

Christiane Keys–Statham

‘Running the City’: In Transit from the Virtual to the Real

As part of the 19th International Symposium on Electronic Art, the College of Fine Arts (UNSW) in Sydney staged a large exhibition titled ‘Running the City’ from 7 June to 20 July 2013. This exhibition showed interactive and experimental digital, video and new media work. Participating artists deployed a range of electronic media and performative strategies to examine how we make, map and move through our cities.

The International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) is an annual event staged each year in a different location across the world. It was initiated in 1988 to support the founding and maintenance of an international network of organisations and individuals active in the field of electronic art. The untethered nature of this organisation lends itself to the creation of digital networks and the production of collaborative new media work. The theme of ISEA 2013 was *Resistance is Futile*, and the ‘Running the City’ exhibition, curated by Felicity Fenner and displayed over various venues at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW in Sydney, responded to this theme by

examining the relationship between virtual and real space, and by exploring how boundaries and points of resistance are circumvented.

Running, as a form of movement, is deeply embedded within the human psyche and was a reoccurring image in the works included in this exhibition. In this paper, I will examine the impact of the works in terms of the depiction of a transitory present within urban spaces, the nature of the relationship between real and virtual spaces and the affective impact of the work. Could the act of running, as suggested by the curator, be a new form of circumventing points of resistance, reconfiguring urban spaces and addressing their limitations?

Originally, as an option to conflict in the fight-or-flight response, we ran to hunt, to conquer, to escape or to migrate. In the twenty-first century, our running has been transformed into something quite different: part of a suite of leisure activities aimed at maintaining physical health, jogging has become a ubiquitous form of solo sport across the world since the 1960s.¹ Marathons are a popular

activity for amateur runners, and their identity is often linked to particular cities (eg. London, New York, and Boston, famous now for sadder reasons). Any city park across the world plays host daily to countless office workers who, at lunchtime, step out of their suits and into their running shorts, and jog around the nearest park or waterfront.

In the history of art, the act of running has surfaced relatively scarcely as a motif.² Perhaps this is due to the traditional perception of art and sport being at either ends of the cultural spectrum. However, as part of the current trend in participatory and physical performance art, which often has endurance aspects to its making or presentation, the act of running has become a familiar theme in contemporary art. Recently, New Zealand born, Berlin-based artist Alicia Frankovich staged a performance piece called *The Opportune Spectator* at the Art Gallery of NSW, coinciding (unofficially and probably unintentionally) with 'Running the City'. The work involved joggers (along with cyclists and yoga instructors) cooling off and stretching out their muscles within gallery spaces. The aim of this work was to 'blur distinctions between art and life, artwork and audience'.³ The implication is that sport and healthy physical activity is not usually encountered in an art gallery.

'Running the City' addressed this same absence but, as a general rule, digital and new media art are not subject to the same audience/artwork dichotomy that performance art often seeks to redress. As we all spend so much of our time using computers or smartphones, the digital medium is conducive to the viewer being treated more as a

'user' than a passive spectator or a performance participant, and the digital artwork's presentation often resembles an interface.⁴ The digital artist is also generally more invisible and intangible than the performance artist, allowing the viewer to feel freer to participate. Interactivity is a buzzword for much digital art, and the 'Running the City' exhibition contained more than one example of interactivity and collaboration in contemporary digital art, as well as more traditional, video-based work.

In order to compare the impact of two types of work in this large exhibition, I have divided my discussion into two sections, comparing the more traditional gallery-based work and interactive practices. I will consider each in terms of affect and in depicting the transition from the real to the virtual. How can this transition be depicted? Does the focus on the act of running in these works increase the experiential aspect of the work and positively impact the viewer's engagement?

The gallery exhibition in the Ivan Dougherty Gallery included the work of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, an artist who was born in Japan, raised in the United States and is currently based in Vietnam. According to the wall text, Nguyen-Hatshushiba works with drawing, video, photography and installation, exploring Vietnamese history, national identities, and the movements and displacement of refugees worldwide. Most of the work here was part of the *Breathing is Free: 12,756.3* series, a project conducted by the artist over several years and across several continents. These works feature the artist running, part of his attempt to run the entire diameter of the globe, a

total of 12,756.3 kilometres. This colossal task is being undertaken as a memorial and tribute to the millions of displaced people and refugees whose migrations are motivated by the search for a better life. The title of the work suggested that running, and breathing, are activities that exist outside the realm of commerce and control, being free to all.

