



Creative Intervention

An Artful Civic Disruption in Vancouver

CALEB JOHNSTON

Newcastle University, England

Introduction

In 2011, I curated *Counter Mapping*, an interdisciplinary contemporary arts exhibition showcased in Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre (Figure 1). The exhibition was organized as part of the city's annual PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, whose programming that year was arranged around the curatorial theme of Happy Birthday Teenage City!, celebrating Vancouver's quasiquicentennial anniversary. *Counter Mapping* brought together the work of 17 professional Vancouver artists from varied creative practices: video, photography, textiles, soundscape and installation. It was an ambitious endeavor, the central impetus of which was to bring together creative work that (in some way) questioned and disrupted the routines and gestures, routes and structures of daily urban life.¹



Figure 1. Exhibition gallery (Photo: Tim Matheson)

¹ See www.calebjohnston.ca/counter-mapping/.

Correspondence Address: Caleb Johnston, School of Geography, Politics & Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK NE1 7RU; Email: caleb.johnston@ncl.ac.uk



Curation began with two guiding questions. How might we produce and circulate a poetic and political cartography? And how might creativity and acts of imagination engage and take up questions and issues of social justice? This questioning seemed especially pertinent within the context of Vancouver at that time (and beyond). The city was then reeling in the aftermath of hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, drunk on the promise of the grand spectacle. The event had come with a staggering cost, an overall price tag of seven billion dollars, with the government having spent nearly one billion on an elaborate security apparatus. Social housing had been appropriated, the downtown area “cleaned up,” and many (rightfully) feared that the spectacle would lead to yet another round of hyper real estate speculation in a city already ravaged by successive decades of whole-scale gentrification. At the same time, in the aftermath, plenty of government cash appeared to be sloshing around to ensure the “cultural legacy” of the Games, and we – as savvy artists – were keen to press the advantage while the good times lasted.

The resulting collection drawn together for *Counter Mapping* was as varied as it was innovative, and the exhibition’s curatorial vision was steered by the well-worn admonishment that everyday life is often the setting for critical, subversive – even revolutionary – thought and action. It looked to Doreen Massey’s (2005) concern that all too often city space remains rendered static and inert, a container for action; what is needed, she argues, is greater attention placed on the dramatic possibilities of “spatial disruptions” and the underlying agency afforded and made possible in and through the crisscrossing and collision of ideas, bodies and experiences.

This is not the place for a lengthy theoretical exposé. Rather, here I present *Downtown Ambassador*, one example drawn from the exhibition that illustrates a creative, critical engagement with the city. It speaks to the possibilities of creative infiltration, disrupting everyday life, and draws us into imaginative ways of contesting and unsettling the urban. The work simultaneously offers a compelling site wherein visual-performance art enters directly into a material politics and the pursuit of social justice in rather surprising and unexpected ways.

Infiltration and Urban Camouflage

Exhibited as a 12-minute video installation framed by twin LCD TV screens and glass vitrine encasing a red uniform (Figure 2), *Downtown Ambassador* was a site-specific performance-based project that began with artist Jamie Hilder’s participation in the 2006 World Urban Forum in Vancouver. He emerged from the Forum determined to move away from textual representations of the city in order to explore and animate how the city is (re)produced materially within everyday life. “The idea was if you could write a city”, he suggests, “then you could write back against a city in

the same way, recuperate that type of figure as a chronicler of the city as somebody writing a counter narrative.”



Figure 2. DTA Uniform (Photo: Jamie Hilder)

As a hybrid academic-visual-performance artist, Hilder was keen to investigate how his practice might be mobilized to disrupt and recuperate the histories that police the ways in which Vancouver is narrated, circulated and performed. Eager to re-appropriate the “chronicling” of the urban, Hilder focused his sights on inhabiting one particular figure, that of the Downtown Ambassador (DTA). Founded in 2000 as a self-described “community patrol,” the DTAs are a private “hospitality” force funded by the Downtown Business Improvement Association (DVBIA) and operated by Genesis Security, one of British Columbia’s largest security companies.² DTAs are put to work to watch over private properties, as well as report on a range of transgressions: instances of drug use, graffiti and panhandling. These activities get recorded and mapped on the Personal Digital Assistants that DTAs carry as they patrol city streets. Their mapping has been used by the DVBIA to lobby municipal government for new policing measures and security initiatives. The DTAs have been deployed on the front line of gentrification, especially in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, and have been accused by civil rights organizations of forcibly removing “undesirables” (through various forms of coercion) from public and private spaces.

