Dimensional Voices

Seth Cimarron Avecilla, MArch (Level I)
Jonathan Westleigh Harmon, MArch (Level 1)
Sonia Klemperer-Johnson, MArch (Level 1)

"Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know."
"There is still one of which you never speak."
Marco Polo bowed his head.
"Venice," the Khan said.
Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972

Theoretical Framework

Our project can most succinctly be described as a meditation on space and the inherent fiction of any single representation of it. It is at one level an intensely personal endeavor, having entered us – the nominal authors – into a direct relationship with those individuals whose voiced thoughts and feelings about the Stata Center. In another sense, authorship belongs to our interviewees, whose agency we projected from disparate spatiotemporal origins into one place, invigorating it with their energy. More importantly though, the installation is a public intervention, designed to engage the MIT community in an inherently political dialogue about the nature of the described space. In so doing, it facilitates the synthesis and understanding of the institutional narrative of the Stata Center. The conversations transmitted and engendered by the project provide a channel for the institute to meditate on the meaning of the place, how it might be strengthened or subverted, and how to integrate or reject it.

By inviting the passer-by to pause and listen to the voices of others commenting upon the very environment that surrounds the installation, the project seeks to provoke reconsideration of the monolithic and arbitrary readings that the individual is prone to force upon the spaces that she or he routinely inhabits. Each recorded narrator imagines a space that varies wildly from the voices that precede it, and eventually a multi-faceted sense of the space emerges from the clashing qualifications, comparisons, polemics, and prescriptions. Just as with Calvino's Polo, who realizes that it is in the context of a multiplicity of overlapping forms that one can most easily come to grips with the complex and paradoxical character of a place, our goal is to have the listener emerge from our collection of narratives – each a simplification, a fiction – with a richer and deeper understanding of the personal nature of space.

Contextualizing the Reclaim the Streets actions of the Nineties with which he was involved, British artist John Jordan noted, "avant-garde agitational artists have tried to demolish the divisions between art and life and introduce creativity, imagination, play and pleasure into the revolutionary project,"[1] and it is in this tradition that this project is clearly situated. Recognition of authorship is rejected, and instead the focus is firmly upon making

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1   Jordan, John. "The art of necessity: the subversive imagination of anti-road protest and Reclaim the Streets" in *DiY culture: party and protest in Nineties Britain.* George McKay, ed. London: Verso, 1998, pp. 129.

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the installation disappear into the fabric of its environment in an attempt to maximize its potential to socially transform the Stata Center. Additionally, the Reclaim the Streets activists changed the places they were working with by creating a carnival-like atmosphere in houses slated for demolition or by taking over highways for pedestrian use. These interventions created new perceptions of old spaces, giving people alternative ways of comprehending places they had only understood in a single dimension before. Likewise, our intervention attempts to create a multidimensional understanding of a place that has heretofore been seen in single dimensional ways by many different individuals.

Tangible Manifestation

Our point of departure was an interest in transgressive and parasitic spaces, using sound as a medium. Our main idea was to create a displacement by creating a fold in space and time. The infinite corridor possesses unique qualities that make it particularly suited for this project. It is a long linear space down which people walk chatting with their friends, creating individual space/time moments. The predictability of people's movements down the hall gave us an opportunity to record them as they walked by one location and to play back the recording as they walked by another location, thereby putting the person in the time location of their recorded words but in the space location of their current position. Practice does not always follow intention, however. Our first iteration failed because background noise overwhelmed recognizable human voices.

Next, we thought about other ways in which we can change a space using sound. We latched onto the main idea of the Italo Calvino book, "Invisible Cities", in which one city is repeatedly described in disparate enough ways to suggest that several different cities are being portrayed. We asked people to describe the Stata Center while we recorded them, and later we projected the edited recordings back into the Student Street Corridor. The intention is that people will hear many different perceptions of a single space and that the perceptions will sometimes mesh with their own, sometimes contradict their own, and sometimes contradict reality. The voices may identify aspects of the space that the listener had never noticed before. By reinforcing one's own perceptions, the space becomes more tangible; by adding new perceptions, the space transforms into something new.