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## Drawing a Circle in Washington Square Park

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Tony Vera, a fire-blowing street performer, draws his performing space on the sidewalk with chalk and writes his name around the perimeter. He describes the circle as "magic," saying, "All I have to do is step into that circle and my crowd starts to develop. It happens by itself. It's magic." Fifty people or more may collect around Tony during his circle-drawing in anticipation of one of many performances he will offer in Washington Square Park on a weekend afternoon. By the time his performance is underway, up to 300 people will be crowded around the circle to watch with rapt attention as Tony manipulates his juggling tools, magic tricks, fire torches—and the audience.

On any warm and sunny weekend in New York City, Tony and other street performers regularly present their comedy, magic, juggling, and musical skills to the people who visit Washington Square Park. Wandering mimes, juggling unicyclists, food and balloon vendors, soccer players, roller skaters, Frisbee players, and religious proselytizers also present their "acts" in the square (Figure 1).

A man covered with American flags and mirrors sits in the center of the dried-up fountain; an older man dressed entirely in purple, his long white hair flowing behind him, guides a purple bicycle through the milling crowds; a punk-style young man wears a sign on his back, proclaiming "Loud Silence as Rebellion—No More Pisco"; a wine-soaked individual wanders by, balancing on his head a shoe with a wooden hoop dangling from it, asking for donations (Figure 2).

The music of a piano, hauled daily into the square, competes with the blare of double-speaker radios blasting out disco music. The smell of hot dogs and sauerkraut permeates the air. All manner of sensory experiences—heard, felt, sniffed, touched, seen—collide in this highly concentrated environment, "festivalizing" the everyday uses of the space.<sup>1</sup> The number of diverse activities the square contains, compared to other open spaces in New York City, is even more impressive when we consider that it constitutes nearly half the total park space available to the 80,000 persons who inhabit the area of Manhattan called Greenwich Village.

Approximately 19,000 people visit this square on a daily basis each Saturday and Sunday afternoon in good weather. The regularity of this event, punctuating the uniformity of week-day life, reflects an unusual intensity of involvement. Performers, spectators, and



**Figure 1** Steve Mills on a visit to Washington Square. Steve performs in the square from time to time with his wife, Carol.

participants alike engage in the sharing and transmitting of multiple messages through a variety of sensory channels simultaneously as events flow in and around one another. This spontaneous flow of events appears to unite people in a particularly powerful feeling of fellowship in which social distinctions may be leveled and conflict circumvented.

"But who has organized this event?" you may ask. No one—or everyone. Indeed, it is a "people-generated" event, organized by no one and participated in by all.

## Historical Overview

Washington Square Park is a container, composed of elements of fixed-feature space, which is further transformed by the nonfixed element of the people themselves, moving and interacting within the container. As palimpsests—ancient parchments erased and written upon again and again—the physical structures of Washington Square Park have been symbolically "erased" and "written upon" numerous times. A brief historical overview of Washington

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Square reveals what I call the folk imprint on the built environment—the ways in which space becomes place.

Originally a marshland teeming with wildlife, the 8.6-acre area was turned into a burial ground by the city during the cholera epidemic of 1798. Shortly thereafter, it also became a public execution site, and the Hanging Elm, New York's oldest living tree, still stands at the northwest corner of the square.

During the 1820s and 1830s, residential housing began to be erected in the vicinity of the square. The development of a sense of neighborhood in this area was stimulated by its conversion, between 1826 and 1828, from a pauper's burial ground to a military parade ground.

In 1852, a fountain was added in the center of the square, and in 1871 the original diagonal paths that had led to the new fountain were redesigned in a curvilinear pattern that was inspired by Frederick Olmstead's design of Central Park. The area was beginning to respond to residents' needs for relief from an increasingly congested and industrialized urban environment.

By 1895, the white marble arch, designed by Stanford White to commemorate the centennial of George Washington's inauguration, had been completed on the north side of Washington Square, at the base of Fifth Avenue. Its dedication was marked with an assortment of parades, bands, speeches, and cheering crowds. Perhaps most significant to my present analysis of events, however, is the quotation from George Washington that was engraved on the south façade of the arch: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair—the event is in the hands of God."

As the neighborhood surrounding Washington Square became more and more notorious for its concentration of artists and bohemians in the early 1900s, the square also became the center of a number of revolutionary activities. The most interesting of these was the take-over of the arch in 1916 by John Sloan and several of his somewhat inebriated friends. They climbed to the top of the arch, shot off cap pistols, built a fire in a large bean pot, read poetry, and declared the State of New Bohemia, with Washington Square Arch as its symbolic monument. Unfortunately, they soon surrendered their new republic to several conscientious policemen.

The redesign of the square in 1871 is particularly significant to this analysis of performance behavior within the square's boundaries. Olmstead's curved designs affected a number of urban parks, and his intention was to create a sense of meandering through a pastoral environment. But Washington Square Park, despite the confusion generated by its name, is not a park, pastoral and serene in its atmosphere. It is, rather, an urban square, plaza, and market: noisy, ac-



**Figure 2** Wine-soaked man with shoe and hoop on his head badgers people into giving him money. He followed me around for hours until I finally took his picture.

tive, vital, and attracting a wide range of socioeconomic groups. The clever designs of Olmstead, which influenced the rearrangement of space in the square, intensified rather than pacified the environment, as the curved walkways tend to spiral a visitor in toward the central fountain area, or what I call the "performance ring" of the square (Diagram 1).