However, the work here does not overtly reference these themes. The only obvious reference to refugee movements is in the wall text. The work does obliquely reference the politicisation of space in the straightforward presentation of the act of running through the megacities of Asia: cities like Guangzhou, Tokyo and Singapore, as well as European and North American cities such as Karlsruhe, Geneva, Chicago and Lucerne. These are cities where the jogger is not necessarily specifically catered for, where the accepted venue for the jogger is the domesticated nature of city parks rather than the areas Nguyen-Hatsushiba runs through. Urban spaces are for labour and production, and it is in reclaiming them for human movement, non-productive play and spontaneous sport, that the space can become politicised, and jogging a political act.⁵

Nguyen-Hatsushiba's running, by its very duration, globalised nature and determined, even unrealistic ambition, seems to escape the more lighthearted aspects of the amateur jogger, thus subtly referring to those who are forced to run. The artist runs not only through streets, but also over rough terrain, along jungle roads and through construction sites, his routes often forming the shape of local plants and flowers, which could only be seen in the aerial photographs of the

series. He is inscribing the landscape, whilst simultaneously reenacting the migrations of those less fortunate. At one point, in the Taichung installment of the *Breathing is Free* series, the artist evidently suffers from extreme exhaustion and is removed by ambulance. The endurance aspect of the piece is clear, although momentary, and the artist runs on. Volker Kuchelmeister's immersive installation piece, *City Jam 2007-2013*, was an interactive installation that reconfigured the gallery space into a vertiginous environment. This work took the viewer on a ride through some of Sydney's iconic landmarks: over the Harbour Bridge and along Bondi Beach, for example. Projected onto a large screen was footage taken from multiple cameras atop a moving vehicle, much like the Google Street View cars. Accompanied by a song from Australian 80s indie-punk band XL Capris, the projected imagery was exposed to slight glitches, triggered by the presence of spectators in the space.

This work was certainly disorientating, but only seemed to reflect the passage through Sydney, and emphasise how strange it is to be dwarfed by moving footage when standing still. The repeated song (a thrash version of the song played to accompany the test pattern on Channel 7, in the days when television stopped broadcasting at midnight) added to the viewer's discomfort. Again, we were left with a beautifully presented image of an aspect of our daily lives, and the meaning was hard to discern amidst the impressive technology. The work's affective impact was deeply felt, mostly by confusing the viewer's peripheral vision, subverting the standard audience position, yet the transition from the virtual to the real felt stultified.



Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Breathing is Free: 12,756.3 – Ho Chi Minh City, 118.5km* (still) 2007, single channel digital video, 19:10. Image courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo and the artist.

The footage of Sydney locations was familiar to most viewers, but the experience was neither truly virtual nor obviously interactive. The audience was left with a longing to be back in the 'real' world. A more impressive, but equally disturbing example of immersive installation using data visualisation was exhibited as part of ISEA at Carriageworks: Ryoji Ikeda's *test pattern [No 5]*.

Architect Teddy Cruz made a stopover in Sydney after appearing at the 2013 Auckland Triennial, and was invited to undertake a day trip to La Perouse, Botany Bay and Kurnell, areas of Sydney that occupy a strange place in our collective identities. The 'birthplace of modern Australia' is now a patchwork, semi-industrialised area, encompassing the airport, an oil refinery, Sydney's oldest Aboriginal community and a memorial park. The documentation of this one-day road trip was featured in the 'Running the City' exhibition in the form of a recording and accompanying footage of scenes in the area. Teddy Cruz works in the border areas between San Diego and Tijuana, envisaging creative solutions to problems of town planning, bicultural territories and social inclusivity. On his road trip to Kurnell and Botany, he spoke of the importance of balancing leadership with inclusivity, and how to 'curate' cities. His strategies of intervention include addressing 'zoning bubbles' where areas like industry, residential and memorial overlap. The fragmentation of the city is a recurring issue across the world, producing enclaves of difference, but particularly in areas where historical and/or current border zones exist.⁶

Cruz suggested that the knowledge produced by universities and institutions

be harnessed, in collaboration with communities, to counteract top-down urban design decisions, inappropriate and unsympathetic landscape design and the resulting palimpsest of postcolonial urban spaces. He referred to the root of the word curate in the Latin *curare* (to care for), which links to the *Curating Cities* project, of which 'Running the City' is part. *Curating Cities* is an ongoing investigation by the National Institute for Experimental Art into Sydney's urban planning and the role of artists and architects in redefining space in ways that are socially and environmentally sustainable. This project turns the idea of curating art on its head, suggesting that we use art to curate space, presumably in a caring manner. This is an interpretation of the practice of 'creative placemaking',⁷ which has gained favour in many North American contexts and is beginning to make an impact on policy in Australia.⁸

