

# Reverend Billy

## Preaching, Protest, and Postindustrial Flânerie

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*Jill Lane*

Enter Reverend Billy, a six-foot-tall, imposing, 50-year-old preacher. His booming “Swaggart-expansive” voice greets his flock of urban, East-Village New Yorkers: “Welcome to the Church of Stop Shopping, Children!” In a measured, vibrato baritone, he intones, “In this church we gather to ask the great questions that face us.” Pause, slowly extending his emotion-heavy hands: “Is there life after perfect teeth?” Apocalyptic rise: “Will we survive good graphics?” Crescendo: “There is not a person in this room who has not had a loved one chased down and *ki-i-illed* by discounted luxury items!” Huge applause and hollers from the audience. “God help us, *yes*, we will be delivered!” A rising chorus of “Amens.” “We will stop shopping yes! We will stop shopping, children!” (Talen 1999a).

Through such abominating semi-ironic preaching, the Reverend has been raging against the noxious effects of consumerism, transnational capital, and the privatization of public space and culture in New York City since 1997. Reverend Billy is the pseudonym of performance artist Bill Talen, whose work as the leader of the “Church of Stop Shopping” represents a fascinating departure for new left theatre in the era of global capital. Like many political theatre artists in the 1990s and beyond, Talen has faced the challenges posed by the rapidly changing political economy of globalization.

In 1994, the innovative network art-activists of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) warned in *The Electronic Disturbance* that the current systems of social power may have rendered oppositional art obsolete; the ground against which opposition could be staged has turned “liquid.” Arjun Appadurai similarly argues that the competing forces of globalization have created a social scene in which culture and power are produced and disseminated in always-shifting “flows,” whose movement rushes through the disjunctures between fluid social landscapes—part material, part imagined—of technology, media, ethnicity, ideology, and finance (1996:27–47). Numerous other cultural theorists—Zygmunt Bauman (2000), May Joseph (1999), Stuart Hall (1997), Mohammed Bamyeh (2000), among others—follow Appadurai in characterizing our new “global times” as marked by ever more complex, asymmetrical and asynchronous transnational flows of capital,

goods, labor, information, and peoples; these, in turn, have informed the progressive corrosion and decentering of previously stable, if also fictional, categories of national-ethnic boundaries and identities. In this overwhelming scene of social “liquescence” (to borrow CAE’s term), how can an artist or activist stage oppositional discourse? How can artists address the devastating effects and casualties of the new global economy, when the representation of power is itself now nomadic, liquid, and on the move? CAE contends that rather than stage opposition, our only viable option is to create calculated “disturbance” in these networks of power. What role then can performance play as a site of such disturbance?

Bill Talen’s work as Reverend Billy offers one trenchant set of answers to those questions, revitalizing political street theatre as a sophisticated repertoire—or arsenal—of anticconsumerist theatre techniques. Indeed, Reverend Billy offers us a model of politicized “theatre disturbance” that follows, engages, and creatively speaks back to the multiplying sites of privatization that have colonized urban public culture. From his beginnings as a sidewalk preacher protesting the corporate redevelopment of Times Square in New York City, Reverend Billy has taken his theatrical activism to a range of sites, most of which are what he calls “contested spaces”: those urban sites that have been recently commodified, or newly condemned, to commercialization. In this vein, he has staged numerous “shopping interventions” in which he and fellow artists perform in commercial spaces themselves—from the Disney Store to Starbucks—in an effort to intervene in (disturb) the seamless corporate architecture and choreography of shopping, or to “re-narrate” them with memories of the lives they displace. Talen also regularly lends the Reverend to a range of staged “political actions” related to the destruction or gentrification of local urban spaces, and of the social memories which they house.

Common to each of these strategies is Talen’s commitment to embodied, local actions that can engage the social movement of capital or illuminate the architecture—both public and psychic—of consumerism. Like many left-wing activists, he has committed himself to the local as an answer to capitalist globalization. May Joseph reminds us that “where goods, fashions, cuisine, films, cultural artifacts, and kitsch flow with intensified speed, bodies flow in less efficient ways” (1999:8). Talen uses this inefficiency, staging the body’s awkward resistance and failures to conform to homogenizing choreographies of commodification. For Talen, the body—his own body, and those of his audiences and collaborators—offers a poetics of useful embarrassment: the body inappropriately blocking the smart march of shopping is the first step in answering corporate capitalism and its culture-for-sale.

However, Talen has not indulged in what Bruce Robbins calls “romantic localism,” which relies on essentialist notions of place and identity to ground claims for local belonging, community, or action (1998:3). To the contrary, what is striking about Talen’s work is his ability to mobilize community while avoiding such essentialisms. In this sense, the politics and poetics of the Church of Stop Shopping are in keeping with that more hybrid urban experience, alternately dubbed “glocal” by Roland Robertson (1995), “translocal” by May Joseph (1999), and “cosmopolitical” by Robbins and Pheng Chea (1998). Talen uses performance not as a site of prior claims to local identity, but a site of ongoing, performative self-fashioning that relies on irony to both create community and refuse its fixity in the same gesture.

That ironic self-fashioning is nowhere more apparent than in Talen’s signature genre, the comic theatrical service. These performances are structured as “collapsing” comic church services, complete with readings from the saints (or the devils), public confessions, collective exorcisms, the honoring of new saints, donations to the cause, a lively choir, and a rousing sermon. His first series of such



services, staged at the Salon Theatre every Sunday in March 2000, was awarded an Obie Award, New York's prestigious recognition of off-Broadway theatre. He followed this with a series at St. Clements Church, *Starbucks out of Hell's Kitchen*, in May 2000, and reprised the genre with his *Spring Revival* at the Salon Theatre (now 45 Bleecker Street) for six Sundays in March and April of 2001. For all the irony that these fake services invoke, each performance is organized around a concrete local issue. For example, one service in 2000 was held to honor the recently bulldozed Esperanza community garden in New York's Lower East Side, another supported efforts to unionize bodega workers, and still others to rally support for a threatened theatre space and a local neighborhood collective. The "saints" who are honored and speak at each service are real activists: Charles Kernaghan, the director of the National Labor Committee; Ricardo Dominguez, Zapatista cyberactivist of Electronic Disturbance Theatre; Alicia Torres, founder of Esperanza garden. The donations support these causes, and every performance concludes with audience participation in a public action staged outside the theatre.

The Reverend's ability to mobilize "real" communities and to stage meaningful social activism through his exaggerated, comic televangelist satire is one of the most interesting aspects of his work. Talen says that he originally devised his Reverend persona out of a desire to "create a comic spiritual strategy for urban people who normally approach experience [...] through habitual irony" (2000a). As I introduce Reverend Billy's work, I will illustrate several ways that it engages and extends a classic materialist critique and aesthetic for new economic times. In the process, I'll query why this particular persona—the false preacher, the ironic priest in the wrinkled dinner jacket with wild dyed hair—has seemed necessary to this critique. Thus we'll trace the path that has led Reverend Billy, as a theatrical persona, to gradually take on the attributes of a "real" spiritual and social leader for public activism against consumerism and commercial redevelopment in the Lower East Side of New York City—even as everyone is winking when they say "Amen."