The diagram of Washington Square Park reveals numerous circular walkways and choices of movement. Once inside the square, one finds one's sense of direction distorted; it is easier to get into the square than out of it. Circular sitting areas, benches that face in toward the circle, ledges around the fountain that face either out toward the benches or in toward the center, stimulate a public reflexivity in the total environment, where all are conscious that they are on display to all others. The circle within the square thus becomes a theater-in-the-round, stimulating performance behavior in all its participants. The athletes perform their soccer and Frisbee games as well as play them; bizarre individuals wander about in the space; readers perform the reading of a book in an environment so noisy and active that concentration on the material must be doubtful; and street performers use this public reflexivity to earn their livelihood.

When this circle within the square is then placed within the larger gridlike structure of New York City, which is efficient but isolating, the appeal of the square's circularity, which is conducive to communication and interaction, becomes more apparent.

In addition, symbolic meanings continue to be ascribed to the square. Regular visitors characterize the square as a kind of "urban Woodstock" because of its multiple performances. It continues to be used as a site for rallies and demonstrations. It is the end point of the Annual Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, and New York University holds its spring graduation ceremonies there. The square is used daily by students, the elderly, dog walkers, sun worshippers, drug dealers, athletes, food vendors, religious proselytizers, tourists, and performers.

## Making Space into Place

Figure 3, taken from the roof of New York University's Bobst Library, opposite the southeast corner of Washington Square Park, is one of a series of 576 photographs taken every minute over a 9½-hour period on September 20, 1981.<sup>2</sup>

The dynamic ebb and flow of audiences become part of the charged atmosphere surrounding the performances. Just as iron filings are attracted to a magnet, the individual magnetism of the performers creates shifting patterns of movement that can be observed throughout the entire series of overhead photographs, and a complex set of relationships between time, space, actions, and objects is therefore proposed. At each level and during each transaction, a series of negotiations takes place. Each event has a structure that relates to other events, and the combined frequencies, durations, and locations of these events constitute an overall pattern.

Diagram 2 illustrates the frequency and duration of several key events in the series of photographs. Note the exchange in performing times between the Piano Player and Tony Vera. Note also that the two lesser street performers—the Mime and Chang the Juggler—both begin their performances just as Tony Vera's performance ends. It becomes apparent that if we are to visualize the territory fully, a relational or field-centered view will be required. Space is defined from this perspective by the locations and movements of people: it lies between, around, and among them. Time is defined in terms of interactions, rhythms, and intensity of performance times.

Several samples from the series of photographs taken in 1981 will illustrate the rhythms that underlie the activities of Washington Square. We begin with the first photograph of the day, taken at 10 A.M.: the empty space, where all is potential, readiness, possibilities unknown (Figure 4).

Events begin slowly on weekends in Washington Square. For several hours, only an occasional stroller moves through the center of the square, perhaps pausing briefly at the fountain. By 1:00, however, the food vendors have arrived, the square's resident pianist has hauled his piano under the arch, and a number of roller skaters have arrived (partially visible at the lower left of Figure 5).

At 1:08 P.M., Tony Vera begins his first performance of the day. His performance space is located directly in front of the arch, and in a series of photographs we see his crowd collect around his chalk-drawn circle (1:08), increase in size (1:11), and become visible as a clear circle (1:17). The configuration of spectators



**Figure 3** Aerial photo of the "performance ring," September 20, 1981, approximately 5 P.M. The fire-blowing Tony Vera has a performance in progress directly in front of the arch, Chang the Juggler is to his left, and further left a visiting mime is performing.

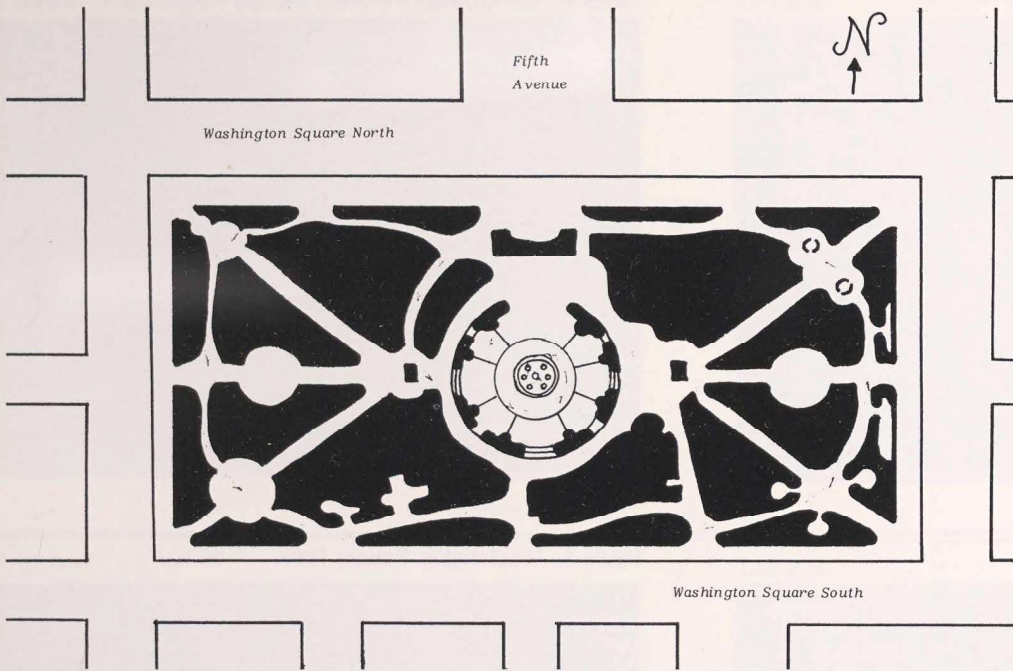
then remains relatively constant for the next thirteen minutes of photographs (Figure 6).

