

Where are you when your birth certificate is in your hand and someone you have never met before is breathing down your neck? You're at the DMV.

I find myself hoping for a smooth transition from start to finish at the DMV: an open parking spot, a short line, the right documents, and working machines. Yet, sometimes I long for my experience to be extended by a longer line at the odds of wanting a positive trip. What is there to be said about the sincere interactions, objects, and transfers that take place at this site, are there any? The DMV is an institution that is shared among many by its mandatory nature as well as one that is often perceived as miserable. I believe that understanding the exterior and interior exchanges that take place at the DMV can inspire locational empathy with the site and thus change the tone of the experience for users.

The first time I visited the DMV prior to this project I attended the E Court St, BMV Cincinnati location (Ohio uses the title "Bureau of Motor Vehicles", rather than "Department"). I went to exclusively take part in line, listen to conversations, and notice the surfaces that were surrounding me – I was only there to watch. This lack of interaction was not out of sorts, as people do not typically talk to each other prior to going up to the service desk. It was the cold experience that people understand the DMV to be until a group of people walked in and talked to one of the employees were as if they were old friends. There was a particular lightness in that moment that transferred into the rest of the people waiting in line. This light conversation changed the way that I wanted to see the DMV; I wanted to see it as a place of potential intimacy and exchange, rather than a structure that's tone speaks only to the institutional setting it is situated within.

I have spent a lot of time at the DMV in hopes of understanding the reasons why people who use it continually dreaded it and why a space that is absent in the majority of our daily lives caused so much stress. Through the visitation of multiple DMV's specific to the Cincinnati area I came to understand the connection between how we see spaces like the DMV and how the tone of institutionalism and the surfaces of objects inside it influence our experience.

DMV as Authority

The DMV is commonly known throughout America as one of few agencies that can serve as the "face of state government" (Karwan and Markland 2005: 254). This meaning, that the services provided and the experiences had at the DMV reflects to the users as a direct look into how the authoritative states above it are functioning. When an institution like this comes under pressure, in this case the pressure is ridicule from the patrons, it tries to retreat to the nation state to defend it. (Steyerl 2006: 18). When I think about the DMV it is impossible to detach it from the governance of an institutional space; because going to the DMV is mandatory it embodies authoritative task.

The DMV's slogan, Safety, Security, and Service, speaks to the institutions role to provide mechanisms of social order, like an ID, to the general public. Institutional spaces, I believe,

demand authority which demands obedience (Arendt 1954: 2). That obedience is one of the reasons that the tone of the DMV can be so stressful. The annoyance at the DMV does not only attempt reject it as an institution that provides necessary services, it doesn't help to reform and change the experience people can have at it (Steyerl 2006: 14).

How has the DMV come to be such a fractious experience? With different waves of institutional critique became a rejection of any political institution by either negating them all together or by trying to build alternative spaces to come to the same goal. (Steyerl 2006: 15) The DMV as an institutional space has been scrutinized on its organizational disarray, lack of proper services per location, and often segregated resources. Philosopher and artist Hito Steyerl's *The Institution of Critique* is a powerful example that illustrates how the shifts in institutional critique serve as a guide to how to integrate yourself into an institutional space. Understanding its challenges while also recognizing the needs and desires that it will continue to create for the users is good inspiration for why the tone needs to change.

In (re)placing myself into the DMV with this in mindset I wondered how this institutional coldness could be adjusted. With such a direct correlation to modern task-based bureaucracies like the post office or a bank it seems impossible to negate the user experience from negativity; however, with a mandatory task comes the option to reframe the occurrence as being not just a product of the institution, but one of possible interaction (Furusten 2013: 5).

Smile on Three (MAY CUT THIS SECTION)

The ID dominates the payoff of the DMV. This object serves as a stepping-stone to the freedom of driving and the privilege and fetish packed into the ID photograph. In *Object Lessons, Driver's License*, Meredith Castile describes the license as a talismanic pass to life: we flash it often to fly, gamble, pierce, drink, marry, vote, file forms, work, open bank accounts, get discounts, and so on, and so on (Castile 2015: 2). Like the DMV, it is a line on a long list of things that can be done in a day.