The more interactive parts of the 'Running the City' exhibition included the work of Hong Kong-based collective, MAP Office. Their *Runscape* series is an international project that deploys the practice of *parkour* as a way of mapping urban spaces and examining how we use and potentially disrupt city spaces. *Runscape* has been enacted in three cities: Sydney (2013), Berlin (2012) and Hong Kong (2010). Performers run at high speed through these urban centres, dodging crowds and spontaneously determining alternate routes. This is a speeded up form of psycho-geography, arguably more suited to our hectic lives than the slow, leisurely pace of the flâneur.

The artworks were presented in the form of videos and large-scale projections, and spread over analogue television

screens packed into a grid. The resulting mass of imagery was as straightforward and non-manipulated as Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work, with a nearby film montage of classic Hollywood film clips featuring people running adding the only metaphorical gravitas to the work. This montage showed clearly what the act of running means in a narrative context: it is shorthand for action, drama, tension and plot development.⁹ By contrast, the rest of the *Runscape* footage seemed tame, somewhat literal and untethered from any larger concept. There was, however, a strong sense of appropriating space for play, random occurrence and improvisation.

The overall impression is that MAP Office, and possibly Nguyen-Hatsushiba, are aiming to develop a sort of rhetoric of running. Michel de Certeau, in his 1984 text, *Walking in the City*, described a rhetoric of walking, and suggested that 'people are put in motion by the remaining relics of meaning, and sometimes by their waste products, the inverted remainders of great ambitions'.¹⁰ The work of MAP Office and Nguyen-Hatsushiba seem to prove this prediction—that we are put into motion and directed by the spaces we have inherited—and they display a desire to reimagine the cities in a way that is more active and born of movement. The deserted areas of our city centres are reinvigorated by these artists, who aim to create a new functionality for these zones like the ones around the Town Hall, reclaiming them for non-productive play (adding jogging to forms of adult play such as skateboarding and *parkour*) and the movement of the individual runner, 'turning the signals of the city into

ephemeral symbols of everyday meaning and duration'.¹¹ Through this reclamation, these spaces will 'become liberated spaces that can be occupied'.¹² The transition from empty, non-functional spaces to living, active and meaningful spaces is depicted in these works. The viewer is left to consider whether this transition can be effected in reality.

Across campus in the new ARC space, Richard Goodwin and Russell Lowe showed a work that delved further into the transition from real to the virtual spaces. Their work *CRYSIS IN PARASITE PARADISE: The work of Realtime Porosity Studio* (2013) was comprised of an architectural model of Sydney's CBD around the Town Hall and the Queen Victoria Building, along with a virtual map of the same area. The virtual map was modeled using a gaming engine, the underlying structure of computer games. Data measurements were incorporated into the gaming engine, which then produced a virtual model of the Sydney CBD. The viewer could explore this area as if they were playing a multiplayer game online. For example, model planes held by the viewer and crashed gently into the architectural model would cause corresponding explosions in the computer game. The avatar of the game had the option of wielding a gun or a bazooka: options which, according to the artists, came preinstalled in the game engine.

When combined with the beautifully constructed and detailed architectural model and the viewer's personal knowledge of the city, the artwork gained depth and resonance. Memory, experience and imagination were used as components of a virtual scenario. The work also has real world applications:

the artists have been working with the City of Sydney, the CSIRO and local emergency services to investigate how this technology, along with their crowd-movement mapping, can be incorporated into urban planning and contingency management. As well as being conceptually and aesthetically developed, this work was also socially and politically active. It provided us with a practical example of the transition from the virtual back to the real, and is the logical extension of some of the ideas Teddy Cruz discussed during his Botany road trip, and a demonstration of the experimental possibilities for the architecture of the future.¹³

The final artwork in the show was arguably the most interactive—so interactive, in fact, that it came with numerous disclaimers and warnings, and was only shown for the first ten days of the exhibition. This was a work by Dutch artist Marnix de Nijs, called *Run Motherfucker Run* (2001–2004). A five-metre treadmill was set in front of a large eight by four-metre screen, and viewers were able to walk or run on the treadmill, controlling the projection in front of them with their speed and direction. The faster they ran, the faster the projection played, and by moving to the left or right of the treadmill, they were able to choose different routes within the projection, much like a virtual version of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of old. This responsiveness and the potential for participation resulted in the work being by far the most popular in the entire exhibition.

