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“Crime–Z–land: An Interactive Public Installation by Stephen Wilson”

by Paula Levine

Introduction

Crime–Z–land is an interactive installation/public art project by Stephen Wilson, with design and fabrication assistance from Bruce Cannon and Mike Wong. The installation is located in an open downtown public lot, strategically situated across the street from San Francisco's City Hall, and offers a counterpoint to Davies Concert Hall and the San Francisco Opera.

Sponsored by the Arts Commission Gallery, a non–profit San Francisco arts organization, the work is one of a series of installations the Art Commission Gallery curates throughout the year, using this urban site to present public art.

Crime–Z–land is a complex layering of technological and conceptual components and functions as a provocative and ironic work. It creates a public space where crime masquerades as entertainment; the site's theme park facade serves to mask its serious intent. Crime–Z–land raises questions concerning nature and definition of crime, prompting discussion on the roles, degree of complacency, and responsibility of citizens.

A complex setup of computers runs the installation – two computers, three chip computers, and two web servers. "That means," says Wilson, "that when everything stops, the scanner is still working. And sometimes when the Internet stops, the poles are still working because they are run by the Mac II...It's like 10 pieces going on at once, and the Internet piece could go on without the rest of it."

This article is a series of intersections that combines excerpts from a conversation I had with Steve Wilson at Crime–Z–land with ideas pertaining to the politics of space, amusement, spectacles, and technology.

CRIME–Z–LAND

The site is located in a lot 35 feet wide by 100 feet long. It features a ground map of the city of San Francisco created by means of a system of strings. The

site is bounded by crime scene plastic streamers and is surrounded by a ring of gilded television sets.

A chain-link fence separates the viewer from the mapped city site. Suspended from the fence are texts that describe the installation and provide instructions. There is also a laminated chart that lists the police codes by crime and a basket containing free pamphlets that describe the site and list the police codes.

To the far left hangs a 2 foot by 4 foot plastic toy "touch mat" that works as an interface with the interior lot. Areas on the mat are labelled by crime, such as rape, murder, theft, etc. These are crimes that have taken place over the past year; here, they are compressed into a 24-hour period. Wilson used the city police statistics that record crime by type, location, and time of day.

In the lot, ten poles locate and name the city's top crime spots; for example, the Haight, the Financial District, Golden Gate Park, 5th and Mission, etc. Toy police cars and toy clowns sit on top of these poles with the clowns acting as crime indicators, swinging to and fro whenever a crime is statistically indicated for that area. Viewers can also activate the Crime-Z-land indicators by pushing the touch mat crime areas at the statistically correlated prime-crime-times.

Images from the installation are broadcast twenty-four hours a day by a mounted surveillance camera connected to the Crime-Z-land website. The website further describes, diagrams, and lists links to other resources.

Viewers at Crime-Z-land are periodically interrupted by strange, synthesized voices. A speaker system connected to the website allows viewers in cyberspace to interject commentary.

Perhaps the most popular component of the site is the live broadcast from police radios. Viewers can push a button to activate the police scanners to hear possible crimes as they occur throughout the city.

"(Social) space is a (social) product... All 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify."

- Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

Crime-Z-land: An Interview with Steve Wilson

Steve Wilson: So everyone asks me why Crime-Z-land. I don't have one point in time where it started but I have a longstanding interest in the danger of abstractions. I think the corporation is a fictional person, but by law it has the same standing as people.

(Pause) Is that a crowd enjoying Crime-Z-land?

It seems to me if you have fictional entities, it's too easy for no one to be responsible. I guess it's not hip right now but I really do believe in the basic decency of people, and a corporation doesn't give that decency a chance to play

that out...I think that...large fictional entities (like corporations or governments) do a lot of things they wouldn't do if there were particular people who felt they were in charge and responsible...Corporations really isolate people from the responsibility of their acts and...that leads to crime... So there are these crimes happening out there that should be getting as much attention...as street crime.

Another influence are television reports on crime. Why aren't they as excited about someone firing ten thousand workers and placing a lot of families in dire straits; like when they do these mergers and 15,000...lose their jobs. That's more important than car theft...and TV plays right into that and it's not sensational. So I wanted to make it sensational...You know the muckraker era? That was an interesting period of history.

Paula Levine: What attracted you to this open downtown lot?

Steve Wilson: I have a lot of interest in non-art audiences. I have questions about the art world...My mother went to museums sometimes but my father never. My dad drove a truck. What would it be like to do a piece that my dad would enjoy and get something out of? So I've always had this interest in non-art settings and non-art audiences, and this place is prime for that. It's outside; it's across the street from City Hall and the symphony, and a lot of homeless and druggies hang out here. I mean you've got everything from the high polloi to the low polloi, and so it's an interesting environment. Also, you don't see a lot of interactive computer stuff outside. I wanted to see what that would be like.

