

Ghost Bikes of Chicago

Marking Tragedy, Contesting Public Space

Ghost bikes are street-side memorials created to mark the sites where cyclists have been killed by motorists. To make a ghost bike, a bicycle that is no longer rideable is painted all white and locked to a pole near the crash site. It is usually marked with an identifying sign ("Matt Manger-Lynch - Feb. 28 2008") and is given varying levels of personalization and decoration, depending on the involvement of family and friends.



Ghost bikes are an international phenomenon, with over 500 documented in locations around the world on the website ghostbikes.org. According to The Guardian, the first documented ghost bike was in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2003. A witness to collision between a cyclist and a car placed a painted bike at the location with a message that read: "Cyclist struck here." These tragic markers serve as warnings for other bikers, poignant memorials to the deceased, and raise awareness of the dangers of reckless driving.

The Chicago ghost bike project is an independent volunteer effort involving members of various groups in the Chicago bike scene. (Critical Mass, Active Transportation Alliance, etc.) The first Chicago ghost bike was created in 2006 for Isai Medina, a 50-year-old cyclist killed by a hit-and-run driver while walking his bike along the sidewalk on Western Avenue. Isai was active in Critical Mass, and known for creating custom, chopper-style bikes. His chopper ghost bike was installed by a group of Critical Mass riders at the northeast corner of Western and Cortez. It has since been removed.

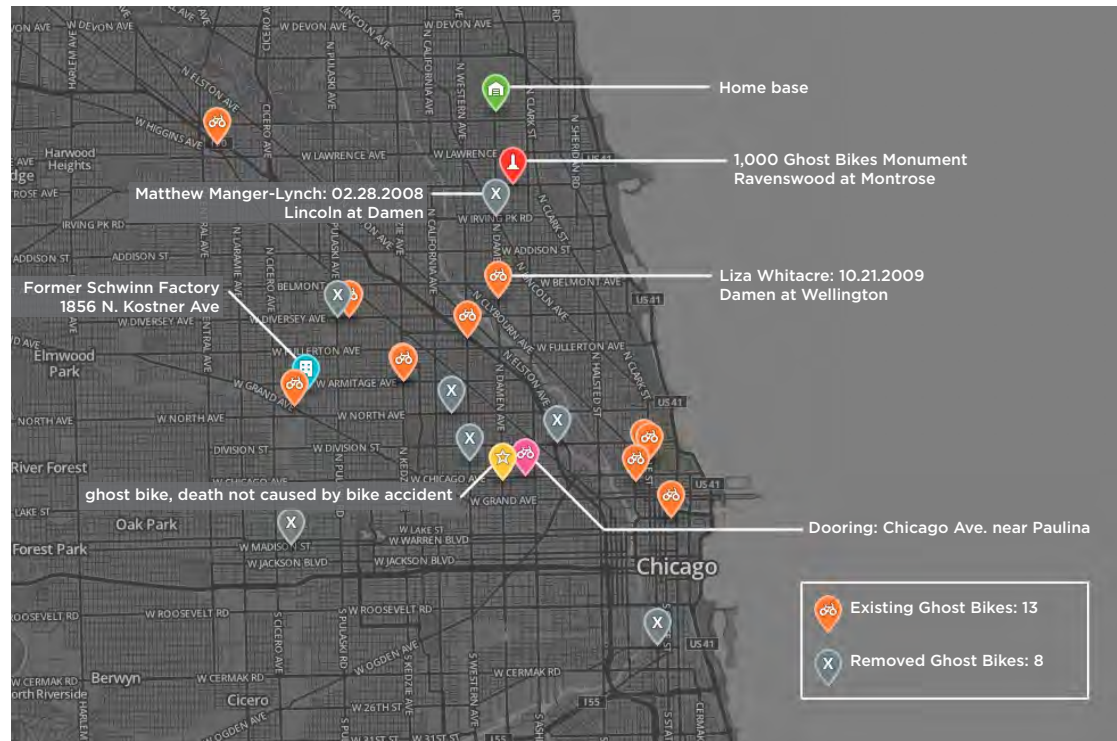
My interest in ghost bikes developed during the summer of 2011, when I regularly rode my bike by Liza Whitacre's memorial at the intersection of Damen and Wellington. My initial reaction was to wonder if there was something particularly dangerous about this intersection (distracted visitors to the park? cars jumping the light change to green?). I paid more attention to traffic and my surroundings as a result. As it happens, the three ghost bike sites nearest my house exemplify three different types of memorials:

