MATERIALITY | IMMATERIALITY

PUBLIC SPACE AS WORKSPACE

GREIG DE PEUTER

In the age of Google Maps, HDcctv, and #occupyeverything, it is difficult to neatly disentangle physical and digital dimensions of public space, where the "physical" broadly references the bodies that assemble in public spaces and the (natural or synthetic) material forms that constitute such spaces, and the "digital" signals a mix of computing devices, machine-readable data, and networked communication.

Given that Adrian Blackwell's installation, *Furnishing Positions*, is housed in an exhibition titled *FALSEWORK*, it seems fitting to take what the political economist Karl Polanyi termed a "fictitious" commodity[1]—labour—as the entry point for glimpsing the imbrication of the physical and the digital in public space. To approach public space by way of labour is to immediately confront a paradox. On the one hand, the notion of public space conjures up escape from, or an alternative to, work: lazing on the green, yes, but also, say, striking on the sidewalk beyond the employer's territory or participating in assemblies of all kinds in which individuals refuse their reduction to labour-power, join forces, and make common claims on the wealth that their collective labour has amassed.

On the other hand, public space is itself a worksite on a massive scale: squares are swept, benches installed, paving stone laid, parks raked, gallery floors mopped, community centres built, sidewalk cement poured, outreach programs designed, etc. By the same token, many of the activities and attributes that are linked to a political concept of public space, from deliberation to disagreement, are unthinkable without a corresponding infrastructure that is produced and reproduced by a vast mobilization of labour, both material and immaterial, paid and unpaid, racialized and gendered, rewarding and rote, commercial and governmental, precarious and more or less secure, organized and not-yet-organized.

The ascendancy of the digital is multiplying the ways in which physical public spaces can double as worksites: laptops, tablets, smartphones, SMS, ubiquitous connectivity, and the now mobile Internet are among the digital resources furnishing public space as a setting for the diffuse performance of mediated labour.

Framed in this way, public space is not necessarily sheltered from the "social factory,"[2] a concept developed by autonomists, a few decades ahead of the digital curve, to designate the envelopment of society by capital. It posits that the scope of capitalist production—and, hence, the reach of exploitation—spatially and temporally overflows the physical walls of the factory and exceeds the activities of the traditionally politically privileged male industrial worker. The social factory finds a complementary contemporary concept in "communicative capitalism," a term political theorist Jodi Dean uses to refer to a twenty-first-century political-

economic order that thrives off the spread of "communicative access and opportunity."[3] Along with a partial narrowing of the digital divide, the advance of online platforms enabling dispersed individuals to exchange their views and participate in discussions about issues of the day would seem to create abundant conditions of possibility for actualizing public-sphere ideals. Yet despite the discourse of democratization accompanying it, the expansion of "communicative access and opportunity," contends Dean, coexists with and indeed exacerbates de-politicization, commodification, and class inequality—as well as the dominance of work.

Examples abound: the freelancer who, untethered to the private space of the employer yet in need of a wireless alternative to toiling in the private space of the home, assembles a makeshift workplace out of (quasi) public spaces, shuttling from café to library to park, laptop in tow; the mobile-wedded worker for whom private and public spaces are homogenized by the imperative to be perpetually available and productive; the itinerant microworker who navigates the neighbourhood according to the instructions of crowdsourcing apps that pay a pittance for the completion of location-based info-gathering tasks; or the distributed wellspring of "free labour,"[4] a generous portion of which is performed in public spaces, whether it is posting a status update on Facebook from the classroom, adding a Twitter follower from the bus, posting a restaurant review to Yelp from the street, checking-in via Swarm from the public square...

Even if these value-generating activities occur in nominally public spaces, it is not inconceivable that the routinization of emergent mobile labour practices will affect social expectations of public space more generally. Advertising's earlier incursions almost certainly helped prepare the ground for the digital reworking of public space, from which private firms and state agencies are now able to harvest torrents of commodifiable

information, continuously heaped into sprawling, and stubbornly physical, data storage centres. The use of public space as a digital worksite favours the production of markets over the formation of publics: as technology observer Sherry Turkle remarks in a different context, "what people mostly want from public space is to be alone with their personal networks."[5]

