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Unlimited edition

CEREMONY. HABITUATION. MYTH. OBSESSION. SUPERSTITION. LITURGY.

October 1-10, 2011
14th Street, Manhattan

Founder and Director: Ed Woodham
Co-curators: Kalia Brooks and Trinidad Fombella
Keynote Speaker: Linda Mary Montano

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On March 22, 1811, the three Commissioners of Streets and Roads in the City of New York submitted a plan, called the Commissioners’ Plan. It was a grid pattern for Manhattan Island that cut through and filled in rocky outcrops, hillocks, depressions, and streams. The dimensions and alignment of the grid were designed as rectangular blocks, with the narrow end facing the water. This facilitated both the flow of water from the island into the river, and the movement of goods transported by boat into the city. On April 1, 2011, as part of the Art in Odd Places (AiOP) Festival and in collaboration with Harmattan Theater and The New School, a performance titled Grid Scenes marked the two-hundred-year anniversary of the Commissioners’ Plan on 14th Street; the first street of the grid that runs between the Hudson River and the East River.

Two groups of twenty students, professional actors and dancers moved toward one another very slowly at sunset, carrying hand-made lanterns and making simple sounds with simple instruments. One group, on the north
side of 14th Street moved from Fifth Avenue to Sixth Avenue, and
turned the corner heading north. The second group, on the south side
of 14th Street moved from Seventh Avenue to Sixth Avenue, and turned
the corner heading south. From seven o’clock until eight o’clock in the
evening, passersby walked through the groups, stopping, pausing, and
taking photos. Others waited, watching quietly and some joined in.
The goal was to create a new urban ritual through slow movement and
ceremonial aura in the hustle and bustle of a Friday rush hour at one of
New York’s busiest intersections. It is also the urban campus of The New
School, and for this reason we felt comfortable to play with it.

*Grid Scenes* was developed in a class called Cinemetrics¹, which
challenged students to move away from designing with mechanical
representational systems and into more open-ended ways of drawing
and making using digital media. Another way to say this is that they were
encouraged to “lose perspective;” to leave behind the construction of
projected perspectival space. In doing so, there is a movement towards
“finding duration” by stopping, sorting, and assembling the less certain
world of moving digital images.² Students used their own everyday rituals
on and around 14th Street as their research site. Art in Odd Places later
created a forum for them to perform this new ritual. The experience
interrupted the rhythm of lectures, discussion and homework, and
grounded them in the accumulated life of 14th Street.

Fourteenth Street also marks an uptown-downtown borderland in
Manhattan. In 2008, as a half-loved, under-claimed and contested
street, AiOP Director Ed Woodham found it fertile ground for a new
festival. *Grid Scenes*, in turn, was strategically located in the blocks
between Fifth Avenue and Seventh Avenue as they are another type of
borderland between the two main business improvement districts that
claim several blocks of 14th Street as their own.³

RITUAL in this way

5 Cinemetrics was taught by Brian McGrath, with Jean Gardener, Jose DeJesus,


7 http://www.meatpacking-district.com/ Meatpacking Improvement District Authority
http://unionsquarenyc.org/ Union Square Partnership

was a moment of intense attention, an excursion into lived space, which
engaged the ongoing flexibility of the grid to accumulate new types of
street life.

Many creative practices located outdoors and in the street fall into
the realm of street art, which are artworks that make a material or
artistic use of the street.⁴ These micro-practices are often imagined as
prototypes of macro-strategies, or mini-rehearsals of macro-statements,
that speak to change as a relational space between many scales. This
nascent movement was recently identified and shared in the 13th Venice
Architecture Biennale 2012 U.S. pavilion exhibition titled *Spontaneous
Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good* (of which AiOP
was a participant).⁵ Art in Odd Places not only brings various street art
practices together for the delight of a random encounter by a pedestrian
on 14th Street, it also brings groups of artists from all over the city and
the world together for the duration of the festival.

The effects of AiOP’s brand of “permitless” street art are important to
understand. Each artist selected from the open-call application process
is encouraged to design his or her work in such a way as to not need a
permit from the city.⁶ When all of the works are viewed as a set, such as
in this catalog, they provide a measure of the lower ceiling of the rule
requiring official permissions. The works make this visible by inventively
playing in the interval, thereby revealing a type of urban design model
embedded in the festival idea. The highlighting of this rule by AiOP creates
a creative compression in the street life of 14th Street. In addition, when
taken to other cities, such as Sydney or Greensboro, the often-moving
boundary of where a rule makes a difference can be compared.

Public space as a fixed territory, such as a block, garden, park, plaza,
subway, or street can also be understood as something more temporal,
lived, and experienced. For example, consider the difference in sociability
of the stroll, promenade, ramble, commute, parade, ceremonial worship,

9 http://www.spontaneousinterventions.org/project/art-in-odd-places
10 For example a Street Activity or Parade Permit, or a Musician or Performer Permit.

8 Nicholas Alden Riggle, “Street Art: The Transformation of the Commonplaces,” The Journal of
Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 68:3 Summer 2010
or protest. Each has a duration and quality of publicness, which sometimes overlaps or has different meaning for different people in different positions of power. The spontaneous intervention or temporary clustering fueled by AiOP is an example of this second public space model. It is a curated duration that “fits” into the territories created by the Manhattan Grid such as Union Square Park and more recently, The Highline.

Urbanization intensifies and ages in patchy and complex spatial patterns, with changes in biodiversity lagging behind or moving ahead in similarly fragmented ways. Taking a walk along 14th Street, we pass a massive cogeneration station, rows of tenement houses with small back yards, high-rise residential towers above shopping malls, schools or subway lines, and all of this intermixed with retrofitted department stores, theaters, factories, banks, parks, and railway lines. Ecosystem Scientists describe this open-ended and non-equilibrium urban process as the ecology of the city. Art can help people understand these multiple trajectories, new juxtapositions and integrated forms in an immediate and sensorial way. It can reveal, reflect or translate, and it can add or remove meaning or value. In this way AiOP also has an ecological effect.

The Manhattan Grid was actually designed for the horse and carriage. Today on 14th Street, cars and trucks are increasingly sharing the street with artists, commuters and their bikes, dogs with their owners, trees and their stewards, shoppers with their stuff, students with their friends, and everyone with cell phones connected to satellites, sensors, and each other. This is all happening in the clumsy mix where each of us is negotiating the political project of what type of globalization we want. Our streets are still transportation corridors, however they are also borderlands that hybridize old and new urban ecologies in important ways. They are also incredibly public, where many individuals, groups and institutions often claim a street corner as theirs. RITUAL with its ceremonies, habituations, myths, obsessions, superstitions, and liturgies added to this accumulation and offered a much needed urban ecosystem feedback device, one of its many innovations.