### *Commodities and Grandmothers: Giving up the Mouse*

Bill Talen moved to New York from San Francisco in 1993—disenchanted, broke, and looking for refuge from the centrist liberal values that he felt had liquidated the San Francisco arts scene, of which he had been an active part for many years as a playwright, performer, and producer of solo performance. He came to New York looking for the grit and grime and tolerance of difference and radical values for which New York is famous. Renting a studio in the neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen, around the corner from old Broadway, just down the road from St. Clements Theatre where he formed part of a writers' workshop, he thought he had left behind the ideology and public architecture of "24-hour drive through convenience" that otherwise organizes life in most of the United States.

Little did he know, he was right around the corner from the site of the new Times Square redevelopment, a plan to transform Broadway and its surrounding neighborhood into a place safe for tourists and corporate investment—which is to say, safe for shopping. Commercialism is, of course, not new to Broadway: as the historic center of commercial theatre and entertainment in the city, it has long been a bastion of over-the-top and under-the-counter consumption. However, prior to the so-called redevelopment, much more of the money passing hands was local rather than transnational, and the vitality of the neighborhood depended upon a complex interplay of formal and informal economies, legal and

1. *Reverend Billy at the pulpit, enforcing a "Franchise Free Zone" from Blockbuster Video on 9th Avenue and 42nd Street to Duane Reade on 9th Avenue and 49th Street, as part of Starbuck's Out of Hell's Kitchen at St. Clements Church (May 2000). (Photo by Michael Rubottom)*

## *from* The Church of Stop Shopping

A Sermon by Reverend Billy

I.

*(The Reverend comes to the pulpit. Swaggart-expansive.)*

YES... Welcome to the Church of Stop Shopping.

Children... Today we will address the great questions that face us...

Is there life after perfect teeth?

Will we survive good graphics?

There is not a person in this room who has not had a loved one chased down and killed by discounted luxury items... What can we do?

God help us but yes... WE WILL BE DELIVERED... I'M SO GLAD TO BE HERE WITH YOU TONIGHT... WE'LL HAVE A WONDERFUL SERVICE... TOGETHER WE CAN STOP SHOPPING! WE CAN DO IT! Oh yes we can!

*(Applause and whoops. Now straight honesty.)*

Some of you have attended our church before...

And you are familiar with our beliefs...

But for those of you who are new...

WE BELIEVE IN THE GOD THAT PEOPLE WHO DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD BELIEVE IN.

*(Looks around. Repeats.)*

We believe in the Logos that people who don't believe in Logos believe in.

We believe in Shopping the way that people who don't Shop shop...

We believe in the God that doesn't necessarily want to hang out with people who believe in God... might find them just a bit of a drag.

Another biggee in our church—*Put the Odd back into God... Yeah! Alleluhiah!*

*(After laughter, get Episcopalian quickly. Very sensible.)*

After today's message we will gather down here on the stage

and divide into small groups and prepare for our journey into the Times Square Disney Store.

Very few New Yorkers have been there.

But of those who have gone inside, few have returned.

*(Big apocalyptic preaching again, confident pauses, a long rising note.)*

But let us talk about this place, this Disney Store.

The corner of 42nd and 7th Avenue, the Southwest corner, those five buildings—going west now—200 West 42nd, 202, 204, 206, and 208 West 42nd—then 210 becomes the lobby of the *Lion King*. THOSE FIVE BUILDINGS WERE BLOWN DOWN, GUTTED, BY 10,000 SMILING STUFFED ANIMALS, AND THEN THEY MOVED IN THIS THING THAT THEY CALL MAGIC.

It is important that we go inside.

Pull on those stainless steel Mickey Mouse silhouette doorknobs.

It's like you are stepping into a tanning coffin full of smiling pom-poms.

The first thing that you realize is that you are on a first name basis with each of these round pieces of fluff. And each of these little faces is smiling directly at you with an air of assumed knowledge about your personal life. Snow White whispers to you about your virginity; Simba knows about your ambition; Donald Duck wants to help you with your earnest clumsiness...

You find yourself thanking these made-in-China totemic polyester smilers for the life you lived; you give it up; your live-events begin to reorganize to fit Disney's product delivery schedule; you self-induce a false childhood...

Constricted over the sin committed.

Now you sincerely believe that Peter Pan mediated you out of your sandbox; when the Little Mermaid walked on land—well, you lost your cherry... Amen.

Seething wrath, John Brown.

Each of us must know how to stand in this gas chamber of false myths and stand there—stand there and please children, *get this! know what I mean!*—stand there, children, no matter where you are in the store, between the Dumbo purses and Snow White and her seven little pricks, stand there in the multiple Mickey Mice and even if we begin to suffer memory loss... even if we are stricken with Consumer Narcosis and our own histories become Disney productions... even as the flames lick us and the Goofies and Donalds and Plutos come down off the shelves and talk to us as if they were new relatives... even if we chuckle now that it's all just good clean fun that our lives have become Disney Productions... even if we... no... no... NO!

...WE WILL STOP SHOPPING... STOP IT! STOP! CAN WE EVER STOP? YES WE CAN! WE WILL STOP!

*(Sobbing. Induce everyone to stand and shout WE WILL STOP!)*

Then let the silence come. Begin again, world weary.

... and we'll never stop shopping, children... believe me...

We will never be able to stop unless we start something else in its place...

## II.

*(Recover. Back to low-key/confidential, the teacher-preacher.)*

Children, we are consumed by the flames of Involuntary Entertainment—an acute form of the condition known as Continuous Shopping.

The Apocalypse that is now underway...

Its managers are watching us closely.

The question is: Will we let them take us completely?

They must be flabbergasted that we let them get this far!

They are studying us in pedestrian-lock far below, down there on the sidewalks of Times Square

We are moving in the tides of great light-headed crowds, dizzy from products.

Yes we are burning in Hell, the trouble is...

We actually have to learn to see and feel this fire...

Ooh... the flames of the unnoticed apocalypse...

This fire... it registers as a kind of tempting dullness...

There is only this barely perceptible feeling that we have forgotten something important...

...about ourselves...

*(Leave pulpit, walking forward into an aisle.)*

Let's just take a moment to reflect on how amazing it is that we made it here today, Alleluhiah.

I know that to come here today...

you and I had to traverse a monstrous landscape...

*(continued)*

I know that if you took the N and R to 47th, if you surfaced at the TKTS booth,  
 You walked right up into the 90-foot-long body of Christy Turlington,  
 wrapped around three buildings on that Southeast corner.  
 She's bending over a coffee table,  
 her eyes glowing there over the crowds like two oval lakes.

"Oh, let's go the other way," you say, "Honey! we're going to the play! Remember? Let's go the other way, away from Christy!"

And so you turn toward the west,  
 but that side of the grand canyon of retail,  
 —Morgan Stanley, the Marriott Marquis—  
 is covered with gigantic happy white people...

