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XEROGRAPHY, PUBLICS, AND COUNTERPUBLICS

It is illegal for any person to paste, post, paint, print, nail or attach or affix by any means whatsoever any handbill, poster, notice, sign, advertisement, sticker or other printed material upon any curb, gutter, flagstone, tree, lamppost, awning post, telegraph pole, telephone pole, public utility pole, public garbage bin, bus shelter, bridge, elevated train structure, highway fence, barrel, box, parking meter, mailbox, traffic control device, traffic stanchion, traffic sign (including pole), tree box, tree pit protection device, bench, traffic barrier, hydrant or other similar public item on any street.

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF SANITATION

As access to copy machines increased throughout the 1970s, urban curbs, gutters, flagstones, trees, posts, poles, bins, bridges, fences, barrels, boxes, and signs were all claimed as potential parts of this urban canvas. Left to accumulate, over time these stapled and wheatpasted posters also formed their own canvases, eventually wrapping entire structures in layered and peeling boards of pastiched paper—sometimes close to an inch thick. These constantly shifting, collaboratively produced and spontaneous paper structures were the work not only of artists and musicians but also of community activists and just regular citizens seeking to promote their own causes. Before digital social media platforms presented other low-cost alternatives, the production and distribution of photocopied posters played an integral role in publicizing events and concerns that would otherwise have been difficult to promote. This was how you found out what was happening and, perhaps more importantly, how you knew you were somewhere where something *was* happening. In the semiotics of the city, these canvases signified that you'd arrived—in an urban scene or subculture or active social movement. Likewise, the absence of these canvases signified

that you'd landed in a neighborhood that was either highly policed, bereft of culture, or both.

In many cities, these canvases were once the outdoor wallpaper of iconic downtown neighborhoods, like New York's Soho and Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, real estate was inexpensive and construction hoardings, which offer a convenient and legal place to poster, were plentiful; as a result, downtown city walls were repurposed as outdoor galleries with little or no interference from authorities, who were either absent or too busy addressing more pressing offenses. Of course wallpaper, indoors or out, is an acquired taste, so as real estate prices rebounded in New York and other urban centers, the aesthetics of xeroxed posters increasingly came under attack. For some urban dwellers the sight of a wall covered in posters, even tattered and peeling, remains a welcome sight. Where there are walls blasted with posters, one assumes that a great café, bar, or bookstore must be nearby. For others, the sight of a wall covered in posters is a warning that social disorder is imminent. It's precisely such polarized responses that have structured debates on public postering over the past two decades.

In this chapter, I trace the unanticipated but by no means inconsequential impact of xerography on urban landscapes and more broadly on publics and counterpublics in the late twentieth century. I argue that xerography changed what cities look like and how we organize ourselves in these spaces, and further argue that eventually xerography also deterritorialized scenes and subcultures once synonymous with urban spaces. Building on the argument advanced in chapter 2, I make a case that xerography promoted the emergence of new and increasingly heterogeneous types of publics in the late twentieth century. However, if xerography helped to change both the look and experience of cities at that time, it by no means did so without resistance. From the largest metropolises to minor municipalities, cities across North America over the past three decades have taken sometimes absurd steps

to curtail and even outlaw postering, consistently targeting activists, artists, and other individual citizens and their xerographic reproductions in the process. Significantly, at stake in these debates are a series of broader questions about aesthetics, xerography as a medium, and who has the right to define and enforce definitions of public space and public culture.

PUBLICS AND COUNTERPUBLICS

Like the concepts of margin and community, those of public, public sphere, public culture, and public space are difficult to define and dangerously bloated with connotations and baggage. As Michael Warner warns, "Publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that."[1] By the time he published the essays that comprise *Publics and Counterpublics* in the early years of the new millennium, the concepts of "public" and "the public" had already given way to that of "publics." Any discussion of publics, Warner contends, is plural, contingent, and contestable: "The publics among which we steer, or surf, are potentially infinite in number."[2] This is a notably different understanding of "public" than that developed earlier by Jürgen Habermas.

The public sphere as described by Habermas may be said to have emerged optimistically with modernity and later diminished with its excesses—excesses realized through the spread of twentieth-century mass forms of communication. In summary, Habermas's public sphere, in contrast to Warner's, is comprised of individuals, not fragmented subjectivities: it is "a forum in which the private people come together to form a public." Habermas's public sphere, at least in its ideal form, pivots on the division between public spaces and what he describes as "intimate spaces": "In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family privatized individuals viewed themselves as independent even from the private sphere of their

economic activity as persons capable of entering into 'purely hu-man' relations with one another."[3] Said another way, the conception of public presented by Habermas remains committed to the pos-sibility that the intimate sphere—for example, the sphere of domes-ticity or sexuality—is *not* public, but rather something that serves as a precondition for the public sphere. Finally, and most relevant to my discussion here, Habermas's public sphere is contingent on the existence of an independent print culture. As the availability of printed books and eventually journals and newspapers increased, literacy rates rose and so too did the possibility for private indi-viduals to educate themselves on subjects of import to the public. Essential to this formulation is the implied link between the avail-ability of independent media (e.g., small journals and newspapers produced at arm's length from the church, the state, and the media conglomerates that Habermas blames for the eventual demise of the public sphere in the twentieth century) and *rational* discourse. Indeed, in Habermas's formulation, an independent print culture is critical to the formation of the public sphere insofar as it pro-vides a viable forum for "rational-critical debate," something ap-parently only achievable to the extent that one is able to speak not as a privatized individual from a subjective position but rather rationally concerning the regulation of one's private sphere.