Filmed in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, the footage in this projection depicted *non-places*:¹⁴ empty late night alleyways,

train stations, container ship docks, and car parks. The film was set to a discordant, ominous soundtrack, heightening the city dweller's natural fear of lonely spaces at night. In this work, the relationship with the viewer was slightly more demanding and antagonistic¹⁵ than in other works in this exhibition. The viewer was encouraged to participate by the familiar nature of the treadmill (arguably a more common form of running for most urban viewers, but this was the only work in the show that examined its possibilities), but its sheer size, coupled with the slightly foreboding soundtrack and footage, contributed to an immersive experience outside the comfort zone of many contemporary relational artworks.

The depiction of these empty, interchangeable and nonfunctional urban spaces in this work reflected the real spaces that many viewers pass through in their daily commutes. Globalisation has contributed to the proliferation of these non-places, or, what Rem Koolhaas termed 'junkspace' in a 2002 *October* magazine article of the same name.¹⁶ He described junkspace as 'a fuzzy empire of blur, [which] fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed.'¹⁷ Junkspace is made up of the 'leftover emptiness'¹⁸ between buildings and places whose functions are defined by human usage: the empty stairwells and forgotten corners of any city. Koolhaas also predicted the use of running as a way of utilising this sort of space, stating, 'where movement becomes synchronised, it curdles'.¹⁹

A century of producing buildings as separate entities, without concern for



Marnix de Nijs, *Run Motherfucker Run*, 2001-2004, video installation.
Courtesy of Martin Dam Kri.

the shaping of the spaces in between, has resulted in an architectural pastiche overlaid by walkways and tunnels, broken up by car parks and public transport systems. This junkspace, a by-product of mass urbanisation and the creation of megacities, is at the core of the 'Running the City' exhibition. The curator asks how we might operate within it, what can be done to integrate our human needs into the design of the cities of the future, and where is the transition to the utopian city? 'Running the City' suggests that this transition can be approached through exploring and negotiating our urban spaces whilst running.

Any political evaluation of these works hinges on their generality. Running through the urban environment is only a political act in its commentary on space in general, the imperfections of our cities and the way they function. Specifically targeted political acts are often more effectively performed by doing the opposite of running—for example, the case of the Turkish standing man, performance artist Erdem Gunduz.²⁰ Another famous example was the Tank Man of Tianamen Square. These figures used their stillness, their non-running, as a tactic of protest and passive resistance. The sit-ins of the 1960s were another form of non-violent protest that involved doing very little.

The artists included in 'Running the City' take the opposite direction, arguing for a more active approach by 'plotting three-dimensional works in leftover emptiness'.²¹ These works seem to follow a route and a method of movement that is the logical extension of the psycho-geographical excursions of the Situationists in the 1950s. Indeed,

what these artists are suggesting is not radically different from the Situationist's idea of unitary urbanism, a repurposing of the city by 'breaking through fields where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favorable to our purposes.'²² Running at high speed through crowded spaces can be considered an updated form of the *dérive*, as decisions are made instinctively and without recourse to signage or habitual routes, allowing for the intervention of chance.

Claire Bishop has noted the link between our Internet surfing habits and the action of the *dérive*, arguing that the Situationist action has actually become 'the logic of our dominant social field: the Internet'.²³ The *dérive* was a way for artists such as Guy Debord, Asger Jorn and Ivan Chtcheglov to escape the fixed and inhuman logic of postwar town planning, but in 'Running the City', the physical act of running could be seen as a slightly more active version of our sedentary online browsing.²⁴ Fast, yet random: the free association of the feet. I would argue, however, that the political aspects of these artistic forms of running approximate our online 'clickivism' in terms of their effectiveness in making real and tangible social change.

As a whole, the exhibition showed that the act of running can be a successful method of exploring and interpreting the spaces we occupy. The interactive works were more successful at stimulating thought in the viewer through the actual act of running on a treadmill, in the case of *Run Motherfucker Run* by Marnix de Nijs, or through negotiating virtual space, in the case of Goodwin and Lowe's *CRYSIS IN PARASITE PARADISE: The work*



MAP Office (Gutierrez + Portefaix), documentary still from *Runscape Sydney*, 2013. Image courtesy of the artists.

of *Realtime Porosity Studio*. Jogging, or running for pleasure, is a transition of the body through space in a literal form, but its use in the present day can also be a way of transforming our common spaces from areas of utility, function and commerce into spaces of desire, spontaneity, imagination and flight.

