Chapter 37

Walking and Performing ''the City'': A Melbourne Chronicle

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''The street level is dead space. . . . It is only a means of passage to the interior'' – summed up Richard Sennet, two decades ago, his analysis of the most impressive and spectacular urban developments of his time, ushering in the new era of the post-modern metropolis.

Bauman 1994: 148–9

Today's action is, after all, different: it is, mostly, about *passing* from here to there, as fast as one can manage, preferably without stopping, better still without looking around. Beautiful passers-by hide inside automobiles with tinted windows. Those still on the pavement are waiters and sellers at best, but more often dangerous people pure and simple: layabouts, beggars, homeless conscience-soilers, drug pushers, pickpockets, muggers, child molesters and rapists waiting for the prey. To the innocent who had to leave for a moment the wheeled security of automobiles, or those others, still thinking of themselves as innocent, who cannot afford that security at all, street [sic] is more a jungle than the theater. One goes there because one must. A site fraught with risks, not chances; not meant for gentlemen of leisure, and certainly not for the faint-hearted among them. The street is the ''out there'' from which one hides, at home or inside the automobile, behind security locks and burglar alarms.

Bauman 1994: 148

Perhaps it's the fear that Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman are right that drives the City of Melbourne to host a regular International Arts Festival in which all and sundry (and especially those who can't afford the ticket prices of the undercover shows) are enticed out on to the streets of the central city with the offer of free entertainment – street theater, food stalls, fireworks, and displays. The tinted glass is wound down, automobiles, security locks and burglar alarms abandoned, respectables and "deviants" intermix and the luxuriously wide (automobile, or was it cart, determined) streets of Batman's Melbourne are reclaimed and enlivened becoming home, for a brief few weeks, to *flâneurs* and *flâneuses* momentarily released from their otherwise largely suburban experience.

It was during this short burst of urban self-consciousness that I ventured out with family in tow to "take in the sights/sites." Not, of course, without the usual generational trade-off: walking the streets and enjoying the ambience with a specific look-in on the Urban Dream Capsule – a group of five male performance artists locked up in a department store window for the duration of the Arts Festival – in return for a visit to a city movie complex to see *Independence Day* – the latest Parental Guidance-rated Hollywood blockbuster with a prerelease hype that had captured the eight- and ten-year-olds' interest enough to motivate a tenuous companionability. So it was that through an afternoon and evening I walked in a city experiencing it from the street, from the theater seat and from the street again – materiality and representation jostling for priority.

In recollecting this day two different stories of the city stand out in stark contrast. One is the prevalent narrative of urban decay, immanent doom, and civic destruction told once again in the filmic representation of North American cities in *Independence Day*. Picking up on the apocalyptic tone adopted by many contemporary commentators of the "postmodern city," the movie shows civil disorder, hysterical masses, and sexuality gone awry as a shadow is cast over the cancerous, "sprawling giantism" of late twentieth-century urbanism by huge alien cities hovering in the sky (Mumford 1961: 618). One by one, each earthly metropolis is engulfed in a fiery blast emanating from the airborne monstrous craft. The city streets that for some, such as Bauman, have already become uninhabitable (except by the layabouts, beggars, homeless, drug pushers, etc.) or for others, such as Michael Sorkin (1992) and Paul Virilio (1991) have been rendered obsolete by the dominance of the screen interface and the fiber-optic superhighway, are finally erased, decimated, and consumed by the alien's fireballs. The modern city as a physical presence is rendered irrelevant and the technologically mediated "posturban" age is upon us. The central characters, a cast of souls who regain their masculinity and/or morality in an all-American way through violence and the exercise of force, abandon the cities and flee – not to the traditional anti-urban utopia of a lush green rural Eden, but to a secret hypertechnical military installation buried deep under the dry brown desert.

As each set of events necessary to the blockbuster genre was roughly welded together, laughs of incredulity burst forth from the teenagers sitting behind us indicating that even they could tell that this was a stupid (but not therefore unentertaining) movie. What was so compelling for this *flâneur/se* trapped in its web by a necessary familial transaction was the movie's resonance with the familiar modernist morality tale that underpins much cultural commentary and discourse upon postmodern urbanism. As it is told and retold in movie or in social theory the story of an urban/moral order under threat, of accelerating mayhem in the streets, ultimate physical destruction, and rebirth of a technologically mediated social order in which the street is invalidated as a social space repeatedly constitutes and reinforces the power of deep-seated anti-urban sentiments that in turn inform so much of our urban experience and practice.

