demolish it. In this relationship, where do the city's motivations lie? Do they want to stop drawing attention to these houses? Are the workers simply confused and think this is the city's new mark for demolition? Or is this a genuine response to beautify the city? (2006: par. 6)

Object Orange also contends that this is not a simple gesture of merely identifying the decaying houses to urge the city to tear them down. The bright orange paint "highlights within the context of depression; every detail is accentuated through the unification of color. Broken windows become jagged lines. Peeling paint becomes texture. Such features are artworks in themselves" (par. 9). Detroit Demolition follows other trends of art as architecture. For instance, Gordon Matta-Clark in the 1970s focused on architecture and decay and is best known for his radical physical cuts through architectural forms (such as splitting a house in half, entitled "Splitting," 1974) (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1992). Another example is Kate

Ericson and Mel Ziegler's exhibition entitled "Camouflaged History." These artists painted a house in South Carolina in camouflage, giving specific names for each color: "names such as 'Moorish maroon red' and 'Confederate uniform grey' evoked venerated and at times problematic chapters in the city's history" (Tang at Skidmore 1991).

However, unlike these previous projects that were celebrated as art in the traditional sense, the Detroit Demolition project is centered on bringing direct attention to urban decay in Detroit while creating a temporary colorful mosaic that is outside of the formal structure of the art world. Tuan's notions of the relationship between space and place are helpful here. When we think of place, and in Tuan's discussion of it, we understand place as this well-defined part of our lives and our home is often what this invokes. Place is routine. Place is also where we express ourselves. Our homes are an extension of who we are, from the furniture, and the interior to the exterior: Do we have plants outside? Wind chimes? Are their tables and chairs? A barbeque? Flower gardens? Place is important and our homes are central to how we understand ourselves and who we are. To see abandoned houses, collapsing and worn, along the streets of Detroit has a ghostly quality to it. Who lived in these houses? Where are they now? To paint this crumbling architecture bright orange adds another layers onto this. If we are used to seeing these homes falling apart, now we must ask, why paint them orange? What is the point?

Detroit Demolition is not the first project to tackle the issue of urban blight in Detroit. In the 1980s, Tyree Guyton decorated dilapidated houses in the East side of Detroit. Using painted polka dots, old dolls, toilets, tires, and other found objects; Guyton brought enough public attention and traffic to these houses that the drug dealers and prostitutes who frequented Heidelberg Street were initially frightened off. However, despite these early positive results, Guyton has been ticketed for littering and many of his projects have been torn down because they were deemed eyesores by the city (Guyton 2007). Herron argues that Guyton's projects are "not so much reassuring as they are disturbing. It is impossible to look at the Heidelberg Project and not imagine that something terrible has happened to cause this explosion of physical deformity" (1993: 199). The key difference between the Heidelberg Project and Detroit Demolition is that Guyton's mission centers on keeping his public art standing as a comment on urban decay, while activists participating in Object Orange were thrilled to have their painted works torn down. Detroit Demolition is creating a stir in other cities that have similar problems of decaying houses littering their landscape. A blog entry from a citizen in Maine, excitedly asks, "Could Portland be next" ([agent-orange.blogspot](http://agent-orange.blogspot.com))?

## Temporary and Nebulous

Tape art is temporary because curious passersby will take the installation or city-cleaning crews will discard. Abandoned houses painted by Object Orange are often torn down. Whether it be to break up the city spaces with temporary tape installations, or to clean up urban decay with temporary orange art, the impermanent is necessary; if we see it every day unchanging, we tend not to “see it.” The quick response in removing public art requires that the activist or artist begin to understand their work as impermanent. Within de Certeau’s notion of tactics, we should recognize these moments as centered in our use of time. The significance of de Certeau’s notion of tactics is tied to presence and how presence involves transforming public spaces, biding your time to strike, and getting out quickly and anonymously. He argues that tactics are “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ ... clever tricks [or] knowing how to get away with things” and are, by their very nature temporary in that “what they win they do not keep” (1984: xix).

The importance of the temporary can be demonstrated by comparing Tyree Guyton’s mission in Detroit to that of the Object Orange project. Although they both are involved in bringing attention to the urban blight of Detroit, their works evoke different responses. My contrast of the two is not intended to discourage Guyton’s project but simply to compare his more stable works with temporary art. The major difference between these two projects is Guyton’s desire that his colorful transformations of these dilapidated houses remain permanent while Detroit Demolition hopes that by painting these decaying homes orange they will bring attention to this problem. As a permanent piece of colorful abstraction, Guyton’s work begs the question of whether or not his work will become, or has become, part of the urban clutter. Maybe Jenkins will hang a tape baby on one of Guyton’s projects to revive it, as he has done on other permanent art installations?