What Habermas fails to account for in his formulation of the public sphere is the fact that the boundaries between the individ-ual and the collective and the private and public, as well as the intimate and the public, are often far less easily demarcated than he claims. As his feminist and queer critics (by no means few in number) have repeatedly charged, seemingly individual and pri-vate concerns (e.g., housework, marriage, childrearing, and sexual-ity) are profoundly shaped by public policies and public opinion. Without completely rejecting the Habermasian model of public space, Seyla Benhabib observes that women's issues frequently ap-pear private given their focus on the family and domestic sphere,

but this does not mean they are by definition moral or merely con-
cerned with the private pursuit of the good life. In every sense, these
issues are also of relevance to the commons.[4] Theorists of trauma
and affect have launched similar critiques of Habermas's formula-
tion, specifically pointing to the ways in which the public-private
divide effectively remove the traumas of women and men—includ-
ing those generated by genocide and war—from public dialogue.[5]

For somewhat different reasons, queer theorists, such as War-
ner, have also sought to rethink the concepts of public, public
sphere, public culture, and public space. "For modern gay men and
lesbians," Warner observes, "the possibilities of public or private
speech are distorted by what we call the closet."[6] In this "regime
of domination," to speak in public may feel like a form of expo-
sure, while to remain private is equated with being in the closet. In
essence, as Warner emphasizes, to be known publicly as a homo-
sexual or a heterosexual is simply not of the same order, because
the latter is always taken for granted and the former is contingent
on some form of public declaration or "coming out." But the trope
of the closet and its implied understandings of public and private
space are not the only considerations here. Given their historical
exile from the intimate sphere of the family, for queers, perhaps es-
pecially for gay men, public spaces—for example, the public bath-
room, bar, and park—have long also doubled as intimate spheres
of sex, friendship, and familial relations. Hence we have Warner's
formulation of *publics*, in the plural, and his additional formula-
tion of *counterpublics*. As he suggests, following Habermas, some
publics "are defined by their tension with a larger public."[7] While
such counterpublics may have much in common with subcultures
and may be comprised of subaltern subjects, there is no specific
style or practice or identity that defines counterpublics. Rather,
he maintains that "a counterpublic, against the background of
the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its
exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical

relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like."[8] It's precisely the *mediated* nature of both publics and counterpublics that concerns me here.

If Warner's position on publics shares anything with the understanding of the public sphere forwarded by Habermas, it is his recognition of the extent to which publics are mediated formations, and mediated in at least two senses: first insofar as they are the products of negotiations, and second insofar as they are the products of media. "The temptation is to think about publics as something we make, through individual heroism and creative inspiration or through common goodwill," writes Warner, but "much of the process … necessarily remains invisible to consciousness and to reflective agency. The making of a public requires conditions that range from the very general—such as the organization of media, ideologies of reading, institutions of circulation, text genres—to the particular rhetoric of texts."[9] What Warner fails to fully acknowledge is that alongside the conditions he lists, one also needs to consider the medium itself. As such, I would add to Warner's rhetorical question—"Can a public really exist apart from the rhetoric through which it is imagined?"[10]—an equally important question, which is arguably the question with which this chapter and book are most directly preoccupied: "Can a public really exist apart from the *medium* through which it is imagined?"

In essence, what this question seeks to explore is the extent to which publics and counterpublics are imagined not only through rhetoric or discourse, as both Habermas and Warner assert, but on a more material level. After all, the publics and counterpublics that came into being in the early years of movable type were different from the publics produced in a world structured by a tangled network of telegraphic cables in the nineteenth century and from those produced more recently in the wake of the Internet. Each

medium is marked by distinctive proximities, relations, and modes of encounter, just as each medium is marked by distinctive aesthetics and temporalities and lived experiences. This is why Habermas suggests that specific innovations in printing—for example, the production of paperback editions—profoundly altered publics. The production of paperback editions and distribution of classic works via book clubs are both innovations that brought "high-quality literature" to a wider range of people. While Habermas is notoriously skeptical of such developments, concluding that the book clubs of the mid twentieth century represented an erosion of the public sphere to the extent that they "intensif[ied] the direct contact of the editors with the needs of mass taste" and "ease[d] the access to literature not merely economically for consumers from overwhelmingly lower social strata," one might just as easily see such developments as expanding publics and counterpublics.[11] As Janice Radway argues, publics, including publics traditionally not recognized as such (e.g., the publics of working-class women), may form through "low-brow" reading practices, offering otherwise isolated individuals (e.g., those historically exiled to the intimate sphere) an opportunity to engage in public dialogues.[12]

As a medium that is accessible not simply to readers but also to producers, xerography was uniquely situated in the public sphere. But again, if publics might be imagined through specific media, what types of publics became imaginable through xerography that would otherwise have remained unimaginable? In the previous chapter, I maintained that the apparent stability and uniformity of print cultures were effectively interrupted by the heterogeneity fostered by xerography. I further suggested that this resulted in new types of communities—including microcommunities that at times exist in parasitic relationship to the larger imagined community of the nation. Building on this argument, in this and the following chapter I explore how xerography enabled us to imagine and in some cases even realize radically different types

of cities, publics, and counterpublics in the late twentieth century. I first turn my attention to New York's downtown arts scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

COPY MACHINES AND DOWNTOWN SCENES

In the early 1970s, as New York City was in an economic and social downturn, a vibrant arts scene emerged in downtown Manhattan south of 14th Street. From its onset, it was fully aware of its status as a bona fide *scene*. Over the next two and a half decades, the scene gave rise to a generation of innovative artists, writers, and musicians. Yet, even though the downtown scene generated its share of art world celebrities, it was always defined by a distinctly DIY aesthetic and ethic. As Brandon Stosuy emphasizes, in this scene writers and other cultural producers "took an active role in the production process, starting magazines, small and occasional presses, galleries, activist organizations, theaters and clubs," and this was as true for the scene's celebrity artists as it was for its cultural producers working in relative obscurity.[13] Like most scenes, this one was the result of a convergence of historic, economic, and technological factors. As emerging artists actively sought out spaces to occupy rather than negotiate entry to, cheap rent emerged as a key factor in the scene's development (and at the time, cheap rent was not difficult to find).[14] But cheap rent was not the only factor driving the downtown arts scene; it was also contingent on the growing availability of a new medium: the copy machine.