² See www.downtownvancouver.net/about/activities-of-the-dvbia/downtown-ambassadors.

“So the idea was to do the job of the Downtown Ambassadors,” describes Hilder, “but do it badly, which means, you don’t talk to homeless people, but talk to tourists. And you make them feel uncomfortable... Or you talk to citizens and you make them uncomfortable about what happens in the city.” Hilder initiated a covert performance, which first involved infiltrating the Downtown Ambassadors program. He applied for a job and was asked to attend an interview, before which he had to undergo a two-week training course with Genesis Security; training which included role-playing exercises, rehearsing various street encounters, instruction in the rigors of incident reporting, report writing, as well as training in safety and crime prevention techniques. He received detailed instruction in the tactical strategies and overall objectives of the DTA program, namely to address “quality of life” issues such as panhandling, litter, theft, informal vending, and graffiti. Throughout, Hilder scripted a field journal that detailed the security training, and having successfully navigated security exercises and after two subsequent interviews, Hilder was hired as an Ambassador. Shortly thereafter, equipped with a two-way radio, digital camera, maps, hat and uniform, he hit the streets.

His employment was short lived; Hilder soon quit but not before having an exact copy of his DTA uniform replicated by a local tailor. His employment with Genesis Security was just a beginning, of sorts, and he quickly began plotting sites in the city where he would (re)appear as an un-sanctioned Ambassador. He planned to covertly videotape these performances, with conversations with the public discreetly audio recorded with a hidden lapel microphone. And yet, Hilder’s preliminary foray into the streets as a covert Ambassador was an admitted failure:

I did a day of filming. I started filming at the Waterfront Station. And I stood outside and didn’t have anything to say to anyone, right? I didn’t have an opening line. Nobody came up to me to talk, and I felt that I didn’t have enough research to speak confidently on the space... It went badly.

Not only did the initial performance go poorly but the whole project nearly collapsed during his first day at Waterfront Station, located in the heart of Vancouver’s historic Gastown area:

I saw an Ambassador on the other side of the street. And then I saw him walk back towards me on my side, with two other Ambassadors. And they shouted, ‘Hey! Ambassador!’ And then I turned on my heels and walked, and had to run back through Waterfront Station and up some stairs, and over an overpass... I recognized them, I did my training with them, so they would have blown the whole project. At that point, I wasn’t sure about the legality of what I was doing. I was pretty sure it wasn’t a felony, but I thought it could be mischief or something like that.

Rattled but unscathed from his close encounter, Hilder retreated, resolute to hone the project's intent and methodology. He busied himself with further research in order to gain greater familiarity with the particular histories of specific sites in the city. He determined the parameters of the engagement. He would not initiate conversation with bystanders; they would have to first ask him a question. And he determined that he would stage himself and anchor his interventions at specific sites: the totem poles and Prospect Point in Stanley Park, the steam clock in Gastown, and along the sea shore at the *Ingnukshuk* in English Bay. These sites were not incidental, and were chosen in order to break silence and recuperate the absence of Vancouver's histories of colonialism and homophobic violence, the appropriation and aestheticization of aboriginal iconography, the commodification of frontierism, and the violence enacted by aggressive programs of urban renewal and the securitization of public space. These performative interventions were designed to circulate new stories, to bring greater visibility to often buried histories and struggles not widely circulated in the sanctioned narratives of the city, and his appearance as a DTA was meant to lend authority to this re-scripting. With his performances covertly video and audio recorded, Hilder spent four days in the summer of 2009 patrolling the city as a DTA agent.