Those who wish to create city spaces that encourage community involvement and creativity, also recognize the need for novelty. Pinder discusses this phenomenon in terms of “initial bewilderment” brought about by something surprising in public spaces. He argues, “through street art and other interventions, its members seek to exploit opportunities for play and subversion as they interact with the city’s spaces” (Pinder 2005: 385). The activist group, Swoon Union, claim that they were attempting to create play in New York City by staging a pirate radio broadcast, street events, and birthday parties on the subway. Swoon Union don’t consider their activities political. However, after harassment by law enforcement about their public activities, they state “we do not consider ourselves a political group but when you do the kind of work that we have been doing, you discover pretty quickly that you are working in direct opposition to American capitalism, and that has a politics all its own” (Pinder 2005: 399). These tactics, or these “creative forms of productive mischief” (385), contests what are “proper orderings of space” and by doing this something novel emerges (387). This is telling another story of the city.

The idea that modern life is “boring, and therefore *wrong*” (Marcus 2002: 2 emphasis author’s) and as citizens we must create our own moments of play and creativity to combat capitalist culture has influenced culture jamming, flash mobs, and street art. The creativity we bring to our urban centers is telling another story of the city. These notions are based in the writing and art of the Situationist International. The Situationist movement was established in 1957, was declared dead by 1972, never held more than twenty members at any given time (mostly young students), with their subversive activities not extending beyond Paris, Amsterdam and Brussels (Ford 2005; Merrified 2000). However, despite the Situationist movement’s short life, limited participation, and restricted geography, the ideas expressed have been widely influential. Their criticism centered on “modern life as boring,” due to the “spectacle” which has “colonized” not just media, architecture, but everyday life (Merrifield 2000). Pinder and Perucci both borrow from the Situationists for their analysis. Specifically, Perucci argues that ruptural performances “obverse” Debord’s “spectacle” (2009: 2). That is, these moments are outside the spectacle created by consumer culture and capitalism, thus they act as an interruption of this dominant ideology, where “the commodity completes its colonization of everyday life” (2). Pinder employs Debord’s notions of psycho-geography, arguing that “geographic environment” alters the “emotions and behavior of individuals” (2005: 386). Central to this is the playful qualities of a city or the “exploring or experiencing the physical landscape in new ways” (391), which can lead to more permanent social changes. Pinder argues the significance of novelty in public spaces is that they offer “awareness, being nudged slightly more awake, [this is] the first step towards changing our culture” (393). Comparable to Perucci’s analysis, Pinder offers moments of public performances as this interruption. Perucci compliments Pinder’s analysis and goes further to argue that these novel moments are “ruptural performances.”

Ruptural performances are interruptive; they “halt, impede, or delay the habitual practices of everyday life” (Perucci 2009: 5). These moments make us “present to the present” (9) and are often “baffling and confounding” in that they do not demonstrate a clear purpose, political or otherwise (14). Both tape installations and Detroit Demolition interrupt the habitual ways we engage in public spaces. They do this by being new and unfamiliar in a city environment we may have begun to experience in mundane ways. A tape giraffe strategically placed or an orange house on the horizon is unexpected and new, this gives us pause and with this we are “present in the present.” The nebulous nature of both of these projects is why they are “startling” or “baffling and confounding.” They do not clearly offer a message. Given this, the passersby must linger and make meaning of what they have just seen. For example, Jenkins’ confrontation and conversation with a homeless man about his tape babies demonstrate how nebulous art can provide meaning making opportunities. The confrontation, conversation, and reconciliation in regards to the homeless man’s understanding of Jenkins’ work is sig-

nificant. The homeless man stopped, first became confrontational about what Jenkins was doing, then he made his own meaning out of the nebulous tape baby by seeing Jenkins artwork as reflecting his desire for a family. Jenkins, in turn, did not contradict this interpretation of his work and welcomed the man's advice on how to hang the tape babies facing each other "like brothers." This moment interrupted the habitual space of this man who frequented this area of the city; it forced him to engage with the present because the artwork was new and not easily definable. However, this moment could have also taken place if the homeless man encountered the tape babies and Jenkins wasn't there, only rather than conversation he would have been forced to make sense of it on his own. What is important is that we are compelled to make meaning of moments in which the intention is unclear.