Emerging in the early 1970s just as copy machines started to move out of offices and libraries and into bodegas and copy shops, New York's downtown scene benefited from this new form of inexpensive print production from the outset: musicians without agents lined up at copy machines to turn out homemade posters advertising upcoming gigs; downtown artists embraced copy machines as

a way to move their art out of the gallery and museum and into the street; and writers seized copy machines as a way to self-publish zines, broadsides, and even books. As Marvin Taylor observes, "Downtown work exploded traditional art forms, exposing them as nothing more than cultural constructs. Verbo-visual work, installation art, performance art, appropriation art, graffiti painting, Xerox art, zines, small magazines, self-publishing, outsider galleries, mail art, and a host of other transgressions abounded."[15] Significantly, most of the art forms listed by Taylor depended on xerography either directly or indirectly: it was either the medium these artists were working with or in, the means by which they were publicizing their work, or the medium of production and dissemination.

Not surprisingly, the Downtown Collection, which Taylor founded at NYU's Fales Library and Special Collections in the early 1990s and continues to develop, is a veritable storehouse of xeroxed ephemera. Among the dozens of collections—some donated by individual artist and many others by artist collectives and other downtown organizations and galleries—are countless examples of artworks, posters, flyers, and printed materials turned out on copy machines. Yet, in my various trips to Fales to carry out research for this book, I found it difficult to find a definitive example or set of examples that might help me illustrate just how important xerography was to the development of the downtown scene in the 1970s and 1980s. The collections that comprise the Downtown Collection contain examples of all the types of art mentioned by Taylor—xerox art, zines, small magazines, and mail art alongside thousands of photocopied flyers, ticket stubs, and posters. In some collections, receipts and check stubs reveal just how much money some of the individuals and collectives represented in the collection were spending on xerography at the time. More or less absent, however, are any self-conscious references to xerography. One is left with the impression that, like talking or breathing, xerography was just something people were doing all the time, out

of necessity and convenience. For this reason, it wasn't something anyone spent much time thinking or writing about or documenting in any formal manner.

Photographs of artists hanging out around Xerox machines at all-night copy shops in the East Village may be elusive (which is not to say that such photographs are not in the collection, only that I never found them), but there is no way to visit the Downtown Collection and not leave with a strong impression that in the 1970s to 1980s, xerography was central to the production and dissemination of art and community building in the downtown scene. In some cases, it was how emerging artists established international reputations while conveniently bypassing gatekeepers at established galleries and art museums. Downtown artists like Jenny Holzer and Keith Haring, for example, experimented with xerography in the late 1970s and 1980s before settling on other media. With few exceptions, however, works turned out on copy machines were rarely labeled or categorized as such. The medium, in most cases, was so taken for granted that it was not always identified as a distinct form of image reproduction, even when being used to produce artworks. This is precisely why, on one of my trips to Fales, I asked to look at one of the most iconic works to come out of New York's downtown art scene in the 1980s. David Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* features a photocopied (yes, I confirmed) cutout of Rimbaud's face cast against various iconic locations around New York City. In its acid-free folder at Fales, the mask (likely just one of the many versions used by Wojnarowicz in the series) looks like nothing more or less than a hastily produced, photocopied paper mask. In the series, the flimsy paper mask is repeated again and again, and in each photograph the mask is attached to another body in another space—a gesture that not only underscores the ephemerality and mobility of the xerographic medium but also the power of the multiple as a means to quite literally occupy the city.[16]

While Wojnarowicz along with Holzer and Haring eventually received attention in New York and well beyond, for most artists in the downtown scene the copy machine was less a medium of art than a means of communication and publicity. After all, prior to the development of digital social media platforms in the late 1990s, xeroxed posters and flyers were the primary means by which artists and performers took publicity into their own hands. Unlike more recent forms of social media, which are typically only or primarily visible to people who are already members or subscribers, xerography's platform, in a sense, was the city itself, and anyone strolling by was a potential subscriber.

It's precisely this democratizing effect that David A. Ensminger celebrates in *Visual Vitriol*. While recognizing that most copy machines were produced by the very sorts of large corporations that no self-respecting punk would ever dream of endorsing, Ensminger concludes, "Xerox and others produced machines that freed punk graphic artists from the demands of money, time, and energy by handing them a machine that could act as a Trojan horse."[17] The Trojan horse in question enabled punk and its signature aesthetic to carve out visible spaces not only in New York but in cities across North America and well beyond, at a time when many downtowns were more synonymous with abandonment and crime than cultural production. While not everyone viewed punk as distinct from the social problems plaguing inner cities in the 1970s and 1980s (in many respects, punk was where it was precisely because high crime rates and the divestment of properties had left a convenient space for it to fill), at least in New York the punk scene was, from the outset, deeply entangled with the city's downtown art scene.[18] Punk's visible presence there in the 1970s and 1980s—the walls of posters and flyers for upcoming shows and events of all kinds that appeared as a result—was a sign of life, of a constantly shifting life force in New York's downtown landscape. This aesthetic and energy were in turn

recirculated in much of the work produced by artists who were part of downtown scene at the time.[19]

