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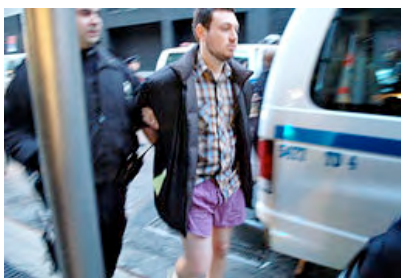
The New Pranksters

By ELLEN GAMERMAN
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Across the country, young people are joining campaigns that are drawing thousands of followers inspired by a common purpose.

They're not handing out leaflets at rallies for Barack Obama or John McCain. Instead, they're posing like statues in public squares, dropping their pants in train stations and bursting into song in malls.

Cities are being swept up in a wave of inane pranks. On a recent weekend, "zombies" smeared with fake blood idly roamed the streets in downtown San Francisco. That same weekend, a crowd of people in New York's Union Square danced to music that no one else could hear; and in Berkeley, Calif., jokesters in white, flowing robes handed out pamphlets at a farmer's market, touting the benefits of joining a cult. (Reason No. 5: "A great excuse not to talk to your birth family anymore.")



Chad Nicholson
Taken into police custody for wearing no pants in a New York subway.

Pranksters say the random events are meant to jolt strangers out of their routines, shake up the monotony of urban life and create mildly awkward moments that play well on YouTube. Organized almost entirely online, the stunts also create a real-life sense of community among participants, many of whom are young people who spend their days in less-than-exciting office jobs.

"We're finding ourselves more and more disconnected," says Ari Lerner, a 24-year-old software engineer in Los Angeles who helps run a prankster group called Guerilla. "We all sit at our computers and we forget there's a sun outside. It's a reaction to that."

Earlier this year, 15 pairs of identical twins, dressed in identical outfits, filled a New York subway car and mirrored each other's actions, without explanation. On different days over the next month, groups in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Toronto plan to gather in public parks and listen to the same MP3 recorded set of instructions on their headphones. Onlookers will be presented with the spectacle of a seemingly random group of people playing games like freeze tag and Twister in unison.

RANDOM ACTS OF SILLINESS

Unlike many pranks of the past, today's most popular stunts don't feature one prankster at the center of the action, but hundreds of people in on the joke. Using the Internet to organize, pranksters create highly choreographed public spectacles that aim to entertain passersby, or at least take them by surprise. One of this year's most popular pranks, "Frozen Grand

Such events are part of a broader phenomenon that includes raves, guerrilla theatre, flash mobs, performance art and other public stunts. The urban playground movement encourages mass pillow-fights in public parks. In

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Central," has been replicated in more than 100 cities around the world. The stunts, from a zombie walk in San Francisco to a pantless subway ride in New York, often go straight to video. Here's a sampling. (Click on the links to watch video.) --*Ellen Gartnerman*

"Operation Best Buy": In New York City two years ago, people dressed like Best Buy employees converged on one of the chain's stores.

"The Strand Race": In a phony race this summer in Manhattan Beach, Calif., runners and cyclists encountered cheering crowds and a finish line out of nowhere.

"No Shirts": More than 100 shirtless men "shopped" in a New York City Abercrombie & Fitch last year -- sort of like the bare-chested men in the store's ads.

"Redheads Protest Wendy's": Redheads "protest" the portrayal of redheads in Wendy's marketing last year.

"San Francisco Zombie Mob 2008": Last month, "zombies" smeared in fake blood lurched around San Francisco.

"Silent Rave Strikes Back": In New York City's Union Square this summer, people danced for more than six hours to music only they could hear.

"Frozen Grand Central": More than 200 people froze at the same time for five minutes in New York's Grand Central Station earlier this year.

"No Pants 2k8": New York City's pantless subway ride drew three times more participants this year than last--about 900 people.

the Free Hugs Campaign, people go up to strangers and hug them.

Prankster groups are sprouting up around the country. Boston-based Banditos Misteriosos says

its mailing list has doubled to more than 2,000 people since the start of the year. Scene Diego, which formed in San Diego, Calif., in February, says it has more than 1,000 people signed up as "undercover agents." And the Urban Prankster Network, a Web site started earlier this year by New York comedian Charlie Todd to help people organize stunts in their own cities, says it now has more than 23,300 members world-wide.

Mr. Todd, a 29-year-old teacher with the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York, is also the founder of Improv Everywhere, created in 2001 and credited with popularizing the current prank phenomenon. Mr. Todd says it began as a way to entertain himself and his friends. They would dream up outlandish scenarios and then try to make them happen.

Today, Mr. Todd's pranks typically involve hundreds of participants and precise choreography to create what looks like a weird, spontaneous moment. He says he never explains the pranks to onlookers. Instead, he lets people draw their own conclusions. "Some people look at them and say, 'Wow, that's a work of art,' " he says. "Others say, 'Wow, that's really stupid.' "

Some pranks just fall flat. One organizer in Phoenix tried to throw an impromptu party in a living room display at an Ikea in May, but it was a flop. Her posting on

the Urban Prankster Network read: "Ikea mission: FAILED!!! Why!? Because only six people showed up."

Joey Skaggs, a longtime media prankster and author of the Art of the Prank blog, is critical of some of the latest stunts. Mr. Skaggs, whose best-known pranks include duping a New York television station in 1976 with a story about a bordello for dogs, says the stunts lack a subversive, anti-establishment edge. Because of that, people are less likely to stop and think about what they're seeing -- or even care. "The bar's been really lowered," he says. "There's a lot of junk out there calling itself pranks."

