

I often feel, when I am walking through the streets and shops of my hometown, that our enthusiastic embrace of consumerism and efficiency is pushing us further from ourselves. An old man attempting to use an automated till at the local post office finds the exchange not just technologically baffling but also physically and emotionally alienating. Where once there was a human exchange, a bit of banter, a light-hearted comment about inclement weather, now lies a mute machine that has no human characteristics resembling warmth, humour or engagement. Machines are obviously cheaper, and perhaps more efficient than people, but what does it mean for us when we strip out the bits of life that make us human?

When I leave the post office I walk down a street that, to most people's eyes, is 'public space', owned and maintained by the council we pay our taxes to. But it's not. It has been sold by the cash-strapped authorities to a private company that employs 'street attendants', and installs CCTV cameras to ensure that anybody who doesn't fit a particular consumerist profile, who is seen loitering or taking photographs, or being curious, or even skipping, is asked to leave. In order to earn the right to inhabit this *public* space, we are required to engage in a financial transaction. Further up the street I see evidence of collusion between planners, developers and urban designers in the form of vicious looking spikes located in areas that might be used by homeless people to sleep in, or maybe by men looking for a place to piss at night.

None of this is particularly new, or even that interesting on first reading, but the implications are huge and potentially profoundly disturbing. The most visible outcome is an increase in social isolation and a sharp division between those who have, and those who don't, while the less tangible effect (potentially more damaging in the long term) is the closing down of our psyches, the removal of a sense of physical and mental freedom to move beyond fixed codes of prescribed behaviour, to situate our bodies in *public* space and feel free to do with it what we want.

The last time we experienced this level of upheaval and significant change in ownership of the public realm was the Enclosures Acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Introduced by Parliament to increase productivity by limiting the number of commoners who had access to land, the Acts radically changed the psychological as well as physical landscape of the country. Land that was previously accessible to all was closed off, leaving a drastically reduced set of options available for people to feed their animals, fish and hunt, cultivate the land and escape their squalid living conditions. The Acts resulted in psychological scarring on a huge scale, constraining the human spirit and shutting down access to other worlds. On the face of it, this seems far more drastic than a few CCTV cameras and a polite request to move on. But what is so insidious about the situation as it stands today is that it is, for the most part, invisible. It forms a kind of low-level controlling hum that many of us are unaware of.

Artists Helen Stratford and Idit Nathan have been thinking about this low-level hum over the last couple of years, and the culmination of their research can be seen in the launch of a game called 'Play the City Now or Never' (PCNN). An App that can be downloaded onto a mobile 'phone, the game is essentially a subversion tool to be used to reclaim the public realm. Rambling through the East Anglian streets of Peterborough or Southend, with movement linked to a GPS tracking device, participants are invited to carry out a number of site specific

actions using a series of prompts: BALANCE WITH SOMEONE OR SOMETHING TO AVOID THE GRASS is located at a public seating area where the grass is out of bounds, and, looking out to sea, with the world's longest pleasure pier within site: LISTEN TO THE RHYTHM OF THE WIND PLAYING THE MASTS. They are essentially absurdist actions that highlight the narrow parameters of society's tolerance of what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour in public space. Stratford and Nathan devised a series of 'walkshops' with local people to elicit stories about places they have played or would like to play; these stories have informed the prompts. DANCE THE MONKEY DRIFT is a reference to stories of ships' monkeys being set adrift on planks of wood when sailors came ashore; DUCK DOWN TO AVOID CEDAR came out of a conversation with children about an enormous tree in Chalkwell Park that they hide in to escape from adults. With others, there is a more critical edge, where tolerance of privatisation and control wears thin: SKIP TO AVOID THE SECURITY STAFF IF YOU DARE and IMAGINE A PIER THAT IS FREE FOR ALL.

'Play', here, is being used as a tool to do a range of things from the prosaic to the sublime. Participants talk to each other and to strangers; they laugh (nervously and with abandon); make noise and disrupt; they notice things they've walked past every day; they embarrass other people (and themselves); they straddle, hop, sing, wave, skip and fall over. They are scurrilously re-writing the spatial etiquette rulebook and actively re-performing the spaces that they occupy on a daily basis; they are provoking those around them (the authorities, other members of the public, private companies) into joining in, retreating or even banishing them. At first glance, it seems light-hearted but it is deeply political. In the film that Stratford and Nathan have made documenting various participants' at play, it is the groups of people who are often sidelined in society as well as mainstream politics and public life (women, older people, the disabled, young people) who form the majority of the players. These groups rely, disproportionately, on public realm provision, and the safety net provided by the Welfare State, and therefore have the most to lose from privatisation, commercialisation and the curtailment of the freedom associated with public life.

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The twentieth century is rich with small-scale, radical, public interventions devised by artists to disrupt the status quo. There's a thread of this type of activity that can be traced from Dada (1910s and 20s) to the Surrealists (1920s and 30s); the Situationist International (1950s and 60s), to performance art (1960s and 70s). All of these groups and artforms aimed, in some way, to transform participants into active agents, with many of them hoping for some kind of social and political change.

