

Deviant Practices: Technological Re-codings of the City through Radical Play

Abstract

By critically analysing recent explorations into walking the city as a creative and politicised practice, this paper illustrates how mobile devices can be used as tools for radical play and to encourage subversive use of public spaces. Building on Henri Lefebvre's *Writings on Cities* (1993) and *The Urban Revolution*, (2003) this paper will offer new types of technologised mapping as a politicised performative practice that enacts participants 'right to the city'. Australian performance group pvi collective's recent piece *Deviator*, (2012) sited in Glasgow and other international cities, demands a subversive re-coding of the city via a technological *derive*, live performance and play. By positioning audiences as interventionists on the streets and encouraging a deviation from the norm the social codes of the city are re-imagined and participant-spectators encounter potentially transformative interactions with public spaces.

Introduction

Australian performance group pvi collective's recent performance, *Deviator*, uses mobile devices as tools for radical play. This paper will critically analyse *Deviator* as a case study to explore how technology can be used to navigate the city and encourage participants to perform subversive uses of public spaces. Building on Henri Lefebvre's *Writings on Cities* (1993) and *The Urban Revolution* (2003) and recent theoretical studies exploring performance and the city, this paper will argue that contemporary types of technologised mapping can be read as a politicised performance practice. *Deviator* has been performed in Glasgow and other international cities and demands a subversive re-coding of the city via a technological *derive*, live performance and play. This paper contends that by positioning audiences as interventionists on the streets and encouraging a deviation from the norm, the social codes of the city are re-imagined and participant-spectators encounter potentially transformative interactions with public spaces.

My involvement in the Making Routes Network - a network for artists working in the area of performance and journeys - has been the impetus to critically analyse performance events that incorporate technological mapping for a 'participant-spectator'. Making Routes launched at the Arches in Glasgow in September 2011 and recently Phil Smith from Wrights and Sites led a guided tour called 'Misguided in Ayr' as part of a developing programme of events. Smith's work responds to sites and city spaces as multiplicitous, ambiguous and complexly layered and encourages 'counter-tourism' as an alternative reading of city spaces on his 'mis-guided tours'. He states: 'A mis-guided tour uses the latent qualities of the standard mainstream guided tour, but rather than simplifying, clarifying and reducing, the mis-guided tour always maintains the multiplicity of stories and meanings in any one site' (Smith, 2012: 162). By nurturing a 'playful paranoia' (Smith, 2012: 134) in participants, the social conventions that dictate our engagement with public spaces can be challenged. Smith's enquiry parallels recent theoretical discussions around performance and the city explicated in studies by Nicholas Whybrow (2010) and Hopkins *et al* (2011). In *Performance and the City* (2011) Hopkins *et al.* ask:

If the city's very parameters – fiscal, political, geographic, socially embodied – are a product of pervasive and routine performance, how can the performing arts work actively to intervene in the framing of the 'new world city' along more democratic, more socially and ethically just lines? (Hopkins *et al.*, 2011: 2)

If, as Hopkins *et al.* suggest, the city is a product of 'pervasive and routine performance', how might arts practices that explicitly explore issues of social engagement on the streets provide an impetus for wider social change?

While the metaphor of the city as a 'text' to be read and (re)written has been useful in considering some aspects of our experience of walking/mapping the city streets and of the palimpsestic nature of the city, Hopkins *et al.* argue that it is performance and not textuality that is 'the most apt discourse for understanding our interactions with our cities, the ones best able to represent the nuance, diversity, and lived experience of our urban spaces' (Hopkins *et al.*, 2011: 3). I agree that we 'perform' rather than 'write' the city and contend that mobile technologies can assist in re-mapping and re-coding our experience of walking/performing the city.

