

STREET LIFE

Andrew Spyrou goes in search
of the Urban Interruptionists

by Andrew Spyrou



Brad Downey, *Wedging*, 2011. Installation with brooms, Grottaglie, Italy.
In collaboration with Akay, image courtesy of the artist.

Artists working within the Urban Interruptionist movement use and react to urban environments, commenting on the apparent necessity of living in cities and the ways that it consciously and unconsciously affects its inhabitants. The artists whose work is documented in the following pages are interested in highlighting our neglect of conscious movement: arguably, the way we move around cities has become automatic and unimaginative – we are more concerned with destination, less with the process of movement to that destination.

Some of these artists have taken it upon themselves to intervene in our daily travel, making us more aware of our surroundings and encouraging us to ‘know the world’, so that we may then understand and know ourselves. Others take a more anti-authoritarian attitude, wanting to subvert the systems that attempt to control urban citizens. The art of the Urban Interruptionists enhances the experience of the outdoors, highlighting the daily ritual illumination of our movements across the liminal zones between indoor spaces.

The City and Creative Encouragement

Movements within cities have changed over time, but across millennia the city has remained a force to affect those within it. Brad Downey, perhaps the best-recognized artist working within this segment of Urban Interruptionism, tells me that when he first started creating art he was very conscious of the existence of an audience: ‘I believed that if you wanted people to look at things and understand them you had to relate these objects to experiences the people were going through.’ For Downey, however, this distinction between the city and the audience became blurred: ‘The city suddenly becomes the people living in it. It was about somehow turning the inanimate objects into people.’ This transformation is best viewed in pieces like *Barricade*, where Downey positioned many hundreds of streetworkers’ signs in a Klagenfurt street, creating the impression of an army of obstacles marching towards unwitting passersby, or *Wedging*, where everyday broomsticks were casually positioned to block off a pedestrian alleyway.

In a world where grid systems are utilised to neutralise our environment, denying us the variety we deserve, and straying from the ideal Roman grid which sought to encourage rationality and complexity within civilized life, art can interrupt and upset the systems, drawing us away from an apparently forced neutralisation towards an intellectual curiosity. The sociologist and urban theorist Richard Sennett has said that the more we care about what we see, the more our creativity is ‘mobilised’. I suggest that Urban Interruptionism creates a mutual chain of creative encouragement, with artists creating to stimulate others who may then be mobilized to further create.

Relocating / Reclaiming the City

Asbjørn Skou, a Danish artist who has embodied various artistic identities in forging a relationship with the city, tells me that one of the reasons he keeps returning to work with the city as a theme, and as a field of work, is ‘both that this strangely ambiguous space – at once so thoroughly planned and controlled,



Brad Downey, *Barricade*, 2013, anonymous installation with police barricades, duration: several minutes, Klagenfurt, Austria. Photo by Gerhard Maurer, image courtesy of the artist



and at the same time so utterly random and chaotic – functions as a perfect allegorical setting for more general deliberations on human society and its modes of operation'. In two parallel series, *Relocating Architecture* and *Object Relocation*, Skou explores and exploits these ambiguities. In *Relocating Architecture* he photographs and isolates fragments of architecture, and then uses mobile projection technology to 're-embed' these fragments in a new context. In the *Object Relocation* series, specific objects, often things that could be classified as temporary infrastructure such as breeze blocks or fences, are physically moved from one point to another. Skou says that 'by "claiming" an object from the city and treating this as "found material", there is perhaps a sculptural quality to its displacement and replacement. An absence and a presence that is perhaps not as noticeable as a large projection of an abandoned storefront, but nevertheless perhaps containing a more "direct" impact in the structure of the city.'

Downey works in a very similar way, relocating roadblocks, street tiles and signage, but in a perhaps more playful manner. Works like *House of Cards #3* or *Relationship* could exist merely to inspire a smile on the way to work, or equally to comment on the unimaginative materials so often utilised in urban construction.