On 14 April 1921, members of the Dada movement in Paris launched 'The Dada Season' with a series of 'excursions and visits'. The event was described by the artist George Hugnet as an 'absurd rendezvous mimicking instructive walks'.<sup>[1]</sup> Fliers were distributed to advertise the event which stated that artists wished to 'set right the incompetence of suspicious guides' and lead a series of 'excursions and visits to places that have no reason to exist'. A series of demands were printed on the provocatively designed flyers: YOU SHOULD CUT YOUR NOSE LIKE YOUR HAIR and PROPERTY IS THE LUXURY OF THE POOR, BE DIRTY. By all accounts, it was a rather drab affair. It rained; hardly anyone came, and planned future visits never materialised.

The Situationist International, lead by the compelling, dictatorial and ultimately tragic, Guy Debord, promoted the idea that in order to repair the social bond we need to create an

interface with reality through the art of interaction. Experimenting with the “construction of situations” (hence their name), they made films, wrote books and devised street slogans. They expounded the importance of participation because it rehumanised a society ‘rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production’<sup>[ii]</sup>. Two SI texts, Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* were said to influence the student rebellion of 1968. Many of the slogans that were daubed onto Parisian walls were taken from these theses: FREE THE PASSIONS / NEVER WORK / LIVE WITHOUT DEAD TIME.

An arguably more revolutionary public act was carried out in the 1970s by the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles who launched a captivating, but also banal attack on entrenched value systems, encouraging people to act in order to change societal norms. For her public performance *Touch Sanitation* (1979–1980) she visited all fifty-nine sanitation districts in New York City to shake hands with, and thank, every one of the 8,500 sanitation workers for ‘keeping New York City alive’. At the end of her year-long performance she was elected Honorary Deputy Commissioner of Sanitation in NYC and Honorary Team Member of Local 831, United Sanitationmen’s Association. The performance was part of her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* which she created in order to reveal the hidden, yet essential role of cleaning and maintenance work in Western society (a role often carried out by women in the home) and the radical implications of actively valuing it rather than hiding it from sight.

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On the day I sat down to begin formulating thoughts about this text, my teenage son came running into my office, breathless with excitement: ‘Mum! I went to the park! It was *amazing!*’ He had discovered Pokémon Go, an augmented reality game which took the world by storm in the summer of 2016. It gets players out of their bedrooms into the streets, encourages them to discover new parts of their neighbourhood, and has become a catalyst for conversations amongst strangers. Players catch virtual creatures that live in public places (many in cultural centers, parks and near monuments); the more they collect, the more points they earn. It functions using a GPS tracking device and a phone’s camera function, creating a two-tiered reality system that is both virtual and *real*. The game has resulted in the extraordinary spectacle of thousands of adults and children in a frenzied rush to catch rare Pokémon in the dead of night. Slightly more bizarrely, people have discovered dead bodies, been hit by cars and fallen off cliffs in their quest to acquire Pokémon Go acclaim.

On the surface, there seems to be many parallels between Pokémon Go and PCNN. A sense of adventure and discovery in outside spaces, as well as the element of social play, are perhaps the most obvious. But the sinister side of Pokémon Go is what interests me here, and can be linked to our culture of control, surveillance and commodification. In practical terms, all players of the game sign over access to data on their phone to the game’s owner (Nintendo), which can then be sold to a third party. This data is the currency of the twentyfirst century, and is linked to the way that the game is valued in the marketplace – it allows companies to build incredibly detailed profiles of millions of individuals, including information about where they shop, what they buy, what their interests are, what state their health is in, where they work etc. The aim is always to create targeted and sophisticated marketing campaigns to sell you things. Less tangibly, there’s also the issue that with Pokémon Go, the players’ imagination is activated *for* them. There is very little creativity,

real freedom or lateral thought that comes into play when catching characters, fighting in ‘gyms’ or evolving into a more sophisticated species.

Inscribed within the Enclosures Acts and Pokémon Go is the concept of appropriation. In the former it is the visible, tangible public realm that is being appropriated, with the latter, it is our privacy. In *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord describes the effects that commodification and reification has on people stating that ‘The spectacle is an extension of the idea of reification where what was directly lived has moved away into a representation, all real relationships having been replaced by that of relationships with commodities, and where commodities have a life of their own – the autonomous movement of the non-living’.<sup>[iii]</sup> With PCNN there is no such appropriation, commodification, or hierarchy of ownership. It is designed to maximise certain degrees of freedom in the way it can be used. Players can explore all manner of worlds, including the idea of ‘publicness’; they can create their own publics with no sense that they are a vessel for corporate gain. Like projects and actions by the Dadaists, the SI and many performance artists, PCNN aims to ‘unplay the dominant systems of control’<sup>[iv]</sup> and to re-inscribe power structures. In so doing, they create a platform for subtle interventions, political awakening and radical acts.

#### NOTES:

<sup>[i]</sup> George Hugnet, *L’aventure Dada*, 1916-1922, Edition Seghers, 1971 (first published 1957). Translated and quoted in Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012

<sup>[ii]</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012

<sup>[iii]</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1970

<sup>[iv]</sup> Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, MIT Press, 2009