I like sites for their sociological or cultural aspects. In this case, I wanted to do something related to city happenings and city life, so it seemed like the right place to do it.

Paula Levine: What about the link between crime and spectacle?

Steve Wilson: It's tricky. It's a way of using spectacle to comment on it. That's why I have the gilded TVs around the installation.

I think a lot of people come by, take it as spectacle and don't go to the next level I had in mind. I would like them to walk away and say: "Gee, why does crime happen in the city?", and think about that. I would like them to walk away and say: "What is crime? Murder? Environmental? Corporate?"...To think maybe there are some crimes that are important that they don't usually think about when they think about crimes, and then...get active somehow, talk to other people, ask questions.

Paula Levine: Are you hoping...to put the person back into the loop of crime and responsibility and reconnect in ways you talked about earlier, counteracting the ways that the existing corporate and governmental systems disconnect people?

Steve Wilson: I'd like people to ask: "If corporate crimes are important, am I involved in any way? If governmental crimes are happening, am I involved in it? Environmental crime?"

It's tricky. I want people to be moved, provoked, enlightened, but you can't wait for that. I think very little art does that or really succeeds on that big level. It takes some baby steps in that area, so that every time I do a piece I feel somewhat unsuccessful.

You know, the piece works better when I talk to viewers. Then, you really get to that next level. So...the first few weeks I would come down and talk to people; ask them what they thought was going on.

There were some kids from Bayview Hunters' point. They were saying: "Hey, where's my neighborhood. Why isn't my neighborhood there?" Meaning, why isn't it represented as part of the installation's mapping of city crime locations? Their claim to fame was their neighborhood's street crime level. As an artist, I'm interested that the piece can generate that kind of response, but is that really what I was hoping would happen?

So I said to these kids: "These numbers are based on police statistics and people reporting crimes to police. Why don't you think there are lot of crimes reported in your neighborhood?" That got us into a discussion about the police and do you trust the police. So that was another level that was really interesting but that wasn't quite what I wanted.

There was a homeless guy who came and said: "All the crime is down here where I live." That's what I wanted. Another woman said: "Well it's interesting but I'd hate to think there had to be art about crime." And another said: "Hey, it's across from City Hall. You know, a lot of those people are criminals." Then it's working as I intended, but...if art works, it expands enough so that people come at it from a number of different kinds of ways. I'm happy with that. I guess I would draw a Venn diagram. I'm willing to accept a big range but when they move far out, I wonder if I could have done something to shape that perspective a little more.

Paula Levine: What about the kids' toys. I notice that when there is a group of people that go by with kids, the kids relate to it first. The kids' toys are really a strong draw.

Steve Wilson: There's a certain irony to having kids' toys in a crime thing...Toys are supposed to be symbolic of an age of innocence, and yet they are not quite. And our society is not innocent...My friends who keep guns away from their kids have their kids make guns from fingers and sticks. So there's something there about power and aggression that I think is human.

Another reason is a commentary on theme parks and amusement, so it's Crime-Z-land and Disneyland; circus, amusement park. The kids' toys contribute to that kind of thing. You go to Disneyland; you go to Crime-Z-land.

Paula Levine: What about that?

Steve Wilson: I don't like the fact we are so oriented toward spectacle and amusement parks. I have this fantasy that thinking deeply about things can be

pretty entertaining...a carnival of concepts. I really think it could work that way. It's exciting to think new thoughts. I think that's one thing that art hasn't played on. The tendency to want to go towards amusement is fine...but what constitutes that amusement?

You know that critical theory says that's all there is in society, spectacle and engagement with images in a shallow way. I don't like it and I don't think it's inevitable.

The history of 'amusement parks' dates back to Medieval times and 'Pleasure Gardens' that featured live entertainment, fireworks, dancing, games, and primitive amusement rides. Pleasure gardens remained extremely popular until the 1700s, when political unrest caused many of these parks to close. However, one of these parks remains: Bakken, north of Copenhagen, opened in 1583, which now enjoys the status of the world's oldest operating amusement park. "The Amusement Park Industry – A Very Brief History," National Amusement Park Historical Association.

Designating spaces outside of everyday life allows for the production and participation in activities and events which are otherwise excluded from daily, ordinary life; a space for pleasure, for example. Carnival took place on the steps of the church, acting as an antithesis to the laws of the church within, and the proprieties of everyday life without, it designated a space outside of everyday spaces, and a time outside of everyday time, where rupture could be contained and localized.

The spectacle, according to Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. Crime-Z-land weds the facade of amusement to that of spectacle. Using a familiar code of mapping and unifying through a system of signs and symbolic language, Wilson attempts to engage viewers through Crime-Z-land's quirky visibility, then push them past its facade of entertainment.

