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Graham Coreil-Allen

Introduction to Graham Coreil-Allen's New Public Sites

Graham Coreil-Allen is a self-described interventionist artist who develops exploratory approaches to mundane urban spaces in order to reactivate a sense of pedestrian freedom and connection within them. *New Public Sites* (*NPS*) is the moniker he has given to the projects he has developed to enable this exploration. *NPS* is a powerful manifesto: part urban visionary, part anarchist. In his own words, he has “an intense interest in improving our shared urban spaces and strengthening political freedom among people.” His design techniques, performance, and humor facilitate exactly that for those who show up to receive what he has to offer.

NPS is rooted in pedestrian tours of urban spaces that are regularly used but hardly noticed. By bringing his tour participants to an invisible urban site such as a footpath through a grassy median and renaming the site “Median Refuge,” for example he demonstrates the site as a place where pedestrians can find rest between lanes of traffic. In bringing his tours to a purposeless highway underpass that looks to be just an empty, overgrown field, the site

becomes a “Freeway Eddy,” a place to notice and appreciate where major paths of transit converge. At another site, an abandoned, fenced lot becomes an “Unseen Field,” empty of architecture, but enclosed with endless possibility.

To make the ideas he talks about on his tours clear to his participants and to make his work accessible to those who experience it only through his website or other publicity, Graham also creates tour maps, posters, books and videos that highlight his poetic approaches. Each new tour comes with its own set of such paraphernalia, stamped with his *NPS* logo and employing a specific font hierarchy and color scheme that he has established as the visual language of *NPS*. To make the breadth of *NPS* sites, tours and their paraphernalia cohesive, Graham also relies on and reuses design techniques borrowed from modern advertising approaches to create his own clean, bold style. The bright colors of his logos and fonts reflect the marriage between a structured approach to developing his alternative approaches to urban spaces and the playful personality that he uses to express them.

Shards

of

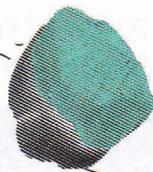
Site



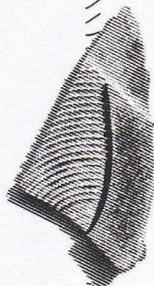
Drift Seed



American Keydom



Cola Glass



Shank'n Headlamp



Domina Fourplay



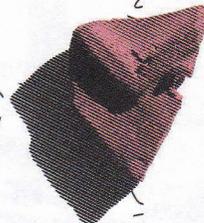
Chunkt Carnage



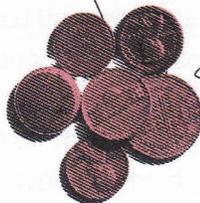
Tread Chip



Galvan Links



Bricken Arrow



Discarded Exchange



Stay Shell



Torn Calculus



On his tours, Graham performs the role of tour guide, dressed in a white monogrammed uniform that is the cornerstone to the *NPS* look. As our guide, Graham offers himself as a trustworthy leader into the unknown territory he seeks to share. Graham is incredibly sincere in this role, inviting his group to stand on building ventilation systems with him to feel the air flow over them, to lie next to him on broken pavement to appreciate the upward plain of a building, and to crouch beside him to appreciate a hidden urban vista at the edge of a parking lot. He even pauses for a moment to allow participants time to procure a souvenir, or “Shard of Site,” from the ground to take home with them.)

His earnestness is unmistakable, but the absurdity of his grand gestures that bring people to appreciate such mundane features is not lost on him. His sense of humor is especially obvious in the monologues that make up significant portions of his tours and videos. On his DC Walking tour, for example, the final site featured on the tour is unseen until after he leads his group through a hole he found cut in a fence and describes it as a point where “one is welcome to discretely exit.” Once through the fence, he introduces his companions to “The Lot of Grassy Rubble, filled with a lot of grassy rubble.” He delivers this phrase with a tone of grandeur and reward, and welcomes the chuckles that come with these strange moments.

Embodiment, Occupation, and Naming in New Public Sites

The *NPS* practices of embodiment, occupation and naming are unmistakably related to queer and psychogeographic schools of thought. Queer notions of embodiment and psychogeographic analysis of power expressed through place are both founded on the inextricable connection between who we are and the conditions of the sites we occupy. Graham’s role as a tour guide, the reliance on the occupation of place by his participants and the typology he developed for *NPS* manifest this connection.

Much of queer discourse is rooted in the poststructuralist notion that the identity of every person is an embodiment of their experiences, history, and cultural

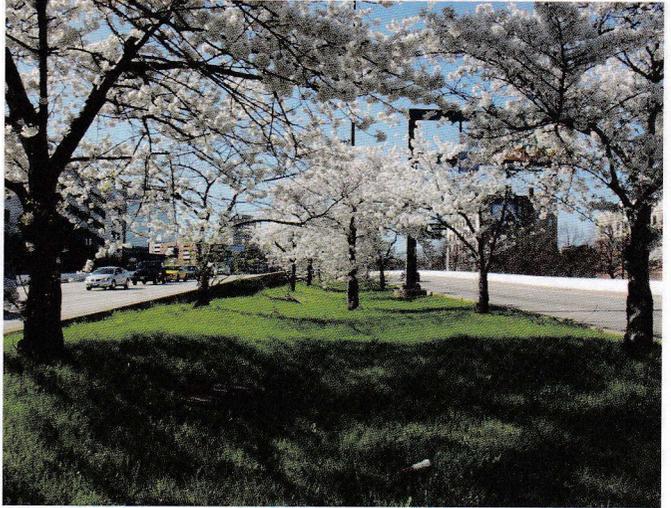
context. Within this frame, identity is not an expression of a predetermined, fundamental self we are destined to become. Rather, we are always becoming who we are, never arriving at a fixed identity. Who we are becoming is continuously shaped by our run-ins with the world and other people. Similarly, psychogeography spotlights the effects an environment has on the inner workings of individuals, including the stylistic and conditional influences of architecture, the imagery and language of advertising, and the evidence we find of other people moving through the spaces we share. These things imprint upon us, and our responses to them dictate our movement within and resonance with different places. The essence of the relationship between queer and psychogeographic discursive spheres is this: the sites we occupy shape the lives we lead and who we are continually becoming.