Figure 3. Patrolling the city (Photo: Jamie Hilder)

Unruly Performances

Hilder's experiment ended dramatically during a performance in Gastown:

[A]nother Ambassador came up, somebody that I had trained with, and saw me in uniform and was instantly aggressive and said, 'What are you doing?' And I said, 'I'm a volunteer Ambassador.' And he said, 'We don't have those. It's illegal for you to be in this outfit. This is the copyright outfit or uniform of Genesis Security and the Downtown Ambassador program.' And I said, 'Can you quote me the law on that?' Because at this point, I had consulted a lawyer who told me that I would be doing nothing illegal. And I consulted a copyright lawyer who said I was breaking copyright but I would have had to profit from the project for them to win any damages. So I was pretty confident that I was, probably over confident, that I was doing nothing wrong. And so I came off kind of, kind of calm and even cocky and arrogant, saying, 'I'm doing a performance piece. I'm giving people, visiting Vancouver, histories that the DVBA wouldn't necessarily want them to know'.

The ruse was up. With his cover blown, Genesis Security resorted to calling the Vancouver Police to the scene of the crime.

The police came and ... 'What's going on here?' And I told them I was doing a performance and told them my name. And they, 'Why are you doing this?' I was like, 'You know I wanted to intervene in the spectacle of the city and to reshape it. And it's a performance. It's for art' ... One other constable went to the trunk of the car, at the command of the arresting officer, pulled out a big book, which was the Canadian Criminal Code, and they spent about 15 minutes just flipping through the Canadian Criminal Code. I guess trying to find out what they could arrest me for, like what I was doing wrong. And so they get out of the car, and they say, 'Well Mr. Hilder, I'm not a big art guy, you know, I don't know exactly what's going on here, but I'll tell you what we're going to do... We're going to slap the cuffs on you and take you to jail.' And I was shocked. And they said, 'We know you're not a bad guy. We know for instance that you go to Stanford University. And if you were to be arrested, it would go on your record, you couldn't travel. We're not necessarily interested in doing that. But this is what we're going to do, we're going to take you to jail.' And so I was a little nervous.

Hidden across the road, Hilder's video camera continued to document the "performance" that had – of a sudden – morphed into an arrest. "I was like, 'Are you sure? because I got legal advice before I did this project.' And he was like, 'Yeah, impersonation with intent to deceive, it's a law. I just looked it up.' And I was, at this point, fuck! And I said, 'Well, I guess I got some bad legal advice.'" Detained on suspicion of impersonation, it was an unexpected turn for the worse. Hilder was handcuffed and marched through the downtown eastside to the central police station. He was then body searched, and after being briefly held in custody, was released without charge.

And yet, Hilder's action did not end on the threshold of the Vancouver Police department. In the events leading into his public performances, he had had a chance encounter with an activist who informed him that in July 2008, Pivot Legal Society,³ in partnership with the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), had filed a legal complaint against the DVBA and its Ambassador program in the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal (BCHRT) – an independent, quasi-judicial body empowered to mediate and rule on claimed human rights violations. Pivot's complaint was premised on alleged human rights abuses enacted by the DTAs and their documented harassment of the homeless or hard-to-house people in Vancouver's downtown eastside.

The litigation represented the latest chapter in Pivot's ongoing legal action that was taking place within an aggressive policy and security apparatus instituted in British Columbia in advance of Vancouver hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. The action was equally situated within the context of intensifying gentrification in the city's downtown eastside, which has resulted in the ever greater presence of private security personnel in the area, as well as heightened police activity and surveillance measures (of which the DTA program is but one example). Pivot alleged that the DTAs had for years been intimidating and forcibly removing the homeless and panhandlers from public streets and alleyways. While the homeless are not specifically safeguarded by human rights legislation in British Columbia, VANDU and Pivot argued that the practices of the DTA (as a private security force) were discriminatory given that the hard-to-house are disproportionately represented by Indigenous people and/or those living with a disability, which are populations protected under the British Columbia Human Rights Code.

