



Written as a conceptual journey through time and place in the setting of the Bay Area transit system, a dialogue emerges between one collective and another. Resonant City, a small anonymous group of artists, writers, and independent researchers based in Oakland, sheds light on the complexities presented by pursuing a unified transit system for the Bay Area. Resonant City reconfigures notions of regional identity by collecting ephemera, documentation and first hand experiences from their travels along the Bay Area transit lines. The discussion between Resonant City and NODE, Network of Daily Experience, an artist collective based in San Francisco, is presented here. The two collectives reflect on the ways in which creativity, personal experiences, and encounters with fellow citizens contribute to how we navigate systems of movement and question how we affect systems of movement that navigate us. Each collective imagines future transiting for the region they call home.



FUTURE TRANSIT

A Dialogue with Resonant City

Kim Cook and Emily Dippo (NODE)

The following text was written in conjunction with the SFAI 2011 MA Thesis 2 Collaborative project, *Transit/Stasis: Negotiating Movement in the City*, an exhibition and publication examining the space of negotiation between transit and stasis as a productive territory for conceptual inquiry and physical interventions. The following text documents an interview between the anonymous members of Resonant City, one of the five projects selected for realization as a part of *Transit/Stasis*, and NODE collaborative members Emily Dippo and Kim Cook, who have been working together since 2009. They chose to work as their collaborative persona for this project as a way of directly engaging with a fellow collective.

History

NODE—Cook: Local transit history is apparent within the existing San Francisco transit system. The transit system has developed and changed while maintaining historically relevant elements, as evident in cable and street cars. It is clear that within this system, the complex range of technologies used make it very difficult to update infrastructure in order to expand service; the convergence of historical and contemporary transit technology delimit future growth. A general fragmentation exists that is as much a symptom of history as it is of bureaucracy. The transit system within San Francisco can be seen as a microcosm of the issues faced by the greater Bay Area and acknowledged by Resonant City.

Q: Do you have specific historical references for the production of your psychogeographic maps? How does Bay Area history play into your research and experiences of the individual stops and individual cities? The systems in place today were at one time an imagined future.

Resonant City: One cannot escape history; it is rooted in conditions of the material world. We do not have specific historical referents for producing the map portion of this project. While history does influence the creation of space, particularly red-lining and the destruction of neighborhoods while creating the transit system or the choices of the

NODE—Dippo: How much of the Bay Area history can be seen, felt, and heard while in transit? As we move over land and water, how often are we conscious of what has come before us and what is currently in the environment around us? What psychogeographic maps are we creating based on our own interests and knowledge, and how much of these personal

end of the line, the actual mapping is based on real-time experience, and provides a way for us to know the Bay Area as a geographical construct from a certain perspective—that of transit.

The desires of the past are always present in some form; transit infrastructure is not exactly flexible. The BART system was and continues to be a massive undertaking and has cost fifteen billion dollars (adjusted for inflation) to build, and the average cost per mile of extension is \$200 million dollars. Over the years its design and administration has had its own internal logic. We are still living with decisions that were made in the 60's about the future of BART.

One negative example of the past lingering is the legacy of carpeted seats. Initially they thought that people would be more comfortable having cushy seats like on an Amtrak or regional train, but now most of those seats are fairly disgusting and the logistics to replace seats is a 15 year process. They've just started a new phase to design their next fleet of trains, which will start operations in 5 years. This time around they are embracing a more open and participatory design process and anybody can send in suggestions for how the cars should be.

maps could contribute to a collective psychogeography? I enjoy thinking about the Situationist International's "drift" and passion for maps, as they might help us produce a collective psychogeographic map informing future transit and movement planning and encourage us to archive contemporary shared experiences. How could the Bay Area's strong history of skateboard culture, for example, inform future recreational movements like parkour?

Public

NODE—Dippo: When working as an artist in the public domain I am constantly thinking about how my actions and interactions with an audience, or simply the people sharing public space, is happening in a meaningful way. In our collaborative, Kim and I are often inviting people to engage with us as either active participants or passive pedestrians. Part of the joy of working in this way is talking to and learning from strangers you will likely never see again. A simple conversation, glance or act will bring so much meaning to a project that is just impossible to attain in a studio or gallery.

