

# The Bomb That Blew Up Seattle

## Jason Sprinkle and the Performance of Municipal Identity

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On 15 July 1996 there was a bomb threat in downtown Seattle, Washington. City police evacuated all buildings in a six-block radius and cordoned off all streets. The Metro Transit rerouted buses that pass through downtown, including those in the metro bus tunnel that runs directly under the location of the supposed bomb. A state of total chaos reigned over rush-hour traffic.

News crews stationed cameras as close to the scene as possible. The cameras zoomed-in down the street to show a small, blurry image of bomb robots sniffing around a large truck that had been abandoned in front of Westlake Center, a busy shopping mall in the heart of downtown. For hours, the eyes of the Seattle area were trained on this scene, a scene that echoed all too closely the truck bombing in Dhahran just three weeks prior on 25 June.

Later that evening, the streets were opened, the buses were allowed to pass through the tunnel, and the truck, now determined to be harmless, was towed away. A young man named Jason Sprinkle had turned himself in and was now in custody. He had been on the scene for some time observing his “art act,” then left, and was afraid to come back after seeing all the commotion. With the traffic jams and the truck and the robots gone, a furious debate began. Was it art? Or was it terrorism under Washington’s strict new antiterrorism law? Sprinkle claims he meant no harm, that he was just making art, and that he could not have predicted the ensuing panic. The police, the district attorney, and a flood of editorial letters charged that he must have known.

Many social forces and power relationships frame this tension between art and real life. Diverse discourses come into play in an attempt by both actors and spectators to make a distinction that cannot be made. No consensus exists within competing mythologies, which seem only to slip against each other and dissolve at their conception. The reactions seem to flow into and out of the confluence of national nightmare and municipal identity, with peripheral issues orbiting.



1. *Hammering Man*, a sculpture at the entrance of the Seattle Art Museum, with ball-and-chain attached by Sprinkle and the Fabricators. (Photo by Barry Wong; courtesy of the Seattle Times)

Meanwhile, Sprinkle's performance prompted a string of performances that played out, on the stage of law, the anxiety over this amorphous boundary between the real and the representation. The postperformance performances take on the guise of reaction to an original. But beneath the surface lurks a trace of manipulation: a contest of the micro-forces of power, manifest in the institutions of the law. To facilitate an understanding of the nature of this contest I will outline the events leading up to the performance, explain what I mean by "performance," and examine the mythologies and local identities that shape the performances.

Jason Sprinkle, a product of the Job Corps and the local community college, began his long career of abandoning art in downtown Seattle on Labor Day 1993. Sprinkle and fellow metal fabricators hatched an idea to affix a giant ball-and-

chain to the *Hammering Man*, a moving sculpture that stands forever hammering at the entrance of the Seattle Art Museum as an homage to work and craftsmanship. The Labor Day ball-and-chain altered the reading of the artwork, an alteration that annoyed the museum directors but amazed Seattleites. The media dubbed the group the “Fabricators of the Attachment” and Sprinkle, “Subculture Joe.”

Several other projects followed, including a giant, fire-spitting Frankenstein-like fabrication, called *Frankentree*, on Halloween and a ten-foot heart left for jilted lovers to strike with a mallet on Valentine’s Day. The Fabricators and Sprinkle with them became part of the city lore—in a city that views itself as the cauldron of alternative artistic activity—its biggest claim to fame being that it is the birthplace of grunge music. Sprinkle was encouraged to apply for funding through the Seattle Arts Commission. What had begun as guerrilla art became a tolerated, and even celebrated part of the municipal cultural scene; Sprinkle’s potentially subversive art was contained within the legitimate margins.

The truck Sprinkle abandoned downtown was previously used for a project that involved driving to different Job Corps camps around the country and allowing kids to write on the truck or on the giant metal heart that rested in the back. The project ran aground, however, when a Job Corps director objected to some of the language the kids were using. The registration on the donated truck had expired and Sprinkle did not have the papers to renew the tags. To make matters worse, the shop that the Fabricators had been using was closed down due to lack of funds. These events prompted Sprinkle to drive the truck, with the metal heart inside, downtown to Westlake Center and abandon it, an expression of Sprinkle’s feeling that the city was somehow abandoning him. As a final gesture, he punctured the truck’s tires; through its immobility it crossed the line from truck to art (Scigliano 1996a:29).