*(In mourning, a catch in the throat.)*

And I know that some... I know that some of us just didn't make it...  
 some of us, yes, some of us ran  
 back underground to escape the roaring fire.  
 And some of us, *oh somebody help me now!*  
 Some of us disappeared into an afternoon shoppasm...

*(Nearly overcome, back at pulpit, handkerchief on neck.)*

But you people persevered, and we want to know how you did it...  
 When you surfaced at 42nd and 7th... you came up that long escalator and you walked through  
 ... under the microbrewery of lost souls...  
 and there you stood between the myth fortresses of Bugs and Mickey,  
 Time Warner and Disney... how did you do it?

Building.

When you tried to cross 7th Avenue,  
 just putting one foot in front of the other,  
 just tax-paying god-fearing little pedestrians...

You look up and there he is... Mickey Mouse.  
 His smile nearly bifurcates his face. And you realize he isn't really smiling.  
 You know with horror...  
 that Mickey hasn't really smiled since 1955.

And you look around at your friends and they quietly burst into flames.  
 And it occurs to you to ask the question, *Am I in Hell?*

Oh, children, I know... I know...  
 Don't you feel the burning? Do you feel the pain?  
 It registers as a kind of minor happiness. It's shopping. Bless us all. It's shopping.

There is only this barely perceptible feeling that a word we knew, or a story, maybe  
 a face we remembered flickered  
 and went out.

But—you are here. You got through.  
 We will remember here, with each other's help.  
 And then we will know how to GO INSIDE.  
 WE WILL RETURN TO THE STORE.

otherwise. The redevelopment was (and remains) a joint effort of conservative New York Mayor Rudy Guillian and his infamous “Quality of Life” campaigns—which swept prostitution, adult entertainment, “unauthorized” street vendors, and small businesses out of the neighborhood—and of several major corporations, particularly the Disney Corporation, bent on making Times Square and Broadway a new mecca for “wholesome” “family” entertainment, alongside Walt Disney World in Florida, Disneyland in California, Disneyland Paris, and Tokyo Disney.

For many, Disney on Broadway seemed to mark the public death of theatre arts. Disney on Broadway marked the theatre’s ensnarement in the commodity chains of corporate capital, as Disney made plans to stage versions of animated cartoons, like *The Lion King*, already disseminated in multiple markets; putting the alternative puppeteer and director Julie Taymor on the payroll was little consolation, affirming only that even the most interesting of theatre practitioners could similarly be commodified.

For Talen, the scene was nothing less than apocalyptic: it was three years before the millennium, in the heart of Manhattan, square one of globalization, home of a (then) ever-expanding Wall Street and inflated Nasdaq, home to a rapidly moving urban “ethnoscape” of eight million people—migrants, exiles, tourists, workers, rich and poor—and there, in Times Square itself, suddenly appeared Disney on Broadway. The force of the image radicalized Talen. With the help of a dinner jacket and fake collar, Bill Talen became Reverend Billy. With a giant Mickey Mouse taped to a crucifix, Reverend Billy arrived on the scene as a cross between an anticommercerist superhero and a mad millennial prophet, ranting at tourists and passersby of the impending apocalypse. “Soon Manhattan [will] awake,” he raged, “to find itself within the walls of a hellishly expanded Disney Store” (Talen 1998a). “This is Manhattan as Vertical Suburban Mall,” he hollered. “This is a fatal disease known as Involuntary Entertainment. [...] This is drowning in a Sea of Identical Details. This is the moment. We stop shopping. The revolution of no shopping!” (1998b).

Disney was, needless to say, the right target for this critique: Disney has long been the flagship of American-style, neocolonial corporate culture on a global scale. Commodity fetishism is the magic of Disney. As a matter of aesthetic and corporate protocol, Disney will never let you see the never-never land of labor and relations of production. You will not see the labor that extracted the nuggets of gold found by Donald Duck and his Uncle Scrooge—as Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart told us in the 1970s, the gold is revealed always already extracted, in fat nuggets or shiny coins in an overfull bag, ready for greedy hands to grab (1975:63). You will never see the low nonunion wages behind the command smiles of Disney employees, from Florida to Tokyo; you will never see or photograph the faces behind the Mickey and Pluto masks at the theme parks. You will not know the names of the people who drew your favorite cartoons, and they won’t own or have the rights to one scrap of illustration (see Kunzle 1991; Project on Disney 1995; Giroux 1999). And you will most certainly never see the sweatshop labor in Haiti and elsewhere that made your Disney T-shirt, dolls, or pajamas (see National Labor Committee 1996, 1997). You probably won’t even quite grasp the enormity of Disney’s holdings. According to the 1997 annual report, these include television and radio networks that service a full 25 percent of U.S. homes, the ABC television network, five motion picture studios, three music studios, the theme parks, in addition to the stores, the clothing, music, videos, and gadgets. In 1997 alone, when the Reverend was shouting down the giant Mickey on Broadway, 200 million people watched a Disney film or video; 395 million watched a Disney TV show every week; 212 million purchased a Disney CD or tape; and more than 50 million visited a Disney theme park around



2. & 3. *Crowds responding to Reverend Billy at the Culture Project on the corner of Lafayette and Bleecker, honoring the recently bulldozed Esperanza community garden (February 2000). (Photos by Rudolphe Baras)*



the world (in Giroux 1999). Disney is its own “McWorld,” in Benjamin Barber’s phrase (1995), commanding more power, resources, and real capital than many countries of the world.

Disney presents a vast circuit of linked commodity chains, endlessly looped, and ever more dense. Disney CEO Michael Eisner commented to the shareholders in his 1997 annual report, “The Disney stores promote the consumer products, which promote the theme parks, which promote the TV shows. The TV shows promote the company [...]” (in Giroux 1999:1). With Disney on Broadway, theatre enters the loop: you can now go to the theatre to see live versions of your favorite film or video, which are themselves new contexts for characters from TV shows, which you can also buy in Disney stores as dolls or as logos on T-shirts or watches or mugs or hats, which are themselves advertisements for the theatre, film, or video, which promote the TV shows, radio, and books, all of which promote the theme parks, which happen to be giant theatre sets, where you pay to meet the characters, which prompts you to buy them in the stores as dolls, logos on T-shirts, on clocks, and so on, and on and on. Intent on interrupting this fluid movement from one scene of shopping to the next, Reverend Billy hollered, “Take your hand off that Mouse!” as he left the street and entered the store for the first time in 1998. Staging his first shopping intervention, he began: “Lift your hand from the product, children!”

Performing in the Disney Store, Talen aims to make audiences reflect on their overdetermined relation to that canyon of “10,000 smiling stuffed animals” who loom and leer at prospective shoppers. Even though Talen loudly asks the shoppers to leave the Disney Store en masse, he is not really orchestrating a boycott of Disney. In fact, his purpose goes well beyond conventional efforts to protest industry practices through consumer boycott. Talen knows, as do other materialist critics, that responding as an angry consumer is still good news for industry: as long as people mistake brand choice and product choice for real social choice, people still act according to the script of consumption. (Not to mention that Disney’s bottom line is hardly jeopardized by the revenue lost during the few minutes that Talen performs, before being firmly escorted off the premises by security or police.)