- 1) a removed ghost bike
- 2) an existing ghost bike
- 3) a "meta memorial" art installation: *1,000 Ghost Bikes*



GHOST BIKES WORLDWIDE

Austria • Australia • Belgium • Brazil • Belarus • Canada • Cyprus • Czech Republic • Germany • Denmark • Ecuador • Spain • Finland • Hungary • Ireland • Italy • Lithuania • Mexico • New Zealand • Poland • Sweden • Singapore • Turkey • Ukraine • United Kingdom • United States



CHICAGO GHOST BIKES

Case 1: Matthew Manger-Lynch was killed by an SUV on February 28, 2008, at the dangerous intersection of Lincoln, Damen, and Irving Park. The Bedno.com website reports that his ghost bike was moved several times because of construction before being removed from the site for good. The erasure of this memorial was the inspiration for my proposed intervention work.



LINCOLN, DAMEN, IRVING PARK



BIKE LANE ON DAMEN, NEAR IRVING PARK

Case 2: On October 21, 2009, twenty-year-old Liza Whitacre was crushed by a truck while riding her bike past Hamlin Park on Damen near Wellington Avenue. Liza's ghost bike is highly personalized and appears to be maintained by family and friends: when I visited in January, it had holiday decorations, personal messages, and a fresh pile of coffee beans by the rear wheel, in tribute to Liza's love of coffee.



LIZA WHITACRE'S GHOST BIKE: DAMEN AND WELLINGTON



SEASONAL DECORATIONS, PHOTO COLLAGE

Case 3: The *1,000 Ghost Bikes* installation was created in 2009 at Ravenswood and Montrose, across from the Lillstreet Art Gallery. The memorial consists of partially buried pieces of a ghost bike frame, small ceramic bicycles dedicated to accident victims, and a plaque reading: "For all the cyclists who are vulnerable on our streets / Ride Safe. Drive Safe." This "meta memorial" was the designated starting point for a ghost bike bicycle tour of Chicago in 2011.



1,000 GHOST BIKES: RAVENSWOOD AND MONTROSE



DEDICATED TO ANONYMOUS



CASE 1: REMOVED GHOST BIKE. LINCOLN, DAMEN, IRVING PARK



CASE 2: EXISTING GHOST BIKE. DAMEN AND WELLINGTON



CASE 3: META MEMORIAL, 1,000 GHOST BIKES ART INSTALLATION. RAVENSWOOD AND MONTROSE

Chicago: Former Industrial Glory, Future Aspirations

To help frame the production of ghost bike memorials in Chicago, I investigated the two-wheeled industrial heritage of the city, and its bike-inspired aspirations for the future. 1890's Chicago was the "bicycle manufacturing capital of America", with nearly 2/3 of the nation's bicycles and accessories manufactured within 150 miles of the city (*Chicago Bicycle Directory*, 1898).

At the center of this bike production was Schwinn, with a large factory on the west side of the city. I visited the "ghost" of the Schwinn factory at 1856 N. Kostner Avenue on a dark and stormy night, and the only trace of Schwinn I could find was a classic bicycle silhouette on the glass above the building entrance.

Today, Schwinn is just a brand used to market bikes built by a large conglomerate, and 85% of the bikes sold in the U.S. are imports from China.



Open Photo: Mr. Gibson and one Frank on a Schwinn-Buch (first issue of 1911)



LADIES' MODEL 90



Photos: <http://schwinncruisers.com>

-page #-



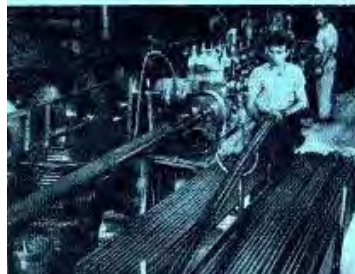
GHOST OF A FACTORY: 1856 N. KOSTNER AVENUE, CHICAGO

69 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP in manufacturing quality bicycles . . .