Deviator

I experienced the 'mixed reality intervention', *Deviator*, in Glasgow as part of the Surge festival of physical and street performance in July 2012. pvi collective describes itself as a 'tactical media arts group' and worked with a team of twenty local artists developing and devising content for the Glasgow version of *Deviator*. The Institute of Applied Autonomy claim that 'at root, tactical media is an interventionist practice that creates disruptions within existing systems of power and control' (IAA, 2010: 29) and *Deviator* aims to utilise interventionist strategies to alter how we engage with city space. Participants experience an immersive, street based performance using an i-phone to 'temporarily transform their city into a playground' (*Deviator*). Audience members use an online map to find fifteen sets of audio instructions hidden in public spaces then scan a 'Quick Response Code' to activate the game instructions and play as many of the games as possible in the 45 minute time-frame. The games include adult versions of well-known children's games such as 'Spin the Bottle', 'Twister' and 'The Sack Race', as well as many new games devised for the event with local artists. These include 'Splat the Banker', 'Guerrilla Pole Dancing', 'Street Golf' and many others. All of the games encourage the player to explore their public space in a new way and 'deviate from the norm'.

Deviator began in the Arches where a large screen showed a map of the city with the various games located on it. Audience members were welcomed by a member of pvi collective and asked if they have a smart-phone (this was a necessity to participate but if you did not own one you were able to borrow one). Once participants had a handset and had put on the headphones, the introductory video began, explaining that 'all over the world, pockets of resistance against the ongoing clusterfuk are beginning to emerge'. As the voiceover is speaking, there are images of recent protesters walking the streets with signs against banker's bonuses. In their seminal text *Theatre/Archaeology* Pearson and Shanks describe walking as a 'spatial acting out' (Shanks and Pearson, 2001: 138). Rebecca Solnit discusses walking the city

streets as often used as a form of protest in the introduction to her history of walking, in *Wanderlust* (2002). The images appear to be the streets of New York but the text reads 'Discontent on the streets of' with the name of the city hidden from view. A moment later the images are of a different city, a protest in another country, this time a non-Western context. I think that the lack of specificity here is to allow for a universality in terms of the democratic and socialist agenda the company are voicing, but also, on a more practical level, allows this introductory video to be appropriate to whichever city the company tour *Deviator* to while acknowledging the practice of walking the city streets as a form of political protest.

The video also explains the role of the 'motherfuckers', members of pvi collective and the local artists that have devised the games dressed in black hoodies with a 'motherfucker' logo on the front and black skip hats with the middle finger gesture on them. These items of clothing ensure the motherfuckers are recognisable to participants amongst the rest of the general public and they are visibly coded as affiliated with *Deviator*. The role of the motherfuckers is to assist with some of the games and encourage a playfulness in the participants.

pvi collective speaks of 'serious' play; its radical use of play in *Deviator* is reminiscent of Richard Schechner's definition of 'dark play' - 'playing that emphasises risk, deception and sheer thrill' (Schechner, 2006: 119). Schechner explores the relationship between performance and play and frames the public as 'non-knowing players' (Schechner, 2006: 119) – this occurs in *Deviator* as members of the general public move about the streets as the performance is taking place. Schechner's concept of 'dark play' which is play that involves 'everything from physical risk-taking to inventing new selves' (Schechner, 2006: 121) allows us to consider adult play as potentially transformative and a way to radically alter our interactions with public space. Stephen John Saville discusses the revelatory potential of play in relation to other street-based practices: 'Indeed, it may be that it is in play, and play not just among young children, that we can find ways to break out of iterative performances, not only of mobility, but of emotionality as well' (Saville, 2002: 910). Play as a tool to disrupt normative interactions with space becomes politicised in the context of *Deviator* in a range of ways through the various games.

Deviator took place on a rare sunny weekend in Glasgow in July as part of the annual Surge festival of physical and street performance. Simultaneously, the 'Merchant City Festival' was also taking place with a large area of the city transformed by market stalls, temporary stages and venues with many performers and performance troupes using the city streets as their site for performance. There was a real 'carnival' feel to Glasgow this particular weekend and, on reflection, I think this allowed the playfulness of *Deviator* to be more permissible than if this had been the sole street event. The general public were very keen to interact with some of the games, in particular 'Splat the Banker' gathered a large crowd and the performers who were assisting in the 'Guerrilla Pole Dancing' were using their large pole as a limbo bar which many members of the public were eager to 'limbo' under.