Hilder had landed unexpectedly in full-blown legal action. It was a serendipitous encounter wherein art fused with social justice activism. Based on his undercover training with Genesis Security, Hilder was deposed by Pivot lawyers and his testimony was submitted as an affidavit detailing how the forced removal of "undesirables" was standard practice advocated by the DTA program. "[I]t was my testimony", argues Hilder, "about the use of the term 'removals', you know, the practice of the Ambassadors bragging about how many removals they had done, that constituted evidence for this practice of harassment." Critically, the field journal that he had scripted during his security induction was entered as material evidence, and proved important in Pivot's complaint proceeding to a full hearing in the BCHRT, to which Hilder was called as a material witness and testified for three hours in public tribunal. Taking nearly three years to make its way through legal proceedings, the BCHRT, citing a lack

³ Pivot Legal Society is an advocacy organization based in Vancouver's downtown eastside. It is committed "to challenging laws and policies that undermine the dignity of those most on the margins or that intensify poverty and social exclusion" (see www.pivotlegal.org/).

of evidence, dismissed Pivot and VANDU's complaint against the DVBLA in 2011.

Art, City, Social Justice

Counter Mapping received two weeks of exhibition in Vancouver. It was free and accessible to multiple publics; in fact, I was keen to work in the Roundhouse precisely because it is a lively hub of community activity in the city's downtown area. In January 2011, hundreds of people moved through the exhibition space to experience an array of assembled works: faculty and students from the Emily Carr University of Art + Design; researchers from the British Columbia Women's Hospital; Chinese seniors perusing art after games of Mahjong; cultural planners from City Hall; children after their karate classes; arty PuSh festival audiences; the media, artists and many others. It is hard to say what effect the exhibition may or may not have had for these diverse publics. In one register, it was conceived as a "reflective space. A space of possibility," following Ian Cook (2000, p. 342), "Where connections can be seen. Felt. Thought Through. Perceptions that can make a difference. Maybe. Somehow."

Of course, there is nothing new about artists getting spatial and moving well beyond the studio or theatre, gallery or workshop to engage the urban. Alastair Bonnet (1992, p. 77) reminds us that for the *avant-garde*, the everyday city has long offered a site for creative and political intervention, with the arts often serving as a means to "think about and engage physically with the possibilities of creating a new and radically stimulating kind of city." Situated at the intersection between the political and poetic, the here and not-yet-there, the works assembled for *Counter Mapping* sought to amplify rebellious views of and from within the everyday city. We looked to occupy a space that David Pinder (1996, p. 421) describes as an oscillation between "actuality and the imaginary; between what exists and what might exist, and between the dead weight of past urbanism... and the possible for a new urbanism."

This short reflection has offered *Downtown Ambassador* as one compelling example gleaned from the exhibition that staged a creative engagement with the urban. As a performance-based visual art installation, it worked to bring to life largely untold accounts and histories that pushed back. It appropriated the authority of one particular urban storyteller, a fused tour guide/private security guard. Hilder's covert presence in city streets may have been fleeting but surely the project had effects that resonated well beyond its performed public disruptions. It became enmeshed in a broader struggle enacted upon a very different kind of stage, a site wherein art and politics converged in the pursuit of social justice. No doubt Hilder's creative intervention was rendered all the more meaningful by its contribution to a campaign contesting everyday violence.

You can view Hilder's video installation of *Downtown Ambassador* here: <http://jamiehilder.com/ambassador.html>.

References

- Bonnett, A. (1992) Art, ideology, and everyday space: Subversive tendencies from Dada to postmodernism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 10(1), 69-86.
- Cook, I. (2000) Social sculpture and connective aesthetics: Shelley Sacks's 'Exchange Values'. *Cultural Geographies*, 7(3), 337-343.
- Massey, D. (2005) *For space*. London: Sage.
- Pinder, D. (1996) Subverting cartography: The situationists and maps of the city. *Environment and Planning A*, 28, 405-427.