Initially, no one thought anything of it, and Sprinkle himself later remarked that he thought no one would notice (Dauber et al. 1996:A1). Police even gave the truck a ticket for illegal parking (Scigliano 1996a:30). It seemed as if the truck might not be read as anything other than a truck. As Bert O. States suggests, “any ‘life’ a performance achieves can only occur in the present, and there is no such thing as a present unless there is a ‘spectator’ [...] there to experience it” (1996:10). The act of abandoning the truck did not constitute a performance because there were no spectators. However, as Seattle police began to examine the truck more closely, it took on greater significance and the spectatorship grew to a nationwide audience.

How could such a seemingly innocent act be read as a menace by so many, a reading spinning well beyond Sprinkle’s control? The performance that began with Sprinkle’s truck did not end there. Although not specifically called “performance,” the actions taken and the utterances made by Seattle police, the district attorney, and the Seattle media constitute a continuation of Sprinkle’s performance because they create a chain of signification, and because they employ elements of performance: people assume or are assigned specific roles and speak agreed upon lines to a specific audience.

Following Christine Broda-Bahm’s analysis of protest as performance, the reactions of the mechanisms of the law take the form of theatricalized events. Broda-Bahm says of resistance to art displays in museums that the “theatrical behavior [...] is consciously planned [...] with participants readily assuming, preparing for, and playing their parts” (1997:85). While Broda-Bahm’s resisters may more consciously engage in theatrical behavior than Seattle’s judicial system, the police and district attorney did assume specific roles and perform rehearsed texts.

In *Between Theater and Anthropology* Richard Schechner defines this kind of performance as “restored behavior”: one behaves as if he or she is someone else,

with the given that this someone else may also be the same said person in another state of being (1985:37). The Seattle police acted out roles of the law protecting the city from the specter of terrorism. In the feedback loop that Schechner describes, which moves between “social actions” and “cultural performances,” the police played out the script written by national myth and local identity while at the same time recreating and thereby augmenting both. The blurry image of the bomb-sniffing robot viewed from several blocks away, the reports of the efficient plan and swift response in evacuating and blocking off a large section of downtown, all created a heightened sense of police action. The police acted out a scenario that they declared was one they feared most, but for which they had carefully prepared. The police had rehearsed both the actions and the script. And the presence of the media created a stage for the police to act in a way that was different from the way they behaved during unobserved police actions.

brohda-bahm states that the actors “utilize dramatized or intensified behaviors (incorporating props, settings, images, words, actions); and they generate an audience through moves calculated to evoke special attention and responses” (1997:84). Although the police and the district attorney, Norm Maleng, would say that they were merely dealing with the crisis at hand, they both played to a specific audience. Certainly they both played to the public to demonstrate the effectiveness of the law in dealing with terrorism, with the hope that said performance would incite the citizenry to action. Both used the stage of law to reach very specific audiences and to accomplish very specific goals.

On one hand, the spin-off performances may appear to be random. Jason Sprinkle left his truck in the wrong place at the wrong time and found his art parked at the confluence of forces he could not predict and over which he had no control. His reading of his own work, of the “original” intent, was lost as soon as it was observed. Jacques Derrida, in his analysis of Lévi-Strauss’s *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), points to a tendency to look to the origin or center within a discursive structure. The center is elusive, however, because the structure exists within a series of shifting structures, a chain of signification that results in “a series of substitutions of center for center” (1993:225). Derrida asserts:

The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified. (237)

In this case, Sprinkle’s intent as an artist is unrepresentable. It is simply bracketed, suspended until it becomes intelligible. It is readable as a performance only by those who know Sprinkle, the Fabricators, and their past performances. Otherwise, it is just an illegally parked truck. Sprinkle was hoping that signification would flow from his past work—the Valentine’s Day gong heart and the Job Corps project—to what was supposed to be a *dénouement*. The movement of signification took the performance in a different direction.

Instead of being shaped by his past work, the reading of Sprinkle’s truck and its metal heart were shaped by two forces: national myths and municipal identity. By “national myths” I mean nationally recognized ideas that, while based in fact, take on exaggerated proportions. The national myth is often propelled by political machinery, which seeks to manipulate the myth to gain legitimacy with a voting populace. One such myth has been that Communists are waiting for the opportunity to invade the United States. While such a threat existed during the Cold War, Ronald Reagan was able to shape his rhetoric and indeed his entire image on this still widely held fear. In this case, the Communists would come from Central America, playing upon the fear of invasion from Latino aliens as much

as the fear of Communist forces. Current myths that influence the reading of Sprinkle's art are myths regarding terrorism and the public funding of the arts.