For a passerby, who is walking or driving through their city to stop and touch a tape "meter pop," or to glimpse an orange house along the horizon in Detroit, the potential lies in the questions: Why? Who? What for? With these questions arises an opportunity – perhaps simply to rethink public spaces, to contemplate the freedom that was practiced by the activist, or to consider a newfound motivation to take part in an ongoing artistic project or create one of our own; the opportunity to engage in our cities. The significance of "strangeness in the commonplace" is that we are offered the possibility to understand our freedom as citizens (Thrift 2004: 3).

## **Conclusion**

Unexpected street art disrupts the conventional spaces of commerce, which have come to define public spaces. Urban spaces that encourage community sentiments have become increasingly limited, and with this, the predictability of our cities as defined by marketing often results in us moving through these spaces habitually. Encounters with novelty in public spaces that have become static, commercial, and unimaginative offer the opportunity of bringing about a moment of reflection. Such moments hold the potential for change. They may startle or rattle us, moving us momentarily away from our routines by suggesting possibilities for other ways of living. The potential to engage in beautifying one's community is part of the freedom of being a citizen, simply creating a silly statement or something interesting is a disruption of the landscape that is swathed with marketing pleas, or scarred by urban blight, or stoic and uncompromising against community involvement.

The act of having to determine the meaning of street art presents possibilities to experience cities in new ways, to realize one's own freedom or lack of it by those who have created an unpredictable artwork. Obviously if the public art is decisively ambiguous to concretely define the meaning of the moment becomes antithetical. This can be discussed in lieu of Christine Harold's research on pranks. She defines pranks as a "stylistic exaggeration [that] interrupts conventional pat-

terns” (2004: 196), stating that it is imperative that we investigate more elusive forms of playful protest despite the problems of direct or rational *translation*. In examining the role of nebulous moments as interrupting the expected we should consider the slippery proposition of less politically obvious forms of activism, despite their difficult translation. Harold contends, "One might even argue that such translations dilute the rhetorical power pranks have to confuse and provoke. Thus, attaching an explicit argument, that is making a prank make sense, may undermine what is unique about pranking's signifying rhetoric in the first place" (207). Harold's contention is significant to the potential and limitations of my analysis. Thus, although my examination of Jenkins' installations, and Object Orange's Detroit Demolition project requires specific determinations of the significance of their tactics, I am cautious about attempting to explicitly define these public artworks that are powerful because they are nebulous. The *presence* of Jenkins' tape installations and Detroit Demolition create moments that are significant in that they are temporary – thus gain the attention of the public, and offer ambiguous messages – thus require contemplation from the passerby. This provides moments that “reveal the rough edges of our shiny surfaces,” interrupt our habitual interactions with others and our urban environment, and require us to engage with our cities (Kohn 2004: 81). Although these tactics are centered in public space these installations do not occupy this space for a definitive amount of time.

The importance of creating disorder, of unsettling the routines of our lives, is vital for our growth as individuals and as a society. Activists and artists that create temporary street art undermine the authority of the behavioral habits and social conventions that have begun to define public spaces as simply canvases for advertisements. Their creations are innovative, sometimes funny or odd; they command our attention, even more so if they can also offer direct participation from the public, with the assumption that anyone can create.

Democracy requires creative reinvestment, and this includes the understanding that public spaces need to be compelling, entertaining, and open to participation. A visual field composed of marketing, urban decay, and lack of community spaces limits how we understand our communities and ourselves. As Jenkins contends our engagement with our urban spaces is essential because our cities are “sterile-dead” (Sudbanthad 2006: par. 18). Cities should invoke community participation and one significant way that we can begin to transform urban spaces is through street art that provides ambiguous and temporary moments for citizens to witness and participate in a cultural event. The meaning making that centers nebulous forms of public art is necessary in creating new opportunities to rethink our freedom as citizens. Artists and activists today are offering playful tactics – be it tape babies or orange houses – these public artworks create the “visual heartbeat” of the city.<sup>7</sup>

**Dr. Carmen L. McClish** is an Independent Scholar, and graduate from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst with a degree in Communication. Her area of research is cultural studies – specifically "performance studies, new media and visual culture. Dr. McClish is currently writing a book about play in public and corporate spaces. E-mail: [cmclish@gmail.com](mailto:cmclish@gmail.com)