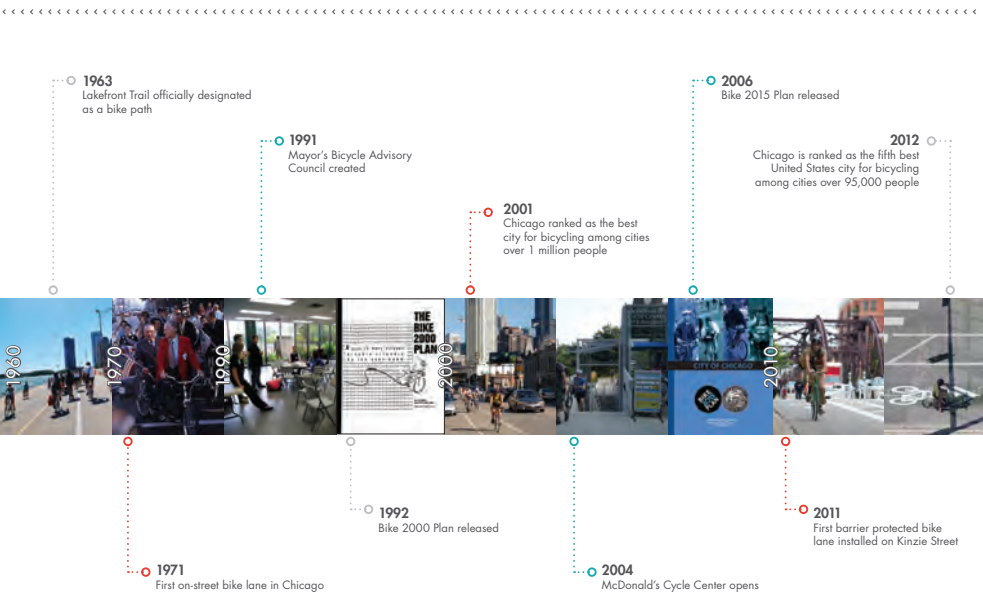
TUBE MILL at the Schwinn factory in Chicago produces high quality steel tubing for bicycle frames.

TUBULAR RIMS are simultaneously punched for valve stem and 36 spoke holes in this operation.

CHROME PLATING—Latest fully automatic equipment applies more lustrous, thicker, longer-lasting finish.



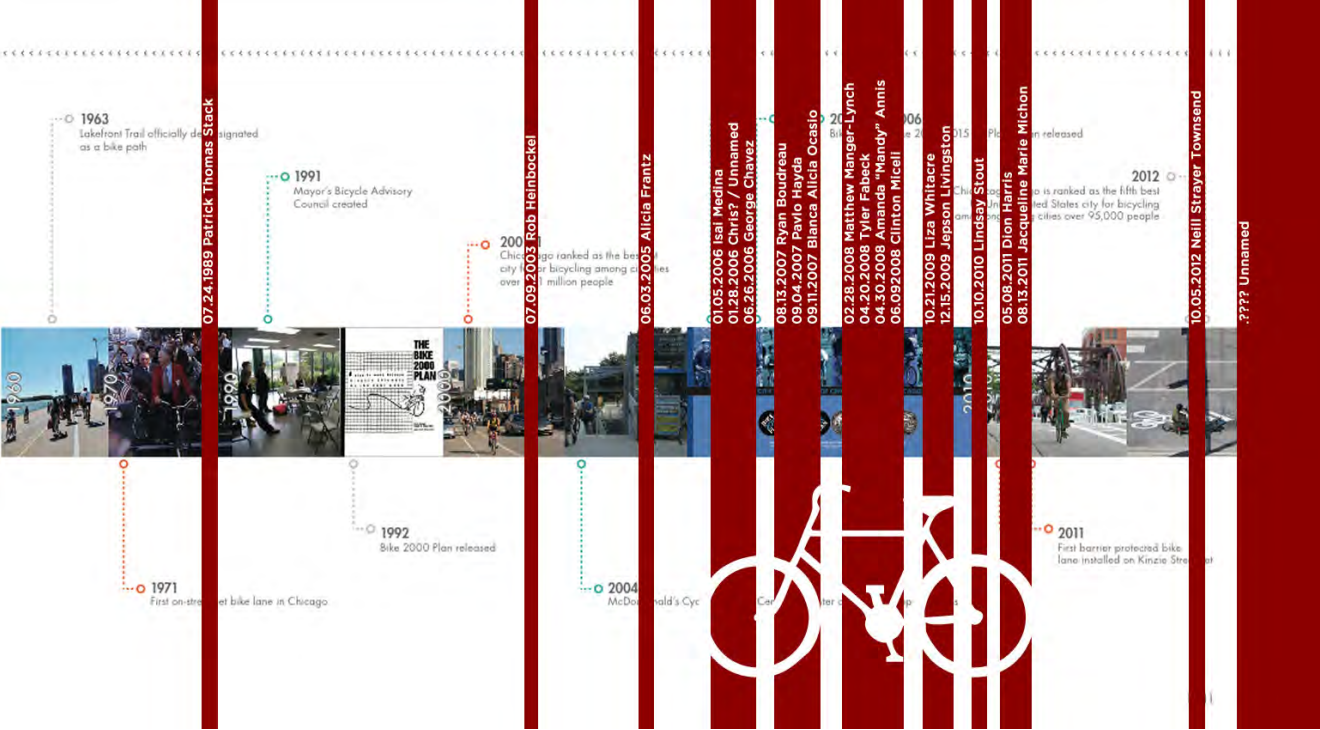
HISTORIC IMAGE: SCHWINN FACTORY IN ACTION. Photo: <http://schwinncruisers.com>