Construction of an Urban Identity as Part of Artistic Process

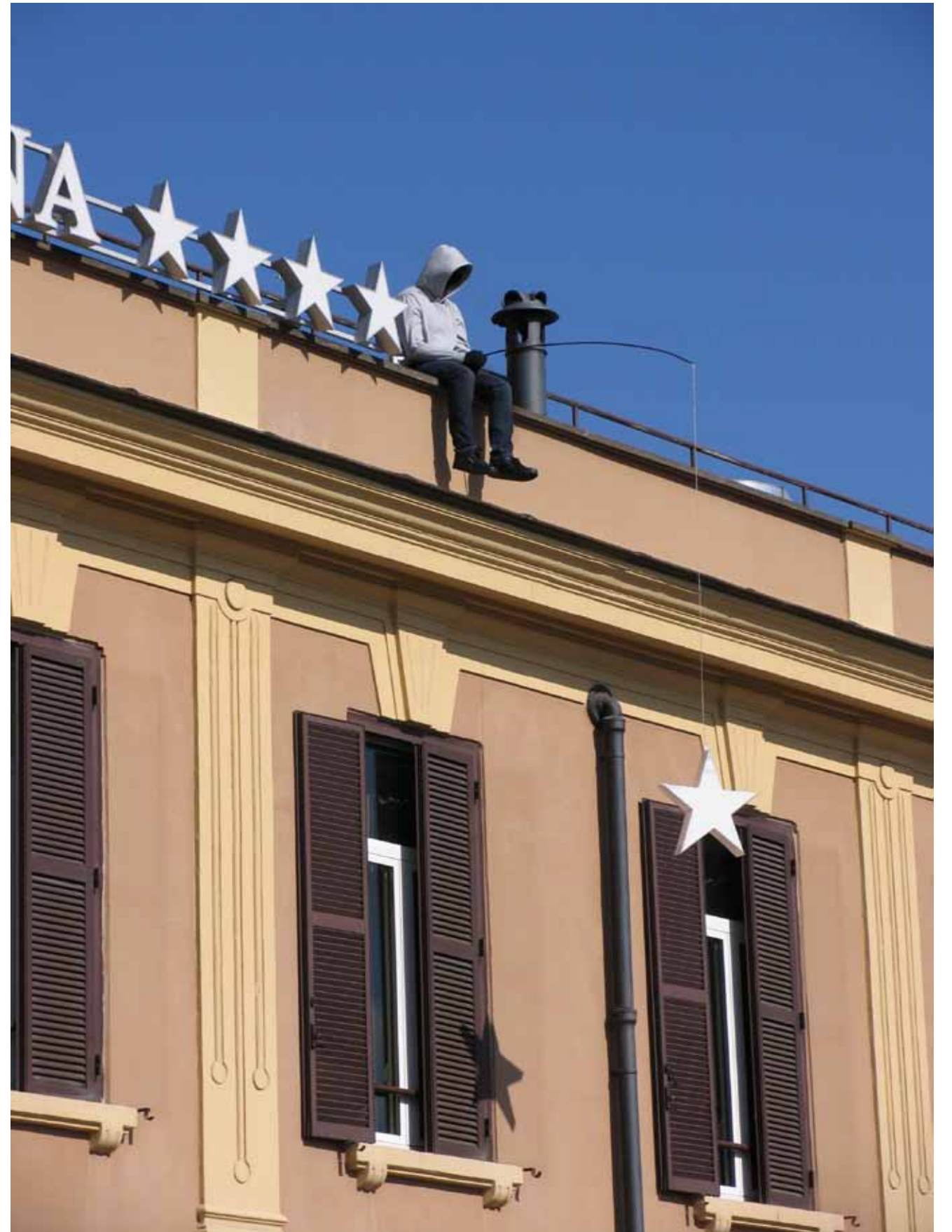
Skou is attracted by the mysteries of the city, admitting: 'As a concrete and abstract construction, the city continues to be a total enigma to me; one that embodies some of what I feel are the most essential questions of how we construct society and our identities in it. I wanted to be a part of that process, rather than just an analytic gaze.' Skou interestingly felt that he had constructed for himself too obvious an urban identity – working under the moniker 'Armsrock' and pasting up intricate portraits around Bremen and elsewhere – to the point that he has since abandoned the moniker and the practice altogether. He says that 'the idea of an emerging "scene", and a set of fixed aesthetics and ethos belonging to this', was the key reason for wanting to avoid classification as a 'street/urban artist' alongside taggers and stencil artists. Although Skou and his work have undergone a modal shift, he admits that several things have remained constant: 'I am still interested in how we manufacture places from space, and how places play a central part in the construction and binding of our personal and collective identities and fantasies.'