The performance and dance of getting a license is one of the main goals of DMV patrons. Embedded in the procedure is presenting a form of previous identification (depending on the DMV, often just a social security number on the card), having your vision checked for people with impaired sight, posing for the computer for your ID photo, and finally receiving your license.

The process of getting an ID, weather it be an ID card, new license, or renewed license, instills stress and pressure in the individual because of the history associated with. As historian Tina Campt explains the ID photo is a quiet image packed with social repressions. Through the research of Gulu Real Art Studio in the Ugandan city of Gulu (Campt 2017:25) the ID photographing process can be internally placed as a job that doesn't only speak to freedom and

leisure, but one that speaks to oppression and identity politics. I do not want to overlook the conversation of the Ugandan serial ID photograph when discussing ID photographs in America because it speaks to uniformity within the human condition.

In *Quiet Soundings* Campt speaks to the regularity and seriality of the ID photograph process in Uganda. The irreverent, intimate, and homogenous nature of the ID cards that she is writing on speak to the uniformity of the experience of getting an license/ID made in the states (Campt 2017: 23). Getting a new ID seems like such a cut and dry experience, so uniform – what it to say about the acquisitions of an ID that is not so typical?

Both Tina Campt and Meredith Castile speak to the lesser-acknowledged ways of attaining ID that, at the DMV, we are not forced to question. Campt is speaking to the handmade installation of the required ID photograph for African Diasporic subjects; in the conversation of the pressures around the ID photograph process at the modern American DMV this is relevant as it inspires the reader to listen (Campt 2017: 28) to the lower frequent images, and objects, like the ID photo that do not go often examined.

What seems is common when I ask people the question, “How do you feel about the DMV?” is that the answers are self-serving. The placement of the contemporary ID photograph is critical to the pressures of the overall experience of the DMV because the experiences had there are never universal, it is important to think about structures that impact everyone in this space that attribute to the tone.

Procedural Dance: Plastic State

The driver’s license could have been something totally different, as could have the DMV. Licensure went through phases in history of limitation until it was decided by the American government that every person owning a vehicle should be licensed to drive (Castile 2015: 57). Having an ID is mandatory and to discuss the impact of the license to the DMV experience it is important to bring up different types of identity documents in the United States. At the DMV you can acquire a divers license, an identity card, or a US passport. All of these can be granted through the presentation of a Social Security Card. The greatest task-oriented impact of this card was what came over it was originally acquired: the renewal.

What the ID card went through to become the object it is today was the shift from an informal leisure object to a mandatory governmental identification tool. As this retrieval became mandatory for most citizens, it became more stressful for the patron of the DMV. The use-to-be process of attending a site that served like the modern DMV was comfortable and spoke to the dispensation of an institution that only assisted the privileged (Castile 2015: 60). With the shifts of the ID card also comes the shifts in the aesthetics of the card that speak to the authoritative government structures the ID is used for.

The state of Ohio released in 2018 that the Ohio license is getting a new physical update that will, rather than retrieving the ID after you take the image at the DMV, be mailed to you. Not only will the license shift in color palette from red white and blue to purple green and navy, it will take ten days to come in the mail. An oddity of this change is a large star that will be placed on the upper right hand corner of the card to indicate if a person holding the license is compliant with general federal regulations. Could some of the procedural tensions of the DMV shift if you weren't handed your ID on the spot? How will the tone of the DMV change when there is, in fact, no physical reward for the time spent there?

Exterior Influence: Building as Tone

Where a DMV is placed is often a factor of a person's experience. When I go a DMV with metered parking it not only creates a harder beginning to the journey, it also places more emphasis on time. What politics of space are involved in the tone of a site-specific DMV and what specific things have been historically problematize in the construction of a governmental building those influences the tonal mechanism of the space? (Baydar 2004: 21) The DMV's that I have attended are always in close proximity to a bank or multi-plaza including a convenient store, a coffee shop, a gas station, or a courthouse. As I have noted before, going to the DMV is often a one-liner on a list of tasks that someone has to complete in a day. Looking at two different Cincinnati locations, Sharonville and Downtown, I can illustrate the effects that institutional architecture has on an experience in comparing the exterior architecture, the parking situation, and yelp reviews written about the space.