Radical Play

To demonstrate some of the politicised agenda in this work, I will analyse a selection of the fifteen games. 'Splat the Banker', a game that was situated on Glasgow's busy

Buchanan Street, also known as the 'Style Mile' for shopping, allows for a physical enactment of an anti-capitalist politics as a member of pvi collective positioned as a 'banker' is hit by wet sponges. 'Spin the Bottle' also refers to a capitalist and consumerist culture and asks participants to perform 'a public exorcism' of a shop affiliated with the 'brand bullies'. The audio text asks participants to place their hand onto the wall of the building and speak the following text:

I'm gonna take you down
Yeah
I exorcise you
Most unclean spirit
In the name of pvi collective
Be uprooted and expelled from this place
I cast you out through my body
I cast this curse back on you

You renounce low wages
You renounce child labour
You renounce poor working conditions, long hours, human
trafficking, workers exposed to toxic substances, violence, abuse
and intimidation
You renounce all the cruelty and greed that you possess

Now shake your left hand up to the sky
Allow it to shake out thru your body
Shake it out now!

The 'Spin the Bottle' game clearly engages with anti-capitalist themes and acts as a protest to consumerist culture by guiding the participant to 'exorcise' a particular branded shop. Recent revelations about working conditions at the i-phone factories in China seemed to echo some of the words used in this game:

The researchers claim that intimidation, exhaustion and labour rights violations 'remain the norm' for the hundreds of thousands of Chinese i-phone workers, despite Apple redoubling its efforts to improve conditions. (*The Guardian* 30th May 2012)

While employing an i-phone to critique capitalism might seem contradictory and in conflict with the wider social message of the piece, I would argue that the company's reference to this in 'Spin the Bottle' acknowledges some of the complexities around our immersion in consumerist culture. At moments throughout *Deviator* the generalised and unspecific anti-capitalist, socially engaged politics seem to sometimes wane from the activist agenda due to sense of being drawn with broad strokes; the inclusive nature of the politics lose a sense of the radical element that the company promise. The use of a state of the art technology, (an i-phone), to draw attention to commodity culture in a bid to transform social practices is a clear artistic choice as the medium and the message become one. To borrow an i-phone participants had to write down their credit card details and give these to a member of the company. While this is a necessary and prudent demand considering the cost of the handsets and the independent nature of the performance experience, the irony of

handing over my credit card details to a company who are interrogating ideas around technology and surveillance through its practice was not lost on me.

'Street Golf', illustrates some of the issues with the policing of city space that pvi collective aim to highlight. The game involves moving a piece of litter around a circuit and is introduced as such:

[..] as you will be aware, conservative social norms deem it unacceptable to perform violent movements such as swinging a golf club outside of a designated play area
So welcome to street golf
We are going to use this section of the street as a small putting green
And swing away!

One of the motherfuckers was illustrating the game outside Central Station when the police issued a fifty pound fine for an 'empty drinks container being knocked along pavement with umbrella' on Gordon Street. The motherfucker did not drop the litter (which would have been an illegal offence and subject to fine) but was simply moving it around the street. This incident illustrates how the policing of our streets can make subversive or non-normative uses of public space punishable and illustrates the point the company are trying to make about authority and social space. pvi collective encountered a similar incident when it was performing *Panopticon: Sydney* in 2003. The piece involved offering a mobile privacy service to individuals as they moved around the city. *Panopticon* had taken place in Taipei and Perth without incident but when it was performed in Sydney the increased security and policing around cultural icons like the Sydney Opera House and the Harbour Bridge resulted in the company's intervention being stopped and members of the company being threatened with a \$4,000 fine each. The interruption of 'Street Golf' and the subsequent fine demonstrates some of the issues of using the city as performance site when security and policing of the space under the semblance of the general public's safety can intervene.