Today's prankster culture has roots in the Vietnam era, a time of social upheaval and political unrest. In 1967, at the height of the war, activist Abbie Hoffman and beat poet Allen Ginsberg organized hundreds of demonstrators to stage a mock levitation of the Pentagon. By chanting and singing outside the building, they said, they'd perform an exorcism and end the war. The stunt was part of a larger demonstration at the Pentagon that drew thousands of people and led to nearly 700 arrests. A year later, similar activities meant to lampoon and disrupt the Democratic convention in Chicago were staged by the Youth International Party, or Yippies -- founded by Mr. Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and others -- and included nominating a pig for president.

Some contemporary pranks owe much to their '60s precursors. During the Republican convention earlier this month, "Lobbyists for McCain" dressed in dark power suits and gathered in a parking lot in St. Paul, Minn., grilling hot dogs at a tailgate party and handing out fake money. The aim, the group said, was to call attention to what it called lobbyists' influence over the Republican campaign agenda. ("It's certainly common for there to be political theater surrounding candidates' events," says McCain campaign spokesman Tucker Bounds. "It's part of campaigning.")

The latest pranksters are "urban alchemists," akin to so-called guerrilla gardeners who cram plantings into sidewalk cracks, or people who create "found art" made from random items plucked from the streets, according to Jonathan Wynn, a sociologist at Smith College in Northampton, Mass.

"These are people in cities who take the public spaces and everyday life and make something kind of magical about it," he says.

Improv Everywhere pranks have typically been aimed at the consumer culture. In one 2006 stunt, 80 people dressed in what looked like Best Buy employee uniforms -- blue shirts and khakis -- walked around in one of the chain's stores in Manhattan, much to the confusion of everyone around them. Mr. Todd says a store employee called the police and the pranksters disbanded after the authorities arrived. Best Buy spokeswoman Susan Busch says the company "took it in good stride" and would only object if the prank interfered with customers shopping.

Last year, the group sent 111 shirtless men into an Abercrombie & Fitch in New York City, in a spoof of the chain's use of bare-chested hunks in its ad campaigns. The men (some fat, some thin) were told to say they were shopping for a shirt. Spokesman David Cupps says the company has no comment.

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The group also sent more than 50 redheads to stand in front of a Manhattan Wendy's and chant "No pigtails!" in a mock protest of what they said was the inaccurate portrayal of redheads in the chain's ad campaign. Company spokesman Bob Bertini says the stunt was a minor distraction and showed people "engaging with the brand."

In fact, some advertisers are starting to see the marketing value of pranks. Taco Bell recently hired Mr. Todd to stage a "freeze" in a new restaurant in Flushing, N.Y., where paid extras posing as employees and patrons simply froze in place, baffling the actual customers. The stunt was later used in a viral marketing campaign for the restaurant's Frutista Freeze drink, and a video of the prank has been viewed 500,000 times online, says Taco Bell spokesman Will Bortz. "We thought it was brilliant," he says.

Some of Mr. Todd's admirers objected, however. "Taco Bell killed the freeze," says David Kartsonis, a 21-year-old video and TV producer from Redondo Beach, Calif., who helps organize events for GuerillA. He says he won't do the stunt now because it's been overexposed. Mr. Kartsonis also complains that Improv Everywhere's videos seem geared more toward viral popularity online than in-the-moment fun: "They spend a lot more time worrying about the end viewer. We focus on people who are actually there at the time enjoying it."

Mr. Todd says he did the Taco Bell stunt after the freeze craze had passed; freezes have already been performed in 50 countries, he says. Sensitive to suggestions that he has been co-opted in some way, he adds that he keeps his commercial events separate from Improv Everywhere, so that prank participants won't show up for a stunt whose content is controlled by an advertiser.

Recently Mr. Todd began accepting corporate sponsorships. In exchange for running a Yahoo logo on the video of his coming MP3 pranks, he says the company is paying him a fee, which he plans to use to hire a production team and possibly stage aerial shots. Mr. Todd says he'll inform participants about Yahoo's involvement beforehand. "If I work on a corporate thing, there's going to be a certain percentage of my fan base who thinks it's evil," he says. "It's been a very difficult thing for me to figure out."

Most prank groups aren't wrestling with such issues, however. They're just trying to pull off a good joke. At a recent "marathon" staged by GuerillA along the Strand in Manhattan Beach, Calif., unsuspecting joggers and bicyclists encountered a cheering crowd, water stands, a finish line and a person handing out medals.

Prank participants included a 25-year-old assistant video editor (who also feeds people's parking meters, just to be nice), a 51-year-old Verizon customer-service specialist who says he feels "locked in a cube" during the week, and a 36-year-old camera operator who recently proposed to his girlfriend during another stunt.

Gregg Tenser was one of the bewildered runners who broke the finish-line tape. He wanted to power through his 10-mile run, so he didn't stop to ask why people were cheering. "That was curious," he said, jogging away. Had a reporter not told him afterward what was going on, he says, he might never have realized it was a joke.

The 41-year-old money manager says he likes the idea of people doing something crazy for no reason. "It was a fun, borderline-bizarre experience," he says.

Write to Ellen Gamerman at ellen.gamerman@wsj.com

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Chad Nicholson

Synchronized MP3 listeners, organized by Improv Everywhere, at a park in lower Manhattan.

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