The Downtown Cincinnati DMV is situated in the County Government County Administration Building near take-out restaurants and coffee shops in a city plaza; it has two rows of metered parking for all of those locations and the nine story administrative building. The E Court St location is rated four stars on yelp, prized for its friendly customer service and challenged for its extensively long lines and small location. This DMV is often crowded as it is located in a city center where most of the patrons live in the city and either takes the bus or walk. The uncomfortable nature of being inside of a large-scale, intimidating, governmental building points out the uncomfortable moment that speaks to a spaces limits of disciplinary discourse and practice. (Baydar 204: 22). What is consistent through the reviews is efficiency through the coldness of the site, cold meaning impersonal and customary. I believe that the Yelp reviews that are written affect the new patrons experience before venturing the DMV, and those preconceptions that affect the tone oft heir experience are then projected onto the staff. The intimidating tone of the building could be a factor in the negative tone of the experiences had at this Ohio BMV location.

The Sharonville DMV is a completely different experience than the E Court St location; this location is one of the highest rated Cincinnati DMV locations on Yelp. Not only do you drive down a hill to two open parking lots with reserved spots for DMV members overlooking a scenic river and old train station, there are multiple storefronts for different DMV services (licensure and driving tests). The physical site serves as its own "DMV Plaza". What is striking in

particular about this location and why it is rated the highest is how extensively packed it always is. This location is associated with a more classic description of the DMV, where you take a number and wait for hours on end until you are called to one of the multiple desks. The experience as a whole is not efficient or welcoming, it is significantly more claustrophobic and time strenuous. I believe that, rather than the resources that it provides or the positive face-to-face interactions had, the physical space of this site is the reasons for its positive feedback. As the influence of institution affects the experience of the DMV as a physical site, it also impacts the face-to-face interactions had at the site.

Inside: Waiting in Line

The most tedious aspect of being at the DMV, and one of the most challenged problems for developers of the site, is the physical act of waiting in line (Karwan 2005: 355). Whether time wasted is felt as a particular annoyance or a scarce resource for many, the stresses of time when waiting in line is not one that is felt equally (Waltz 2016: 19). Intersectionally needs to be considered when discussing the stressors of waiting in line at the DMV as people of different race, genders, and socioeconomic classes. The DMV is a place where its mandatory nature combines a diverse group of people that are all experiencing different time constraints and scarcity of time as money, all forced to wait in line.

As I discussed the DMV with my friends and colleagues I was often told that at the DMV you spend most of your time just standing, waiting, and staring at the clock. In an institutional setting in particular, it references the commodification of time since industrialization and pulls the patron into an emotional state of tension (Waltz 2016: 17). In Margaret Waltz's, *(Im)patient Patients: An Ethnography of Medical Waiting Rooms*, she refers scholar Kinneret Lahad's theory that waiting in line is structured into an individuals daily lives and guide through traffic rules, but in a bureaucratic organization it is more stressful as it alludes to the structures of bureaucracy that speak to capitalism's ability to "let the rich have a fast pass". (Waltz 2016: 23). One of the best parts about the DMV is that it does not yet people skip the line, it a neutralized shared experience that makes everyone wait together. I want to see the DMV change to be a place where these diverse interactions can be leveraged to ease the experience for the users involved.

Clutch

In spending time at various DMV locations I became attentive to the objects that people were clutching in their hands when waiting in line. People waiting in line are so often clutching onto documents; because is discouraged to use technology in this site, the paper forms are the only things in the hands of the patron. I believe that a large contributor to the emotional tensions at the DMV is exaggerated through the document as an object. Documents are often overlooked because it is easy to think that they are a direct link to simply giving immediate access to what the consumer wants at the DMV (Hull 2012: 253); if you bring the right document, you get the service done.