'Quiet Time' demonstrates one of Phil Smith's (aka Crab Man) counter-touristic tactics encouraging readers to interact with heritage sites in non-traditional ways. These strategies allow for a subversion of the idea of how we read and engage with heritage sites (or 'heratij' sites as Smith calls them). In *Counter-Tourism: a pocketbook*, Smith advises counter-tourists to 'lie down somewhere surreptitiously' (Smith, 2012: 6). This simple act of lying down somewhere where you would normally be moving *through* usurps traditional codings of space – particularly the streets which are designed for pedestrians to walk along. In the same way, 'Quiet Time' in *Deviator*, asks participants to lie on the ground behind the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow (GOMA) as the following text plays:

Welcome to quiet time
Do you slave all day without much pay?
Are you being worked into the ground?
It's time for a small act of resistance against the working day
Find a private place to lay down
This will be a symbolic gesture of your discontent

We are going to do nothing for 2minutes
And see how it feels

Once again, the intervention is framed as a small act of resistance against normative behaviours and interactions with space that interfere with the performance of the city. For this game there was often more than one participant at a time taking part which allowed for a reading of a collective resistance and forged the sense of a community of those participating in *Deviator*, the headphones and i-phone acting as a signal to other participants.

'Ring a Ring a Roses' asks participants to perform an engagement with ecological politics as they undertake some 'guerrilla gardening'. In St Enoch's Square one of the large box planters had been prepared with some pills of biodegradable micro seed bombs containing compost and native seeds for rocket, broccoli, mint and rosemary. The recorded voice explains that these have been chosen as they can be used as either medicine or food and are suitable for the climate. The instruction states:

plant your seed pill where you think it will have the best chance of survival.
It's time to attempt to bring nature back into the urban equation.
Picnic time!

This demonstration of returning nature to an urban environment is framed as a small act of resistance to our perceptions of city space. 'Glasgow' comes from the Gaelic meaning 'Dear Green Place' and there are many pockets of greenery within the urban space. Even within the city centre, Glasgow Green in the East provides a huge pocket of green undeveloped park-land that is frequented by many. Peripheral areas outside the city centre areas such as Queen's Park in the South and Kelvingrove in the West provide large areas of greenery and illustrate how Glasgow got its name. Within the city centre and the specific area of Glasgow around the Arches that *Deviator* takes place there are many flower planters and trees incorporated into the urban environment. 'Ring a Ring a Roses' explicated the ecological politics that the company want to disseminate, but it did make me consider other cities that this may tour to that did not have its own urban greenery or gang of guerrilla gardeners who appropriate disused space for growing in the way that Glasgow does. In a globalised world, many of our cities do have commonalities, but it seems that in some of the games a generic 'politic' for every city does not allow for the specificities of each particular city that the performance is sited in. As pvi collective works with local artists in each city in which it performs, it seems that there is a commonality in terms of the issues that artists and practitioners explore through the work. This could represent the democratic and socially engaged quality of arts practices throughout the world.

Games are often based on the premise that 'big changes often start with acts that look pointless at the time.' In 'Guerrilla Pole Dancing' the politics are less clear as participants are asked to 'act as if there were no tomorrow' as they perform a pole dance against a lamp-post. I found this game the least fitting with the overall theme of *Deviator* and I felt uncomfortable participating in this and as performing myself as a sexualised female body in a (albeit safe) city space.

'Guerrilla Pole Dancing' made me ask questions such as, what are audience members doing when they are participating in *Deviator*? They are *playing*, in that they are engaging with and completing the games for points while walking the city. They are also *performing* and it is this performance of non-normative behaviour in public spaces that is witnessed by the general public – the other, 'accidental' audience to *Deviator*. However, despite their unknowing participation, I would argue that the general public on the streets of the city are also the intended audience of *Deviator*. The volumes of the general public that participated in the 'limbo' game and queued for a chance to 'Splat the Banker' indicate a willingness to participate in a playful encounter in public space. The eyes of strangers meeting and the smiles exchanged points towards a sense of community and democracy, a friendliness and shared human understanding that our urban encounters often lack. One of pvi collective's motherfuckers is positioned around the city as the 'smilecatcher' and she looks at passers-by in the eye and smiles. If they smile back she makes a mark in chalk on the street. The hundreds of marks visible on the street at the end of the day testified to the volume of the general public who were willing to participate in this small performative action.