Tony concludes his performance at 1:30. His crowd disperses rapidly, appearing to gravitate back to the roller skaters' area. A few spectators remain around the pianist (Figure 7).

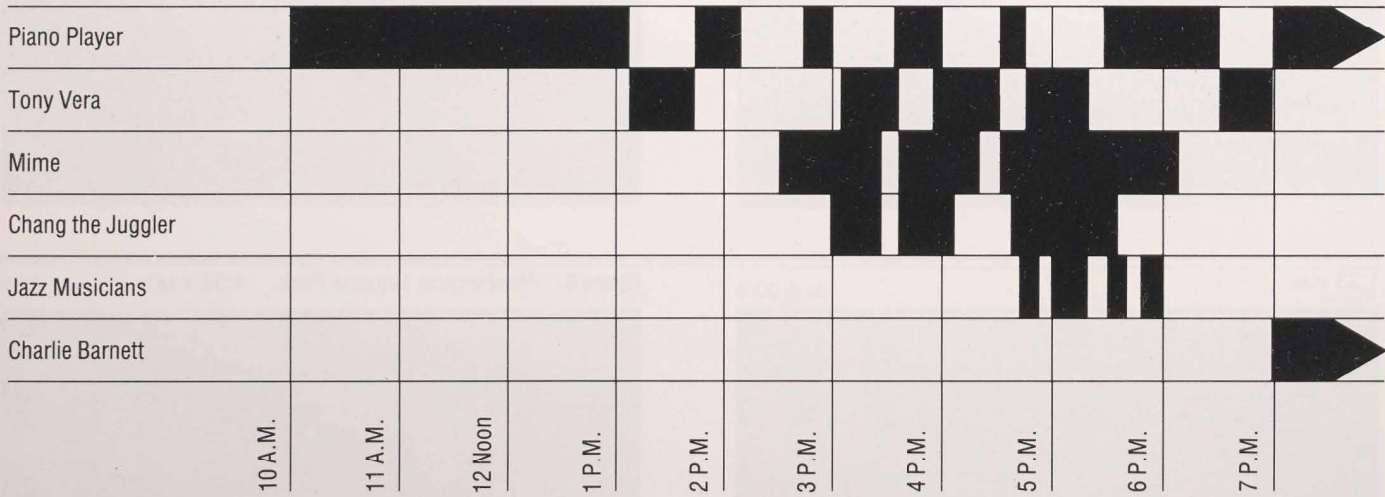
Prime performance time in Washington Square Park is generally between the hours of 2:00 and 5:00 P.M. The photographs below, taken from 4:55 to 5:12 P.M., show Tony Vera's fourth show of the afternoon underway in front of the arch. Within minutes, two other performances begin: those of Chang the Juggler and a visiting mime. By the end of the series, at 5:12 P.M., four clear rings of spectators are evident in the photographs. The fourth ring has been created by the arrival of the jazz musicians in their regular location beneath a group of shade trees (Figure 8).

By 5:13 P.M., Tony Vera and the jazz musicians are taking a break in their performances. Their audiences scatter, and some are drawn to the two remaining performances in progress (Figure 9).

Finally, toward the end of the day, at 7:00 P.M., Tony Vera concludes his fifth and last performance. Charlie Barnett, the evening entertainment in the square, has arrived. He waits until Tony has completed his show and then begins to gather and arrange his audience in a space that for most of the day has remained relatively empty—the center. His performance is longer than most of the daytime shows and continues long after it is too dark to photograph. His audience has assembled in the center of the square for a final gathering before returning to their homes or moving out of the square toward other nighttime activities in the city. The special sense of "communitas" one encounters in the square on any pleasant weekend afternoon has been affirmed, and soon after, as night falls, Washington Square Park becomes once again an "empty space" (Figure 10).