One way to bring an element of contestation to the question "Is public space physical or digital?" is to remember that alternative media have long been intrinsic to the labour movement. Mainstream news production, criticized for excluding labour's voices and masking its interests, compels a workaround: documenting exploitation, covering disputes, outlining demands, celebrating victories, and critically evaluating union politics are among the genres of counter-information whose circulation has historically nourished labour's alternative public spheres. That this process has evolved from pamphlets and newspapers to blogs and apps is one indication that communicative capitalism cultivates competencies that can be directed towards ends other than the bottom line. Contradictions, of course, remain sharp. The easier it is for workers to publicize their discontent, for example, the easier it is for employers to listen in, too. And as opportunities to speak out online grow, so too do worries that activism is diluted into what some critics dismiss as "clicktivism." If the public sphere is in part about furnishing positions in the hope of transforming practices, then labour's digital self-activity is an integral, though insufficient, prerequisite.

Perhaps organization is to public space

as opinion is to the public sphere. One of the classic communicative forms of collective organizing, the strike, makes clear the centrality of public space to organized labour. But it is workers who are non-union, spatially and temporally disaggregated, labour outside a traditional workplace, and lack an employment relationship who have a distinct need for public space as a site on which to gather, to explore and display commonality, and to address demands to extra-employer institutions. Examples from contemporary precarious labour activism[6] point to the dual physical and digital character of public space: the use of online platforms to name-and-shame companies in violation of employment standards, a tactic that has bolstered the growing intern rights movement that also encompasses street-based actions, courtroom battles, and legislative proposals; efforts to harness the affordances of social media to share urgent news about labour conflicts and assemble supporters for on-the-ground solidarity activism, such as the 99 Pickets initiative born from Occupy Wall Street; and the use of mobile phones in both the coordination and circulation of protests, including, notably, by workforces in low-wage regions of the world where the majority of the planet's digital devices are manufactured.[7] Constructing two-way relays between physical and digital public spaces is a defining feature, and major challenge, of contemporary organizing.

Controversy arose when it was revealed that over half a million dollars had been spent on a pair of boulders for a new Toronto public park, Sugar Beach. The City's Deputy Mayor defended the expense, claiming, "It's

the photographs of Sugar Beach that count."[8] The rocks, paradoxically, were deemed immaterial. What matters is the circulation of images of the beach the boulders are a part of: shooting photos on mobiles and sharing them on social media are now mundane zero-wage practices calculated into the branding of the metropolis to international tourists and investors. "And if you don't understand that," the politician added to his initial comment, "I would argue that you don't understand the world that we live in."

This is a concise statement on the dynamic, global relation between the physical and the digital in the production of public space in contemporary capitalism. This process cuts both ways though. In the occupations of public space that recently cycled around the world, and to which concerns about general labour conditions were germane, aerial photos of the crowd assembled at Tahrir Square and digital sousveillance of police violence in New York City and Gezi Park spread swiftly online, and, in doing so, did not simply represent the aggregations, but augmented them as well. Of this situation, Jean-Louis Fabiani proposes: "One can measure the force of an event by looking at its capacity to multiply images."[9] It is also true, however, that communicative capitalists are happy to help with the multiplication.

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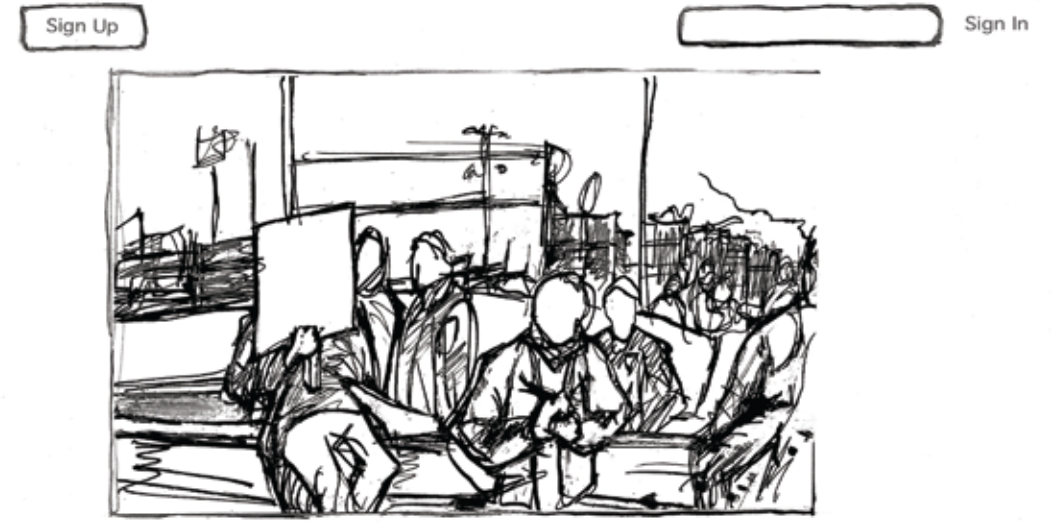
PAIGE SARLIN is an artist, scholar, and political activist. She holds a PhD in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University and an MFA in Film/Video/New Media from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her feature-length documentary film, *The Last Slide Projector*, premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2007. From 1999 to 2010, she was an active participant in 16Beaver Group in New York City, a platform for the discussion of the intersection of art and politics. Her artwork has been exhibited internationally, and her writings have been published in *October*, *Re-Thinking Marxism*, *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, *Scapegoat*, and *Framework: A Journal of Film and Culture*. She is at work on a book-length manuscript entitled *Interview-Work: The Genealogy of a Media Form*. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Study at University at Buffalo, SUNY.