In *The Urban Revolution*: Lefebvre's describes the street as 'a form of spontaneous theatre' where he becomes 'spectacle and spectator' (Lefebvre, 2003: 18). pvi collective ask the audience to take the role of the 'performer-spectator' and participants 'perform' as they move around the city interacting with the games. Lefebvre argues in 'The Right to the City' that 'only relatively recently and through institutions has theatre become "cultural", while play has lost its place and value in society' (Lefebvre, 1993: 171). In *Deviator*, pvi collective claim that 'serious play can transform our spaces' and aim to 'encourage players to deviate from the norm and subvert the social codes of the city.' This assertion that play can act as a 'trigger to alter the official narratives' develops Lefebvre's idea of play to have a more directly activist agenda and situates radical play as a political device that can be used to re-imagine public spaces and locate art practices as part of the solution to what pvi collective describe as 'the ongoing clusterfuck' that is happening globally. I contend that the small acts of resistance that participants perform are potentially transformative but that there is a complexity in how these actions can then practically lead to wider social change.

Lefebvre acknowledges the way that social relationships are constructed through the city:

However, the urban is not indifferent to all differences, precisely because it unites them. In this sense, the city constructs, identifies and delivers the essence of social relationships: the reciprocal existence and manifestation of differences arising from or resulting in conflicts. Isn't this the justification and meaning of this rational delirium known as the city, the urban?' (Lefebvre, 2003: 118)

I argue that this is also applicable in terms of social behaviours and social norms and that his concept of 'irruption', when 'disparate heterotopic groups suddenly see, if only for a fleeting moment, the possibilities of collective action to create something radically different' (Kofman and Lebas: 1996, pxvii), is what pvi collective is

endeavouring towards in its practice.

Deviator can be situated within a context of recent performance work that uses the city as a site and employs technological devices as a way of negotiating the streets. UK performance collective Blast Theory has created a range of experimental work in intermedial and interactive performance practices over the last twenty years. *Can You See Me Now?* (2001), involved a game played both online and on the streets involving a chase around the live and virtual city, and *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003) used a similar gaming form for participants to engage with this 'mixed reality' performance using handheld computers to search for Uncle Roy in a virtual city. pvi collective also uses the city and mobile technologies in its work but has a more socially activist agenda as it 'attempt[s] to deal with our fears and insecurities and the impact that has on our sense of personal freedom and ability to take risks, whether they be personal, political, social or otherwise' (pvi collective website article, www.pvicollective.com). pvi stands for 'performance video installation' and its intermedial practice often uses humour and play to draw attention to the ways in which city space is policed and placed under surveillance and how our rights to city space are becoming more monitored and coded.

The Right to the City

The phrase 'the right to the city' has been used in many ways since Lefebvre's introduction of the concept of in 1967 and I want to reaffirm Mark Purcell's assertion that Lefebvre's original writing on this concept is 'at once complex and fluid' (Purcell, 2002: 101). Purcell explicates: 'His right to the city is not a suggestion for reform, nor does it envision a fragmented, tactical, or piecemeal resistance. His idea is instead a call for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond' (Purcell, 2002: 101). Lefebvre argues: 'the right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts desire'. (Lefebvre, 2003: 4). The French Left in the 1970s advocated the idea *Changer la ville, changer la vie* (change the city, change life) (Kofman and Lebas, 2003: 35). This assertion that the key to changing society lies in altering the city is important when we consider pvi collective's work and its use of radical play as a political practice to re-code and reinvent the city and the wider world as a consequence of this. While its agenda is clear, the difficulty of actualising a lasting transformation lies in how the small acts of resistance that participants enact in *Deviator* translate into wider social change.

The idea of using play and spontaneous encounters and events on the streets was a key concept that the Situationists introduced in the 1950s. The Situationist International were active in Paris between 1957 and 1972 and

[...] developed the notion of 'drift' (derive) as a form of recognition and remapping of the city based on a performative practice of 'walking without aim', as well as inducing impromptu 'diversions' (détournement): that is, triggering responses or 'situations' in public places that momentarily introduce ruptures into the urban everyday (or aspects of the so-called society of the spectacle) (Whybrow, 2010: 88).