**Diagram 1:** Walkways and "performance ring" of Washington Square Park.

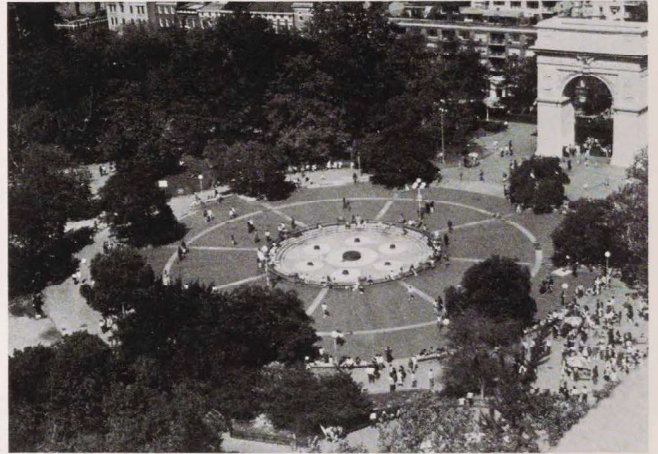


**Diagram 2:** Frequency and duration of key performances in Washington Square Park.

**Figure 4** Washington Square Park. 10 A.M.



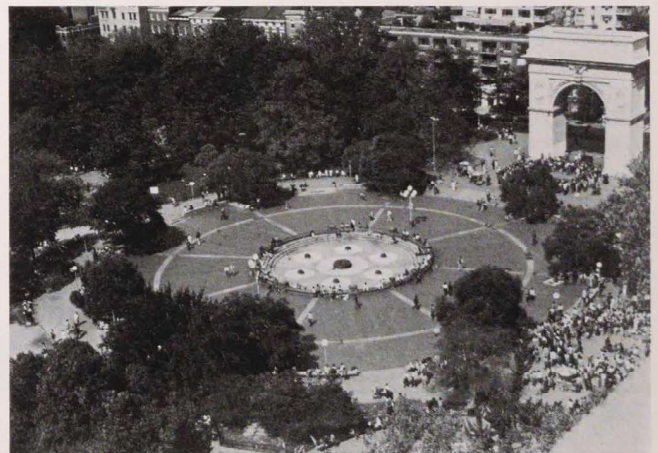
**Figure 5** Washington Square Park. 1:00 P.M.



1:17 P.M.



**Figure 7** Washington Square Park. 1:30 P.M.



1:33 P.M.



**Figure 8** Washington Square Park. 4:55 P.M.



**Figure 6** Washington Square Park. 1:08 P.M.



1:11 P.M.



1:31 P.M.



1:32 P.M.



4:56 P.M.



5:00 P.M.





5:02 P.M.



5:03 P.M.



5:12 P.M.



**Figure 9** Washington Square Park. 5:13 P.M.



5:16 P.M.



**Figure 10** Washington Square Park. 6:57 P.M.



5:04 P.M.



5:05 P.M.



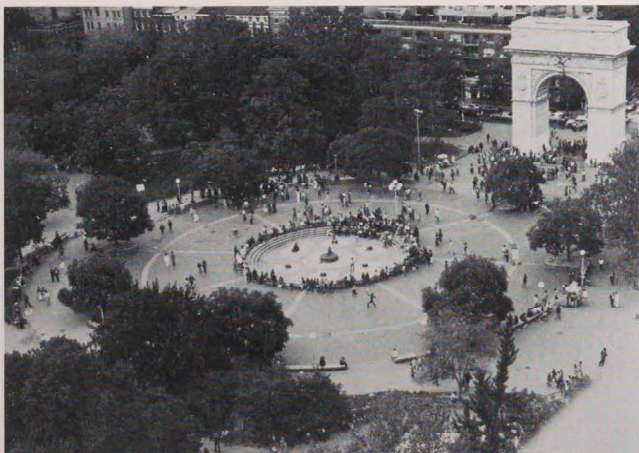
5:14 P.M.



5:15 P.M.



6:58 P.M.



6:59 P.M.



7:00 P.M.



7:01 P.M.



7:02 P.M.



7:03 P.M.



7:07 P.M.



7:12 P.M.



Many of the multiple functions of the space have been determined by the diverse groups who frequent the square, and the multichannel functions of the square have caused the emergence of clear territorial boundaries. We now return to ground level to investigate these boundaries.

### Performers into Place

The first territorial area is at the square's perimeter, where a steady stream of joggers moves rhythmically around the surrounding sidewalk, physically defining this boundary as a "jogging track." Crossing this boundary, a visitor encounters the circular choices of movement mentioned earlier—pathways curve to the left and right, circular sitting areas open out to the sides, and the visitor is ultimately drawn to the performance ring.

Strolling along the outer pathways, the visitor finds areas that are officially designated for specific activities by fixed-feature elements: chess tables, children's playground equipment, a petanque court, and so on. However, other areas are "unofficially" designated territorial areas as well. The elderly, for example, are always found seated on the northwest benches surrounding the fountain. Drug dealing, although occurring throughout the square, tends to gravitate toward the western area surrounding the fountain. Soccer players have established the southwest section of the fountain as their own, using garbage cans for goal posts and physically imperiling the welfare of any who wander through unaware, while Frisbee players perform on the opposite southeast section. Roller skaters demonstrate their ballet-like movements, accompanied by loud disco music, in the volleyball area, but will generally surrender this space when someone arrives with an "official-looking" net.

At the apex of this territorial structure are the street performers. Their presence in the square dominates the environment, not only through their elaborate fireblowing, juggling, and humorous routines, drawing huge crowds, but also through their appearance in consistent locations that are agreed upon and regulated to a degree by Tony Vera, the self-proclaimed "king" of Washington Square Park.

Tony holds the prime location in the square, directly in front of the arch, and the power of this space, combined with his consistent appearances in the square for nearly five years, maintains his "kingship." He will suggest locations, arbitrate disputes, invite new performers to the square, and assist other performers who are having a difficult time. Recently, someone from the Park Department painted Tony's "magic" performance circle on the sidewalk with green paint,

confirming his kingdom through an official agency as well.