While many audiences mistake the performances for simple boycott gestures, Talen’s point is not to end the day’s shopping. Rather, the goal is to arrest it long

enough to make the underlying psycho-social investments of the scene visible. While he speaks tongue-firmly-in-cheek of “saving the souls” of his unsuspecting consumer-audiences through these interventions, he is, indeed, hoping to release their imaginations from the strictures of consumer practice.

With apocalyptic bravado, Talen roars, “We’re caught in the flames of forgetting! We think we’re ‘just browsing!’” Looking at the multiplying Mickeys, Plutos, Snow Whites, and Simbas, the Reverend tells us: Disney invented your childhood, identical in dysfunctional form and content to everyone else’s, and then made you believe it was yours. In the solo monologue, *The Church of Stop Shopping* (1999a), the Reverend insists that each animal “smiles directly at you with an air of assumed knowledge about your personal life... You find yourself thanking these made-in-a-sweatshop totemic polyester smilers for the life you lived. Your life events begin to reorganize to fit Disney’s product delivery schedule; you self-induce a false childhood.” In the store, he yells: “These animals cause memory loss!” Needless to say, the Reverend has been several times arrested.

Reverend Billy is a provocateur who works to unleash and reveal programmed scripts and narratives that constitute the scenes of today’s consumption. Talen is interested in the way in which the consumer is (re)produced by the scene itself, and the way the consumer knows and plays his or her part. Such shopping interventions reveal the consumers’ own scripts, produced as seamlessly by the commercial process as any other product. It is a classic Marxist maneuver, worthy of the best materialist theatre makers, from Bertolt Brecht to Augusto Boal: to reveal the relations of production, and the conditions that make consumption possible.

The response of one shopper, caught on video during a 1998 intervention, illustrates how these performances engage the ideological structures of leisure consumption. As Talen’s monologue ran apace—“Mickey Mouse is the anti-christ! This is your opportunity to stop shopping and save your souls!... Join a twelve step program!”—a young, white man challenged Talen, yelling, “Save your breath!” He appealed almost petulantly, “Why are you yelling at tourists? You’re just getting everyone upset!” When Talen continued, “Yes, let’s get upset!” the man stood firm, arms crossed and confrontational. “I don’t think you are funny at all. All you did is upset my grandma and that little girl over there. Like,



they're really upset. And they're just trying to buy Mickey Mouse." While another shopper did intervene on Talen's behalf ("Your grandmother should look at what's going on the world!"), the resistant shopper's protest is itself striking (Talen 1998c).

In their famous text from 1975, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology and the Disney Comic*, Dorfman and Mattelart note: "there are *Automagic* antibodies in Disney. They tend to neutralize criticism because they are the same values already instilled into people, in the tastes, reflexes and attitudes which inform everyday experience at all levels" (1975:29). The young man who berates Talen for frightening children and even worse, his grandmother, precisely speaks the script of automagic Disney defense. As we know, children and grandmothers play a particular role in Disney's ideological cosmology: if childhood itself is the ultimate product that Disney "Imagineers" produce, grandmothers are its adult protectors. Always postmenopausal, postsexual, grandmothers are the only nurturing adults in Disney (the mothers are of course all dead, the stepmothers are evil, and the fathers mostly absent). Grandmothers, then, are the innocent enablers of Disney magic: the fairy godmothers, the women of Disney wishes and wisdom (see also Bell 1995).

The young man unwittingly speaks the script that Disney imagineers long ago wrote for him: Disney produces and reproduces a certain kind of child and grandmother, both of whom are privileged versions of tourists and leisure shoppers. The man blames the Reverend, not Disney, for the news that all those stuffed Disney animals, clutched with such gorgeous emotion by American children, are actually produced by other Disney children: girls in sweatshops who support their grandmothers, parents and siblings on the 28 cents an hour paid by the contractor. As though by a programmed consumer instinct, the man blames the Reverend not on his own behalf, but on behalf of a child and his grandmother—a grandmother who, according to Talen and the video record, was literally not to be found in the store.

### *Shopping Invasions: Commercial Theatres and Involuntary Entertainment*

Talen has since systematized his theatrical entries into commercial spaces into carefully choreographed shopping interventions. These often involve other artists and collaborators; they most often involved the audiences of his New York one-man shows in 1998 and 1999 at the Theatorium, the Theatre at St. Clements Church, and Collective Unconscious. Like the preaching described above, the interventions are designed not as simple civil disobedience, but as scenes of shopping revelation. After one show in 1999, for example, the Reverend asked audience members to record a message, multiple times, on miniature tape recorders. He then led the audience, piper style, to the 42nd street Disney Store, where the audience—easily disguised as tourists—hid the recorders behind the rows of stuffed animals, and hit "play." Soon real tourists were confronted by a commodity opera: rows and rows of surreal Mickeys and Plutos and Donald Ducks and mermaids offering such self-revealing confessions as: "I was made in a sweatshop," "I cause memory loss," "You can stop shopping," and "I am the anti-christ."

To stage these interventions, Talen has written a series of "Invasion Manuals" that guide the process of performing in commercial spaces. One such manual for what he called *The Anti-Disney Spatathon* (1999b) reads as a cross between a theatrical improvisation scenario and a tactical street-war manual. The scenario is a "spat" between lovers that will not be recognized as theatre by most of the audience, including the security guards who might otherwise halt it. Like Boal's

early work in Invisible Theatre, it intentionally blurs the line between acting and real life in order to provoke unsuspecting audiences (called tourist-shoppers or “TSs” in the manual) to become involved in a revelatory public scene. Through this scenario, critique can be surreptitiously introduced into public discourse. Staged in a staggered “spatathon” over an hour or more, the spats focus on the politics of the Disney Corporation: sweatshop labor, the destruction of Times Square, the nonunion status of Disney workers, and so on. An excerpt from the manual reads:

- 3) Have your argument around the issue of a toy. Don't be abstract. Ground your conversation in an actual Disney character. Pick the Dumbo purse up and wave it around...point to it...make it a character in the spat.
- 4) We will assign various spots in the store for you, but be attentive to the places that the TSs congregate. They tend to collect in certain *cul de sacs*. We want a TS to join in whenever possible.
- 5) The M.O. of Disney security is to come up to people that they [find] suspicious and say through clenched teeth “Can I help you?” Be polite to them and reduce your volume for a while, but let the spat rule. Let the argument carry you. If and when they take you by the arm and show you the door, take it way up. Generally people of all types give a [...] public lovers' quarrel lots of space. Keep shouting all the way out. (Talen 1999b)

Here Talen encourages his collaborators—in this case, the audience of one of his shows—to enter into and manipulate the theatricality of commercial space itself: to note why and where “TSs congregate,” to engage the usual scripts of security officers, and to manipulate the social dynamic of a private argument in public space. These manuals are promissory notes for countercommercial theatre that can actively disturb and momentarily reclaim commercial space.

