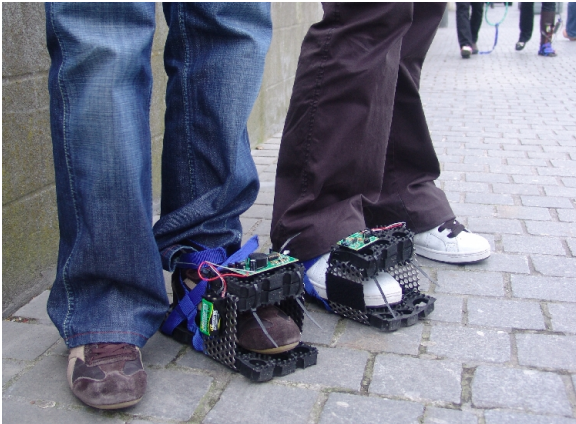


Routes and Routines

Peter Westenberg



(Carrer de Saint Miquel, Palma, Mallorca, 2008)

Two shoes, each fitted with electronic eyes. The shoes keep track of each other. Two walkers each wear one of the pair. If the shoes lose sight of each other, an alarm signal goes off. One sharp electronic beep that cuts through bone and marrow. The walkers must stay in step to keep the signal from going off. If they do not succeed, a glaring beep. One more attempt: they maintain a fixed distance between themselves. Rigorous, clear communication is required. A strictly planned implementation is necessary. They devise a method: count: 1,2,3,... walk. The first steps are calm, quiet, it works. But then the beep sounds again. They panic and begin to discuss how their routine can be improved.

Routes + Routines (R+R) is a series of urban interventions that arose out of an interest in the relationship between urban patterns and the use of the city. How does the built environment condition our behaviour, and how do the surroundings, in turn, shape themselves around the behaviour of the people who use the city? R+R walks develop new routines: They deregulate, rearrange, and create small scale, temporary moments of friction.

R+R approaches the city as hardware, on which different sorts of programs run at the same time: political, ideological, social, infrastructural, economic, historic and fictive software that is continuously read, copied, carried-out and rewritten by city developers, administrative systems and city-users.

Public friction



(Rue de Dilbeek, Brussels, 2006)

The walks I organised in Brussels in 2006 were strongly inspired by the specific character of the city, which is a complex and hybrid web of integrated systems, cultures and viewpoints, at a social, linguistic and administrative level. We accessed shortcuts, unofficial roads and other sorts of loopholes, and came across links between law, people, history, ideals, and the logic of the street.

Two years later, I developed another series of city walks for Z33 contemporary art centre in Hasselt, in which 'internet access' was a central theme. We tried to provide an insight into the technical protocols, codes and laws upon which this access is dependent, by comparing them with the rules and protocols surrounding the access to public spaces. Local regulations, European directives, cables, plugs, antennae, fused with sentiments, misconceptions, assumptions, creative solutions and artistic work.

The walkers wore shoes that were fitted with mini-cameras, microphones and sensors. The signals that the shoes recorded were broadcast to an exhibition space, where they were projected. In order to do this, we needed internet connections along the way. We asked local residents to provide us with their access details but in the contract that one makes with an internet provider, it is stated that the customer is not allowed to share his/her connection. In conversations it was clear that despite that passage in their contract, virtually no resident doubted their right to share their bandwidth with us. By having them temporarily wear the broadcast-shoes, they became broadcasters themselves. In this way, we wrote our own protocols without breaking the contract and made a connection, with the web and with the residents.

Many spaces that we call public, are actually not. Shopping malls, shopping streets, etc. are often private spaces that are publicly accessible. In Hasselt, for example, wifi coverage is more than 100%. Wifi is often proffered as 'open wifi', but it is actually a commercial service that's offered by the local monopolistic telephone company. Sometimes it is free to use, such as for its own clients, but it is never 'open' as in 'public' or 'open source'.

The law, as written code of the public space, is experienced as debatable the moment it stands to serve commerce. Whose law is it anyway? (.. do we think as modern Robin Hoods) If I hire broadband that I cannot fully use-up myself, why can I not share it with others who don't have broadband access? I pay the subscription, so isn't the space mine?

The R+R walks seek experimental solutions for questions like: how to expose fake public spaces as such and to deploy them to pursue other goals? How to step outside of the commercial paradigm without immediately becoming absorbed by it again, without becoming a plug-in of the same system that you criticise?



(Copy & Design shop, Badderijstraat, Hasselt, 2008)

The local copy shop, that printed the promotional material for the project, was one of the neighbourhood contact points we used for the required internet connection. We fixed an ethernet cable to the inside of their letterbox. During the evening walks, when the shopkeeper went home, I could pull out the cable and stick it into the laptop.



(Essenhof Cemetery, Dordrecht, 2005)

In 2005 I worked on the walk *Dood gaan we allemaal (we will all die)* in the Dutch city of Dordrecht. In the weeks prior to the walk I asked the people at the local cemetery about the daily activities they carried-out there. Recordings of their stories were audible during the final walk.