This self-regulating phenomenon has developed over time without the assistance or interest of city administrators. There has been scant media attention and no clear organizing agency beyond the people themselves. It is a contemporary example of Edward Sapir's classic definition of culture: "people act in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all." My job, as a performance studies "detective," has been to arrive at an understanding of this phenomenon through its primary agents—the street performers.

### The Street Performer

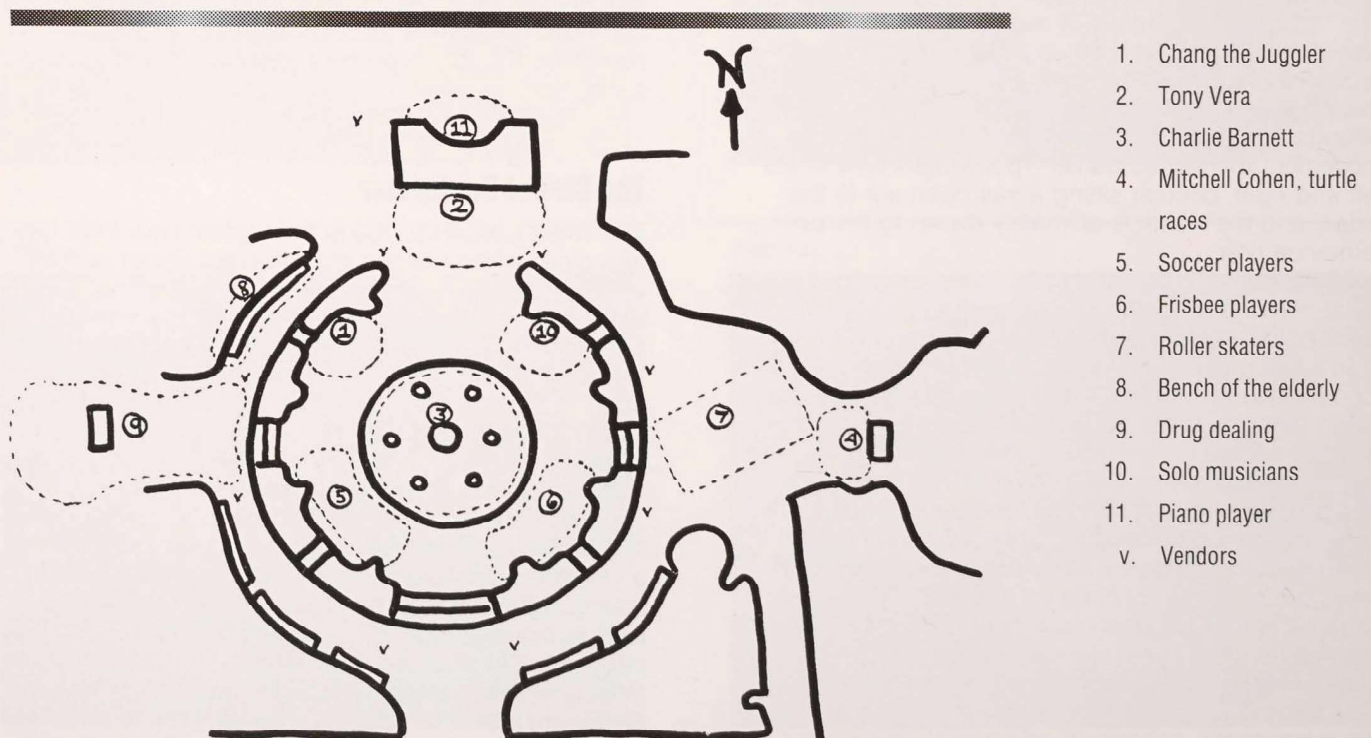
The street performer, found throughout New York City and other urban centers of the United States as well as on nearly every other continent of the world, is the contemporary representative of an ancient tradition of performance dating back at least to early Egyptian times. In the past, he was known as a "busker," "minstrel," "jongleur," or "troubador." Today, in the United States, he is known simply as a street performer, though he is more often found in the parks and other open spaces of cities than in its streets.

A significant element of the street performer's routine concerns his ability to interact directly with the audience. Foregoing the sanctity of a walled theater space, with darkened auditorium, fixed seating, prepaid audience, and reassuring reviews, the street performer develops a "performance text" that must reflect his environment directly and hold transient audience members.<sup>3</sup> His act is not designed to travel as the script of a play might, being transmitted from performer to performer and from century to century. It is specific to himself, his abilities, and his audience, incorporating messages of particular relevance to the culture-specific audience he acquires on the street. Even within New York City, there are great differences among the performances found in its unofficial performance spaces—Central Park, outside the Metropolitan Museum and the Public Library, Times Square, and so on.

The Central Park performer, for example, performs for an audience seeking a pastoral environment. His act may include Renaissance costuming, poetry, stringed instruments, story-telling, or magic tricks. The act of the Washington Square Park performer, on the other hand, reflects the conversion of a complex urban square to high festival. This performer will rely upon humor, political satire, sexual innuendo, and drug-oriented commentary. The Washington Square Park performer is fast, harsh, and dazzling. A detailed investigation of street performance therefore cannot

overlook the impact of the environment in which it is taking place.

Diagram 3 indicates the locations of Washington Square's current performers, as well as some of the other central, recurring activities found within or near the performance ring. Having set the scene and sketched the environment in which these performances occur, I now describe three major performers in Washington Square Park.



