

**h a u n t**

*Slight of Hand Transactions*

By Amelia Acker

In an era of mobile device habituation, particular bodily movements are beginning to disappear, while others are becoming more visible—like texting while driving or the inchoate reactions to unidentified buzzing from “silenced” phones in public. While the displacement of many physical movements into digital commands is becoming commonplace, the circulation and reception of new mobile objects moving through telematic networks is increasing. So, it was with little surprise that I received two texts from a friend after brunch last month that read:

“Squa muglia (sic) is text interface ordering today”

“Come down!”

I did go down to the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles and I found a half-coffee-shop-half-installation in a one-car garage. This particular *Squamuglia* installation featured a text code menu handwritten on the mirrored, floor to ceiling, walls of a garage attached to an apartment complex. Visitors could order coffee, beer, fruit, or cookies through their mobile phone’s SMS interface by texting menu codes to a number listed on the wall.<sup>1</sup> The order codes appeared to be written in red lipstick. I text ordered a cappuccino, a plum, and a cookie by sending this string of code:

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To visit *Squamuglia* is to be apart of an encounter full of transactions; some are hidden, while others resemble familiar exchanges. As an artist project it brings participants into three scenes of interaction: texting your food or drink order;

<sup>1</sup>Benjamin Turner, “SQUAMUGLIA,” [http://benjaminlturner.com/?page\\_id=374](http://benjaminlturner.com/?page_id=374)



leaving money on the ground of a mirrored box; and re-orientating the spaces between what's hidden behind the garage and in front of the viewer, the garage itself, and the street outside. Visitors who participate in *Squamuglia* bear witness to an unraveling of our everyday relationships with transactions and the boundaries we cross when we pay for coffee, observe art, and move between hidden and open spaces in private and public.

To begin, each *Squamuglia* event involves visitors leaving small contributions on the garage floor in exchange for drinks and small plates. The mediated and processual nature of dropping money on the floor draws attention to the processes of exchange that happen when we consume food and drink. The mirrored walls, that bind the edges of the (rather) tight installation, point to an invisibility of labor that's taking place behind the false wall, in the back of the garage. Like a disappearing magic trick, the mirrors hide a back room while you see yourself and your money reflected. The mirrors and the false wall keep formal transactions, such as ordering refreshments, away from viewer's observations in a hidden space. This, at once, creates a private space and a threshold that reflects out onto a third space, because the garage is opened out onto a public street.

The garage interior allows visitors to experience the work through this boundary crossing, as it acts as a threshold between the public sphere of the street, and the hidden sphere of the labor of food and drink preparation that is being obscured. As a participant, texting my order and then leaving money on the ground was a

distinct kind of limited experience. Interacting with *Squamuglia* complicated the idea of transaction, or the process of passing goods or services from one person to another. The process of ordering via text messaging hails other kinds of mobile money exchanges we engage with every day—from buying coffee to paying parking meters with plastic cards. In each of these stages we swipe and sign and press buttons and engage with circuits of mobile devices. Yet these transactions happen at distinct points, with machines and service workers nearby that we engage with, physically and often, digitally. In archival science, official transactions leave records, like receipts, contracts or legally recognized documents. The irony of the transactions that *Squamuglia* adopts is that they resist formal records that document the money on the ground but create fleeting traces of these transactions—in the text messages sent, the money left behind, and the mirrors reflecting.

Even more, while the installation makes use of some of the most pervasive mobile payment infrastructures like wireless networks and mobile devices, actually using text messages to order has little support in most coffee shops in Los Angeles. While most use iPads equipped with mobile payment peripherals and apps such as Square or Google Wallet to remit payment, they don't let customers use their own mobile devices (though they often will ask if they can text you the receipt). Despite this, *Squamuglia* is doing what many coffee shops already try to do with new technologies. Using mobile money tools, they try and obscure the labor of money changing hands, but *Squamuglia* reverses this process by asking participants to text their order and to throw ducats on the ground. Like many merchants who use mobile devices, *Squamuglia* dislocates the site of digital labor into the process ordering of food—by putting the onus onto the user and her device.

*Squamuglia's* creator, Benjamin Turner, has found a way to ding a unique niche in mobile money encounters. The installation relies on physically holding mobile devices (and their attendant network connections) in our hands. Better known as “BYOD,” bring your own device refers to business and employment trends that allow workers and students to make use of their personal devices while doing work. The *Squamuglia* installation tells one story about art production and another



about exchange and interface, by hiding the effects of text messages sent from participants' own phones. It works the way the canary in a box magician's trick works—except instead of one trap door there are two. Using your mobile device to order from a hidden barista turns this typically banal experience of ordering from a service person at the counter on its head. The process of transaction achieves maximum fragmentation, while hiding in plain sight with the support of mobile networks and mirrors. It was distinctly manual and dependent on rapid digital gestures; viewers have to use their fingers to text orders and disembodied hands would quietly serve the plates through little open cubbies in the back wall and then quickly disappear.

After waiting for five minutes near the cubbyhole in the false wall, someone told me that I must of have texted my order to the wrong number. It was true, I had typed 425 instead of the 415 area code. I also realized that my first text message was blank. Coincidentally, my lost and blank text message gave me the opportunity to remember where “Squamuglia” actually comes from. The art project's namesake comes from one of the two cities in “The Courier's Tragedy,” a fictional play written by Richard Wharfinger within the third chapter of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In the Jacobean revenge play, Angelo sends Niccolo with a “lying document,” a forged letter with a contradictory message: “a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse.”<sup>2</sup> So, the misdirection of the mirrored box and my lost text message are

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pynchon, “3,” in *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1986), 31-63.

both kinds of blank; obscured and empty transmissions were poignant. It was a kind of magic box trick that had lost the rabbit, or a text message in this case.

When my order finally appeared in the back wall's dumbwaiter, I grabbed it and walked outside. The fruit and cookies were served on small-mirrored discs that reflected the palm trees and sun once I stepped out onto the street. The last four digits of my phone number were written on the mirrored-plate identified my order.

As I mentioned, texting your order in a mirrored box is another kind of scene. The mirrors produce some kind of weird foreclosure by orienting participants through invisible transactions, supported by text message transmissions. The mirrors also oriented viewers by doing what they do well. I noticed that most people did not stay in the garage for more than a few minutes, as I did. They seemed to force visitors out of the garage and on to the sidewalk in the open street. Mirrors set aside, the money was still being thrown on the ground. A core abstraction associated with money is found in its circulation, in its networks of exchange. Where does it go? How does it move? How is it imbued with value? Certainly, dropping cash on the floor points to the materiality of carrying units of exchange; but for me, the text ordering complicates this process. (I can see my money on the ground, but I can't see where my text message goes.) The text message became enrolled in this aesthetic experience of exchange and consumption.

*Squamuglia* introduces us to a new era of networked publics that rely on the logic of BYOD, where private and interstitial places no longer exist beyond the reach of managed mobile networks. It points us to an aesthetic encounter that relies on visitors consuming and making art by bringing and using their mobile devices in their hands. It highlights the governmentality of our personal relationships to information technologies, in an age of mobile computing. Part of the doxa of personal telematics in urban spaces is a myth of immaterial information and the disappearance of bodies—despite the fact that digital labor found in networks of exchange is in fact utterly material. If nothing else, carrying mobile phones on our bodies' points to how we are oriented by objects and the ways we orient ourselves to them.

For information on future events, sign up at: <http://squamuglia.com>

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