Paula Levine: Jean Baudrillard talks about Disneyland as a place which functions "to conceal the fact that the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, is Disneyland. Disneyland is presented as imaginary to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the American surrounding it are not any longer real but of the order of the hyper-real and of imagination." I wonder if you think that Crime-Z-land also works in this way. That is, it creates a relationship with the city outside by pointing to itself as amusement and spectacle. So that if Crime-Z-land is fiction, a simulation, then everything outside of it must be truth or real.

Steve Wilson: I would say to Cathy, my wife: "There's not enough crime going on!"...You know there's very few murders in San Francisco. There's only 80 murders in a year. That's not very many murders. She said: "You're crazy!"

Or, I come out here, there's nothing going on and I say to people: "Come back at night. There's more happening!"

Paula Levine: So it swallowed you?

Steve Wilson: I'm uneasy about saying that it's all simulation, it's all spectacle. In that, there's a kind of resignation.

Paula Levine: And is that movement away from resignation something that you want to incite in this piece?

Steve Wilson: To the extent it uses the form of a spectacle in order to get to other levels of thought and involvement, then it works. You have this amusement park...which gets you thinking about what actually is an amusement park.

I wanted to involve other parts of the city in this more directly. I told you I'm working on this technology where I have an inexpensive camera you can broadcast from anywhere. So I thought I'd hire students to go to these high crime spots and do live broadcasts to here. I thought about ways to somehow get criminals to call in. But a lot of stuff is going on here. I had to give up some things.

I wanted to show that not all spectacles are the same. What is it that attracts people to spectacles doesn't tell the whole story... People come and they are amused; they are entertained. They say, "I went to Crime-Z-land and had a lot of fun."

I don't know if I'm part of the problem or part of the solution.

Paula Levine: What works particularly well?

Steve Wilson: The Internet part. I'm really interested in the virtual world and the real world...Someone could come (to the site) from the Internet and (it would) be as though they were pushing the button.

The police scanner is probably the most successful aspect. People kept asking: "Is this really crime as it happens?" I think eventually we will have systems in place ... where we really can tap crime as it's happening. The next best thing is the police scanner radio. It is crime as it's happening, or it's the police talking about events that might be crimes. So a lot of people like that because they have never heard a police radio. In Europe, it's against the law. They don't want the public listening to the police. This is one of those circumstances where the American ideal still holds...The U.S. has one of the most liberal laws in terms of listening to the police. My Populist notion is that I don't think the public is aware that this is a resource to them, so it's a real kick to...get it out there.

It turns out, I'm on some kind of edge of the law as it is, because while you are allowed to listen to the police radio, you're not allowed to use what you hear... I went to see a lawyer about this to see if I am in violation of the law. It's still questionable, but I think what I've done is just set up in a technological way...if people push a button, they hear a radio...Now, if I recorded it or something, it would be more complicated. People like it. All kinds of people are fascinated...

They push it. Does it get them thinking about anything? For some people, I'm sure it does.

Now the part that I did...that...was a lot of work but strong conceptually, was that I have fake transmissions. I studied the nature of conversations on the scanner and drove my family crazy listening to the scanner. I saw how it went, saw how they used the codes, and then I made up four fictitious transmissions. One was about a corporate takeover and the resulting unemployed workers; one about a group that was going to cut down old growth redwoods; another about an HMO denying more service; the last was about sweatshop owners in San Francisco.

Conceptually, I think that's just great. I love that part of the piece. Does it really work? I don't know...It's a deconstruction. I have the codes...and...I think that's against the law because I'm using copyrighted material. But it is out there for anyone who listens. That's the most vandalized part....I had this very nice graphic of all the codes. I laminated it and it's been ripped off six times, even though I put copies out there for people to take. I guess copies run out and people want it, and so they take it...

That's another thing. That's how I know it's strong – if it's vandalized. There were six teenagers who passed by the site and they pushed the button on the police scanner and got so mad...This one kid just took the box and ripped it off. I couldn't believe it happened just when I happened to be there...I think they were just being teenagers and showing each other they could do anything they want, but I wondered if it was the police transmissions and the kid didn't get that it was a comment on it. Maybe he thought that the scanner seemed to promote the police and this contributed to his anger...I should have gotten an interview with him.

Paula Levine: What did you do?

Steve Wilson: I didn't want to mess with them, so I waited until they went away and I fixed it up. It was hanging by a wire.

Technically this is most complex piece I've every done. All my pieces have always been run by one computer so only one thing could happen at once. For this one, I learned how to do the chip computers...and it's kind of a kick that it's all working at once...

"Any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationship, despite the fact that a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products). Space is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces – but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements..."

– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

Wilson uses characteristics of space as a mirror with which to reflect the naming, ordering, and classification of crime. Crime-Z-land depends upon, and

to a certain degree emulates, the social system's immense capacity to deflect, direct, and control through a complicated system of techno-mystico routing of information, abstractions, and representations.