Ultimately, the performers of these interventions suggest alternative modes of public discourse and behavior which are already available to average shoppers, but against which we are routinely disciplined. Here the Reverend elaborates his poetics of embarrassment: a body that agrees to be embarrassed can house an everyday, usable threat to privatizing forces. Where commercial spaces carefully choreograph the use of space, lighting, Muzak, and product placement to maximize shopping practices and profit, Talen just as carefully choreographs inappropriate behaviors in that same mise-en-scène. Embarrassment is a risk: “going into a really sophisticated retail church like Starbucks or Disney is still a harrowing experience,” wrote Talen after a recent entry to the Disney store. “But when you feel excruciatingly inappropriate, [...] and you feel the executives in Orlando or Seattle staring at you through the surveillance cameras, well...Embarrassment is [...] the signal that we have found their power” (2000a).

On the other hand, facing down that embarrassment also allows for strategic use of one's own power in any given social space. Talen, for one, is keenly aware that he commands a particular kind of presence and social privilege as a tall, white man with a privileged background (“I don't suffer from racial profiling. If a cop stops me, he knows immediately that I have a college education and dental work” [2000b]). Talen well knows that in social dynamics organized around unstated and unresolved racism, he—unlike an African American counterpart—will be treated more generously if he begins shouting in a store, or whispering conspiratorially in the ears of all the middle-class consumers. Realizing this, Talen uses that privilege tactically, gaining access to privileged spaces, and commanding attention of those who might otherwise dismiss his message. Progressively pushing past the line of expected normative behavior (a line he sometimes calls “the

Swiftian line,” the moment of saturated irony that suddenly reveals the truth of the context), Talen acknowledges too that embarrassment is a minor risk, compared with the strategic advantages it offers.

Embarrassment is also the key to invention, to leaving behind the automagic scripts of shopping. When the audience goes to the Disney Store on the subway, says Talen, “rehearsing various skits about sweatshops en route from some small downtown theatre covered with dusty duct tape and coffee can lights, these people are carrying this moment of mystery into a completely and very claustrophobically resolved environment” (2000c). Talen’s manuals, then, are a new kind of acting manual: they help retrain the body to tolerate and exploit quotidian embarrassments in commercial space.

Consider the more elaborate manuals that supported his most recent initiatives directed at the Starbucks corporation, a project inspired in July 2000 with the news that Starbucks had opened, after only two years, its 100th store on the island of Manhattan. Each one of those Starbucks either replaced an existing coffee shop or business, or was built to displace the locally owned competition on the same block. (“I think of Disney as ruining the world; Starbucks are ruining our neighborhoods [2000d].) At the time of this writing, a year later, there are 137 Starbucks in Manhattan. The Reverend created what he calls a Starbucks Invasion Kit (2000e), a more elaborate shopping intervention module that, like the Electronic Disturbance Theatre’s Disturbance Developer Kit, might be deployed by others. The Kit, available on his website, involves another round of Spat Theatre and also “Cell Phone Operas.”

Spat Theatre in Starbucks runs along the same lines as that in the Disney Store, although this time Talen has provided sample scripts that engage a more nuanced ideological critique of the corporate coffee culture, which Starbucks has patented. Rather than a married couple arguing over sweatshop labor, here the characters and their critique are less predictable: *The Stockbroker Bitch and the Pagan Imp* (2000e), for example, features two women arguing about the fate of the Starbuck’s logo, the Mermaid. The Mermaid, we learn from the Imp, had her nipples removed several years ago in response to market research that suggested that less anatomical detail would make the figure more “family friendly.” The Pagan Imp upsets her conservative friend by loudly demanding that the nipples be restored to the Mermaid in the name of new-age feminist practice. The Stockbroker Bitch argues in favor of protecting the brand name at all costs; she is a shareholder and her wealth is at stake. Another script, *Virtually Hip* (2001), is an improvisatory piece for three actors whose loud adulations for the “hip” interior décor give voice to the underlying logic of the design:

ONE: [...] this caffeine buzz has convinced me that this is Paris café society in the '20s.

TWO: Sit down. This is embarrassing.

THREE: This isn't Paris.

ONE: No, you're right. This is New York in the '50s and I am Jack Kerouac and all of you are members of the avantgarde. You don't need fame or money because you are so confident of your Duchamp-like indifference.

TWO: Please. [...]

ONE: I can tell by the graphics on the walls. This art has an off-hand quality like Jean Michel Basquiat and yet it seems to suggest some ritual that we all understand but don't state...(Talen 2001)

These “spats” do not dramatize a shopping antagonism (to buy or not buy the sweatshop product). Rather, they direct an audience’s attention to the theatricality of advertising and corporate staging, and to the underlying social logic that has governed those choices. For some, these spats might prompt self-reflection on their own investments in the myths and cultural icons invoked by Starbucks.

Cell Phone Operas are a variation on this theme, capitalizing on the now-ubiquitous figure of the cell phone user—an ideal candidate for Talen’s anticommmercial theatre that already indexes the interpenetration of public space and private language, often at an inappropriately loud volume. A Cell Phone Opera involves several people having unrelated loud conversations on cell phones in the middle of the Starbucks, all of which ultimately interweave critiques of Starbucks’ corporate practices. At Astor Place, where three different Starbucks literally stand across from one another, one strain in the opera might go:

I’m waiting for you the Starbucks.... Which one?... At Astor Place....  
There’s more than one? Oh (*going to the window.*) ... Oh, I see the other one, by that new Kmart.... Not that one?... There’s another one, here?...  
Oh, in the Barnes & Noble?

As the opera signals the multiplying presence of corporate franchises in the East Village, suddenly Reverend Billy enters with a mobile pulpit and a 30 second sermon, crying: “My children, Astor Place is the Bermuda Triangle of Retail!” (see Talen 2000e).

One of the more striking aspects of this guerilla theatre is the response it garnered from Starbucks Headquarters, which sent their employees their own official script in the form of a memo (Starbucks Corporation 2000): “What should I do if Reverend Billy is in my store?” They instruct: “Do not answer any questions. Nothing is off the record.” Like Talen’s manuals, the memo itemizes a series of actions in response to “Reverend Billy and his devotees.” If questioned, every “barista” in those 100 identical Starbucks, is instructed to say: “Starbucks is about people. [...] Each one of our stores has become a unique part of its neighborhood.” (Indeed, and that’s what they said last fall, when Starbucks opened in China’s Forbidden City.) Through this memo, Starbucks rather lucidly reveals its own theatricality. Like the man who instinctively protects his (absent) grandmother when Disney is challenged, Starbucks, the transnational mogul of cookie-cutter franchises, answers its challenge in the language of uniqueness and neighborhood. Reverend Billy’s challenge curiously compels key players at the scene of shopping to reveal the artifice that makes shopping thrive.