## Notes

- 1 A short list of the more popular scholars on this issue: David Harvey, Naomi Klein, Robert McChesney, Mark Crispin Miller, Steve Pile, and Michael Sorkin. Artists and activists who have spoken out on issues of democratic action, public space and advertising clutter are too numerous to name.
- 2 I am purposely using the terms of walking and driving here. Nigel Thrift's "Driving the City" problematizes de Certeau's discussion of "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Thrift argues against de Certeau's "romantic" and limited view of experiencing the city through walking. He argues that "the world of driving [is] as rich and convoluted as that of walking" (45). Thrift claims that "driving (and passengering) [as] both profoundly embodied and sensory experiences" (46). Building on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Thrift centers his argument on the technological changes that have created a "humanized car" alongside an "auto-mobilized person" (47). In this essay, I am assuming our routine ways of experiencing our cities can be considered through walking, driving, public transit, bicycling, or whatever our mode of transportation in which we experience our cities.
- 3 I am basing this statement on research given: 1) The over-consumption of many Americans and how that is making us both unhealthy and unhappy, this is based in the research of Peter Whybrow in his book *American Mania: When More is Not Enough*. And a large random survey of Americans distributed in 2004 that found that fifty percent more people felt more isolated and alone than the previous survey done in 1985. Published by Shankar Vedantam, for the *Washington Post*, and Henry Fountain for *The New York Times*. 3) Celebrated scholars, such as Erich Fromm, Henry Marcuse, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who have argued for decades that capitalist culture does not lend itself to democratic action and that our engagement as citizens is significant to freedom and happiness. Erich Fromm's 1941 analysis of the relationship between modern culture and happiness, or "Automaton Conformity," in which he argues that we become absorbed within mass culture and capitalism and assume that because we know what we need to wear, eat, and buy to fit in that we are "happy." Herbert Marcuse in 1964 argued that alienation in modern culture is "so pervasive that the sense of alienation as an ongoing process has vanished" and now "people realize themselves in their commodities" (Sagi: 21). Csikszentmihalyi stated in 1975 that Western civilization in its current manifestation is not about happiness but about consumption. He sees happiness, as presented to Americans, as being equivalent to what we own. Our very limited free time is structured as leisure that "reflects patterns of consumption and has nothing to say about personal satisfaction" (197). In research that Csikszentmihalyi conducted in 1975, he asked participants to avoid any engagement in an activity that was outside of the practical, means-to-an-end events that we are all required to engage in (this included individual "unpractical activities" such as day-dreaming). The results of this research were that participants felt more depressed, exhausted, and otherwise unhealthy. Most play theorists argue that play is not only necessary for a creative and healthy democracy but also a healthy individual. Aside from Csikszentmihalyi, Victor Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, D.W. Winnicott in *Playing and Reality*, and other anthropologists and psychologists who have studied play have discussed this at length.
- 4 Throughout this essay I will use "street art", "public art", or the term "artworks" to describe the engagement of Object Orange and Mark Jenkins. I am using the term art loosely. Because

Jenkins creates installation pieces for public forums, and given that Object Orange transforms decaying houses into bright orange installations, I am employing the term to separate this type of “engagement” from those who interrupt the routines of our the experiences of our urban centers by performing. Albeit temporary, both of the activist/artists I analyze are creating an actual form of “public art”.

- 5 There are critiques of the dichotomy between time/space/place. Most notably by Doreen Massey. In *For Space* Massey argues that Tuan’s research proposes that “space is more abstract than place” (183). She is also critical of de Certeau’s notions of tactics/strategies. Given that Massey’s research centers on the relationship of space (and time) in terms of globalization and shifting identities, her critique of Tuan and de Certeau is understandable as neither of these scholars provide trajectories that are easily transcribed to discussing issues of globalization, shifting borders, social inequalities, specifically in terms of how we understand our individual identity. However, for the purposes of studying public spaces as material spaces that we occupy, usually in terms of physical movement (moving through space from place to place), and given that these public spaces are becoming increasingly regulated and static, Tuan’s notion of movement alongside Kohn’s focus on presence provide an important and interesting approach to examine how nebulous and temporary artworks interrupt our routine experiences of public spaces. In terms of the application of Massey’s research to understanding the relationship of space to identity and globalization, see Sanae Elmoudden’s “Crossing and Passing: Discursive Borders in Off shoring.” Elmoudden ethnographic based research is a fascinating analysis of the intersection of physical borders and “discursive borders” in terms of “metaphorical space.” Her research demonstrates the “diverse and creative ways that members, forced by collapsing borders of globalization, negotiate their spaces and hence their identities” (67).
- 6 Throughout this essay, I am using the term “meaning making” in terms of the research of Stuart Hall. That is, I understand meaning making as a process, meaning as not fixed, nor centered in the sender of the message, and the audience is not passive in their reception. I assume that messages “sent” are not transparent or obvious and can be read in multiple ways. See Stuart Hall’s article “Encoding and Decoding” in *Culture, Media, Language*.
- 7 Jenkins’ quote from Sudbanthad’s interview in 2006, *The Morning News*, par. 19.