The affective impact of these works was occasionally sabotaged by the disjunction between the activity depicted and the medium used to convey it, the transition from concept to form. Digital art can sometimes fall short on emotional impact, despite our daily connectivity and interaction with computers in our everyday lives. Where applicable, the interactive element of these works was a success in terms of audience engagement, but the quality of this involvement is a concern. It could be argued that running produces little more than a physical response, although some writers have advanced the idea that the impact of running is felt in both body and mind.²⁵ The ‘Running the City’ curators claimed that these works acted as circumventing points of resistance. I believe they did this to varying degrees of success and, politically speaking, only obliquely and possibly to a lesser extent than some forms of physical inactivity, such as simply standing still, lying in bed or sitting down.

However, many of the works in the exhibition successfully conveyed the proposition that running could be, and possibly is already, a form of approaching and addressing the limitations of urban spaces and their design. Perhaps jogging has transcended its roots in organised sport and has now thoroughly made the leap into the realm of contemporary

artistic practice, as walking and skateboarding have before it. ‘Running the City’ was a timely and fascinating examination of the transitions that are occurring across the world in the imaginations of contemporary artists, particularly relating to human movement and our interactions with the city.

1. Popularised, incidentally, in New Zealand by trainer and coach Arthur Lydiard.
2. The act of walking, however, is a common theme in contemporary art, and has its own history and roots in ideas of the *dérive* and the *flâneur*. See David Evans ed. *The Art of Walking: A Field Guide* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), for some contemporary examples.
3. AGNSW website, URL: <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/calendar/opportune-spectator/> (accessed 3 July 2013).
4. Rem Koolhaas took the metaphor even further: ‘On its triumphal march as content provider, art extends far beyond the museum’s ever-increasing boundaries’ (Rem Koolhaas, ‘Junkspace’, *October*, Vol. 100 [Spring 2002], 187).
5. Ultimately, the work—like others in the exhibition—is aiming to be ‘a critique of the processes of exchange and consumption in the modern city, and, above all else, proposes a reassertion of *use* values as opposed to exchange values’ (Iain Borden, ‘Performing the City’, *Skateboarding, Space and the City* [Oxford: Berg Publishing 2006], 237).
6. ‘The new mode of production (the new society) appropriates, that is to say, adapts to its own ends, pre-existing space, whose patterns had been previously formed’ (Henri Lefebvre, ‘Preface to the New Edition: The Production of Space’, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings* [London: Continuum, 2003], 212).
7. See Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010).
8. See Australia’s 2013 National Cultural Policy, *Creative Australia*, and the forthcoming cultural policy for Sydney.

9. This section of the MAP Office work used similar editing techniques to Christian Marclay's work, *The Clock*, shown in Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2012, and produced a similar hypnotic effect.

10. Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City', *Practices of Everyday Life* (California: University of California Press, 1984), 99.

11. Borden, 229.

12. de Certeau, 99.

13. 'On the bases of this mobile civilization, architecture will, at least initially, be a means of experimenting with a thousand ways of modifying life, with a view to an ultimate mythic synthesis' (Ivan Chitchevlov, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism', *Internationale Situationniste #1*, 1958, URL: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/formulary.html> [accessed 17 September 2014]).

14. See Marc Augé and John Howe (trans), *Non-Places: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

15. See Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, Vol. 110 (Autumn 2004), 51-79.

16. Koolhaas, 175-190.

17. *Ibid.*, 176.

18. *Ibid.*, 187.

19. *Ibid.*, 179.

20. Richard Seymour, 'Turkey's 'standing man' shows how passive resistance can shake a state', *The Guardian*, 19 June 2013, URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jun/18/turkey-standing-man> (accessed 17 September 2014).

21. Koolhaas, 187.

22. Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', *Internationale Situationniste #2*, 1958, URL: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html> (accessed 17 September 2014).

23. Claire Bishop, 'Digital Divide', *Artforum International*, Vol 51 (1), September 2012, 439.

24. Compared by William Gibson to 'fishing' rather than 'surfing'. William Gibson, 'The Net is a Waste of Time', *New York Times*, 14 July 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/14/magazine/the-net-is-a-waste-of-time.html> (Accessed 17 September 2011).

25. See, for example, Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (London: Vintage, 2009).