Xerography, in this sense, offered more than a means of production and distribution that bypassed the expectations and censorship of promoters, curators, and publishers. In the 1970s and 1980s, walls of xeroxed posters and street art distinguished downtown scenes from other neighborhoods by creating constantly changing and highly textured facades. Xerography also effectively blurred the boundary between art making, its context, and its publicity. As a result, as artists, musicians, poets, and performers of all kinds publicized their work and events, the city in turn was transformed. These posters changed what certain neighborhoods looked like and changed the function of these neighborhoods along the way. In an interview for the ACT UP Oral History Project, Avram Finkelstein, artist and cofounder of Gran Fury, recalls, "Eighth Street was literally papered with posters, manifestos and posters and diatribes. It was literally like a billboard, the entire corridor between the East and West Village, and I remember that as a very vital way that people communicated in the street. It was free. Everyone did it. I remember it as a part of my adolescence."[20] In an interview for this book, artist and activist Carrie Yamaoka, reflecting on the downtown scene in the same period, remembers that "back then, you could look at a wall and see a poster and you knew that so and so is playing at the Pyramid on Saturday. … That is really the way you would find out that something was going on. It was a bulletin board, but the bulletin board was everywhere."[21]

One might argue that there have always been posters in downtown cores of cities, making what happened as a result of xerography merely an extension of previous forms of urban advertising. This analogy quickly breaks down, however, since with xerography there was a drastic shift in who was producing the posters and how posters were being produced. As Ensminger emphasizes, the

postering and flyering that were synonymous with the punk scene and more broadly with artistic production during the punk era were not simply about advertising events. Sometimes, after a show was announced, three or four different posters would appear advertising the gig—some made by members of the band and others by fans (something that xerography made possible by drastically reducing both the cost and time of production). Copy machines, in this sense, not only helped to forge social bonds but also arguably changed who could be an active participant in the making of culture.[22] After all, as long as the city was a bulletin board and the bulletin board was everywhere, in a sense we were all living *in* our communication platform. We walked through it, were influenced by its aesthetic, and of course, as my own archival research for this chapter reminded me, we took it mostly for granted too—that is, until downtowns regained their status as sites of economic interest and the aesthetics and content of xeroxed posters began to come under attack.

As downtowns regained their mainstream appeal in the late 1980s and 1990s (both as sites of commerce and as preferred places to live), public postering—with its strong links to art, activism, and the punk scene—was targeted as one of the things to be contained or eliminated (along with other forms of street art). If borrowed time on copy machines and borrowed space on city walls once offered artists and activists a way to carve out a space for themselves in downtowns and actively participate in defining cities, by the late 1990s these practices were increasingly being constructed as antithetical to efforts to clean up, gentrify, and privatize the same public spaces.

XEROGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF THE SANITIZED CITY

In New York City, the crackdown on public postering came as a consequence of the city's much more aggressive crackdown on graffiti in the 1990s.[23] As Yamaoka recalls, "There was a transformation of public space in New York, and it started with Giuliani in the early 1990s."[24] Yamaoka's assertion that the transformation started with Rudy Giuliani's administration (1994–2001) is reflected in statistics on fines issued for postering. From June 1996 to June 1997, the City of New York issued more than twice the number of summonses for illegal postering that it had the pervious year: 7,738 compared to 2,910 (and a negligible number only a decade earlier).[25] While commercial postering companies were not entirely let off the hook, individuals and artist and activist collectives posting xeroxed posters were disproportionately targeted in the city's efforts to eliminate postering. A 1997 letter to the editor in the *New York Times* reveals just how petty the NYPD was in its crackdown on postering. As Greta Pryor reports, "In June, a police officer came to my apartment and asked me, 'Aren't you aware that you have outstanding summonses with the city?' I was shocked! I asked what the summonses were for, and he told me 'postering.' I had been given five tickets of $50 each for taping signs to bus shelters in my neighborhood. (I was trying to sell my air-conditioner for $150.)"[26]

While the crackdown on New York's graffiti artists has been widely documented, the similar crackdown on postering is rarely mentioned in histories of New York street art and histories of gentrification. Indeed, even as the NYPD began to issue hefty fines to anyone daring to post a poster in a public place (e.g., a bus stop), there was little public debate. In other cities across North America, however, where graffiti was perhaps a less obvious or widespread problem, illegal postering became as much of a flashpoint as the graffiti issue did in New York. For reasons that remain unclear to me after a

decade's research on the history of xerography and public postering, the crackdown on postering, while not necessarily more prevalent or aggressive than in the United States, garnered particular public support and collective resistance in several Canadian cities.

As in New York, Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles, in most Canadian cities the most striking displays of posters are often comprised of glossy advertisements for new-release films and other events with corporate backing. In the 1990s, however, as city after city launched campaigns to restrict public postering, the aesthetics of the DIY photocopied poster—the kind posted by people looking for a lost cat or announcing a spontaneous march against a proposed garbage dump or advertising an upcoming art opening or gig at a local bar—were consistently targeted as the real source of urban blight. Across municipalities, charges laid for illegal postering targeted individuals posting posters turned out on copy machines rather than businesses blasting entire walls with large glossy posters advertising big-ticket events. While different cities introduced legislation against public postering at different moments (and with varying degrees of vigilance and success), everywhere public officials seeking to control or eliminate postering adopted nearly identical lines of argument.

