

*State and Lake*

By Laurie Palmer

Essay for catalog for group exhibition “State and Lake” curated by Annie Morse, shown at Gescheidle Gallery, 2006

If I think of drawing a portrait of a city, I think of drawing a portrait of that city's potential. Potential is the intersection of a number of lines, each line traveling in two directions. State and Lake can be understood literally in terms of intersecting streets and an elevated/subway interchange, and figuratively (for example) as power and contemplation, identity and landscape, law and resources, bureaucracy and waves. In each configuration maximum potential depends on maximum exposure of each term to the other, as opposed to, for instance, the containment of the lake inside a concrete bathtub, which separates land and water, reduces exposure of each to each, and thins life (eliminating habitat in the rich and fertile littoral zone). Against forces that thin the world -- separating, reducing, flattening, privatizing, homogenizing and unifying based on translations to ease the flow of profit -- against this, to push for maximum contact and exposure to difference; this is not dilution but collision. *Public* is an action not a place, where the city's life gets made, and amplified, through differences colliding.

*At State and Lake green- and red-line riders exchange news in person and at the intersection kiosk where pushpinned notes locate the week's urgent meetings. West, south, and north traveling riders talk on the trains, the talk is open, genial, and optional, though most everyone introduces themselves to those immediately near and the topic for the time of moving together is sharing news-- it is motivated talk. All official business has been lowered to a horizontal grid, you can still go up in a tower to look down but no one is throwing things down from above anymore, public business that matters is transacted on the level of the trains and buses, in the trains and buses, while moving.*

Whom do we speak with? Where? How? What do we have to gain from initiating encounters except everything, the surprise that takes us out of a closed circuit, switching from green line to red, from bus to walking, from walking to the train. We don't know who knows what. Because there is so much information, it seems to fill and define public space; but because there is so much, there is no public space that's shared; different groups and individuals tap into different pockets that often don't overlap. What passes for public are the large governing bodies that act without connection to constituencies, and local groups proliferate without connection to other local groups. Available information seethes and whorls, like a thick miasma, undifferentiated until a piece gets exchanged. At that point of exchange an idea takes a shape. Each exchange is an articulation that counts, like a signal jumping between nerves.

While I am copying readings for class in Kinkos in the early morning, two men doing a lay-out and Xerox job are conversing about the state of the world and the need for collective care-taking. I am excited by the direction of their conversation, about solving needs with available resources and mutual aid, and I interrupt to tell them that. They are both warm and responsive, ask if I am a teacher and one man hands me a copy of the

Muslim Journal, a paper that he helps to put out. The other man smiles warmly too, says I might be interested in this, and hands me a palm card that says all homosexuals will be swallowed up by the fires of hell very soon. But I am a homosexual! I say, laughing. This man's smile leaves quickly, but the other man rallies, and says to his friend that you have to make room for everyone, you can't be leaving anyone out. We then introduce ourselves; and the inclusively-oriented man writes down the time and place that he preaches.

Public space is intersections, delicate in structure; like the pattern of steel trestlework that holds up the el -- not the steel itself, but the collision of steel and light in a flickering filigree all the way down Lake Street from the Loop to the Conservatory, hypnotic and dangerous if you drive too fast.

Action, friction, switch -- but speed is not the aim. When I hear myself praise connectivity, I hear the echo of high speed internet ads insisting on the need to get connected. The problem of being over-connected is similar to being over-committed except connection without commitment is worse. Being plugged in - into a larger system of news and information and access to others and they to you - also means being surveilled, traced, marked, watched, and watching. Connected means flows without interruptions, it means ease of movement if you have an ID, it means access if you have paid up front, it means speed, smoothness, visibility of your credit record, your driving record, your prison record; it means drinking large specialty coffees at every other corner in order to keep up, and carrying a card with a band keyed to an electrical field.

As we grow, lines of intersection proliferate and situate us, providing directions for moving and doing, as well as nailing us down, pin pricks in someone else's map. (Cell phone calls, credit card exchanges, fast pass snapshots -- coordinated stab points.) State and Lake is the intersection of a bow across a cello, or a bow across a curved saw, a baleful sound. But the interruption of smooth connections in deeply grooved power networks can create alternate networks based on different concerns.

