Volume 8, Issue 3 - June 2013

A Prank and Its Possibilities

In the course of everyday life, in order to survive and prosper individuals must communicate with groups, interact with institutions, negotiate with corporations, and navigate through bureaucracies. The experience of artists, entrepreneurs, and activists can offer insight into these processes. The success and failure of their pursuits is affected in large part by their competency in communication, and perhaps most importantly, their creativity in communication. In my work, I learn from the performances and interactions of art groups like Temporary Services, a Chicago based art collaboration that attempts through their art to temporarily alter or subvert “business as usual,” and to promote more ethical, intimate relations between people and organizations.

By taking a close look at Temporary Services’ work The Library Project, I tell the story of how an art prank designed to challenge an institution’s authority operates both as a gift and as a threat. I show how, in the space of this ambiguity, the possibility for creative relationships—outside the typical channels and manner of communication—is

In 2001, artists Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julin, and Marc Fischer, the core group that makes up Temporary Services, enlisted the help of over 50 artists and art groups to construct 100 artists’ books that were “donated” to the Washington Library Center (HWLC) in Chicago in a covert act of artistic intervention. By manufacturing replicated stamps used by the HWLC, Temporary Services’ made the books look like they already belonged in the library. Because the library security checked for books leaving the library—not those entering—it was relatively easy for Temporary Services to smuggle the books into the library and shelve them in places the artists had selected. The goal of this action, according to Marc Fischer, was to create “new juxtapositions of materials not normally possible in common library practice,” while “bringing obscure, subversive, self-published, handmade, or limited edition works of visual art—behind closed doors. Why not, they ask, shelve an artist book like Hans-Peter Feldmann’s Die Toten, which contains photographs of the victims of terrorism in Germany, next to other non-art books about extremist groups who practiced terrorism in Germany (Fischer par. 17)? Why not let the authors decide which section of the library will “provide the strongest experience of their work” (Fischer par. 22)?

The most compelling aspect of The Library Project is how the prank wavers between a threat and a gift, an oscillation that is accomplished through the language of “gifts,” “giving,” and “donation” that Temporary Services uses to describe the project in a zine they produced. Additionally, the prank takes shape through the on-going interactions and conversations that occur as the books are discovered, the library’s official holdings, and eventually put on display by the library. I draw from communication scholar Harold’s insightful work on culture jamming and prankster art to argue that The Library Project is an example of a rhetorical strategy I call “pranking as gifting.” Pranking as gifting critiques the library, perhaps to change its policies, but its real payoff is the invention of creative relationships among Temporary Services, the library, and the library’s patrons. As The Library Project shows, pranking as gifting extends prankster art beyond the initial covert act, bringing the artworks, librarians, and patrons into conversation with one another.

The covert tactics of sneaking the books into the library had the potential to reinforce a rigid us/them dichotomy between the institution and the artists, a relation characterized by asymmetrical power relations. By working outside the norm...
communication between the library and its patrons, Temporary Services placed the library on the defensive, forcing it to tighten security and/or cleanse the library of disorder. Further, by providing the public with an example and detailed instructions for how to pull off such a prank at this and other libraries, The Library Project kind of Anarchist Cookbook, a looming threat to the powers that be.

However, this sharp edge is dulled in a few key ways. First, Temporary Services used the rhetoric of gift giving in their zine, arguing that the prank should not be viewed “as an act of aggression” (Fischer par. 6); rather, think of it as a “massive gift” worth in excess of $1000 (Fischer par. 20). Second, Temporary Services appropriated the library’s discourse and values in order to position themselves as allies to the library. They did this by using HWLC as the cover of the zine, and by including the HWLC’s mission statement and the “Library Bill of Rights” zine. In Christine Harold’s terms, Temporary Services augmented the library’s maps and documents with Services logo and aesthetic, and they folded the library’s mission statement in a way that aligned The Library Project with the goals of the library. The zine provides a rhetorical frame through which to view the action. It did with traditional argument, but also with the performative enactment of friendliness and the dressing of clothes of the library.

Lastly, The Library Project, as an example of pranking as gifting, works because of the conversations that continue to occur since the prank was executed. For example, in the Fall of 2006, Temporary Services revisited the scene of the prank with a group of students. In anticipation of their arrival, HWLC librarians created a large display of some of the captured books. The librarians expressed excitement about the project and a desire to find books. The conversations among the students, the artists, the librarians, and indeed even among communication scholars like me, show that a prank can be a gift that continues to give. By using “pranking as gifting,” ambiguous move that unsettles the expected relations proposed by strategies of control, Temporary Services creatively, producing a space where unique and intimate relations among Temporary Service and the library’s patrons are now possible.

Joe Hassert is an Adjunct Professor of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University and a doctoral candidate at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, IL, USA. This essay appeared in the June 2013 issue of Communication Currents and was translated from the scholarly article: Hassert, J. (2013). The Library Project and the gift of prankster art. Text and Performance Quarterly, 33(3), 98-114. Text and Performance Quarterly and Communication Currents are publications of the Communication Association.