The most common argument against postering was premised on the view that posters and flyers, especially those turned out on the fly using DIY methods of reproduction such as xerography, were aesthetically undesirable. Like other forms of vandalism (e.g., graffiti), printed ephemera were seen as marring the face of the city. Following the "broken windows" approach to crime prevention, which links small crimes, such as vandalism, to more serious crimes,[27] the argument further asserted that public postering was not only an aesthetic crime but also a practice that fostered an environment in which more serious crimes were likely to emerge. Thus, in contrast to the high level of public tolerance for the illegal copying that takes place in copy shops, which is seen as ultimately

supporting the public good, illegal postering has been attacked because it is assumed to work against the public good. In extreme form, rather than viewed as an innocuous addition to the urban landscape, a xeroxed poster wheatpasted to a mailbox is seen as a calling card for gangs and heroin addicts. Less commonly, public postering has been targeted because of the content that most DIY posters feature (e.g., information that promotes alternative economic activities, lifestyles, and countercultural movements) and even on the basis of the claim that postering public works (e.g., utility polls) might compromise the safety of maintenance workers and even the general public (beware of those errant staples!). In my first (and not-so-urban) experience of a municipal battle over public postering, all of these concerns appeared to coalesce in a case that would eventually reach the Supreme Court of Canada.

In 1990, a rotund and gregarious fiddle-playing small town musician named Reverend Ken inadvertently changed the face of urban landscapes across Canada. Kenneth Ramsden (Reverend Ken's real name) was a fixture of the local arts scene in Peterborough, Canada—a town (technically, a small city) located about two hours northeast of Toronto. Before Reverend Ken's high-profile legal battle, Peterborough was best known for its historic lift-lock system and modern-day book bannings in local schools. In other words, it was neither definitively urban nor progressive. Thus it was an unlikely scene for a legal battle that would ultimately change what Canadian cities look like while also entrenching Canadians' right to poster.

Like many local performers, Ramsden liked to advertise upcoming gigs for his band, Reverend Ken and the Lost Followers, by placing posters on electricity poles and other public works and walls around Peterborough's "downtown core" (picture a few blocks of cafés and storefronts in a college town of about 50,000 residents). Ramsden's posters looked pretty much like all the others stapled and wheatpasted to the town's surfaces, whether they

were advertising an upcoming garage sale or lesbian cabaret or searching for a lost cat or misplaced accordion. In short, they were handmade—usually scrawled on foolscap with a Sharpie—and run off on a perpetually low-in-toner, two-cent-per-page copy machine at a corner store.

Ramsden's troubles with local authorities started in 1988 while he was posting a flyer for an upcoming gig on a lamppost. Although this was something he had done hundreds of times in the past, on this occasion he was surrounded by police officers and handed a hefty $108 fine. A bylaw, dating back to 1937 and amended in the 1980s, clearly stated that "no bill, poster, sign or other advertisement of any nature whatsoever shall be placed on or caused to be placed on any public property."[28] Broadly interpreted, the bylaw prohibited all printed ephemera from being attached to any public property, built or natural, within the city limits, leaving no legal public place to post posters at all.[29] Ramsden not only continued to post his xeroxed posters; with the help of Simon Shields, who ran a local paralegal service known as the CIA (Community Information Agency), he decided to fight the fine. The paralegal and musician argued that the city's bylaw violated Section 2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which states that everyone has the right to "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication."[30] Initially, two lower courts rejected the case, arguing that Ramsden's posters were both aesthetically undesirable and apparently a threat to public safety. Then the duo enlisted the help of a Toronto lawyer who agreed to take the case to a provincial appeals court. Here the court ruled in support of Ramsden, recognizing that a total ban on public postering did violate the Canadian Charter of Right and Freedoms. The City of Peterborough in turn appealed the case to the Supreme Court of Canada, making it one of the most high-profile freedom-of-expression cases in Canadian history.[31] Among

the evidence cited in the Supreme Court ruling was art historian Robert Stacey's research in the history of public postering:

> [Stacey] testified it was early recognized that posters were an effective and inexpensive way of reaching a large number of persons [and] utility poles have become the preferred postering place since the inception of the telephone system. … Posters have always been a medium of communication of revolutionary and unpopular ideas. They have been called "the circulating libraries of the poor." They have been not only a political weapon but also a means of communicating artistic, cultural and commercial messages. Their modern day use for effectively and economically conveying a message testifies to their venerability through the ages.[32]

In the end, the Court agreed with Stacey's assessment—DIY postering, even on utility polls, is an economic way to spread messages, and one measure of a society's openness is its willingness to tolerate such postering. As a result, the Court ruled that in the case of *Ramsden v. Peterborough* the City of Peterborough had contravened the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Despite the clearly articulated Supreme Court ruling that regular folks, including those who choose to make homemade posters and reproduce them on photocopy machines, have the right to publicly post their posters no matter how ugly or hastily produced they may be, in the early 2000s the City of Toronto embarked on an aggressive crackdown on postering. The crackdown coincided with the development of the city's new privately owned and operated "public square" at Yonge and Dundas. Home to the city's largest indoor shopping mall, the intersection was already part of the city's public face, but to many city councilors it was also an embarrassing blemish. Once visitors exited the pristine indoor shopping environment known as the Toronto Eaton Centre, they were

confronted with dozens of run-down video arcades, porn shops, and record stores, and most of these businesses—along with every newspaper box, trash can, and utility poll in the area—served as a rotating open canvas for posters advertising upcoming music shows, political events, and the printed works of emerging artists from several local colleges. Worried that the intersection with its seedy retail outlets and plethora of do-it-yourself visual ephemera was tarnishing the city's reputation as a safe and sanitized haven for American tourists, the city made efforts to build a public square fit both for residents and tourists, and eliminating posters became a central part of the city's clean-up strategy.