**Diagram 3:** Locations of Washington Square Park's current performers.

### Chang the Juggler

Originally there were two jugglers, Nguyen Phuc (now known as Chang) (Figure 11) and Paul Bonniën. I first encountered this pair early in the 1981 season performing outside the performance ring in an open circular area near the drug dealers' territory. This is a typical choice of territory for new performers.

Over the course of my observations, the act has changed a great deal. Originally the act was of the type one might encounter in a circus—a silent performance of juggling and magic tricks with little audience interaction. But these newcomers had a lot to learn about the streets as a performance environment and about the necessity for participative interaction with a street audience.

The street audience must be "captured" by the street performer as individuals pass his performance, and its attention must be held until the important "pitch" for contributions is made at the conclusion of the act. As Washington Square audiences are particularly interested in seeking relief from city-generated anxieties when entering this festivalized environment, frequent laughter is a critical factor. Many street performers I interviewed cited a factor of one laugh, giggle, or other acknowledgment from the audience every three to five seconds. A street audience is less inclined to wait patiently for the development of a slow-building climax, seeking instead a quick laugh and the opportunity to move on.

Soon Chang was performing alone and had moved into the performance ring. He had also become a close friend of the king, Tony Vera. In his 1983 performances, Chang explains his tricks, adds funny names or stories to his techniques, and actively solicits participation. For example, he has the audience repeat "Ching Wah Wah" over a "devil stick," which he

then causes to rise into the air. He asks questions, stops to pose for photographers, and comments on his audience's behavior.

Chang has incorporated his Oriental background into the performance text. Though originally from Vietnam, he tells his audience he is from China, perhaps not wishing to add stressful memories of recent history to his audience's appreciation of his performance. Some of his routines depict a foreigner's experience of New York City—the "Tax Collector," "New York Staying Alive," and "Disco" techniques of juggling.

Another central street performance technique Chang currently uses involves teasing an audience. He says, for example, after juggling five balls, "Want to see seven?" When the audience responds affirmatively, he holds up seven balls, shows them to the audience, and lays them down again. After performing a particularly difficult routine he says, "Want to see that again? Come back tomorrow." And, at the conclusion of his act, Chang says, "One of the nicest things about street performing is that you always get a standing ovation," referring to the fact that his space provides no places for sitting.

Chang told me in April 1981 that he was getting an M.B.A. from Fordham University and that he was performing in the square for tuition money. When I returned in September of that year, he had forgotten our initial meeting and denied that he performed to earn his tuition. Perhaps Chang had learned to keep quiet about finances and outside activities in order to create the self-sustaining image that is also essential to a street performance text. This image relies upon an audience's identification with a "talented," "independent," "hard-working" individual. One must appear skilled and earnest, yet not overly professional (read: "wealthy") in order to receive substantial contributions. The message further appears to be one of "we're all out here on the street together," or "we're all equal" in the street performance text. A performer must therefore tread a fine line between the equally negative connotations of "begging" and "too good to be on the street." As a successful performer, Chang responds to the codes and manipulates them with the same skill he employs in the juggling of his batons.

### Tony Vera

Tony has been performing regularly in Washington Square for nearly five years. Every Saturday and Sunday, from 1:00 to 7:00 P.M., he performs from 6 to 10 shows, each twenty to thirty minutes in duration. Tony is, in fact, the most predictable of the performers in the square. He stays in the vicinity of his performance space, either performing or taking a short



**Figure 11** Chang the Juggler, performing at his first location in front of a statue west of the performance ring. He chooses this spot on very hot days because it offers some shade.

break and speaking to the square's regular visitors.

Tony's act is best known for the lighter fluid that he spits out of his mouth and ignites into huge fireballs, five to ten feet in diameter. Actually, this is a relatively small part of his act. In a well-rehearsed routine that he repeats with little variation throughout the day, Tony mixes comedy, magic, and juggling with his dramatic fire-blowing technique. He balances not only a bicycle in his mouth but also a small boy perched on a folding chair, demonstrating a symbolic victory over space and gravity (Figure 12).

Tony communicates entirely through gesture, facial expression, and different rhythms and tones produced by four whistles he wears around his neck. No words are spoken at any time during his act, and yet each complicated routine is entirely understood by the volunteers he selects from his audience. Tony says that he can speak Greek, Chinese, French, Swahili—"any language of the world"—with his whistles and gestures.

Nearly 50 percent of the audience-assisted scenarios that Tony proposes involve the use of a dollar bill. In his opening routine, for example, Tony draws a young child out into the circle. He shoves a handkerchief into his fist and indicates that the child is to select the hand that holds the handkerchief. If necessary, Tony will repeat the trick until the child guesses successfully. He then rewards the child with a dollar. The trick is repeated. A dollar is rewarded. Again and again, Tony performs the trick, no longer

bothering to hide the handkerchief completely, and soon the child holds a fist full of dollar bills. The real trick is finally performed, in which the child does not find the handkerchief in either hand. Tony yanks the dollar bills away, and pulls the handkerchief out of his mouth. Following the audience's laughter, he rewards the child with a dollar.

Tony similarly rewards the young winner of an eating contest between three volunteers. He has a man produce a dollar bill in order to be kissed by a woman he has never met. These visual cues of the proper code of exchange becomes significant at the conclusion of his performance, when he presents his dramatic fire-blowing demonstration.