### *Urban Memory, or Postindustrial Flânerie*

Talen has committed himself to rescuing realities, memories, and even history itself from the Disneyfication and commodification of experience, past and present. For Talen, like Benjamin before him, the arts of the storyteller are central to this task. Where contemporary urban realities tend to frame, flatten, and commodify experience into consumable information, stories provide alternative structures of memory, alternate modes of keeping—literally, safeguarding—experience for other social uses. The Storyteller, writes Benjamin in his famous essay of that title, is one who can, “in the midst of life’s fullness [...], give evidence



4. Reverend Billy preaching inside the Astor Place Starbucks, the largest of the 150 Starbucks in New York City and former site of the beloved Astor Riviera Diner (13 May 2000). (Photo by Steve Vitoff)

5. *The Reverend outside the Cooper Union Starbucks, one of the three Starbucks at the Astor Place intersection (13 May 2000). (Photo by Steve Vitoff)*



of the profound perplexity of the living.” Stories are, in his view, a form of counsel: “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” (1968:86–87). The Reverend steps into the endangered role of the Storyteller; walking through the wreckage of transnational capital he is “constantly asking the question, ‘What’s the story here?’” (2000c:5). Walking the streets of New York, he “finds himself at the center of an ongoing collision of stories” unfolding around him (2000c:5) and he attempts to voice to such perplexity.

This form of storytelling, which appears most often in monologues and theatre sermons than in his street preaching, describes the damaged urban landscape, and often attempts to salvage from it the lost memories and lives erased by every next layer of commercial linoleum. These narratives testify to Benjamin’s grim projection that, under rampant capitalism and urban rationalization, metropolitan life would be so thoroughly stamped by commodity form as to eliminate all other personal or social imagination; the best the Reverend can do is describe the tightening limits of the imagination in this scene. He asks: “When the corporations own so much square footage, in the sense of psychic space as well as real estate—where does original language begin?” (1998a). In this sense, Talen is a postindustrial *flâneur*: one walking the city, actively trying to see in the new global order of things the diverse realities—lives, memories, bodies—that are rendered everyday more invisible as our forms of social space and public representation are reorganized by commercial culture.

Thus the Reverend describes the experience of trying to make a home—literally—in between giant 150-foot models—Christy Turlington, Michael Jordan, Kate Moss, Brad Pitt. The young, near-naked bodies unfurl down the rubberized billboards that cover the sides of buildings, and even obscure windows of homes and offices. These gorgeous rubberized giants loom tall, towering with air-brushed menace over the blaring traffic and vendors at Houston and Broadway, affirming that we are, indeed, living in the postwar science-fiction films on which so many of us were raised. “Walking down the street is now officially so weird,” says Talen, “we have to stop saying the Apocalypse is in the future” (1998d). From down below—or from inside the obscured offices and apartments hidden behind the scrim of advertised knees or cheekbones—the beautiful image

giants appear to share in their own erotic product-to-product relations, making us, the beetle consumers driven about by overwhelming desire or fear, almost redundant. “Have they invented a name for this trauma?” asks the Reverend.

As Talen tells these stories, he is interested in their power to re-narrate—momentarily resignify—the spaces that they signal. Talen wants to remember those displaced or erased by the machinations of so-called “progress” and “quality of life.” When one of Mayor Guillian’s “Quality of Life” sweeps empties a street of social density; when the “New Prosperity” substitutes local idiosyncrasies with “the dotcommed rhetoric of freedom” (2000f); when a place is liquidated of what Talen calls (after Benjamin) “communicable experience” (1968:84), transforming it from a place where lives were lived and told to an efficient transit to and from labor or shopping, then Talen moves in to re-narrate that space—to act, however momentarily, as its memory.

Talen’s materialist critique of the privatization of public life thickens considerably in these narratives. The flâneur, Baudelaire’s painter of modern life, walks into the view of Benjamin’s angel of history: walking the city is a textured, bodily practice of rehearsing its social life and memories. The aim of such pedestrian storytelling is not just to invent or retell the good stories of old, but to reveal their ghosted presence in things as they are. As Michel de Certeau writes of pedestrian speech acts, the “long poem of walking” offers a tactic for reinhabiting the panoptic grids imposed by private property and city planning (“urban systematicity,” per de Certeau [1988]). Talen’s stories about walking the city are an archive of counter-memory that index the “rich silences and wordless stories” that saturate urban space, and that are most endangered by the one-dimensional glossy makeovers of franchise facades (105–09).

“I miss New York on *this* spot!” cries the Reverend indicating the entryway of a Starbucks shop, in a 2000 sermon entitled, *I Love New York* (2000g). From the sidewalk on 9th Avenue to the clean entry of the Starbucks is the portal between New York City and a deterritorialized McWorld, floating in its “Sea of Identical Details.” Talen’s stories give voice to spatial practices of moving in the new cosmopolitan city. He narrates the physically disorienting experience of stepping through the disjunctures between the city and this newly present McWorld, like sidestepping so many cracks in the sidewalk. He describes the temporal vertigo of oscillating between a material world comprised of the labor and lives of the dead, and the virtual life that is offered us in ultra-brite pixel clarity through dotcom advertisements at every turn. He conjures the lives of those dead, the newly displaced, and the endangered by naming them: old St. Patrick’s Cathedral, obscured by billboard advertising; Hakim’s Knish and Hot-dog Stand, displaced by Times Square redevelopment (2000h); Esperanza Garden, bulldozed in the name of “quality of life” (2000i). “The verbal relics of which the story is composed, being tied to lost stories and opaque acts,” writes de Certeau, produce lacunae in the stories. These names—St. Patrick’s, Hakim’s, Esperanza—are such lacunae, acting as “anti-texts, effects of dissimulation and space, possibilities of moving into other landscapes, like cellars and bushes” (1988:107). Talen’s stories work to insinuate themselves into an increasingly closed public discourse, to make room—habitable space—in the imposed order of things.

Consider a series of short sermons on the cemetery at old St. Patrick’s Cathedral, one of which aired on the public radio station WNYC in February 1999 as a “moral advisory,” entitled *This Way In*. The Reverend notes that the old cemetery is a kind of “village commons,” where even the hurried New Yorker pauses to reflect on the brevity of the small Irish lives that are commemorated there. From St. Patrick’s, you have a view of the sky; between the gravestones and clouds, the New Yorker has a solid place from which to imagine eternity. But



now, the Reverend testifies, a new imagination has intervened. Rather than see the sky, we see a dotcom ad, four stories high, that instead offers a picture of the sky, with a gigantic door, and a website address. “*This way in...*” it reads. It offers, the Reverend says, “an alternative heaven called Intel” whose threat looms over the dead as much as the living. “Children,” he cries, “we must have a defense against this blue door.” “Our friends, the dead, give us that help. They seem to tell us: ‘you are in, you are way in your life now’” (1999c). As de Certeau says, “Haunted places are the only ones where people can live” (108).