The first national myth that shapes the reading of Sprinkle's truck is the myth that the nation is besieged by terrorists. The panic in downtown Seattle echoes the fear engendered by contemporaneous terrorist bombings. In the truck bombing in Dhahran, two terrorists left a truck bomb near a building inhabited by mostly American military personnel. The Dhahran bombing occurred just weeks before Sprinkle left his truck in downtown Seattle, prompting many people to equate an abandoned truck with bombs. A domestic incident also remained vivid in the American imagination. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing of a federal building by Timothy McVeigh left many with the eerie feeling that terrorism does not necessarily come from outside; that terrorism may reign when the social fabric deteriorates. Theodore Kaczynski, the infamous "Unabomber" who sent several package bombs between 1978 and 1995 to make a point about the evils of technology, added to this fear of terrorism from within a society gone awry. TWA flight 800 exploded mysteriously and crashed into the Atlantic three days after he was arrested, adding fuel to the fire—and the furor.

Terrorism was fresh in the minds of both the police and the city council. In response to unease over the terrorist bombings, the debate in the Seattle City Council focused on funding for equipment to aid Seattle Police in combating a terrorist attack. The reading of Sprinkle's truck as a bomb was further exacerbated by the fact that one of the Job Corps kids had written: "Timberlake Carpentry Rules (the 'Bomb')" on the front bumper of the truck. A truck with slashed tires, no driver, the word "Bomb" scrawled on the outside, and rush-hour traffic; what to Sprinkle appeared to be the natural resolution to problems he was facing in his work looked to Seattle police like their worst nightmare. Terrorism had indeed come to their orderly city.

The editorial attacks on Sprinkle's "recklessness" also reflect this pervasive nightmare. One letter to the *Seattle Times* suggested that Sprinkle crossed "a dangerous line" when he performed an act that resembled so closely the recent bombings. The writer refers to the "sense of menace that comes with hinting at bombs in the era of Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center and even the recent deaths of U.S. soldiers in Saudi Arabia." He invites the reader to "imagine the press conference with Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper trying to explain the deeper meaning he saw in the exhibit before it detonated" (*Seattle Times* 1996a:B6).

In another letter to the *Seattle Times* a couple applauds the actions of the Seattle police in dealing with the emergency. The letter suggests that such an act would not have been so dangerous in times past when the United States was not plagued by the threat of terrorism. They lament:

Living in a society as we do now we must think of the enormity of possible consequences that could result in such acts—perhaps bringing to mind Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center, not to even mention the many other acts of terrorism against our country. (Gulin 1996:B9)

For the most part, public reaction acknowledges that Sprinkle is not an actual terrorist, but expresses the feeling that he acted irresponsibly and should have known that his art would spark a citywide panic. However, some do not make the distinction between the bombs of a terrorist and the truck-read-as-bomb of the artist. A caller into a local radio show suggested that Sprinkle should be tried for treason (Scigliano 1996b:7). An editorial column in the *Washington Times* clearly makes this point:

Mr. Sprinkle's case will no doubt be closely watched by a host of other would-be artists—that is, those in trouble with the law. Timothy McVeigh, for instance, might want to consider the possibility of changing his plea to “Not Guilty by Reason of Performance Art.” So too, Ted Kaczynski could point to the elaborate craft, and weighty political ponderings, that went into the Unabomber crimes, and argue that the First Amendment protects his artistic “speech” (*Washington Times* 1996).

Because of a growing fear of “our growing vulnerability to terrorism” the King County prosecutor, Norm Maleng, charged Sprinkle with intimidation or harassment with an explosive device (*Seattle Times* 1996b:B2).