CHICAGO STREETS FOR CYCLING PLAN 2020, TIMELINE, PAGE 11

Chicago may have lost Schwinn, but it still aspires to be "...the most bike-friendly city in the United States." (Mayor Rahm Emanuel, in *Chicago Streets for Cycling Plan 2020*.) Chicago currently has 170+ miles of bike lanes and many more miles of off-street paths. The Plan for 2020 proposes a 645 mile bike system throughout the city, and includes a timeline of positive Chicago biking milestones. Unsurprisingly, cyclist deaths are not noted, so I created an interrupted version of this timeline, inserting the dates and names of accident victims who have been memorialized with ghost bikes into the official narrative.

If Chicago wants to succeed as a biking city, an attitude shift about the public space of the street is necessary. Protected bike lanes will not eliminate the hazard of the motorist who believes that the street is exclusively for cars. Increasing awareness of cyclists through visual cues in the environment and outreach events is a start, but the best perspective shift comes when people navigate the streets as a cyclist.



CHICAGO STREETS FOR CYCLING PLAN 2020, TIMELINE WITH GHOST BIKES INSERTED

Removed Ghost Bikes: Interventions, Markers

The most tragic site that I encountered was the missing ghost bike memorial to Matthew Manger-Lynch at Lincoln, Damen, and Irving Park. Traffic whizzes by constantly, people bustle in and out of the strategically located Starbucks, and there is no awareness of the absence. (Of Matthew or the memorial.)

To mark the presence of the removed ghost bike, I created a stencil of tattoo-style angel wings, and spray-painted the wings and Matthew's initials above the seat of a bike lane marker on the east side of Lincoln Avenue, just north of Irving Park, close to where the original ghost bike was chained.

I would have preferred photoluminescent paint so the image would glow at night, but using the language of iconic street markings for bike lanes and Banksy-inspired graffiti art seemed appropriate. These angel wing street tattoos could be either be customized to reference the individuality of each biker (a cup of coffee for Liza?) or become a repeated symbol throughout the city, marking the sites of car/bike accidents.



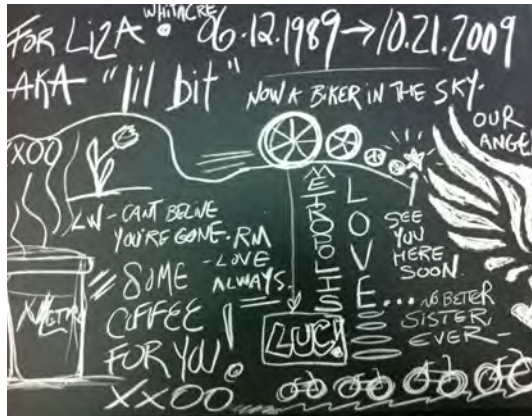


Removed Ghost Bikes: Interventions, Markers

Complementing the graffiti street tattoo, I also proposed using chalkboard paint to occupy parts of the sidewalk by existing or removed ghost bikes, creating the opportunity for a participatory memorial. These chalk memorials would be ephemeral and likely invite random commentary, but also set the scene for spontaneous contribution. A similar technique is used at the Oklahoma City Memorial, where children are encouraged to leave messages on chalkboards.