A cemetery is an accessible place for the public that consists of individually hired private plots that are cared for by the next of kin. In the Netherlands these plots often comprise of a gravestone surrounded by

a miniature garden. A city for the dead, but maintained by the living as a metaphor for the connection between place and identity. By taking some time out to maintain the grave, place flowers, set it up in a personal way, there remains space for the deceased person in the lives of those left behind.

New Routines

Not long thereafter I made 'Goed jaar, Slecht jaar' (Good year, Bad year): a conceptual work that is for hire at the Artotheek in Rotterdam. The work is intended for one person, who gets to use it for two years. A lessee hires two empty calendar notepads. He/she is asked to make two notes each day of the year in which he/she has hired the calendar: on the 'Good year' pad the best moment of the day is described and on the 'Bad year' pad, the worst experience.

This creates a diary with memories of the 365 positive and 365 negative moments of the year. After a year, the notepads are bound and returned to the lessee as a tear-off calendar. Each day of the subsequent year, the lessee tears-off a 'best' and a 'worst' calendar day. He/she is thereby transported in a slow-motion film, through very specific memories, each of which is exactly one year old.

A girl of 14 used it as a diary, a pregnant woman noted the daily changes that she experienced during this special period. A businessman brought back the work after a number of months and said that he could no longer tolerate the daily realisation that there are no good moments in his life to describe. 'We will all die' and 'Good year, Bad year' were important for further developing my ideas around working with routines as an artistic element.

Deregulating associations

When I am preparing an urban intervention I always think I set about my work intuitively. But my partner sees patterns: I am impatient and nervous, don't know how to proceed, each meeting with the commissioner makes it worse. Landing on location changes that: There are small triggers that provoke a story; a neighbourhood is coherent, there are connections, issues that are specific to that place. I need to discover them and piece them together.

The trick is often: Do not take a meta-position. Try not to retain an overview. So I launch myself into the neighbourhood. I hang around, buy a sandwich, tell the baker what I do: something experimental with art that will result in a new view of the neighbourhood. People are curious: this is their neighbourhood, what is going to happen? Often they do not even need to think twice, and participate.

I use the banal word 'city walk' on purpose. The term lends us (performative urban interventionists) the cover and camouflage that allows us to experiment discreetly and anonymously with an alternative treatment of the city's toolkit. Disguised as neutral outsiders, as city tourists, we tinker with the nuts and bolts that hold the urban fabric together.

Participants in an R+R walk are not passive viewers. We make a collective work as we wander along. My role as artist consists of the initiating of a narrative, of a coherent route or method, the construction of a context within which the walk is defined. I devise the game, which cannot be played without others. In this sense the walks are 'collectively executed scripts' rather than derivations, meanderings or city explorations.



(City centre, Ghent, 2009)



A group of people stands at the entrance to a fashion boutique. They are wearing green transparent antennae that they wave around in front of the detector that's inside the door opening. The antennae scan the electromagnetic field surrounding the entrance, a portable amplifier converts it into grinding, whining, rhythmic, pumping electronic sound. In the morning the participants built their own Electromagnetic Field antennae to their own design. Together they form an 'EMF orchestra' that uses the available EMF fields in the streets of Ghent as input for an improvised composition. Trams, cash machines, high tension electricity sub-stations, mobile telephones ... wherever the group uses their antennae, the 50 megahertz buzzing drone that is produced by electric devices, forms the backbone of the dissonant city symphony.

Strategy of the stumbling block

During the R+R walks, there arise, in different ways, urban stutterings, artificial delays, hiccups, which disrupt the smooth urban flow and render the underlying technologies and processes palpable. Whilst wandering along, R+R attempts to locate and open-up parts of the source code of a city. It studies these through performative exercises. A particular, unaltered, rewritten version of this code is then carried-out and, if possible, implemented on location. By wearing clumsy shoes, by stomping on the usual duration of urban activity, by organising displacements in time, space, genre, rhythm, place, the walkers create small frictional moments of 'realisation'.



(R+R, Hasselt, 2008)

The city-cyborgs advance slowly, with their open source DIY technology-guts hanging out; they avoid the beaten track, and distrust ordinary environments. With their soles rubbing against the pavement, the technology breaks-down and occasionally needs repairing en route.

The space that opens up through the performative R+R urban urban exercises, offers room for a new type of publicness. Not that of consensus, mass celebration and homogenous beliefs, but a public space in which doubt exists as an investigating, productive power. A space in which experiment enters the battle with ingrained collective habits, in which disruption, disturbance and detours detect and exploit in-between spaces, in which difference of opinion and diversity make it interesting to exchange experiences with others.

Peter Westenberg is a visual artist working in film, video and urban intervention. He is a core member of Constant, a Brussels-based organisation for art and media, active since 1997 in the areas of feminism, copyright alternatives and networking. Between 2002 and 2004 he led the public video workplace 'Uit+Thuis'. He taught at ArtEZ in Arnhem, Piet Zwart Institute for Fine Arts in Rotterdam, and has shown his work in exhibitions and festivals including: Impakt, Argos, Witte de With, Viper, VideoEx, IFFR, and the Dutch Film Festival.

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