The editorial debate in newspapers from Seattle and elsewhere was spun out of a second national myth: that an enormous amount of public money funds subversive and dangerous art. Several editorial letters and columns pointed out that this tragedy was the direct result of money being handed out to performance artists who “promulgate trash under the guise of creative expression” (*Wisconsin State Journal* 1996:13A). Sprinkle was compared to Ron Athey, Karen Finley on numerous occasions, and, by virtue of sharing the same last name, to Annie Sprinkle. One letter states:

The only thing that can be said in Jason Sprinkle's defense is that, unlike Annie Sprinkle, he apparently committed his thoughtless little act without the aid of a government grant. Nonetheless, Seattle businesses and taxpayers will get stuck with the tab. (13A)

The perception that Sprinkle's act was dangerous art was reinforced by the reaction of the arts community, which distanced itself from Sprinkle. The Seattle Arts Commission immediately issued a statement proclaiming that it had never funded Sprinkle or the Fabricators and that it deplored Sprinkle's actions (McLennan 1996:SL11). The Fabricators themselves wanted to assure everyone that Sprinkle acted alone. Speaking for the Fabricators, Virginia Rose stated: “This was incredibly dumb, and we had nothing to do with it” (*Seattle Times* 1996b:B2). Both were quick to make the distinction between good art and bad art to establish themselves as “legitimate” artists and dissociate from Sprinkle.

The municipal identity of the city of Seattle came into play along with the national myths that shaped the reading of Sprinkle's work. Very generally speaking, Seattlites view their city as an orderly place, apart from, but not safe from, the chaos that seeps out of other metropolitan centers. Municipal codes for traffic and pedestrian violations reflect this need for order. In particular, Seattlites celebrate their jaywalking law, which provides for penalties for those crossing against the light. Columnist Joni Balter of the *Seattle Times* noted:

Seattle's jaywalking law, which dates back to the 1930s, and the citizenry's extraordinary obedience to it are part of the city's gentle, polite culture. Tourists from New York, Boston and Podunk go home from Seattle every year shaking their heads in disbelief about these strange people who obey jaywalking laws. (1994:B1)

Charles Royer, mayor of Seattle from 1978 to 1989 compared Seattlites to New Yorkers in a column for the *New York Times* in which he attempts to warn New Yorkers of the dangers of imposing jaywalking laws:

I have long believed that about the only thing separating the gentle souls of Seattle from the not-so-gentle souls of New York City is our willing-



2. The busy area in front of the Westlake Center in Seattle where Sprinkle's truck was found. (Photo by E.J. Westlake)



3. The Valentine's Day heart created by Jason Sprinkle and the Fabricator's sits in the back of the abandoned truck. (Photo by Stefanie Boyar; courtesy of the Seattle Times)

ness to follow traffic rules when we cross the street. There is no doubt that this pedestrian obedience is what puts us on every list of livable cities. It's probably why Bill Gates still lives here, and why all those rotten Californians are trying to move here. The place is, in a phrase, soggy but civilized. (1998:A13)

In both of these columns, and in an interview of columnist Jean Godden by National Public Radio's Scott Simon (1998), the writers all recount the popular story of former Police Chief Patrick Fitzsimons and his famous encounter with Seattle culture. The story goes that Fitzsimons came to Seattle to be interviewed for the job of police chief. When he awoke in the middle of the night he looked out of the window of his hotel and watched as a lone Seattlite stood on a street corner in the rain, with no car in sight, waiting for the light to change. Reportedly, Fitzsimons points to this incident as his reason for wanting to work in Seattle. "Seattle," he is reported to have said, "is so civil" (in Royer 1998:A13).

As Royer reveals in his above warning to New Yorkers, quality of civility invites

invasion from unwelcome outsiders. Anyone who has lived in the Pacific Northwest probably knows of the fear of outsiders, particularly Californians, which shapes Seattle attitudes. One commercial for Washington Mutual Bank depicts the “Rodeo Grandmas” stopping a stagecoach. The stagecoach drivers explain that they are opening a bank in Washington. They are planning to drive up north, fill the coach with money and then return south. When the Grandmas ask if they are bandits, the drivers are surprised and laugh: “No, ma’am, we’re Californians.” While xenophobia focuses Seattlite anxiety toward possible invasion from outsiders, the fear of disorder works in tandem to create anxiety toward native elements that may spin out of control.