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For Zevs, a French artist who has preferred to hide behind a disguise but who nevertheless suffered a high-profile arrest in Hong Kong in 2009, his identity as a graffiti artist gave him the 'keys of knowledge and experience to react to the city and reveal its traces'. Still using graffiti, but in a number of different ways, Zevs has pioneered several new forms of the medium: 'Reverse graffiti', or, as he calls it 'proper graffiti', uses high-pressure waterhoses to stencil images onto walls revealing the city's true colours beneath; he has used light-sensitive paints that only appear at night; and he has used the excess light emitted from advertising hoardings to display alternative images (*Graffiti Illumination*). In this way he has taken one urban identity, that of a 'graffiti artist', and selected certain elements of it to emphasise his particular strain of Interruptionism.



Brad Downey, Hanging (self-portrait), image courtesy of the artist



Mark Jenkins, photograph from the Rome series, 2012, courtesy of the artist



Mark Jenkins, photograph from the Malmö series, 2008, courtesy of the artist

Downey has also often used the medium of graffiti as his message, but again in unconventional terms: in *Making Illegal Permanent* he created a mosaic replica of a graffitied wall, exaggerating the legally questionable nature of the work; and in *Buff the Fucks* he used oppressive grey paint to 'buff' everything except the graffiti on the side of a Lisbon warehouse. So while there is an apparent rejection of traditional 'graffiti' by the Interruptionists, it appears impossible to withdraw entirely from the urban context within which graffiti is regarded as the original form of systemic interruption.

Personal / Impersonal & the Ambiguous Audience

Mark Jenkins is one of the few artists in the scene who works predominantly with the human form, rather than appropriating existing objects from the surrounding environment. Jenkins says that this 'makes the work personal in many ways, perhaps foremost because the casts are often of my own body. When I see work on the street it is my projection: I have been inside the sculpture, my sweat is physically present *within* my work.' Such a different and unique approach has also had profoundly different effects on the audiences viewing the works, some of which, like a floating figure in a Malmö river, have caused police and rescue units to be called out: 'I now have a lot of knowledge on how crowds form, disperse, what pigeons, police, rescue squads do. I can tell you if I put a child in a corner that young kids and old people will ignore it but parents in their thirties will quickly approach.'

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Skou comments that in these artistic contexts one can divide the audience into Primary and Secondary groups. The Primary group actively seeks out and 'visits' the works, while the Secondary group chances upon the work. Skou is intrigued by this Secondary audience, saying that to them his work could 'have the potential to function as a rapture in an otherwise known and settled grid of signals and signs, something that meant that a new coding had to take place, perhaps leading to questions arising with regard to other things being seen within the understood grid of signals, images, observations, text and so forth'.

All the artists I spoke to said that, although they hope their works may have some sort of effect on their audiences, whoever they may be, they have no place in determining what this effect will be. Downey's curiosity in this regard reveals an interesting personal phenomenon he experiences: 'I like that someone could be standing somewhere in a city, looking at a pile of stones, and thinking: "Maybe that's Brad Downey's work?"'