Given the earlier Supreme Court ruling, a total ban on postering was not possible, so steps were taken to make public postering extremely difficult. Following a formal study, the city introduced a bylaw that proposed to restrict the size and locations of posters and afford most public property, excluding utility polls, nearly as much protection as private property. Specifically, the bylaw proposed that:

- Posters would only be allowed on 2% of hydro poles in Toronto,

- Posters would have to be 100 meters apart,

- Poster would have to feature a "date of posting,"

- Posters would require a scannable barcode permit to assist with regulation efforts.[33]

City councilors and concerned citizens in favor of the postering legislation constructed postering as a practice antithetical to the production of safe, clean, and welcoming public spaces. Not surprisingly, support for the postering bylaw was disproportionately expressed by councilors representing constituencies not located in the city's downtown core. One suburban councilor, Rob Ford, who

would later gain notoriety as Toronto's belligerent crack-smoking mayor, maintained that "posters make our city filthy and dirty." Another councilor, who would later serve as speaker of the house under Ford, insisted that "posters are totally disgusting," and even went so far as to declare that "a lot of it is pornography."[34] The city councilors supporting the restriction of posters across the city but specifically in downtown neighborhoods, such as Yonge and Dundas, were acting less on behalf of their constituents than on behalf of the private sector. The Downtown Young Street Business Association, for example, argued that postering should be treated as a form of "vandalism," not communication, since along with graffiti and garbage it tarnishes the city's public face.

Although the postering bylaw did not explicitly target photocopied posters, visual examples circulated in Toronto's seemingly endless debate on the issue consistently highlighted photocopied ephemera, especially posters produced by musicians and marginal political organizations. Moreover, as the public debate escalated, the targets of the city's postering bylaw become even more narrowly and clearly defined. By 2006, having yet to pass the initial postering bylaw, the City of Toronto proposed an amended bylaw that would exclude certain posters (namely those advertising lost people, lost pets, and garage sales). While some welcomed the amended bylaw, activists, artists, and musicians maintained that it simply clarified what they had known all along: the real point of the postering bylaw was to silence downtown artists and activists, effectively shutting them out of efforts to visibly shape public spaces in the city.

In contrast to the rather limited public response to crackdowns on postering in cities throughout the United States, in Toronto the postering debate not only proved especially controversial but served to galvanize efforts to protect citizens' rights to use public spaces as a means of communication. The Toronto Public Space Committee (TPSC), a nonprofit that eventually splintered off into

several related public interest groups (e.g., the Toronto Public Space Initiative and *Spacing* magazine), formed at the height of the postering debate as an "advocate" for the city's "streets, sidewalks, parks and alleyways." As they emphasized in their original mandate, "We are dedicated to protecting our shared common spaces from commercial influence and privatization. While some see the streets as an untapped source of advertising revenue we see protected public spaces as a fundamental pillar of a healthy democracy. If only wealthy advertisers have access to our visual environment, then freedom of speech suffers in our city."[35] Notably, in addition to defending postering in public spaces, specifically postering by the individuals and small groups who rely on copy machines, throughout its existence the TPSC used photocopied posters and flyers to disseminate their message to the city's more than five million residents. "A community without posters," they insisted, "is not a community at all."[36]

As illustrated above, the passionate argument both against and for public postering has at times, especially in Canadian cities, taken on absurd proportions. Some city councilors and citizens have claimed that public postering is a safety hazard; others that postering is filthy and even pornographic. By contrast, advocates of postering have consistently argued that public postering should not only be recognized as a constitutional right to the extent that it is a vital form of public expression but should also be embraced as a practice integral to community building and the solidification of social bonds in otherwise alienating urban spaces. What these "poster wars" reveal—and perhaps most notably by their endurance (in Toronto, city councilors spent over a decade periodically debating the postering issue)—is the extent to which the presence of DIY photocopied posters was a salient marker of urban spaces in the late twentieth century and in some cases remains so today, despite the fact that other inexpensive modes of communication are now readily available to musicians, artists, writers, and activists. Beyond

FIGURE 3.1

The cover of the first issue of *Spacing* magazine—a publication that grew out of a collective effort to fight against the City of Toronto's increasingly aggressive attack on grassroots forms of communication, including postering. Image reproduced with permission from *Spacing* magazine.

the content or aesthetics of the individual posters and flyers, we read clusters of photocopied ephemera as a sign that we're a bit closer to the symbolic and literal margins. This is still, to some extent, part of the experience one has walking east from New York's West Village toward Alphabet City. While Eighth Street is no longer a literal corridor of posters, as it was in the 1980s, at some point the photocopied posters reappear and you realize you're at least a bit closer to what remains of the city's downtown scene. This is also the experience many of us had descending on Zuccotti Park (or any Occupy site) in the fall of 2012. Though most of the protesters were posting updates on Facebook and Twitter, Occupy sites were littered with photocopied posters and flyers. Even in the age of the smart phone, the photocopy reigned at most Occupy sites not simply because it remains a convenient and inexpensive form of communication but because, as I discuss in the final chapter of this book, xerography is readily recognized by people across generations as a medium through which regular folks historically have successfully occupied public spaces. Xerography (or more precisely its digital offspring), while no longer the only way to circulate information, was integral to the Occupy movement because it was the medium through which we could most easily *imagine* achieving the types of public spaces the Occupy movement sought to create in cities across North America and around the world.