The image of Seattle as orderly and provincial may seem diametrically opposed to a view of Seattle as cosmopolitan and artistically innovative. Seattle’s alternative music and theatre scene draws a sharp contrast to a view of Seattlites who refuse to cross against the “Don’t Walk” sign or who would call a piece of performance art “treason.” But I would suggest that although Seattle has a thriving artistic subculture, that subculture is carefully contained. Seattle plays host to the alternative music festival Bumbershoot, and the Seattle Fringe Theatre Festival. The city tolerated the Fabricators and Jason Sprinkle’s installments celebrating Sprinkle as “Subculture Joe.” But within every dominant culture/subculture relationship, there is a mutable, impermanent line which, once crossed, reveals the workings of authority.

Joseph Roach astutely asserts that carnival and the law work together when he writes about New Orleans Mardi Gras (1993). While carnival may allow for temporary inversion of the status quo, it is an inversion for which the law has created a space. As Schechner observes in “Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly”: “The old order sponsors a temporary relief from itself. Obeying strict calendars and confined to designated precincts, carnival allows the authorities to keep track of such relief while readying the police” (1985:88).

The actions of the Seattle police and prosecutor took on particular significance as Seattle continued to make headlines. In the winter of 1999, Seattle police overreacted to people demonstrating against the World Trade Organization meetings that were taking place in Seattle. After some confusion about how to handle the protesters, the police unleashed the force of panic. According to the CBS news website, critics of the Seattle police stated that: “tear gas and rubber bullets were fired indiscriminately and innocent workers, shoppers and residents were swept up in the arrest of more than 500 people Nov. 30 and Dec. 1” (CBS 2000). Police Chief Norm Stamper was forced to resign as a result of the national outcry. At the end of December 1999, the city of Seattle decided to cancel the usual New Year’s Eve celebration because officials feared a terrorist attack. An Algerian man had been arrested and charged with bringing bomb-making materials into Washington. He had a hotel reservation in downtown Seattle. According to CNN, Mayor Paul Schell was quoted as saying: “This is already an unprecedented, unpredictable New Year’s, and we did not want to take chances with public safety, no matter how remote the threat might seem” (1999). Underneath the image of Seattle as progressive, avantgarde, and multicultural, is an undercurrent of xenophobia and the fear of chaos. Ultimately, this xenophobia and fear of disorder fed the reading of Sprinkle’s truck as a terrorist threat. The truck parked in front of Westlake Center disrupted the sense of order, which was later officially acknowledged when the prosecutor reduced the charges to criminal trespass. Sprinkle was sentenced to 30 days but was released because he had already served 33 days while awaiting trial. Sprinkle and the Fabricators fell out of Seattle’s field of vision.

Where the performances of the arrest of the artist and the action of the law may seem random, on one level they are not. On one hand, they reveal the



continuous tension and anxiety over what is perceived as real and what is a simulation. Following Jean Baudrillard's model of the simulacrum (1993), the pursuit of Sprinkle for his simulation of a terrorist act was really a reflection of public perception of the "real" terrorist threat in America. If the threat of terrorist attack in the United States takes the form of a national myth, used by media and political entities alike to acquire legitimacy, then the prosecution of Sprinkle "masks the absence of a basic reality" (347). The weakness of the case in court bolstered the use of the national myth on the political stage.

The postperformances were deliberate manipulations of power. Eric Scigliano, writing for the *Seattle Weekly* as a dissenting voice in the media, noted that the Seattle police had just asked the city for money for a bomb-searching robot (1996:7). The Seattle city council refused. A staging of the threat of a terrorist bombing changed the council's vote. While the police utilized the stage of law to play out the scenario of terrorism for the public, its intended audience was the city council. The same can be said of the performance of district attorney Maleng. The ensuing trial and the charges brought against Sprinkle provided the setting for his Republican gubernatorial candidacy. He based his political platform on keeping the state safe from terrorism. While Maleng played himself as the district attorney, he also used the stage of law to play himself as the future governor. Sprinkle unknowingly set the stage for this discourse and provided his truck as a tactical point for debate.

But, Sprinkle lacks the power to even enter the debate. In the arena of the media, others control the means of production. Eventually, Sprinkle's role was assigned to him by his own defense attorney. His defense rested on the fact that Sprinkle is mentally ill, that he could not have foreseen the consequences of his actions because his dyslexia and attention deficit disorders do not allow him to think in a linear fashion. His only recourse was to play a role within a script already written for him. A subversive act of art was spun first into a terrorist attack, and then into an irresponsible and dangerous piece of nonart. The ironic result was that a performance was read as real life, and what passes as real life, the protection of the law, turned out to be performance.

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