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2017

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Michelle Liu Carriger and Eero Laine

Introduction

In August 2017, the annual ATHE conference was held in Las Vegas at the Planet Hollywood Hotel and Casino. As the co-organizers of the Performance Studies Focus Group's (PSFG) fourteenth annual pre-conference, we had hoped to arrange a backstage tour of one of the many spectacular entertainments on offer in Vegas. We had imagined the theoretical thrills of taking a few dozen performance scholars backstage at Cirque du Soleil or Blue Man Group or Thunder from Down Under. We thought we might offer multiple plenary sessions addressing Las Vegas and its myriad spectacular pleasures, along with its overt and aggressive embrace of fantasy, simulacra, and misogyny. It was obvious to us that the work should exist—perhaps too obvious. Indeed, we discovered in the process of planning that not many of the performance scholars that made up our constituency were researching Vegas, and (perhaps more importantly) neither did it seem that any really wanted to. We also found that most backstages were sealed against us unless we ponied up a significantly larger amount of money per person for tour tickets than PSFG typically spends on pre-conferences. The “backstage” was not actually backstage—or maybe there was no backstage. In a sense we were stymied by the toughness and depth of Vegas's venter: it proved much harder to get into or behind the spectacle than we had initially anticipated. Vegas was Vegas all the way down. Yet, despite the corporate strength of the superficial, the backside of the glitz seems to be oozing out all over the city. As an alternative to staging a tour “behind” the spectacle, we created an activity for pre-conference participants to intellectually and performatively engage with the material fact of our conference location in Planet Hollywood: to burrow into or skate atop the spectacle, looking at its seams and margins, snooping for stage doors and ingresses, stopping to contemplate or find pleasure in the great interlocking machines and stages of Vegas capital and Vegas landscape.

The Annotated Planet Hollywood project began on the morning of August 3, 2017. We sent approximately twenty participants out into the space with a short instruction sheet to see what they could find and how they would create, document, and represent our presence in Planet Hollywood. The participants ventured into the “hip, modern, dramatic” Planet Hollywood, where, as a Google search reminds us, “everyone is a celebrity.” Armed with internet-enabled digital devices and steeped in performance theory, participants encountered the performative spectacle of Planet Hollywood in all of its overwhelming obviousness and impenetrability. Simultaneously complicit with and critical of the technologies and companies (hardware from Apple mostly, and software primarily from Google) whose products (and their ubiquity) allowed us to create this project, participants created a multilayered map, available to anyone with the link to edit, add to, and alter. Our overarching goal, then, was to consciously bring the material conditions and ramifications of our national theatre conference's presence in Vegas and our personal imbrications with digital technology, with all its promises and perils, into focus.

The project that you can access here came together in three stages: an initial set-up and preparation period, including some example prompts and points marked, designed, and carried out by Michelle Liu Carriger and Eero Laine; the ninety-minute period of the activity, completed by approximately twenty PSFG pre-conference participants on August 3, 2017; the subsequent editing and alteration to add pictures and commentary that was not easy to get into the map application during the activity period; and the expanded and edited entries to better reflect our intellectual engagements and considerations. Contributors included James Ball, Taylor Black, Michelle Liu Carriger, Eero Laine, Steve Luber, Lindsay Hunter, Aileen Robinson, Megan Shea, and Stephanie Vella.

Annotated Planet Hollywood

Las Vegas is a major US theatre and performance center, and yet it also poses a major challenge to our field of theatre and performance academic study: it marks an edge where theatrical spectacle most strongly resists intellectualizing, arguments about the political efficacy of performance, and/or lofty aesthetic judgments. The spectacle overwhelms the intellect, or maybe the theoretical interventions are too self-evident. Theorists like Barthes, Baudrillard, Debord, and Horkheimer and Adorno have all ably and convincingly laid bare the negative ramifications of “spectacle” on the order of Las Vegas, and a few others (for example, Benjamin; Berson; The Project on Vegas; Schechner; Wickstrom) have presented us with arguments in favor of spectacle’s powers and efficacies. And yet Las Vegas remains and we came here.

In an effort to move askance, past the tired binary of spectacle’s goodness or badness, resistance or collusion, we invite you to interface and intervene with ATHE’s spectacular 2017 setting, the Planet Hollywood Hotel and Casino, in a series of micro-actions and critiques; bringing our professional skills to the task of being present in this place—a place both rife as a petri dish with specimens of the variety we purport to study and also seemingly impervious to our usual types of engagement.

You may access our annotated map of Planet Hollywood Hotel and Casino at <https://tinyurl.com/yqcp9xmw> or <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1LqiiO8147Bj3NfxlUqdAVHc6qOc&usp=sharing>. Using this link on your smartphone, tablet, or laptop allows you to edit and add to the maps’ layers, adding prompts, ideas, documentation, and discussion of your interactions with the space. You can also access the map via our website, psfglasvegas.wordpress.com. We encourage you to share this link with other conference attendees at ATHE 2017.

We have established four layers of maps:

1. Key locations
2. Interventions: invitations and prompts, in the style of Fluxus, to interact in new ways with the space and place of Planet Hollywood. You are welcome to participate in the prompts already placed or to add your own. (Please document your participation in the documentation layer.)
3. Documentation: photos, video, and verbal documentation of interventions carried out.
4. Discussion: a place to share written thoughts, on-the-ground analysis and critique of what this is, what is going on here.

Known Issues

The main drawback with the map as Google has created it is that it compresses multiple levels into one plane. You can get a better idea of the levels above the first when you zoom in closer. There are no layouts, but places are labeled. Tag your places with the level number when they are not on level 1 of the complex. The Google Maps app for iOS does not adequately support adding and labeling pins in a separate layer, therefore laptops or internet-browser apps are recommended.

Michelle Liu Carriger is an assistant professor in the theatre department at UCLA, where her research interests include performance and historiography, particularly in conjunction with queer, feminist, critical race, and transnational theories. Her current book project considers clothing controversies and the quotidian performances of self in nineteenth-century Britain and Japan, as well as in contemporary subculture. Her first excerpt from this work, “The Unnatural History and Petticoat Mystery of Boulton and Park’: A Victorian Sex Scandal and the Theatre Defense,” appeared in *TDR* and won the Gerald Kahan award from the American Society for Theatre Research in 2014. She is the incoming Focus Group Representative for the Performance Studies Focus Group of ATHE.

Eero Laine is an assistant professor of theatre in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University at Buffalo/SUNY. His book *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* is under contract and engages the often peculiar performance form of professional wrestling to examine issues of labor, class, and the financial and global infrastructures of live, popular entertainment. He coedited the volume *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (2017), and is a coeditor of *Lateral* (csalateral.org), the peer-reviewed, open-access journal of the Cultural Studies Association. He is a member of the Future Advisory Board and the secretary of Performance Studies International, and also serves as the treasurer of the Performance Studies Focus Group of ATHE.

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