Q: Within your *Transit/Stasis* proposal, you state that you will be collecting interviews and documenting the transit experience of individuals. How do you view your relationship to these participants; are they collaborators? Do you consider your participants as audience members as well? Do you take on the persona of Resonant City while in the public domain?

Resonant City: Transit is something that affects us all. It is one of the crucial elements to everyday life, and one would hope that people think that the ways in which they view the world matters. One part of our research is conducted through interviews and surveys and the other part, the visual/sound recordings, are based on our own interactions with the city and transit systems. On a very base level we are collaborating with our participants because they are taking a small amount of their time to actively participate in this project, but we would not say they are collaborators per se. We have the mentality that you start where you are, so many of the participants are friends, co-workers, and acquaintances,

NODE—Dippo: Whether enacting a research methodology for further studio work, or actions completing a conceptual plan, working in public spaces with strangers certainly has its rewards. There is a fine balance in negotiating relationships with strangers; deceiving people or taking advantage of particular situations is an unacceptable but unfortunately all-too-often scenario.

NODE—Cook: It is sometimes difficult to attain the level of interaction imagined for a project. Pressure is added when a project is so dependent on the participation of others. Emily and I have had projects in the public realm that were not as successful as we hoped due to this circumstance. There

which in a round about way says, yes, some of the audience will be participating by consenting to an interview or taking the time to fill out a survey. In public we are still largely anonymous, Resonant City is not a persona—this is not currently a performance project.

is a level of give and take when you are working with the public. Sometimes projects go over well, as planned, and sometimes they do not. You must constantly be aware of the context of your interaction and have a back-up plan if things go awry. With each new public project we learn more about interacting with the public.

Future

NODE—Cook: I've begun to think about divisions between neighborhoods, both real and perceived. In many cases transit lines create and enforce these divisions, although, ironically they functionally create connections. Through our research for *Transit/Stasis*, and in our own art practices, we have been exposed to many recent art projects on this theme. It is necessary to have an informed critical dialogue to better contextualize the current moment and imagine the future.

Q: The end result of your project has an interesting visionary element, as stated in your proposal: "With the results of the exploration, we would like to speculate on how a more unified system could prefigure a more unified regional identity." Can you hypothesize on what a unified system would look like? Do current conditions allow for implementation of this system or is it less grounded in the here and now?

Resonant City: The nature of the exploration is more speculative than grounded in reality—this is, after all, a work on paper rather than being hired as regional transportation planners. The on-the-ground reality of regional transportation infrastructure is wrapped up in bureaucracy, public-private partnerships, billions of dollars, and prolonged

NODE—Cook: While thinking about visionary projects I ask myself, 'Are the solutions presented by artists viable?' In many cases the answer is 'not particularly,' but they are easily accessible for their audience as concepts. The artist may not be interested in immediate tangible change, but getting people to re-envision their world. In the statement for

multi-year, multi-decade project implementations grinding most progress to a halt. We, on the other hand, are not confined by these types of restraints or resources.

Of course we can hypothesize on what a unified system may look like, but material conditions of regional planning would not allow a project like this to come into effect for another fifty years, if ever. This is, of course, a conversation that is more about long-term thinking and planning; the here and now is not always the most concrete way to hatch a plan. By imagining things differently we open the door to more possibilities of what the future can look like.

This project is more about the spatial relationships within the Bay Area based on mass transit and the spread of resources. If we had an effective mass transit system, would capital be less concentrated? Would it change the material relationships in Richmond or San Jose? How would the region change if it were viewed as a unified Bay Area, instead of San Francisco and the rest of the outlying suburban areas? Since it is clear that capital is unevenly distributed, how does the geography of the Bay Area create its material conditions, and what would happen if this distribution

the visionary project, *Wish You Were Here! Postcards from Our Awesome Future*, artists Steve Lambert and Packard Jennings explain the change that is made through the visioning process:

“We believe that exposure to these visionary plans expand our concepts of what is possible. Common perceptions of urban landscape are of an unchangeable constant, or when changes do happen, they are made from opaque government offices or behind the doors of a developer’s conference room. However, our built environment is created through decisions and those decisions can be different.”¹

Lambert’s and Jennings’ answer suggests that in the long run they are interested in provoking change, but not just by changing the issue at hand. It is more complex than that. What they suggest is a change in thinking that moves beyond the status quo. With that in mind, one must reflect on the final forms of visionary projects and how these forms reach the intended audience.