NOTES

1   "Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life. [Labor is not] produced for sale. The commodity description [...] is entirely fictitious." Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1944]), 75.

2   See Nicholas Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 69-102.

3   Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 17.

4   Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 63, vol. 18, no. 2 (2000): 33-58.

5   Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 14.

6   On precarious labour activism in creative industries, see culturalworkersorganize.org, the website of a research project on which I collaborate with Enda Brophy and Nicole Cohen.

7   See Greig de Peuter, Enda Brophy, and Nicole S. Cohen, "Locating Labour in Mobile Media Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media*, ed. Gerard Goggin and Larissa Hjorth (New York: Routledge, 2014), 439-449.

8   Norm Kelly, cited in Paul Moloney, "Costly Sugar Beach Umbrellas Defended," *Toronto Star*, July 2, 2014, http://www.thestar.com/news/city_hall/2014/07/02/costly_sugar_beach_umbrellas_defende d.html.

9   Jean-Louis Fabiani, "Changes in the Public Sphere (1983-2013)," *Eurozine*, March 4, 2014, http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2014-04-03-fabiani-en.pdf.

May 5, 2012 - Cultural workers and their allies on the verge of entering an abandoned 31-storey office tower in Milan, Italy. The room dedicated to digital communication was among the first to be set up when the skyscraper, renamed Macao, was occupied. Photograph by Greig de Peuter.

This poster cannot be shown in any cultural or academic institution that

I refuse to support any institution that does not respect

I will not contribute material to any academic or cultural publication that is complicit with the denial of Palestinian human rights.

By choosing to participate in this academic and cultural boycott, we seek to isolate all institutions that deny freedom of expression and access to education for Palestinians.

I will not speak at any academic or cultural institution that does not recognize

Daniela Kantorova

Incredible! Israeli ship is blocked from unloading in Oakland for four straight days bit.ly/1Ifydtv #BDS #BlockTheBoat

Haaretz: Gaza war gives massive boost to boycott Israel apps bit.ly/1oGXi1q #BDS #GazaUnderAttack

Make boycotts, divestment and sanctions the main message at every protest around the world. #GazaDayofRage #StopArmingIsrael

As the Gaza crisis deepens, boycotts can raise the price of Israel's impunity @RafeefZiadah writes in @guardian bit.ly/1rKoQnf #BDS

PACBI Guidelines for the International Academic Boycott of Israel (Revised July 2014) pacbi.org/etemplate.php?... #BDS

http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/pics-pro-palestine-march-in-cape-town-1.1720692#.VAS4rrywKb8

The World Stands With Palestine | July 2014

Photos and videos from 70+ solidarity demonstrations taking place this weekend bit.ly/1mWo3gU #GazaUnderAttack #BDS

Now is the time - artists & cultural workers- please join the call from Palestinian artists to boycott Israel usacbi.org/2014/07/statem...

Retweeted by BDS Movement
Silence = Oppression @freeatlastman · Jun 4
International Keynote speakers at two Israeli conferences withdraw in reaction to BDS calls #bds #apartheid #win zite.to/1kwnCYI

Electronic Intifada @intifada · May 27
.@stevesalaita says there's no need for academics to wait for tenure to act in support of #BDS and Palestinian rights bit.ly/SNiVyL