## References

- Agent Orange Blog (2008): <http://livefromapt.blogspot.com/2008/04/agent-orange.html>
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1975): *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games*, San Francisco, Washington and London: Jossey- Bass Publishers.
- De Certeau, Michel (1984): *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Detroit Demolition Disneyland (2006): “Detroit Demolition Disneyland: A Project”, *The Detroitter*, Available: [www.thedetroitter.com/nov05/disneydemolition.php](http://www.thedetroitter.com/nov05/disneydemolition.php) (10/11/24).
- Docherty, Thomas (2006): *Aesthetic Democracy*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Elmoudden, Sanae (2009): “Crossing and Passing: Discursive Borders in Off Shoring”, *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, 2009:1, 66-88.
- Ford, Simon (2005): *The Situationist International: A User’s Guide*, London: Black Dog Publishing.
- Fountain, Henry (2006, July 2): “The Lonely American Just Got a Bit Lonelier”, *The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/weekinreview/02fountain.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/weekinreview/02fountain.html) (10/11/24).
- Fromm, Erich (1969/1941): *Escape From Freedom*, New York, Avon Publishers.

- Guyton, Tyree (2007): *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Hall, Stuart (1981) "Encoding And Decoding in The TV Discourse", Stuart Hall et al., (ed.): *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson.
- Harold, Christine (2004): "Pranking Rhetoric: "Culture Jamming" as Media Activism", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 21:3, 189–211.
- Herron, Jerry (1993): *Afterculture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History*, Detroit: Wayne University Press.
- Jenkins, Mark. Street Artist. *Personal Communication*, August 3, 2010.
- Jenkins, Mark (2008): "Tape Sculpture DIY", *Tape Sculpture*. <http://tapesculpture.org> (08/02/01).
- Kohn, Margaret (2004): *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Marcus, Greil (1989): "Guy Debord's Memoirs: A Situationist Primer", Elisabeth Sussman (ed.): , Goldsmiths College, *Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: MIT Press.
- Massey, Doreen (2005): *For Space*, London: Sage.
- Merrified, Andy "Review of the book *The Situationist City*", *Harvard Design Magazine*, 2000: 12.
- Metropolitan Museum of Art (1992): "Gordon Matta-Clark: Splitting", *Metropolitan Museum of Art: Timeline of Art History*, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bola/ho\\_1992.5067.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bola/ho_1992.5067.htm) (08/02/01)
- Perucci, Tony (2009): "What the Fuck is That? The Poetics of Ruptural Performance", *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 5:3.
- Pinder, David (2005): "Arts of Urban Exploration", *Cultural Geographies*, 12, 383–411.
- Quinlan, Adriane (2006, July 23): "That's Mark Jenkins All Over", *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/07/21/AR2006072100286.html> (08/02/01).
- Sagi, Avi (2002): *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- Shepard, Benjamin (2010): *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Sudbanthad, Pitchaya (2006): "Let No Man Scare You", *The Morning News*, 30/3 2006, [www.themorningnews.org/archives/galleries/let\\_no\\_man\\_scare\\_you](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/galleries/let_no_man_scare_you) (10/11/24).
- Tang at Skidmore (1991): From the exhibition *Camouflaged History: America Starts Here: Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler*, Tang Museum, October 1 – December 30, 2005. Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina, <http://tangskidmore.edu/4/exhibitions/show/381/doc/533> .
- Thrift, Nigel (2004): "Driving in the City", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21:4/5, 41–59.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu (1977): *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Turner, Victor (1982): "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology", V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ.
- Vedantam, Shankar (2006): "Social Isolation Growing in U.S., Study Says" *Washington Post*, 23/6 2006, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06) .
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971): *Playing and Reality*, New York: Basic Books.
- Wooster Collective (2006): Wooster Collective: How To. *Wooster Collective: A Celebration of Street Art*. Available: [www.woostercollective.org/howto](http://www.woostercollective.org/howto) (10/11/24).
- Zacks, Stephen (2006): "Orange Alert: Detroit Artists Use Color to Draw Attention to Urban Blight" *MetropolisMag*, 15/5 2006, <http://www.metropolismag.com/cda/story.php?artid=1966n> (08/05/30).