So what a shock to return to the street and to resume walking in a city in the throes of celebrating the urban. It was early evening and people were everywhere, milling around, not seemingly going anywhere, but being sociable, entertained, and present. Here was another, very different city story – space occupied, not ceded to a

narrative of despair or destruction. It is this other image that we want, in this chapter, to dwell upon and explore for its potential.

Walking (in) the City

The practice of walking and the reflection on urban walks contribute to a counter-discourse of the urban. This counter-discourse finds its power in relational opposition to those god's-eye conceptions of city form and changing structure that have been motivated by the modernist quest for lawful spatial order and captured by the organizing narrative of capitalist urbanization (Gibson-Graham 1996: ch. 4). Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Michel de Certeau among others have drawn upon this ambulatory counterpoint in their representations of the urban.

> The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmanner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. . . . The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped by fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other (de Certeau 1984: 93).

De Certeau invites us to walk in the city and to allow the "long poem of walking" to reveal and confuse what has been concealed and clarified by urban theory. Working against the "imaginary totalizations" produced by those who seek to render the city readable and therefore ultimately controllable, he encourages pedestrians to be producers of their own urban texts, to construct and occupy urban space inventively. Perhaps the metaphor of walking possesses the power to unsettle the narrative of (post)modern urban decay and civic disarray?

> This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing (Barthes 1982: 33–36).

As he meandered on foot through the (for him) "practically unclassified" streets of Tokyo guided only by impromptu drawings and gestures that elevated new ways of seeing and writing over old ways of speaking and reading, Barthes reflected that the "rational is merely one system among others" of knowing a place (1982: 33). His observations on Tokyo prompt us to challenge representations of a perceived coherence of the urban as embodied in the map, guide, telephone book, or indeed panopticon pronouncements on the "postmodern" (Western) city. Barthes writes of the trace left by the city in one's memories – of the feel of the pavement, the orientation of objects in space, the smells and tastes – its writing on/in you. And here he touches upon topics written about so lucidly by Benjamin: "autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection" (Benjamin 1978: 28).

In "A Berlin Chronicle" Benjamin (1978) describes his own introduction to the city, recollecting street images and associated emotions, school spaces, friendships of his childhood and youth, buildings, and happenings in context. His urban writings represent a denarrativized city – a city temporarily released from the discursive structures imposed by history and rationality. He celebrates distracted thought and absent-minded strolling, straying, hovering, daydreaming, and idling as bodily/intellectual practices which are counter and subversive to the notion of productivity. Walking for Benjamin is a practice of remembrance. Memory is the "medium of past experience" just as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. Benjamin validates the power of imaginary maps and alerts us to the chance that "valuable things" left "lying around" the streets might be found, like objects long forgotten in an attic, and incorporated into the individual's experience of walking/knowing (in) the city (1978: 20). He places value on these discarded, little used or seemingly unimportant urban activities and spaces that are rarely seen to hold significance in conventional urban discourse. For Benjamin to dig and dig again in the same and new places reveals "hidden treasures" lying buried deep in one's memory (1978: 24–6). At the same time the "art of straying" and losing oneself in the city enables the mind to be more receptive to deceased experiences flashed into the present by involuntary memories. Walking might be seen as an invitation to allow sudden flashes of illumination and chance stumblings across hidden treasures to reshape urban knowledge, possibly invigorating pro-urban sentiments and writing different scripts for the "postmodern city."

We are interested in the enabling potentialities of re-presenting the city from the street – from the perspective of the walker and the street inhabitant. The trope of walking offers us ways of representing the city and constituting contemporary urban experience that might unsettle both the anti-urban apocalypticism of much contemporary urban thinking and the preoccupation with spatial ordering that has channelled urban representations and experience into the constricting binarisms of public/private, home/street, residential/non-residential. It allows new spatializations of the city to emerge and loosens the hold of historicist narratives of restructuring and postmodern decay. The body is reintroduced to the urban, but not in its capacity to occupy at various times private/residential space or public/industrial or commercial space, or to move between point A and point B as commuter or householder intimately linked to the functioning of capitalist production or reproduction. The body is introduced as a sensual being – smelling, remembering, rhythmically moving – jostling with other bodies and in the process constituting active, perhaps multiple, urban subjectivities. The walker becomes lost, allows the city – street signs, bars, cafes, billboards, passers-by – to "speak" to her as does a bird call in the wild or a twig crackling under foot in a forest (Benjamin 1978: 8–9). The speech act of walking creates stories, invents spaces, and opens up the city through its capacity to produce "anti-texts" within the text. The ambulatory occupation of urban space permits a myriad of unrealized possibilities to surface, triggering emotions and feelings that may lie dormant in many people.