NODE—Dippo: When thinking about a more unified transit system of the future I started to imagine how the architecture and engineering would look. Does this unified transit system have many layers incorporating multiple

of resources and access changed? Part of this answer may actually be tied to regional place making and identity—how we conceive of ourselves regionally and how our relationships to place affect us.

types of movement, or might it be super streamlined like the sterile tunnels in the science fiction film *THX 1138*,² a movie I can’t help thinking about while on BART. Does it maintain the mundane repetition so succinctly illustrated in *Koyaanisqatsi*³ or is one of its features a fantastic interactive *Velo-City*,⁴ a rapid mobility system based on human-powered wheeled movement? Creating a unified and efficient system for the future might look very much like the *Velo-City* vision that fosters healthy lifestyles, increases our acknowledgment of actual distance in relation to the environment, and engages us in a social sphere that places value on sharing common infrastructure.⁵ Indeed, might H.G. Wells have been right in declaring “cycle tracks will abound in Utopia?”⁶ Our future systems may rely more upon our own energy and communal public space. While notions of a unified regional identity can evoke visions of homogeneous life, they can also do just the opposite; regional identity might be based on notions of shared commons, enabling a multitude of people to move together in many forms.

Mapping

NODE—Dippo: The mapping process has historically been a practice based on demarcating territory. The process of mapping designates a space as belonging to a specific group or it highlights space yet to be mapped in great detail. The act of mapping has the potential to be an empowering experience, producing greater awareness and understanding, or involve reclaiming lost knowledge or territory. In the introduction of *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*, Rebecca Solnit states: “Maps are always invitations in ways that texts and pictures are not; you can enter a map, alter it, plan with it. A map is a ticket to actual territory, while a novel is only a ticket to emotion and imagination.”⁷

Q: The supporting images for your proposal, *Train Route Typologies and Proposed Unified Transit System Routes*, are suggestive of a journey. We are thinking specifically about the journey as a metaphor for the ‘unified system.’ Can you speak to the use of images in regard to this project?

Resonant City: *The Train Route Typologies* are an example of what the various transit routes look like from above, lines placed on a map to signify the methods of movement throughout the region. There are only a handful of generic typologies that transit systems take—a spiders web of criss-crossing lines, a circle or a straight line (A to B) along the grid. We pulled the Typologies out of the map environment in order to understand the patterns of the routes and create a series of images for the overall design of the transportation proposal.

We do not subscribe to a certain metaphor when thinking about images in relationship to this

NODE—Cook: I understand references to the map as an entry point in ways that other forms are not, but am not fully convinced by their efficacy. When thinking of a map in this way, I am left contemplating the fragmented maps proposed by Resonant City and looking further back into history to the fragmented maps created by the Situationists. There is value in the psychogeographical map that is not inherent in its form. The dysfunctional map acts as a symbol of societal issues. I am thinking specifically of Guy Debord’s *Naked City*, a map that fragmented Paris and illustrated “the Situationists’ concern with the construction and perception of urban space.”⁸ Resonant City

project. It is really more about typologies of the different stops on mass transit and the psychological affect that architecture and space have on an individual in transit. This could conversely be the way that sound walls on the freeway make one feel claustrophobic, or it could be the way a person is affected by traveling through portions of the City on rail, bus, or bike. It’s not so much the journey we are interested in as the feeling the journey creates in the individual.

Collaboration

NODE—Cook: As members of NODE, we have found there are many advantages to working collaboratively. The ability to create more complex projects with added support is possible through this collaborative environment. We bounce ideas off of each other before realizing them in the world, thus providing an automatic feedback loop; in a sense we are sometimes more critical in our collaborative endeavors. Our mode of collaboration differs from that of Resonant City in that we view our collaboration as an extension of our individual art practices.