In Crime-Z-land, we/the viewer/the urban bodies hear the disembodied voices from police scanners mixing with the synthesized voices of viewers from the web. We are able to analyze the distribution of crime within the city through a humorous system of toy buttons that cause the indicators/toy cars to whirl according to crime category and location.

Crime-Z-land becomes, in a strange and strained way, a kind of extenuated, bizarre and silly (perhaps accurate?) portrayal of the systems of information that shape social institutional consciousness and harbor the constituents of social polarities – law/justice or chaos, truth or fiction, myth or knowledge.

One of the intriguing aspects of Crime-Z-land is that through its constructions, it gives viewers a place to stand that suggests a kind of safety zone in which an urban body can experience crime in the city from some distance. Standing in front of the chain-link fence, one has, in a strange way, a sense that crime is safely contained and managed. Its miniaturized scale and system of abstractions afford the viewer an omnipotent view of the city, one usually reserved for those in power and in control of information systems; viewing crime from a place apart from crime in the city; above it (the viewer stands above the ground map), outside of it. From this perspective, crime can be assessed, viewed, mapped and 'safely' observed, ironically by all its participants – the law, criminals and victims, all standing on common ground.

Paula Levine: Who is your audience?

Steve Wilson: Well, it works for the public in terms of engaging a lot of what's interesting to me that I've claimed is important. Whenever I come down here, someone is enjoying it.

Did I tell you about the homeless guy who acted as the curator? I came down here with some friends from out of town and there's this homeless guy in a wheelchair, and he rolled up and said, "You know, I can tell you all about this piece." He got most of it right and had read all this stuff and he was a very interesting kind of docent. I was very pleased that a stranger, from whatever walk of life, became engaged by this.

I've got a lot of thoughts; all kinds of experiences. I come down here and find a non-art audience, a person engaged with this piece in some way or another. It was pleasing. But I'm still confused about the art world and the non-art world. So it hurts that the... art world is ignoring it; the mainstream art world and its commentators. Crime-Z-land got an honorary mention in Ars Electronica, which is a great honor. But that's my own confusion as an artist. It doesn't stop me; it doesn't dominate my life, but it's unfortunate it hasn't quite succeeded on some level... There ought to be an art prize given by the public.

I'm always thinking about what I can learn from art pieces. I like taking information, visualizing it, and making that available to people...

"As it develops then the concept of social space becomes broader. It infiltrates, even invades, the concept of production, becoming part – perhaps the essential part – of its content."

– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

Crime-Z-land uses the facade of spectacle to interject critique on the nature of crime in society. If a crack exists in the scheme, it lies in its too successful replication of the spectacle's monstrous capacity to ingest the viewer, which works contrary to instigating a state receptive to critique. If the spectacle is a force as powerfully described by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*, as that which "does not realize philosophy" but rather "philosophizes reality" then the force of the inversion must be more strongly orchestrated than the force of the capacity of the spectacle to subsume reality, in order for the strategy to propel the viewer out of the gravitational force of sublime entertainment and into a state of mind that asks 'why?'

The problem, with this installation, if there is one, is that the site is impermanent. Having a fixed site in the downtown urban arena where one can separate oneself from survival in the city and view questions of crime with some measure of distance is as important as parks were to the conversation between nature and culture in the 19th century. Dialogues around crime engage questions of economics, disparity, education, neighborhood rights and privileges, and more. As ideas for theme parks merge with the technology of the 21st century, the capacity to create sites that convey 'real' experiences carry powerful and promising possibilities. Such is the nature of the discussion around the Holocaust Museum in Washington, designed to provide a link between those who lived the Holocaust, and those who now must learn about it. Unless time can be conquered, technology is the next best thing to closing the gap between experience and knowledge. The possibilities suggested by Crime-Z-land are only limited by imagination...and cultural support of the arts.

Notes

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Paula Levine teaches in the Conceptual/Information Arts, Art Department, San Francisco State University. Her video work has been shown in Canada, the United States and Europe. Her current projects include "Blotto", a website that brings together work and ideas from Hermann Rorschach, religion and projection and "Burials and Borders", a project on land, history and memory and a coming to terms with the past. It is situated in Israel, with a focus on the Golan Heights.

Stephen Wilson is a San Francisco author, artist and professor who explores the cultural implications of new technologies. His interactive installations have been shown internationally in galleries and SIGGRAPH, CHI, NCGA, Ars Electronica, and V2 art shows. His computer mediated art works probe issues such as World Wide Web & telecommunications; artificial intelligence and robotics; hypermedia and the structure of information; synthetic voice; and environmental sensing. He won the Prize of Distinction in Ars Electronica's international competitions for interactive art.