The invitation to stroll, daydream, look about, and wander aimlessly through city space was offered to Melburnians during their International Arts Festival. Precisely because the city itself often appears in contemporary texts as an outmoded fragment or ruin of its former self, the strategy of enticing people on to the streets during the

festival could be read as a recognition of the real abandonment of public civic space and therefore as a rearguard action by the City, or it could be seen as an intervention that operated completely outside this discourse of despair. We prefer the latter reading because on the day that our chronicle documents, flashes of illumination emanating from a boxed treasure suggested that walking in the city is an activity that turns up even greater possibilities for destabilization and reenchantment than at the time that Benjamin was writing.

Performing (in) the City

In a world where privacy is vanishing, come see your future. For sixteen days of the Festival, five of Melbourne's street performers will be hermetically sealed behind the glass walls of Myer's Bourke Street Windows! . . . these intrepid art-stronauts will translocate their entire lives to the heart of the city in a 24 hour a day, non-stop, incubation event. Without a curtain in sight. Watch them eat, sleep, entertain, perform – in our very own biosphere experiment that is at the cutting edge of performance art.

Melbourne Festival Guide 1996: 38

In a flash of recognition and then misrecognition it becomes clear that the Myer department store windows – home every Christmas to a wondrous scene of moving mechanical gnomes, fairies, elves and assorted fairy story characters – is occupied by grown living men! The crowd gathered in front of the windows is not mainly kids and their Christmas-shopping parents, but Melburnians of all ages and backgrounds gathered to observe the "Myersphere experiment." When we push our way to the front of the crowd it is "getting-ready-for-bed" time. Some of the five bald men are in their striped pyjamas – others are still in their day suits. One is in the window/room that contains the bathroom basin, shower (with partial screen) and exercise equipment, cleaning his teeth. He turns round to the crowd, my son bares his teeth and has them scrubbed – albeit through the "pane of separation" (Kermond 1996). The smudge of toothpaste on the inside surface remains in place all evening – a trace of the communicative act.

The Urban Dream Capsule (UDC) took the 1996 Melbourne Festival by surprise. By the time the art-stronauts (Andrew Morrish, Bruce Naylor, Nick Papas, Neil Thomas, and David Wells) emerged after 16 days of sealed isolation in the four adjoining shop windows, an estimated 200,000 people had viewed them for varying lengths of time. Even more had contacted them via fax, telephone, and email. At any time of day or night the crowd outside the windows never seemed to drop below 50. Sometimes it was cast in the subject position of "audience" to be "entertained" by the "elaborate synchronised ritualisation of everyday activities" (shaving heads in the morning, preparing meals, showering and preparing for bed). "People are transfixed by the spectacle, bonded by a sneaky sense of voyeurism coupled with outright fascination" (Scott-Norman 1996).

At other times members of the crowd actively communicated with the performers. On one occasion two people shouted through the glass to Neil Thomas (the mastermind of the performance), "We've got a house-warming present for you." They proceeded to attach a very small plant, perhaps a sweet pea, in a tiny square

Figure 37.1 Art-stronaut Andrew Morrish has his daily headshave under the watchful eye of early morning shoppers (photo: Angela Wiley; from *The Age*, October 19, 1996)

pot about a metre from the ground. Thomas looked truly delighted. He wrote a sign which read "Please take care of our garden" and attached it to the inside of the window. Not long after someone else watered it. "The experience has been full of surprises, says Thomas. People turning up regularly with notepads to write messages on; people concerned about whether the capsulites were eating and sleeping enough; big burly guys, the type Thomas says don't usually go in for performance art, getting a charge out of the experience" (Schembri 1996b).

Partially conceived as an exposé of the increased technological surveillance of urban lives and the loss of privacy, the Myersphere experiment turned the disciplinary power of panopticon vision into a game. The UDC transformed a common tactic of the urban marginalized – occupation and performance – into an acceptable art form. Just as teenagers entertain themselves by acting up for the security cameras strategically placed in shopping malls and railroad stations, the capsulites acted up 24 hours a day under the constant gaze of countless Big Brothers. Out of harsh coldblooded scrutiny and visual invasion, those under surveillance generated love, humor, and identification.

