

4.301 - Introduction to Visual Arts - Fall 2004
Assignment #1: Made Public

THE PICNIC
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Video - analucia berry, Danny Benitez

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

77 Massachusetts Avenue is the official address of MIT. This location is the first landmark one sees after leaving Boston via the Harvard Bridge and one of the most recognizable sites at the Institute. The crosswalk in front of the stairs & pillars at this address is perhaps the single most active area of campus, especially at the end of a busy autumn school-day. This 3000+ square-foot space is also unique in that it is one of the largest spaces in Cambridge that is shared between both pedestrians and moving vehicles, though (like any crosswalk) this sharing of space is bound to a specific schedule dictated by traffic lights.

The picnic called for 3-5 nicely-dressed people, each carrying some picnic staple (basket, cloth, etc), to meet at the edge of the sidewalk in front of "77" at an appointed time, but only to interact with each other when sitting on the cloth. The performance itself, which was conceived as specific to this site, used a small but central segment of the crosswalk as the picnicking area -- during red lights only -- for 15 seconds at a time, over the span of about 10 "traffic light cycles" (red->green->yellow->red) for an unscripted performance of approximately 10 minutes total, or until all food (a small lemon meringue pie) and drink (White Cranberry-Apple juice served from a wine bottle) were consumed.

The picnic is meant to examine and illustrate the particular timing and rhythm of this special type of shared public space by inserting an activity that is meant for a different type of shared public space. The stoplight, the descending counter next to the Walk/Don't Walk sign, and the opportunity for firsthand observation of (and potential interaction with) passersby and motorists are unique to the chosen location and integral to the success of the piece. The artificial bird chirps that signal blind people to cross the street also add a certain something to the "picnic" atmosphere, although this is purely serendipitous. In addition, these stated features act as important cues for the Picnickers, making it the safest and thereby ideal performance site.