Talen’s sermon re-narrates the scene colonized by the advertisement. Like Benjamin in his essay on the storyteller, the Reverend reminds us that advertisements have stripped our capacity to appreciate both the value of human experience and its fundamental unknowability. Talen insists—again, following Benjamin—that the structure of stories and social memory depend on a respect and tolerance for that which is not explained, but lived; “half the art of storytelling,” wrote Benjamin, “is to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (1968:89). Advertisements, on the other hand, never allow for open imagination, or the unknown: “Nothing human cannot be immediately solved with the purchase of a product,” says Talen of the way advertisements distort the structures of storytelling (2000c). Thus the eternity to which those immigrant Irish lives are consigned might yet be brought under commercial control, as suggested by the next dotcom ad to hang over the cemetery some months later: “HTML meets DNA.” In a later sermon, the Reverend wondered whether the very remains of those dead were not about to be uploaded to that server blocking our view of the sky (2000f). Another sermon, entitled *Freedom’s Got Us Surrounded*, illustrates how Talen engages a materialist understanding of memory and storytelling to serve an anticonsumerist imagination. This sermon, from his 26 March 2000 performance staged at the Salon Theatre in support of unionization of local bodega workers, includes an anecdote about buying coffee at a local deli. As he reaches for the can on the shelf, his arm freezes in mid-gesture, before touching the product. “I’m having a moment of accidental entry into another world,” he says, as he narrates a lyrical but lurid vision of the coffee plantation where the beans were grown, replete with underpaid growers and threatening goon squads and the rich children of the overseers flying to resort towns. For some reason he has not been “ushered into that final acquisition, the final reach, touch, grab, and take to the register to pay and bag” (2000j).

This time the fetishized labor of the commodity has been revealed; he is “seeing backward, upstream, into who made this, who worked, who lived, who gave, who was stopped [...]” But why was he offered this special vision? He answers, finally, quietly, as his organist Bill Henry dramatically punctuates the narrative shift with a new chord: “I realized, I was not alone. Next to me is a man. He’s been standing there for a long time, but now I see him.” The presence of the worker, underpaid and exploited in circumstances comparable to those that produced the sweatshop coffee, has prompted all exploited and fetishized labor to be momentarily revealed. From here, after telling the worker’s story, Talen urges the audience out into the streets to join an action in the bodegas.

As his hand freezes on the product, and it reveals its own history and relations of production, that moment of knowledge belongs to a materialist historian. Benjamin, in his much-quoted “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” writes:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, [...] a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (1968:262–63)



6. *The Reverend “saves” a lost soul displaced by the realm of corporate culture. (Photo by Daniel Falgerho)*

It is precisely this kind of thinking that intervenes in—arrests—the choreography of shopping: “the final reach, touch, grab, take, pay, and bag.” Just as the commodity has been stripped of fetishized labor, so too has the choreography of shopping been defamiliarized.

The revolutionary chance in this form of political storytelling lies in the way of thinking, as much as the pregnant content of the thought. As Benjamin so famously reminds us, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it for what it really was. Rather it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (1968:255). To my thinking, the ultimate value

## This Way In

A Short Sermon by Reverend Billy

We interrupt this program for a moral advisory.

This is Reverend Billy. I live near the old St. Patrick's Cathedral, on Prince between Mulberry and Mott. This is the village common of my part of the city, the gravestones of the Irish, some of them dying so young in the 1800s, have the effect of taking the hurry out of a New Yorker; you look at clouds, are surprised by an old memory or a new idea. As you walk along the famous sagging-inward red-brick wall, the wonderful high trees seem hurled over the wall by the lives that those dead lived.

On February 1st 1999, a four-story-long rubberized billboard was unfurled, right over the cemetery. On it is a gigantic sky-blue door with a website address. A phrase across it says, "this way in ..." It is an advertisement to an alternative heaven called Intel... "This way *in*..." It towers over the dead and the living and addresses us both with the same taunt.

Children!... We must have a defense against this blue door, and our friends, the dead, they give us that help. They seem to tell us, "You are *in*, you are way *in* your life now... Don't open that blue door. It's not heaven. *No one has to sell heaven.*"

This is Reverend Billy.

of Talen's storytelling well exceeds its initial activist and propaganda value; its purpose is not just to announce that your coffee harbors unethical relations of labor, or that your local deli sanctions sweatshop hours and wages, although this message is important. The value is pedagogical in a broader sense: it teaches us *how* to recognize these quotidian moments as moments of danger, emergency, and to learn again to hear the fullness and fury of disfigured social lives, caught in the violence of colliding stories, that our everyday behaviors, spaces, and objects carry.

### *Negative Dialectics:*

#### *The God That People Who Don't Believe in God Believe In*

The question that emerges finally is, why a preacher? Benjamin's storyteller wasn't an ironist, after all. Why does Talen's storyteller need a fake collar and waistcoat, the altar-ego; why the tongue-in-cheek amens and halleluiahs?

At first blush, we might imagine that the preacher role is solid satire. Talen offers a send-up of the abominating fundamentalist rhetoric that characterizes the rise of the religious right in the U.S.—from senators like Jesse Helms to televangelists. A corrupt figure like the fallen televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, whom Talen sometimes resembles, is an obvious site from which to deconstruct the ways in which fundamentalist Christianity has been wedded to free market values, eliding democratic social practice in the name of aggressively conservative "family" values. "Transnationals," says Talen, "are the reigning fundamentalism of our day" (2000b); the persona of Reverend Billy plays ironically against the tight norms of what Linda Kintz, in a related critique, calls "market fundamentalism" (1997). Yet, the obvious ground of satire does not fully account for the ways in which

Talen's work actually advances certain spiritual notions of community development and social activism.

Bill Talen himself has had a long-term, complex interest in religious practice as a ground for his work in performance, beginning with his youth as a member of a tight-knit Dutch Calvinist community in Wisconsin. While he rejected that upbringing as an adolescent, it no doubt fostered his interest in the power of preaching as a performance form. His later work has often explored the peculiar, energy-creating force of the social oratory that—in a phrase from Laurie Anderson he likes to quote—“hangs between talking and singing.” He has been interested too in the power of certain religious stories, especially under the long tutelage of Sidney Lanier, the former Vicar of St. Clements, whom Talen credits with the Reverend Billy concept. Lanier, according to Talen, helped him recognize theatrical preaching as a vehicle for expression beyond satire. In his 2000/2001 artist's residency at the New School in New York City, Talen even taught a semester-long course on preaching in America.

Talen similarly professes enormous admiration for the politicized activism of so many African American churches, and the preaching of a long line of Baptist preachers, many of whom were models for white televangelists. He has spent ample time at services at the Mariner's Temple Baptist Church, where his own organist and chief collaborator, Bill Henry, both plays organ and practices his faith. The Reverend's relation to these churches is, then, not ironic at all, although he marks his distance from them; “I *will* be the white guy flipping and flopping up there with the African American grandmothers” (2000b). Yet there is a complex irony at work when his often young, disaffected, white audiences in the East Village require this “flopping” white preacher to open a space for their own chorus of “Amen!” and “You tell it brother!”—enthusiastic phrases they too quote from a range of racialized religious sources that they would otherwise be unlikely to indulge. So Talen's keen desire to explore what religion can offer to an atheist, urban Left is still not reconciled with this ironic tone.

We come closer to understanding the Reverend persona and its power, I believe, with the news that Talen finds something spiritual—actually spiritual—in the work of his comedic heroes, Andy Kaufman and Lenny Bruce, performers in whom Talen senses the magnificent proximity of the seriously funny and seriously divine. When asked, point blank, are you a real preacher? The Reverend does not answer. At best he winks. I am certain that his unwillingness to answer, an unwillingness finally to commit to any form of positive identity, is part of the answer.

