

## ***Searching for the Fourth River: Creative Tactics for Gathering and Disseminating Stories (and Information)***

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presented at the 2004 Community/Performance Conference, Bryant College, Smithfield, RI

The city of Pittsburgh developed where the Monongahela and the Allegheny Rivers meet and form the Ohio River in southwestern Pennsylvania. Because of the rivers, Pittsburgh became a significant site for U.S. steel production. Pittsburgh's steel industry has since declined, but the three rivers remain an important geographical feature for the region. Numerous local festivals and place names have adopted this label, including the Three Rivers Arts Festival, the Three Rivers Regatta, and the former Three Rivers Stadium. In a city that places great emphasis on its identification as the three rivers region, stories prevail about an underground fourth river.

As newcomers to Pittsburgh, we were curious: Did people know about the underground river, and if so, what could they tell us? We wanted to collect various versions of this urban legend. Could we draw attention to the significance of urban myth and provoke discussion amongst strangers?

In the summer of 2003, we developed a performance as an opportunity for dialogue about Pittsburgh's geography and the city's collective identity. This public intervention was constructed around the fictional premise of two private investigators and the public interest group that hired them, the Fourth River Lobbying Organization Working Group, aka FLOW. FLOW maintained a downtown window-front office that served as the headquarters for their campaign to lobby the city for a re-branding of Pittsburgh as the *Four Rivers* region of southwestern Pennsylvania.

As geological private investigators, Cat Furman and Macauley Brooks conducted man-on-the-street interviews. They attracted attention in colorful uniforms and life preservers. Among the leads the private investigators received from Pittsburgh citizens were a sighting of the river in the basement of a prominent downtown hotel and tips on how to find the underground water using a dowsing rod. Others told stories of river rats coming up to threaten summer picnics. Meanwhile, FLOW's downtown window display detailed the clues that had been relayed to the investigators and tracked their progress.

By soliciting these stories from the citizens of Pittsburgh, Furman and Brooks became stewards of an urban legend, and also part of that legend. Most people were receptive when this absurdity was inserted into the routine of Pittsburgh's business district. Passers-by were willing to engage with the geological investigators and conversations were sparked amongst strangers through the use of spectacle.

This project created multiple insertions into everyday life that were at different times perceived as real, illusory or somewhere in between. *Searching for the Fourth River* blurred the line between fact and fiction by means of numerous encounters in person, through the storefront window, and with the media. This project combined performance and the gathering of oral histories to insert art into everyday life.

We choose to make projects in public for a number of reasons. We believe that art should be accessible anywhere, anytime (not reserved for museums and galleries). The joy and/or challenge of unexpected discovery is reason enough to make work on the street. We are provoked by the nature of the urban environment: it encourages unpredictable encounters and fosters multiplicity. By creating a system of reflection on this environment and an open-ended dialogue, we create something that changes perspective. This type of art practice has been called "new genre public art", "community-based art", or "socially engaged art". Critical theorist Grant Kester writes, "...this practice involves a deprivileging of conventional artistic identity (defined by a wholly autonomous capacity for critical reflection, unproblematized claims to cultural or social exteriority, and traditional models of agency and expressivity)." We choose to collaborate in part because it complicates the notion of creative authorship. Extending our creative process outside the individual and onto the streets is the starting point for that process to continue to the audience-participant.

The term "audience-participant" refers to our interest in strategies that require active participation from the audience in order to generate the meaning of the piece. In this way the artist attempts to relinquish control of authorship and to destabilize the relationship between artist and audience. This method of working is intended to question the authority of an artist as one who has a privileged ability to represent or provide an enlightened perspective.

Like anthropologists performing field research away from the academy or a documentary filmmaker who must leave the film set, artists who decide to stray from traditional art institutions and an insular studio practice must be highly conscious of the nature of their work with human subjects. In the case of the social scientist, journalist, or documentary filmmaker, people become the subject matter of the work, but they are usually not involved in the process of creating or assembling the final written or visual product. In his essay "The Artist as Ethnographer," Hal Foster critiques the "collaborative" interaction between artist and community by saying that the artist is presumed to be the "institutionally sanctioned authority to engage the locals in the production of their (self-) representation". Can the roles of audience member, participant, and artist become conflated in order to provide a more visible critique of representation? *Searching for the Fourth River* used humor and play to destabilize the artist-participant-audience relationships. Cat and Macauley were specialists, brought in from outside to conduct research. Their position as investigators was that of a cosmopolitan, somewhere between tourist and native. Roxana Marcoci writes:

The term "cosmopolitan" refers to dwellers of the world, and includes the particular experience of exiles, immigrants, diasporic residents, students, nomads, and other border crossers, whose sense of belonging, or of "home," is constructed in the process of voyaging or relocating to one part of the world while preserving attachments to another.

Creating these characters as a way to navigate the geological and psychological terrain of Pittsburgh was perhaps a way of creating a sense of belonging in our new hometown. We voluntarily embedded ourselves in the local culture. In the act of false pursuit we also

transformed and became a part of the local mythology and created a way for ourselves to access its history.

As Edward Said argues in his essay, "Reflections on Exile", the matter of choice in one's identity is a determiner of experience. Our choice to come here as students inevitably places us both as privileged tourists of culture, and relegates us to the status of outsiders. In this project we chose to be playful with that position, taking on the character of two other completely unique visitors, who knew even less than Pittsburgh than we did. They had no commitments at the new site, just a job to do. Like Cat and Macauley, we acted as investigators. We became fascinated by the mystery of this underground river, and the variety of stories people told us about it increased our appetite for this mystery.

Some participants adopted our sense of play and came up with fictions and stories of their own. We felt our project was the most successful in these interactions. Our goal in future projects is to refine the ways in which participants have agency and to develop methods in which participants will be more aware of and responsible for shifts in the power dynamics of their relationship with us, the artists.

Although urban myth is impossible to separate from the location of people from which it springs, our aim was not to represent any community through myth, nor do we feel that the people we spoke with throughout our investigation would identify themselves as being "in community" with one another. It was the very nature of the stories being disparate and sometimes contradictory that was so compelling. We were delighted that these newly gathered stories compelled further dissemination. The urge to investigate this urban myth determined that our project was more process-based than product-based. There was no culminating display for this piece. The project was not intended to be experienced as a whole, as retold now, but intended to be engaged with by many people in brief encounters. Any of the tellers of the fourth river story had opportunity to shift the focus of our story, to embellish it with fiction, to bring it to a new audience. And yet, bringing the project to an academic conference, we are forced to usurp that control in order to share a complete picture of the project with you.

In *Searching for the Fourth River* we became one of the conduits through which the myth of the fourth river was passed. The fourth river became a complex character in Pittsburgh's social history. Inevitably, like the fountain or the sightings underground, we know that our investigation will be evidence of this unseen body of water.