Visibility and Documentation

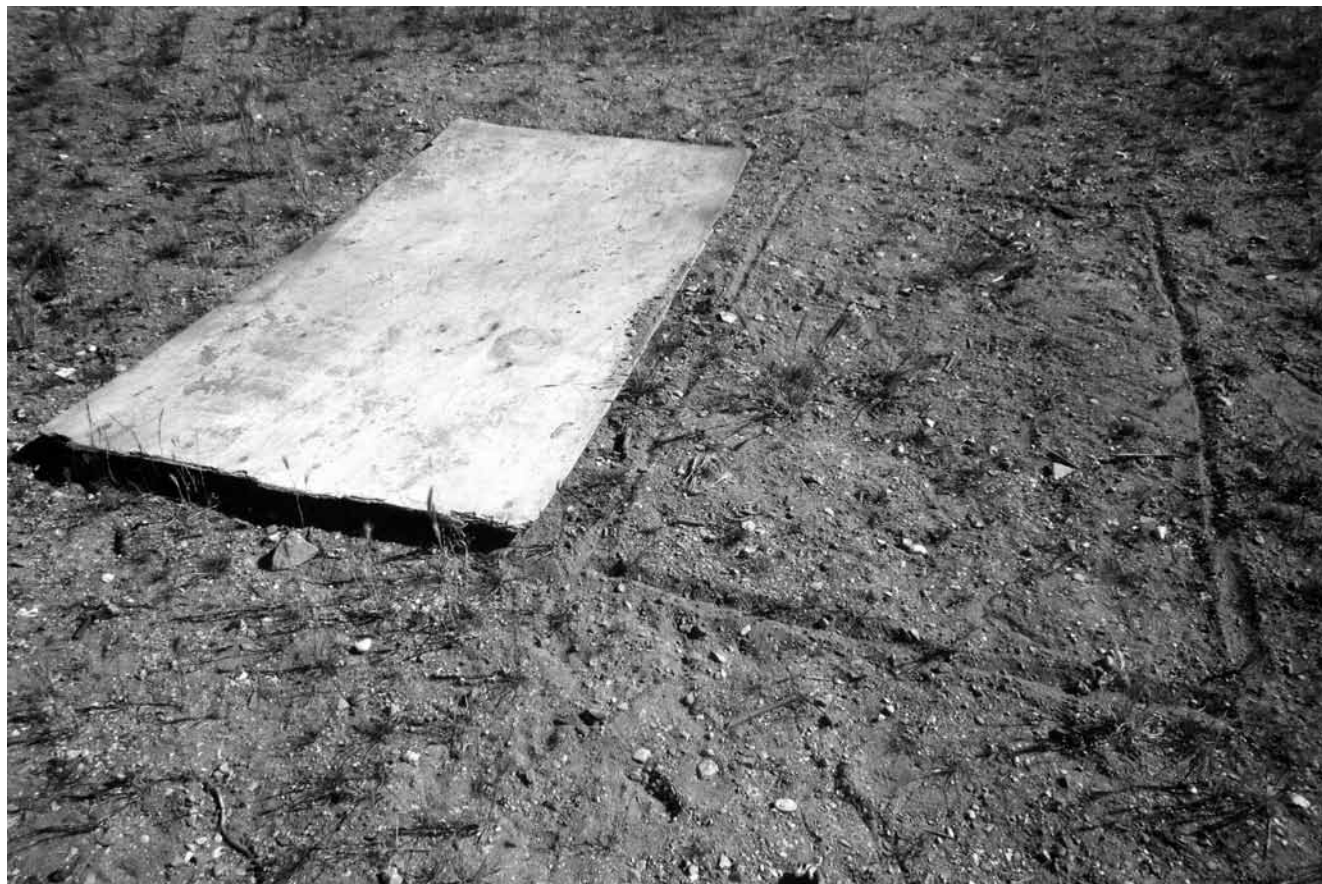
Downey doesn't believe that it is important that people see his work in person: 'I feel that if I do something in the here-and-now physically, this will touch people directly, whether they see it or not. I don't know why, but I think all physical materials are communicating with each other in ways that are not just tangible, visible or audible.' Downey admits, however, that the documentation of his works is an important part of ensuring that people might still be affected by the art, even at a later stage.