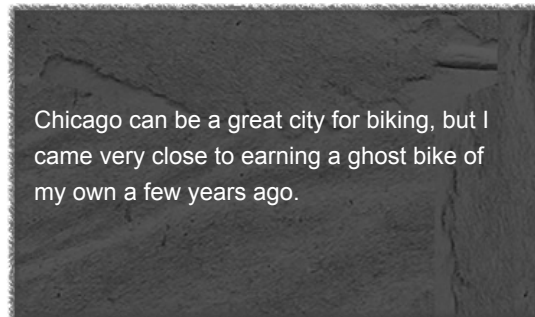


CHALKBOARD FOR MATTHEW MANGER-LYNCH



CHALKBOARD FOR LIZA WHITACRE

Sometimes the most effective way to get a message across is to share a personal story. I was doored years ago while biking on Chicago Avenue, and used a narrative of this experience to create a zine in the style of a religious tract called "Don't Get Doored: A Cautionary Tale." Borrowing from Jack Chicks' repertoire of evangelical comics, and a "do it yourself" online tract template, this photocopied "publication" is intended to be distributed at ghost bike sites and serve as an emotional appeal to raise awareness of bikers. The zine ends with this message: "I don't want a guardian angel or a ghost bike. So: check your mirrors before opening your car door. Share the Road."



As of 2013, there are 21 documented ghost bike sites in Chicago: 12 existing memorials, 8 bikes that have been removed, and an art installation called *1,000 Ghost Bikes* (a "meta memorial") at Ravenswood & Montrose, near Lillstreet Art Center. The Chicago ghost bike project is an independent effort; volunteers create ghost bikes for accident victims with the goal of making the project unnecessary.



Isai Medina ghost bike (removed) Photo: <http://bedno.com>

Ghost bikes are grim but necessary reminders of the dangers cyclists face on the streets of Chicago. They warn of dangerous intersections, and remind drivers to share the road.

Open to read a nearly tragic biking story...

ONE FINE DAY...

WICKER PARK, SUMMER, 1996. I HAD JUST GRADUATED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, AND WAS STILL WORKING A FEW SHIFTS AT THE MED ON 57th IN HYDE PARK. GETTING TO WORK ON CTA WAS A PAIN:



TOO MANY HOURS ON VEHICLES THAT SMELL OF PEE. BETTER TO JUMP ON MY BIKE.

THE SOUTH SIDE BIKE PATH ALONG THE LAKE IS LOVELY...



SO.

I DON'T REMEMBER WHY I WAS BIKING WEST ON CHICAGO AVE. THIS PARTICULAR DAY BEFORE WORK,

BUT,

I WAS. AND UNFORTUNATELY, I ENCOUNTERED THIS...

WHAM! DOORED

MY FIRST REACTION? ANGER. I THINK I YELLED AT THE DRIVER, MADE SURE I WAS IN ONE PIECE, THEN HEADED TO A BIKE REPAIR SHOP.



HEMOTS: SILLY + ESSENTIAL



...after my bike was bent back into shape, I headed to work.



FOLDED ZINES LEFT ON GHOST BIKE

MORAL LESSONS

Those who hit bikers with cars will burn forever in a lake of fire.

"And whosoever steereth their SUV into the path of any bicyclist was cast into the lake of fire." Bke. 20:15

Who will YOU serve?

<p>The Planet</p>	<p>Satan</p>
-------------------	--------------

"Believe on the power of the pedals, and the earth shall be saved..." Bke. 18:31

STREETS R4 PEOPLE

I DON'T WANT A GUARDIAN ANGEL OR A GHOST BIKE.

SO → CHECK YOUR MIRRORS BEFORE OPENING YOUR CAR DOOR. SHARE THE ROAD.



HURRAH FOR COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT! FUN!