THE DETERRITORIALIZATION OF SCENES AND SUBCULTURES IN THE AGE OF XEROGRAPHY

While xerography's gritty aesthetic was one of the markers of downtown scenes across North America in the 1970s to 1990s, and in some cities continues to be part of the semiotics of the city, xerography also enabled us to imagine the possibility of being active participants in urban scenes and subcultures even if we were not

actually *there*. In essence, as much as xerography helped demar-
cate and in some cases solidify urban scenes and subcultures, it
also played a role in their eventual deterritorialization, laying the
groundwork for the types of networked communities we would
come to take for granted by the early twenty-first century. Zines,
the DIY photocopied publications produced by individuals and
small collectives that flourished in the 1970s to mid 1990s, played
a critical role in this process.

   Once relatively unknown outside the underground, since the
late 1990s the history of zines has been widely documented by
culture and media studies scholars.[37] Zines date back to the 1930s,
when science fiction writers and readers began to turn out their
own DIY publications on mimeograph machines. The zine explo-
sion, however, is nearly always said to begin in the 1970s, coincid-
ing with the widespread availability of copy machines and the rise
of the punk movement. As observed earlier in this chapter, the copy
machine was the Trojan horse of the punk movement—a machine
capable of reproducing the most vile, offensive, and controversial
materials without the censorship, cost, or delay associated with
printed forms of reproduction. In the 1970s, most zines took the
form of fanzines—often dedicated to promoting a particular band
or musician—and typically circulated at concerts and in indepen-
dent record stores and bookshops. As zines became more widely
known, their circulation and points of origin expanded. A zine pur-
chased at a punk show in New York's East Village might end up
in the hands of a fourteen-year-old kid living with his parents in a
Connecticut suburb. The same kid might produce his or her own
zine and trade it with other zine producers who might or might not
ever have hung out in New York, let alone caught a show at CBGBs.
Of course, zines were by no means only connected to the punk
scenes in cities like New York and London. They were also being
produced by artists and musicians and lonely teenagers in places
like Seattle and Toronto and Toledo and Regina and everywhere in

between. Over time, zines radically changed the conditions under which people could participate in scenes and subcultures and arguably changed understandings of what defined scenes and subcultures along the way. If they were once assumed to be rooted in a particular place, by the 1990s the idea that subcultures might be defined by a fixed location no longer held.

Zines enabled people living in suburbs and small towns and even rural and remote locations to do more than passively bear witness to what was happening in the downtown scenes they were unable to experience firsthand. With the spread of zine networks, they could become active participants in scenes or subcultures rooted in an urban landscape. It was as if zines picked up and made mobile the aesthetics of downtown city streets by transporting a little piece of downtown across the continent—a piece that could in turn easily be reproduced and recirculated on copy machines. After all, many pages of zines look remarkably like the walls of pastiched posters one might have walked by in a downtown neighborhood in the 1980s or early 1990s. But more importantly, because zines represented "a radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be ... *ought* to be,"[38] they also recruited readers, turning them into cultural producers whether or not they were part of a downtown scene. With zines, a teenager living on a farm in North Dakota could become a reviewer of New York punk bands and gain his or her own fan base. Finally, and perhaps most notably, as zines became increasingly important in the 1980s and into the early 1990s—in part due to the appearance of review zines, such as *Fact Sheet 5* (a zine dedicated to reviewing

FIGURE 3.2   The cover of *Xerography Debt*, no. 15; cover art by Botda/ Bobby Tran Dale. Image reproduced with permission from Davida G. Breier.
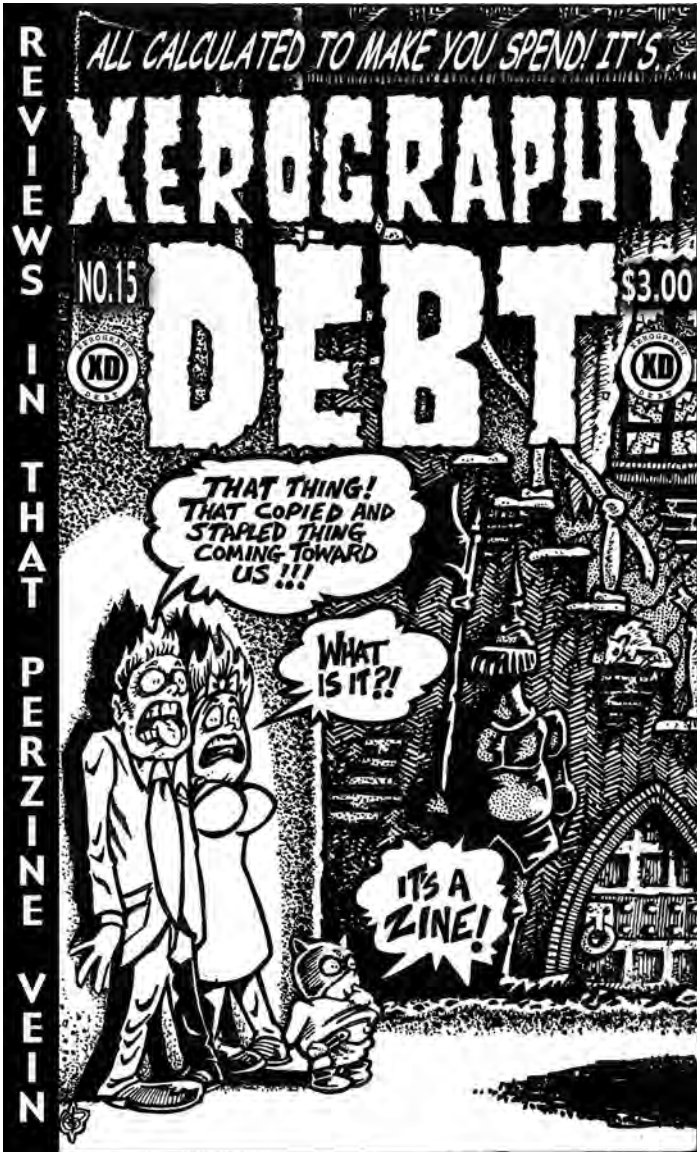
other zines and disseminating their mail order addresses)—it be-
came possible for scenes and subcultures to take shape outside ur-
ban centers. Riot Grrrl, an all-girl subculture/political and artistic
movement that emerged in the early 1990s, represents a notable
example of the impact of xerography on the development and
spread of subcultures.