Skou also talks of documentation as being an important part of the process of creation. Of his new works, such as his *Urban Archaeology* series, he says: 'I am trying to let the work serve as a kind of interventionist research process within various "blind fields" of the urban structures. A lot of the works deal with the idea of discovery, with part of the works focusing on discovering, interacting with and documenting aspects of the city, and other parts aiming at being undiscoverable, in the sense that the work is either so closely based on the existing vocabulary of aesthetics of the city, that they are indiscernible from its "natural" occurrences, or they are taking place more as a traceless interaction that exists "merely" as a documented process, one where the questions of what is fact and fiction become rather blurry.' Here Skou highlights a dilemma that appears inherent in the movement: it seems to tread a fine line between subtlety, allowing works to seamlessly blend into the urban landscape, and visual ubiquity, wanting works to constantly pierce the eye of the metropolitan citizen.

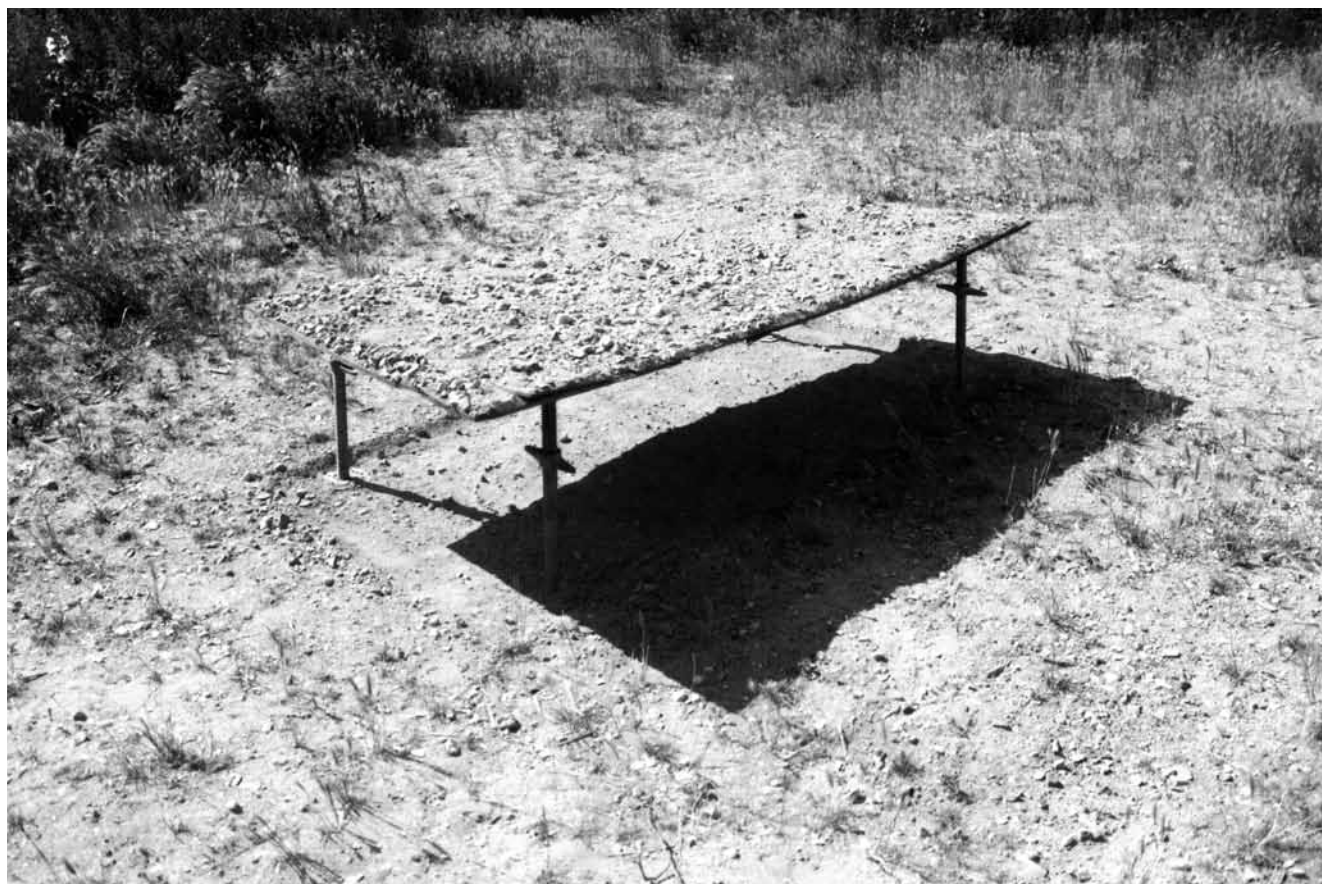
Downey achieves the latter through his particular interest in the aesthetics of signage and its manipulation, citing Jean Baudrillard and his essay 'KOOL KILLER, or The Insurrection of Signs' as a major influence. 'I think land art, Dada, Fluxus, street art and graffiti all seek to produce works which represent their desires against the official norm and institutionalisation, and I feel quite close to all of those movements.' I suggest, however, that the Urban Interruptionists may not be as anti-authoritarian as they are sometimes made out to be. Instead, I find these artists are more exploratory or disregarding of authority rather than consciously acting against it. The Situationists, originally led by Guy Debord, whose Marxist-derived theories asserted that social alienation extended across all aspects of life, were a politically inclined revolutionary group who approved of the 'construction of situations' which encouraged expression. It is arguable that their 'art' was more theory-based than practically expressed, an irony often ignored by the artists whom they are said to have inspired. (Jenkins