The role of embodiment in queer approaches to identity and need for occupation of place within psychogeographic practices are two points of the *NPS* triad that function as interdependent compliments of one another. Because Graham enacts no physical change upon the sites he addresses, the only things separating a forgotten lot from its history of invisibility and its state as a *NPS* are his presence, the language he employs, and the presence of his tour participants. The *NPS* practice is also not exclusively made up of the specific sites featured in the work. *NPS* is instead an approach to exploring and talking about public space that becomes embodied by its participants through their experiences viewing various sites along a *NPS* walking tour. In this way, *NPS* illustrates a very queer kind of embodiment that emerges from the experiences *NPS* tours provide their participants. Graham’s transformation of space within *NPS* relies on the presence of individuals to experience and embody his approach to these sites with him. This need for participants to join him in occupation of the sites he addresses with *NPS* is a generous expression of the works’ roots in psychogeographic practices.

Completing the triangle of queer psychogeography is the importance of organized nomenclature within *NPS* and the role of naming in articulating the relationship between psychogeographic occupation and queer embodiment.

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Names make places and ideas communicable. Elements in our world become what they are to us through the names we give them. Invisible sites become visible and their qualities become communicable when they are given names that reflect the unseen attributes revealed by the *NPS* practice. In creating a typology of sites, and subsequently naming different sites within *NPS* based on the experiences they provoke and using appropriated and newly created terms, Graham enables the essential communication of *NPS* ideas. Because *NPS* does not have a physicality of its own, nor does it exist outside of the occupation and embodiment of its tenants, once the participants have left all that remains is the language of invisible public spaces and liminal experiences.



Naming also carries strong importance within queer theory and psychogeographic practices. Queer theory is a discourse of malleable applications, boundaries, and definitions. Naming and/or redefining new ideas, experiences, bodies and identities are critical to maintaining and sharing the flexibility and freedom that is a keystone of queer discourse. Naming is also indispensable within psychogeographic art practices as it is an essential tool for the reconceptualization of ordinary spaces. Within the still short history of psychogeographic art practices, Robert Smithson used naming to transform suburban construction residue into a series of epic monuments in his “Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967). With this project, a walk, a name and an essay turned a suburban, backwater area into a point for consideration of what our contemporary, lived landscapes have become and how they are in turn shaping us and our histories.



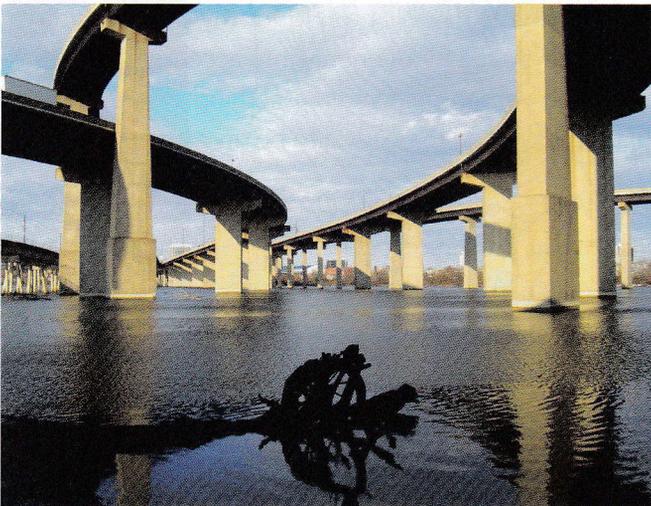
Like Smithson’s monuments, naming in the context of *NPS* allows for the reconceptualization of our relationships to familiar sites, new found abilities to describe freshly seen nuances of a site and the potential for communication of and activation by public space observers and producers. By giving emergent moments of infrastructural disintegration or repose in urban surroundings such strange names as “Crosswalk Dissolution,” “Tactile Rupture,” and “Anti-Throne,” the new



names and language of *NPS* allow participants to reconceptualize their public space experiences and everyday invisible sites as imbued with exploratory potential, unwritten history, and poetic drama, rather than mere infrastructural mistakes and forlorn cityscapes.

Both queer theory and psychogeographic approaches in art are exciting and still relatively new territory being explored with increasing fervor by artists and academics alike. Graham's *NPS* practice serves as a powerful catalyst for exploring these complementary fields of critical inquiry relative to the ways our identities emerge from our relationships to place. Given that both queer theory and psychogeography emphasize the formative relationships individuals have to the places they occupy, the *New Public Sites* project presents a compelling example of how new applications of language and carefully crafted experiences among people in public space can open up new potential beyond the edges of body and site.

[1] "Their" used deliberately as a gender neutral pronoun despite its grammatical incorrectness in application to a singular subject due to the lack of a gender neutral singular pronoun in the English language.



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