What's good? The refusal of the anaesthesiologists in California to execute Michael Morales in February intercepted the smooth functioning of state sanctioned execution and suggested the potential of a movement of linked refusals; the refusal of citizens of Cochambamba, Bolivia, to allow the privatization of their water in 2000 demonstrated the potential for a massive connected local response to supplant corporate power. In January, 2006, Bechtel corporation dropped its 25 million dollar suit against the government of Bolivia for not letting it privatize and settled for a token payment equal to 30 cents.

*Empty lots formerly razed by deliberate processes of uneven development (hoping to generate future capital flows) now feed neighborhood grocery trucks with fresh produce. Some lots with greenhouses and healthy colonies of worms produce leafy greens year round, others are occupied by towering piles of steaming composts in January, in others the raised beds and cold frames wait it out for spring. By May the sound of the grocery truck bell delivering early peas and lettuces rings weekly in West and South Side neighborhoods where the lots which had been tagged as future investments are now*

*linked in a distributed farm. High schools that had been listed to become military training academies to channel black and brown students directly into war have been instead converted to horticultural programs training urban farmers and small business entrepreneurs for local initiatives before entering college if they want to go (which will be free), as well as scientists working on alternate fuels and energy production (for example, methane from steaming compost). The city (constructed via bus and train conversations) decided this investment carried maximum potential: making connections between needs and resources on the level of living, not triangulated through appeal to the vertical tower, where anyway no one is any longer at home.*

I want... is a child's demand that gets censored early because it is misunderstood as a cry of selfishness, rather than a cry for connection with the world filtered through whatever ways and means are available for connection. I want milk, or touch, or attention, or the ball, or to go home -- these are all shared needs and they link us to each other. As if individual need were independent from public good; as if it were embarrassing to need to eat, or to have a place to live, or to be recognized.

The angle of the sun coming in my window at 7:43 am on February 12 is the angle of an atom that has swerved off course. For the early atomists of Epicurus the beginning of things is a collision, the result of one atom swerving off course, and intersecting with others. Before the beginning, particles fall in parallel lines in a chilled and absolute order of fixed relations; the angular swerve and the resulting collision followed by multiple collisions as multiple atoms are bounced off course is the beginning of the world. The beginning is the eruption of chaos out of order, not the other way around; it is promiscuous connection and relation. The beginning is about more and more and more, rather than editing. Like a nuclear bomb.

Atomism's beauty is not about the self-contained and isolated particle as irreducible entity, it is about the collisions and intersections of these particles as they bloom and construct the world. How do you amplify difference and keep it public, everyone wants to ask. As if these ideas were mutually exclusive, as if difference were incommensurate with public good, and both needed to be muted in order to coexist.

Connectivity is opportunity for change - not just exchange, as if all were the same, flattened by money. There is a problem of confusion between the metaphor of horizontal movement in a network that's non-hierarchical and the flattening metaphor of homogenization and privatization and equivalence (money). There is a problem with metaphor in general, separated from doing. Making maps, paths, connections, interruptions, relationships, excesses, shapes, textures--in an otherwise smoothing context--is doing.

It could be a slow walk, or a boat ride, or the re-valuing of water; the lake not as a cement wading pool stilled of all its smaller ports, but the lake as another mode of connection, and not only movement on the water, but also of it -- water moving through our bodies and the city and the sky, how we intersect with the deep tunnels and waste flows and changing climate, rather than simply how we consume it all. Looking through the lacy

structure of this work we see the city and the world and the time that we are situated in. These lines take us outside of ourselves into the collisions that make the world-- encounters as openness to change, intersections sometimes delicate, electrical. Transfer. Slide sideways. Intersect. State and Lake is a transitive place; only a place because of the energies extending it in four directions and the intersections that happen there -- not necessarily fast, but with enough motion to avoid arrest.

Essay courtesy of Laurie Palmer