Perhaps the potential for this inversion to take off as a model for urban interaction was infectious. When early the next year students of the city campus of RMIT University of Technology occupied the administration building for 19 days to protest the introduction of fee-paying courses, the television screen replaced the glass of the Myer store window. Media coverage of the sit-in produced images of recognition and resonance with the previous year's public occupation. The televised scenes of

students on the second floor receiving food and supplies on a rope paralleled the UDC deliveries of food through their "backstage" door. Their window performances were more raucous and less polished, but nevertheless served to highlight issues of resources and survival for young people.

The languages of science and cyberspace were harnessed in the promotion of the UDC. The performers were scientific experimental subjects – their everyday life, the object of scientific observation by the crowd cast here as "researchers." They in turn cast themselves as scientific observers of the crowd: "There's a score where we imagine that we're in an alien bathysphere that has landed in Myer and we're there to observe. So it's like we're at the bottom of the sea – the sealife is floating by and we're taking notes" (cited in Schembri 1996a). And as experimental scientists testing out the usefulness of the Internet as a performance aid: "I don't know if this is good to say, but being honest, part of this thing was to check out whether the Internet was an interesting form of communication, and I just don't think it is. If you want to get real, come down and see the show. You can't beat that" (cited in Schembri 1996b).

As authentic scientists, the five bald men were open to discovery. In representational or naturalistic theater actors perform with a fictional "fourth wall" between them and the audience – while the audience sees the actors, the actors appear not to see the audience (McGaw 1980: 141; Whitmore 1994: 60). Street performers, performance artists, and comedians often tilt at this convention moving through this fictional wall to variously shock and engage. In accordance with their exploratory mission, the UDC placed themselves behind an actual fourth wall and discovered that it proved to be quite porous. They found that the plate-glass window, described by Richard Sennett in terms of its "strong power of isolation" and its ability to divide the "physical senses" through the way it insulates those inside "from sound and touch and other human beings" outside (1990: 109), was indeed permeable. Sociality could cross the boundary, it could osmose through the tinted glass and transform scientific practice into playful intercourse. And in this experiment, even this paneful communication was more compelling than the cyberspace variety.

For many, the UDC was a treasure to be stumbled over, providing a fleeting interchange and welcome laugh in an otherwise impersonal space. For us it provides inspiration for thinking the city outside the hegemonic frames of inherited urban theory. We are not only interested in the ways in which it worked to unsettle prevalent urban "stories" such as that of the diminished privacy and increased technological surveillance of contemporary urban life. We are also intrigued with the way in which it destabilized binary modes of thinking the city and in the process helped to interpellate and constitute very different urban subjects. In bringing the private, domestic realm on to the streets this "public exposition of the mundane" (*The Age*, Nov 5, 1996, editorial) took just a little step further than do TV soapies, docudramas like *Sylvania Waters*, and infotainment shows such as *Burke's Backyard* and *The Home Show* toward demystifying the private and rendering the practice of individual self-management a public "entertainment." The "audience" admired the apartment's decor and were concerned that the art-stronauts were getting enough to eat, enough sleep, and were cleaning their teeth before they went to bed.

At the same time the very act of living on the street in Melbourne's Central Business District in an environment that dripped of affluence (a brightly lit interior with all the mod-cons, comfortable beds, paintings on the wall, a well-stacked

Figure 37.2 In their "living room" the Urban Dream Capsule art-stronauts perform for a Festival audience (photo: Penny Stephens; from *Sunday Age*, November 3, 1996)

refrigerator) spoke to two current political concerns – the homeless and the Postcode 3000 invasion. Among the audience were, indeed, real street inhabitors, people who through force of circumstance and sometimes inclination actually do live on the streets of Melbourne. And rubbing shoulders with them, no doubt, were the new residents of modern apartment blocks and office conversions who have been actively recruited by the City to move into Postcode 3000 to "revitalize" the urban center (and perhaps constitute a force to agitate for the clean-up of street people in the area). For the homeless and homed to comfortably share the same space and stand, for a nanosecond at least, as one in a space that is usually premised on the exclusion of "undesirables" is a rare experience. For a moment, imaginary battle lines between "illegitimate" occupants and the "legitimate" residents might have been forgotten in the interpellation of all concerned as a heterogeneous "we." Perhaps such a collective positioning of the performers and crowd would have stirred the question as to why the ethic of care that was being actively generated for the UDC dwellers might not extend to those who actually live on the streets?