The emotional pitch of Tony's audience is high by the time of his finale, and he rides the waves of their enthusiasm. He elaborately fills his mouth with lighter fluid, swishes it around, and walks around the circle, seeming to seek the best angle for his fiery exhalation. He may clown around with the audience and move several times. Finally, he will produce a breathtaking fireball in the air (Figure 13). The crowd inevitably cheers with tremendous enthusiasm.

Tony then steps into the center of his chalk-drawn circle and bows grandly. Removing his hat, he begins to imitate the audience's applause and shakes his head from side to side, indicating that a different gesture of their approval, enjoyment, and understanding of his act is now requested. The preset code of exchange has been visually established and, as Tony passes his firehat through the crowd, one observes that the most common contribution is, in fact, a dollar bill (Figure 14).

### Charlie Barnett

Charlie Barnett is a particularly notorious performer in Washington Square Park (Figure 15). Primarily a stand-up comic, Charlie uses humor that is rude, insulting, sexual, highly topical, and New York City culture-specific—and his audiences love him. By using the play frame already established by the festivalized environment of the square, Charlie has developed a stylized form of rudeness that enables him to reframe messages and manipulate the context of his abuse into a playful (i.e., "not true," "as if") mode of performance. Functioning as a contemporary clown figure in Washington Square, Charlie engages in a form of social leveling that has been uniquely employed by the clown throughout history. He insults the various cultures of New York City—black, gay, Japanese, tourist, Upper East Side, Puerto Rican, and so on—with carefree enthusiasm. He imitates their behavior on the streets, in the subways, or in the bedroom (a particular favorite with his audiences). During his routines, he will point to representatives from the group



**Figure 12** Tony Vera, balancing a boy in a folding chair on his lower lip.

he is parodying and ask, "Isn't that right?" They respond with giggles and embarrassment.

Charlie's humor appears not to reflect the "actuals" of whatever ethnic group he is abusing at that moment, but rather the dominant (i.e., white middle-class) culture's ethnocentric image of that group. His humor is concerned with delineating boundaries: between "us" in the square and "them" outside the square, between "us" in New York and "them" in New Jersey, between "us" the residents of the United States and "them" the foreign tourists, and between "us" the poor and "them" the rich.

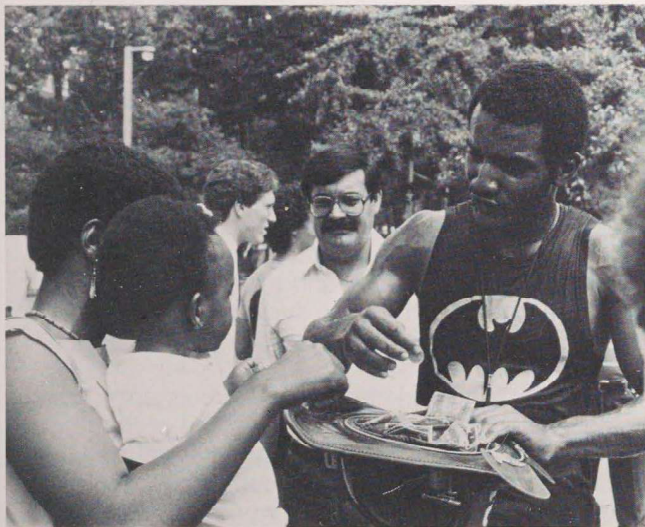
His humor is extremely physical and oriented toward mimicry. He imitates the gay population of New York in a large portion of his material (Figure 16). He imitates the way different groups go to work (the Polish walk backward, for example), the way tourists look at black New Yorkers ("Will you mug me, while my husband takes a picture?"), the way black New Yorkers wear their hats backward and one pants leg pulled up ("If you were a cab driver, would *you* pick this person up?"). He twists his face into a delightful



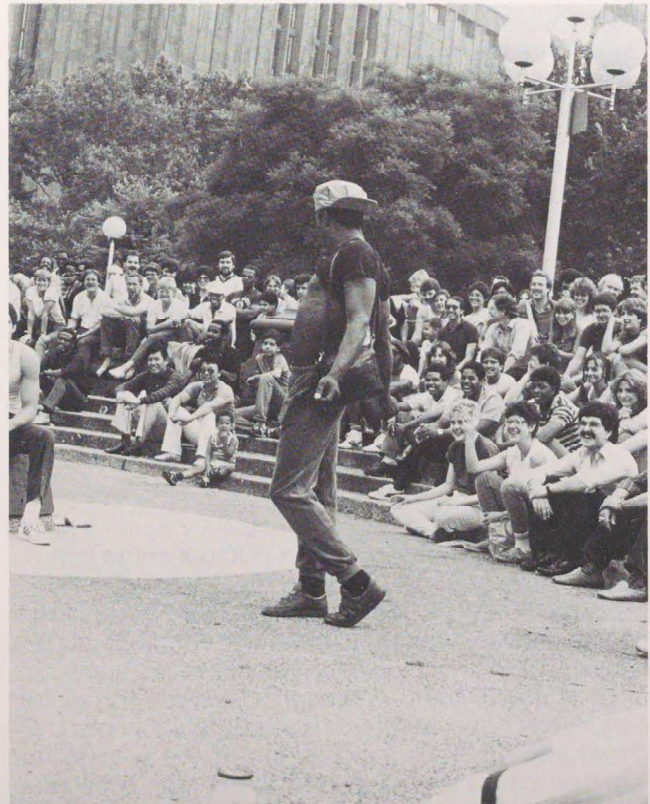
**Figure 13** Tony Vera, blowing lighter fluid from his mouth.