Sometimes Talen's unwillingness to fix his role offers strategic opportunity. He can, for example, momentarily “become” the very thing he critiques, and doing so might win him temporary access to the spaces that are otherwise policed and protected for right-wing expression. For example, when Mayor Giuliani tried in the fall of 1999 to withhold public funding from the Brooklyn Museum of Art because the Mayor objected to a painting by Chris Ofili, which used elephant dung in the representation of a black Virgin Mary (*The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996), Reverend Billy was a regular protestor on behalf of the museum. But in this context, his religious persona had more power not on the Left side of the street, where distinguished activists and artist gave long rallying speeches about freedom of expression. Rather, he literally went to the other side, to test and reveal the limits of free expression.

Stepping behind the police barrier and next to grim women holding signs reading, “Stop Funding for Catholic Bashing!” the Reverend greeted the group warmly, momentarily becoming an angry Catholic priest. Surrounded by a wall of cross-armed police, he began preaching, in a loud, staccato yell:

My Children! Let's take the art off the walls and let's have...sports! Let's turn the Brooklyn Museum into a...Sports Bar! [...] Tear down the art! No more art! I want my Freedom! I want my Sports! And Disney! Thousands of monitors, all with...GAMES! It doesn't matter what games, just GAMES! And Elton John! And Chim Chim Cheree! Let's turn the Brooklyn Museum into...Times Square! A place that is only safe for shoppers, Children! Let's go shopping! Praise be! Amen! (1999d)

Like the Starbucks memo, Billy-as-Catholic-priest can vocalize the underlying ideological assumptions informing Guiliani's campaign, and do so in a space where he might be mistaken for a real right-wing protester. In this case, however, soon into his sermon, a police officer tried to usher him away from the protestors; she made her own decision as to whether he was a real priest, and whether his message was permissible behind that barricade. Apparently only "real" angry Catholic priests have a right to speech, protected by police-issued permit, in that particular public space.

Talen's actual preaching often sounds like the critique of the culture industry articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the 1940s. Like Adorno, Talen reminds us—again and again—that consumer culture cannibalizes public culture and reproduces us all as consumers, duped into imagining we exercise the free choice of individuals. Yet the fact that these critiques are staged through the persona of a comic Christian priest brings Talen closer, I think, to the Adorno who wrote "Negative Dialectics" (2000 [1966]), looking for a way to trace that nonconceptuality that is the limit and potential freedom of philosophical thought. "We believe in the God that people who don't believe in God believe in," says Talen of his Church; he asks his followers to join in a communal recitation of a long list of such "dis-believes," usually with a great deal of tittering and laughter on their part. Believing in the double negative has a homologous relation to Adorno's insistence that philosophy should strive "by way of the concept, to transcend the concept" (65). Talen, along with Lenny Bruce and other relentlessly inappropriate and irreverent comedians before him, does offer a theatrical and political equivalent to negative dialectics in their practice. If dialectics is the "consistent sense of nonidentity," then Talen can't afford a positive identity: the minute he offers a reconciliation, of any kind, of the social contradictions he seeks to reveal, the dialectical potential opened by his work disappears. That negativity—never really being any one thing—becomes a means to an end he cannot name.

In the blur between the real church and real theatre, sustaining this negativity is the Reverend's most genuine, and perhaps most spiritual act. It is an everyday, renewable sacrifice: he commits himself to an endless negativity in order to make possible new configurations, new revelations, new ways of imagining being in public, being a public, beyond the retail church of shopping.

### *Conclusion, on Magic*

Talen joins a range of other performance artists whose potent fictional personas begin to blur and overtake the everyday artist that performs them. Critic José Muñoz notes that because performance artist Alina Troyano, alias Carmelita Tropicana, appears almost always in character, her performance "defies notions of a fixed subjectivity," and, instead, that persona undermines notions of ethnic, racial, or sexual "authenticity and realness in favor of queer self-making practices" (1999:139). Something similar is at work with Reverend Billy, who is Reverend Billy more often than he is Bill Talen these days, churning in his own performative magic. As long as he doesn't actually become the preacher he now continuously

## We Believe

by Reverend Billy  
with the Deacons and Musicians  
of the Church of Stop Shopping

*(Rev Billy asks in a tone of mocking high seriousness:)*

The congregation will now rise for the recitation of the We Believes. The words are in your program. Please, children, be open to the possibility of believing in something.

*(The organ begins in stateliness. This is a vespers spoof, with the long part of each phrase sung Gregorianly on one note. Then pause on the dash and, with the last words at the end, rise with three ascending notes. Be mournful, holy.)*

*(Congregation joins in:)*

We believe in the god that people who don't believe in god — believe in.

We shop the way that people who never shop — do their shopping.

We put the — ODD BACK IN GOD.

We believe that not particularly great sex involves more information by several orders of magnitude than the merger of — Time Warner and AOL.

We believe that something will happen, somebody will do something, before every damn inch of New York is — the Mall of America.

We believe that Chagall's flying violinist would prefer not to hang out with — Deepak Chopra.

We believe that ultimately we will reclaim the psychic space we have ceded to Consumerism because there is a profound boredom that we must expel after being promised a cathartic moment so many times when what really happens is — more lousy shit.

We believe that you didn't have to squeeze me like you did but you did — but you did.

*(Band and choir break into old Sam and Dave; end with AND I THANK YOU!)*

We believe that Minetta Creek will rise up and overwhelm NYU, flooding the basements of the office towers, and that ravens will appear in the windows of the suites, and the paupers still buried under the park will claw their way to sunlight like characters out of the writing of — someone who lives around here.

We believe that if a sweatshop worker finds out that one morning of Michael Eisner's income would feed her family for 10 lifetimes and that with her knowledge Eisner is already closer than he knows to — being forced to share.

We believe that being the subject of constant surveillance makes us evolve a deeper privacy, a world where robot cameras will search for us but finally — turn into pigeons.

We believe that Consumerism is the new fundamentalism and that New York, which has always had a starring role as Sodom and Gomorrah in the comic book Apocalypse, knows how to resist totalizing scenarios by redneck cracker — even the ones in Versace.

We believe in the return of the indie bookstores, ma and pa apothecaries, small vendors, sex workers, and stoops with open containers which have liquid content of all kinds and where you might have to stop and weather the feeling that you are wasting time and find yourself telling a story or — being told a howler which you might have to retell with your own adornments and expurgations.

We believe that to stop crime you don't have to — kill life.

We believe that Convenience — is not convenient.

We believe that we were raised more than we realize by a revolving group of radical mothers Madame Blavotsky Rachel Carson Zora Neale Hurston Mother Jones — mommy where's your sponsor?

*(The Reverend says:)*

Mom isn't brought to you by / made possible by / brought to you courtesy of — Mom is unbranded —

We believe that Ghandi said that "First they laugh at you, then they ignore you, then they fight you — then they lose."

Amen.

pretends to be, his performances will continue to refract, deconstruct, and open rigid understandings of spirituality and materialist critique, at the same time that they mark, like a social bookmark, a place for a community to momentarily form around him.

Perhaps real fairy godmothers wear wrinkled dinner jackets and have wild dyed hair?

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