Certainly we need not ignore the extent to which the UDC inhabitants, unlike people living on the streets, were permitted to dwell in city space *because* they were performers. Nor need we overlook the ways in which elements of the performance appeared as a spectacle of consumption that worked to advertise the store and its wares – particularly as, following the UDC's success, the window space continued to be used as a live advertising space exhibiting anything from models in underwear to

cooking demonstrations. But to recognize the existence of these forces does not annul the alternative power and challenging nature of the performance.

In some small way the UDC enabled a degree of sustained interaction over 16 days that had the capacity to alter the way the city is experienced and thought. In observing this interaction, many people appeared to possess a sense of contentment in being involved, even if it was simply watching others in their communication with members of the UDC. People owned the UDC, participated in the performance, and permeated its glassed boundary. As they became attached to the UDC, the city became more inhabitable. By openly inhabiting the uninhabitable, the UDC challenged the imagined fixed spatiality of the domicile upon which the city is dependent. It troubled the perceived solidity of public/private and home/street boundaries. Perhaps as a consequence of the performance, the city appeared less of a place to be wary and more of a place to belong or occupy.

"Street theater and freak shows, [Thomas] said, have strong parallels" (Kermond 1996). Certainly the UDC was a freak occurrence, a flash of intense brilliance in an already full-with-brilliance International Arts Festival. For any one of the 200,000 visitors to the site an illumination of very ordinary acts rendered extraordinary was produced. Straying past this city site people were captured and drawn into its excess, energy, and unknowability. By the end of the third day the performers also stumbled across this secret: "Yesterday we had our first serious meeting, expressing concerns about burn-out, over-excitement, disorganisation. Then all promptly performed like maniacs for eight hours without stop. It's not really tiring. It's inspiring. The audience fuels our energies as we fuel theirs. Behind the window, it's performer's heaven" (Thomas 1996).

The overexcitement and stimulation of the city is something that urban commentators from Simmel on have observed and been wary of. In the quest for order, control, and a homogeneous conception of civility such subversive emotions and affects have often been deemed dangerous. Perhaps now, however, this (feminized) energy is less threatening? As political theorists cast around for new postmodern models of citizenship such as Iris Marion Young's "the being together of strangers" (1990: 232) and Alphonso Lingis's "the community of those who have nothing in common" (1994) we can see here a glimpse of a new civility of excess. Interpellated as communicators across technology, physical barriers, social and cultural difference, the crowd and the UDC modelled new forms of address and care: "And the biggest surprise? 'What this show has done is put people in a space where they're very beautiful,' Thomas says in the draped-off area behind the capsule (where the toilet is). 'People are really smiling and they're very loving. It's just brought out that side'" (Schembri 1996b: B10). "'People come along and do the most amazing drawings for us,' he says. 'There's this incredible sense of comradeship and love and care that comes through the windows, and also through the e-mail and the fax – and that's like 'Wow! I don't mind seeing that'" (Schembri 1996b).

Conclusion

The poetics of walking permits encounters with city fragments and seemingly "unimportant" urban activities – the practices of urbanism that are not neatly folded into forceful stories of capitalist urbanization, social polarization, urban

consolidation, and dead city syndrome. How are we to think of these entertaining but ultimately "unimportant" experiences? One way is to critically address the discourse which discursively "discards" these urban treasures placing them in a position of marginality on the urban terrain. In the face of the alien spaceships in *Independence Day* urban street performances appear quixotic, small, and ineffectual. Similarly, in the face of apocalyptic pronouncements on the state of cities and city life "under late or postmodern capitalism" the transformative potential of walking and performing appears weak, powerless, and foolish. But these are representations all.

In the distracted state of watching and interacting with the UDC perhaps the shock defense of urban fear and alienation produced by dominant urban narratives was pierced in many of the UDC's diverse audience? Perhaps the "rhetoric of walking" allowed new conversations to begin between urban subjects and a rewriting of the urban text to commence? It was not only the speech/performance acts of the UDC that confronted and sidestepped dominant images of the city, but also the feelings and speech that flowed on the footpath between the walkers momentarily arrested by the brilliance of what caught their eyes. Straying in city space exposed walkers to the things that are concealed by the concept city of urban planning and theory. Stories such as those that can be composed around the UDC have the power to rewrite the city. They can contribute to a vision of the city as a site of potentiality, not imminent destruction; of civic sensibility as caring of others, not competitively self-interested; of urban structures as permeable and diverse, not rigid and limited and of urban narratives that lean toward enabling futures, not nostalgic pasts.

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