**Figure 15** Charlie Barnett, standing, upper left. Surrounded by seated audience in the natural amphitheater of the fountain.



**Figure 14** The "pitch," humorously known among street performers as the "audience disappearing act."



**Figure 16** Charlie Barnett, imitating a gay man.



laughter-producing imitation of a Japanese tourist discovering the World Trade Center towers, which appear as his prop in the southern skyline of the square.

The most significant element in the environmental structure of Charlie's act involves his choice of location and way of acquiring an audience. He is the only performer who chooses the center of the dried-up fountain for his performance space. Perhaps he is the only performer who has the vocal strength to sustain a performance in such an extraordinarily large space, but more likely it is the power he acquires from his superior and intimidating demeanor that supports him. His energy within the space holds one's attention throughout his performance. Further, this is the only space with seating, on the steps that descend into the fountain, thus forming a natural and more comfortable amphitheater for his performance.

Charlie begins by standing on one of the ledges surrounding the fountain and shouting, "It's show time! Next show starting now! Everyone over here!" Usually 20 to 30 people are attracted by this opening announcement. Following this, Charlie announces to the assembly that he has a terrific show for them, but that he won't do it for less than *half* the square's population. (Perhaps, given the insulting context of his performance Charlie is counting on "safety in numbers": when there are many in the audience, they'll laugh; when there are just a few, they'll get angry.)

In the past, Charlie would entice his initial audience with a few jokes and insulting remarks; now, since his routines are legendary among visitors, he simply has to remind them of their role: when he counts to three, everyone must yell, cheer, applaud, whistle, and generally make an incredible amount of racket. This never fails to attract great numbers of people. ("They'll think I'm getting killed over here, and they'll all come over to watch!")

### The Magic Circle

The necessity for crowd control is important to consider in any street performer's presentation. Charlie plays on the desire of a crowd to be where the most people are when he elicits great noise from an audience in order to draw others. He also relies upon the many to control the few throughout his act. For all the performers in the square, however, the spontaneous crowd also becomes a closed crowd: the spectators turn their backs to the city and, in the ring formation, the crowd exhibits itself to itself, increasing a sense of security in the ring. The performer becomes, in such a configuration, the ringmaster, in control of the risks that he demonstrates through magic, juggling, humor, or simply his presence on the streets, and the magic

circle of performance is defined in reference to this central figure.

The unique, magnetic power of the individual street performer makes it possible to draw other persons, the participating spectators, into the magic circle, and the circle becomes an image of both community and creation. Thus, the forms of street performance have symbolic significance that reach far beyond the explicit content of the particular text. In the same way that Paul Bouissac (1976:66), in his semiotic analysis of circus, feels that "the meaning of circus performance is based on each act's particular relevance to those structures that constitute the culture of the country in which the acts are being performed, i.e. the 'contextual culture,'" we can identify in the smaller culture "circus" of Washington Square Park, set within New York City, responses to the complex competitive environment of a large urban space. Value is created for the visitors to this urban square, as performers explore a dramatization of the inner life of New York City residents and tourists, and respond to their desire for a sense of unity.

In an environment such as Washington Square Park, where the spectator can move around and explore a number of different circles containing different events that are occurring simultaneously, he or she has the additional opportunity to explore theatrical space in an active and creative way, while the territorially defined consistency of the environment offers another kind of security, conducive to communication and participation. The spectator creates opportunities within the performances to actively inject his or her personality into the event, and the notion that this is an event that is "outside the system" of commercial entertainment further heightens one's sense of personal potency.

For many New Yorkers, the city streets are a kind of tunnel, leading only from home to office or from home to shopping and back again. A good street performer has the ability to surprise these tunneling individuals, drawing them into a temporary world of wonders, encouraging interaction and participation, and allowing the isolated, cautious New Yorker the opportunity to temporarily let himself off his own leash. The magic circle of performance, whether in a theater or on the street, encourages the notion that something special may occur, and as people enter into the event, attention focuses on the performance while distractions are screened out. The circle closes securely around the event, and a transcendent, if only temporary, sense of relief is achieved.

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## Notes

- 1 The term "festivalization" is a recently coined expression used regularly at New York University's Department of Performance Studies, where this study first came about. I feel that it accurately expresses the sense of festival in an environment that is not "officially" a specific festival. There are no colored lights, gaudy banners, or predominant themes—yet the milling crowds and diverse activities "festivalize" the space.
- 2 All overhead photographs were taken by Tom Mikotowicz, a fellow doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies, and Joe Mosier. The initial research for this study was undertaken, with Tom Mikotowicz as a coresearcher, in connection with a Performance Theory course offered by Richard Schechner. I owe them both credit for much of the early research into the square's structure.
- 3 The use of the word "text" should not imply that the street performer records in written form any part of his act. Instead, the text of performance includes the facial expressions, costuming, props, interactions, location—all the "readable" elements of the performance as a whole.

## Reference

- Bouissac, Paul  
1976 *Circus & Culture: A Semiotic Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.