One of the most popular conversations that I have heard from watching others at the DMV consisted of the employee not being able to process the request of the participant because they either brought the wrong form or they filled out the form incorrectly. When my friend Claire visits the DMV she thinks this is the worst part: I feel like I am going to get yelled at. When I go up to the counter, I feel like they are going to yell at me for doing or bringing something wrong.” In anthropologist Matthew Hull’s book *Documents and Bureaucracy*, he argues that the fear and pity when holding a document is because it cannot be detached from the connotation of the document to emotionally evacuate bureaucratic structures (Hull 2012: 255). I believe that the people are clutching these documents so hard in line at the DMV because they are the only hope that this tenuous transaction will go smoothly, not because the object is weighted with politics.

Documents are not the only politically governed material objects that they are often identified as. They are catalysts for containing, carrying, or inciting affective energies in when they are transacted or put into use in specific webs of social interaction (Navarro-Yashin 2007: 18). They are not just clutched in the hand of the impatient user; they are the bridge to the experience about to be had.

As documents can be associated with stress, it should also be mentioned that situating a document with fear because of administrative control or power dynamics could excessively socialize the transactions had from documents (Hull 2012: 257). Documents have the potential, like the DMV, to create patterns of interaction that are not common to daily life (Hull 2012: 257). This interaction that is had, face-to-face, from the participant to the employee holding the document is not like one you will have elsewhere. The fear instilled from documents is one that is a result of over-theorizing the relationships to the tensions within a governmental space like the DMV. The emotional line between the possibility of interactions to be had in a state and the social setting is one internally drawn in the sand (Hull 2012: 258). Challenging the document, as a catalyst for meaningful interaction is a metaphor for a user’s potential positive relationship with the DMV because it can be another physical object, like the ID, that grants the user with the opportunity of a meaningful interaction.

What Can We Do For You?

Service: third pillar to the DMV slogan and of the institution as a whole. Aside from possibility light small talk while waiting in line, this is the main act of the DMV as performance. There is an emotional barrier that is different between places of bureaucracy and places of domesticity, caused by the prior dealings with spaces that warrant caution of tension (like the DMV), and the vast array of cultural assumptions presumed to be shared in the space (Goffman 1983: 4). When an institutional space already projects the emotional tensions from the physical site and the task of waiting, how is the interaction between patron and employee going to be positive?

What sincere and meaningful interactions we can have in the comfort of our own homes are much more tangible and the intimacy of regulated spaces like the DMV. The behavioral settings

instilled in these spaces are mostly orderly and dull, funded by the desire to be done with the task. The order of operations is to go in, maybe grab a number, wait in line, go up to the counter, have a procedural conversation, receive a service, and leave. There is so much space in those moments to potential has intimate or even positive interactions with another. In the presence of others we can truly become vulnerable to their words, gestures, and expressions that are then pushed upon us when they are in close proximity (in line, breathing down your neck) (Goffman 1983: 4).

The DMV is the institutionalized space that forces users with similar mandatory tasks at hand to be together in a setting that is not common, nor taken advantage of. What would the DMV feel like if the tone of the site wasn't so pressurized and the negative connotations of the bureaucratic systems didn't taint the interactions had within it? Like the ID photograph, these interactions could be the tangible reward that is gained to the user throughout the procedural tensions of the DMV.

Validate Your Parking and Go Home: Conclusion

Through this essay I wanted to understand the connection between how we see spaces like the DMV and how the tone of institutionalism and the surfaces of objects inside it influence our experience. I was inspired by a simply friendly, and thus out-of-sort, interaction that I witnessed at my own chosen DMV. Through spending time at this space and seeking out the intimacies that could be had, and that already exist, within it I feel empathy toward it now and hope that this mandatory experience can be reframed or empathized with.

The coldness inlaid in the architecture and bureaucratic surfaces within this space, along with the tensions of wasting time, are the main contributors for the experiences had at the DMV being so dreadful. The DMV is stressful: from the institutionally associated architecture of the physical site to the over-theorized pressures of the documents in the patron's hand. This space will probably not ever be disassociated from its governance; however, the interactions that are had within it can break down the tension of the experience. Knowing the stressors of the space can influence the participants overall experience, thus transferring that positively to the employees, line-mates, and yourself.

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