Q: On the Resonant City website ‘About Us’ section you state: “We write collaboratively because it is not a single author that is important, but rather ideas.” We are interested in how you came to this self-less mode of collaboration and how it has been helpful to you as artists? What are some of the difficulties you have encountered working as an interdisciplinary group?

Resonant City: We are not self-less—believe me—we are each a cantankerous personality. We are also not all visual artists, more so we are independent scholars and writers and artists. With this in mind our interdisciplinary way

is addressing a similar concern through mapping; “how one travels through space defines how we see ourselves and how local and regional identities are formed.”⁹

NODE—Cook: The anonymity employed by Resonant City reflects a trend in anti-individuation in public art practice. *In Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Suzanne Lacy’s pivotal book of essays on public art, Suzi

of thinking does not lend itself to specialization, although each of us has our own strengths and weaknesses that complement each other.

Collaboration offers a certain type of social interaction that we all find enjoyable and creates a space with more minds to work through ideas. Resonant City is more about creating a platform for the series of ideas we have been ruminating on, rather than about each of us as individuals. We felt that it was easier to present ideas on their own merit than on some notion of expertise, our force of personality, or reputations.

The difficulties we encounter are no different than any other type of group activity: such as a clashing of heads over ideas, time constraints, or varying styles of work habits, but these idiosyncrasies can be expected in any collaborative project. But we do this project out of our own personal interests and enjoyment. //

Gablik wrote, “much of the new art focuses on social creativity rather than on self-expression and contradicts the myth of the isolated genius...”¹⁰ One could say that the current moment in public art has gone beyond the question of the ego-driven individual artist, but collective anonymity extends this viewpoint even further. Gablik concludes her essay by stating, “this book [*Mapping the Terrain*] bears witness to the increasing number of artists who are rejecting the product orientation of consumer culture and finding ever more compelling ways of weaving environmental and social responsibility directly into their work.”¹¹ The mode of collaboration practiced by Resonant City is but one example of artists rejecting the ‘product orientation of consumer culture’ or more bluntly stated, capitalism.

NODE—Dippo: Resisting the production model based on the individual art star, so favored by international art markets has positioned many artists in such a way that they are able to produce work differently than they otherwise would. The choice to work in a collective cannot always be evaluated as a resistance, there are many collectives functioning very successfully within the international art market systems.

So collective does not always signal a rejection of the market, but what does it signal? A social dynamic based on exchange, an intent to cooperate, an interest in pooling resources and sharing skills, and a need to produce in ways that are unattainable as an individual. These are basic life skills and yet are often highly undervalued or not required of artists who primarily work solo. So how then do we envision the arts playing a vital role in future multidisciplinary projects? Specifically in reference to this project, I am interested in thinking about how this art project might influence people working in other disciplines, future transit in the Bay Area and beyond. //

1 Jennings, Packard & Steve Lambert. *Wish You Were Here! Postcards from our Awesome Future*. November 2008. <http://visitsteve.com/made/wish-you-were-here-postcards-from-our-awesome-future-2/>. (10 Feb. 2011).

2 *THX 1138* Official Website. www.thx1138movie.com. (12 Feb. 2011).

3 *Koyaanisqatsi* by director Godfrey Reggio. <http://www.koyaanisqatsi.org>. (accessed February 13, 2011).

4 *Velo-City*. <http://www.velo-city.ca/n>. (13 February 2011).

5 *Velo-City* Mission Statement. <http://www.velo-city.ca/>. (13 February 2011).

6 Wells, H. G. *A Modern Utopia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967, 47.

7 Solnit, Rebecca. *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 6.

8 McDonough, Tom. ‘Situationist Space. Guy Debord’s The Naked City’, in *October* No. 67. (Winter 1994) 58-77.

9 Resonant City proposal submitted to “Transit/Stasis,” 2010.

10 Gablik, Suzi. “Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism.” In *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, 76.

11 *Ibid*, 87.