    In contrast to punk, with its evident roots in urban neighbor-
hoods in cities like London and New York, Riot Grrrl developed
in Olympia, Washington, which at the time had fewer than 35,000
residents. Among them in the early 1990s were many transient
residents linked to Evergreen College—a state institution nestled
in a Pacific Northwest forest. Lisa Darms, who was a student at
Evergreen College in the early 1990s and is now Senior Archivist
at NYU's Fales Library and Special Collections, where she over-
sees the Riot Grrrl Collection, suggests that "Riot Grrrl was not a
centralized movement. ... [It was] descriptive of a moment as much
as a movement.[39] In my own research on Riot Grrrl, which dates
back to 1994 when I first started to collect zines and correspond
with and interview their producers, the decentralized nature of the
movement, if it can even be called a movement, has always been
one of its most notable features. While it is possible to locate Riot
Grrrl's "origins" in Olympia in the early 1990s, in the end few of
the women who published so-called Riot Grrrl zines or identified
with the movement and its music and style ever stepped foot in
Olympia. Olympia was a starting point, but it did not necessar-
ily become a destination as the East Village did for North Ameri-
can punks. Rather, Riot Grrrl, as I've argued elsewhere, was always
a movement that took the form of a dispersed network, and the
production, distribution, exchange, and eventual collection of pho-
tocopied zines was integral to the movement's development and
popularity and remains integral to its ongoing legacy. At a time
when "virtual communities" were still only populated by hardcore
techies congregating in MOOs and MUDs, Riot Grrrl was proving

just how vast, vibrant, and vital networked communities might be, and it was doing this with the aid of glue, paper, copy machines, and the postal service, not modems and screens.[40]

For all these reasons, I maintain that before digital social media became integral to the development of local and global scenes and subcultures, publics and counterpublics, there was xerography. In many respects, one might even think of xerography as a form of predigital social media. Social media are usually described as digital platforms that enable users to generate, share, and exchange information, often in collaborative ways and usually quickly and with little or no overhead. In contrast to contemporary forms of social media, however, in which users can choose to take a relatively passive role (e.g., simply reposting texts and images from other sources), using copy machines was an active endeavor. Just as making and distributing posters requires a certain degree of effort and even risk, acquiring zines takes considerably more effort than accessing social media sites. In the 1980s and 1990s, it meant going to a show or a used record store, which were among the only places you could purchase zines, or finding an address for a zine (usually in another zine) and corresponding with the zine producer. This correspondence, which usually took the form of handwritten notes and letters slipped into zines, was often personal, even intimate, and it all happened in the slow time of the analog world.

In contrast to earlier forms of print reproduction, zines were deceptively easy to produce and distribute—even for people who have traditionally been unable to engage in the production and dissemination of publications (e.g., teenagers and people living on fixed or limited incomes). Perhaps most notably, zines troubled the line between private and public texts and in the process disrupted established understandings of the relationship between print cultures and public cultures.

If Habermas's objection to forms of mass media is that they allow fewer people the opportunity to voice opinions and subject

more people to a single, authoritative perspective, xerography helped people imagine and realize publics and counterpublics that operate along a startlingly different axis—where the possibility to express and circulate opinions is infinitely expanded, where even opinions expressed by the mass media may be quickly appropriated and put back into circulation as types of critique (consider the pastiches and parodies, often comprised of cut-up materials from mainstream newspapers and magazines, that are commonplace in xeroxed zines or political posters). "A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time," contends Warner.[41] To the extent that xerography fostered a high degree of disregard for copyright laws and made recirculation inexpensive and accessible to anyone capable of pressing a button, one might argue that xerography also enabled existing texts to circulate through time and space more widely, thereby expanding what might be imagined as a public. Yet xerography did more than fracture the monolithic voice of the mass media in the last few decades of the twentieth century and expand publics and counterpublics. Some xerographic forms, such as zines, also rendered the divisions between the private (or intimate sphere) and public sphere increasingly irrelevant.

In Habermas's formulation of the public sphere, reading may take place in private but there is an assumption that journals and newspapers are produced in and for the public and ideally reflect the public's broader interest. Zines, however, have never clearly been circulated as public documents. While some zines may be produced for larger audiences, many more, especially the "perzines" that became increasingly popular by the late 1980s and into the 1990s, were written and produced by individuals often for limited audiences (only friends or only people the zine producers deemed to be fellow travelers).[42] But even zines with a wider circulation (e.g., fanzines focused on a particular band) do not carry ISSNs, casting them outside mainstream publication markets.[43] In

addition to deterritorializing scenes and subcultures once synony-mous with the city, then, zines demonstrate the extent to which the medium of xerography eroded assumed boundaries between the private and public spheres.

As discussed in the following chapter, perhaps especially for people whose lives have never fit clearly into established notions of the private or publics spheres—a situation most notable for queers but also shared by other people affiliated with the symbolic and lived margins of society—xerography was a particularly adapt-able and desirable medium of communication.