The Situationists devised the idea of 'disruptive mappings' and pvi collective is exploring this concept through its alternative mapping of the city while also aiming to 'disrupt' the status quo through their interventionist strategies. Geographer Doreen Massey agrees that the intention of some cartography is to interrupt coherent narratives. She says: 'situationist cartographies sought to *disorient*, to defamiliarise, to provoke a view from an unaccustomed angle' (Massey, 2005: 109). It is through this de-familiarisation that a new way of perceiving space can occur. As Whybrow claims: 'Thus urban walking continues to be viewed not only as a fundamental means in itself of engaging with the everyday city but also as possessing revelatory potential' (Whybrow, 2010: 20). This revelatory potential can be experienced by participants through the practice of walking/mapping the city and a familiar space can be 'seen-anew'. I contend that in *Deviator* the experience of moving through the city is de-familiarised but question how this seeing-anew and potential for transformation can enact the wider social change that pvi collective wish to instigate.

Conclusion

After completing *Deviator* you are given a score depending on how many games you have completed. Throughout the experience your journey has been mapped using GPS and you receive this with the following message after you have completed the game:

hello deviator_laura4,

please find attached your personal derive through the city formerly known as glasgow we offer it to you as a parting gift, and as a reminder that it is through deviation that progress can be made.

thank you for deviating from the norm with us

your friendly neighbourhood tactical media arts group pvi collective

pvi's GPS mapping as a visual representation of the physical journey you have taken while participating in *Deviator* is framed as a 'derive' and while this differs from the Situationists original concept of the 'derive' as a 'drift' or 'walking without aim', the ethos of the Situationist's 'disruptive mappings' are reflected in the interventionist strategies employed. When I received the email with my derive, a scribbled shape where my moments of confusion and lost-ness were charted within the structures of Glasgow's grid-like streets, I was reminded of Smith's provocation in *Wrights and Sites* 'Manifesto for a new Walking Culture':

Abolish industrially-produced maps. Walking can facilitate the construction of new, more personalised maps as in the case of Daniel Belasco Rogers' *The Daily Practice of Map making*. He's been using his handheld GPS device to record all of his journeys since April 2003. If at the end of your life, you could look at the shapes your wanderings over the earth have made, what patterns would you see? What words may be formed that take a human lifetime to write? (Smith, 2011: 78-9)

I would argue that performance has the potential to be politically transformative and that the deviation from the norm that is encouraged through *Deviator* provokes a radical recoding of public space that is enacted by participants and witnessed by the general public. By participating as a 'performer-spectator' the level of investment is high and therefore the experience is one that enables a critical response. On the other hand, the generic politics that are applied to every city that *Deviator* tours to and the controlled sense of agency that the performance allows (i.e. you are allowed to choose your own route within a mapped and constructed area) reminds me of Hopkins *et al.*'s comments about contemporary audiences:

Contemporary cultural practices and audiences' engagement with them are complex and ambivalent. We need to review how we read them to extend our grasp on this complexity and to begin, in view of that complexity, to reconsider how power is distributed in conditions that both apparently afford us agency and apparently take it away (Hopkins *et al.*, 2011: 217).

The complexity of these types of interventions and their responses need to be carefully considered and the effectiveness and longevity of the small acts of resistance performed through *Deviator* are difficult to measure. I hope that in critically analysing this work I am contributing to the discussion about contemporary performance practices that consider technology and mapping and would encourage further enquiry into this. By placing audiences as interventionists out on the streets and engaging them as 'players', the act of 'playing' is validated and the political and performative potential is enacted. pvi collective assert that 'every city has its rules, every map has its agenda, ours is one of new possibilities'. While the sometimes generalised and generic sense of a socially engaged and democratic 'politic' can at times be ambivalent, the interventionist intention is clear. Lefebvre argues that: 'The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. How best to exercise that right?' (Lefebvre, 2003: 4). pvi collective is performing Smith's assertion that 'extraordinary changes will begin with disruptions in the ordinary' (Smith, 2011: 80-1), reacting to this call to exercise the right to remake ourselves and our city.

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Biography

Dr Laura Bissell is a Lecturer in Contemporary Performance Practice at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Laura has recently joined the CPP team from the University of Glasgow where she taught Theatre Studies. Laura studied at the University of Glasgow and at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia and has presented her research on contemporary practices at conferences nationally and internationally. Laura's research interests include: contemporary performance practices and methodologies; technology and performance; live art and feminist performance. Laura has recently embarked on a new research project exploring performance and journeys as part of her involvement in the Making Routes network.