Zevs, *After the Riots*, 2005, Paris, image courtesy of the artist



Asbjørn Skou, photograph from the *Elevated Topography* series, 2013, plywood, metal rods from scaffold, earth and sand, 60 x 122 x 244 cm, image courtesy of the artist



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says, for example, 'It's too trendy to reference it these days in attempts to give contemporary street artists an intellectual basis to what's being done.') However, the Situationists' comment that all artwork must be critical of society is still being explored today. Although it is probably impossible to separate art and politics, I am not sure that all art must necessarily be critical of society. A commentary on society, or a reaction to social situations, does not have to be a criticism.

Downey also recognises this criticism of the Situationists, but emphasises that one can make the inverse criticism of contemporary artists today: 'They are too practical and rarely reflect their work back into the theoretical or historical. But many of the artists working today coincidentally bring ideas from the Situationists into being. This happened to me once with my work *Castles Beneath Cities* which I made before I was aware of the Situationist text *Sous Les Pavés La Plage*.'

Temporality / Permanence

Both Downey and Skou comment on the temporality of their work, but in different ways. Skou finds an interesting irony in the fact that he expends much time and energy in creating work such as his projected street portraits, a long-running series called *Citizen Shades*, for these to exist only as long as he keeps the projector running. Skou engraved directly onto large-format negative transparency film to project anonymous portraits of the urban masses upon the city. Today he sees these works, some of which appeared at the International Forum of Light in Art and Architecture in Eindhoven, as an exploration of urban traces, structures and surfaces. He notes, however, that he would often spend as much time and energy documenting and archiving the work, creating further traces in the process.

Walking in the City / Imagining a New City

Michel de Certeau wrote that a walker not only reinforces the existence of certain elements of a city, but he can also 'privilege, transform or abandon' these through the 'selection' he makes in his route. The Urban Interruptionists have the same effect on cities, with Jenkins creating false encounters with shady characters in tense situations, transforming roundabouts into merry-go-rounds, parking meters into lollipops. Although he acknowledges that some of his works are 'whimsical, poking fun at the city planners', the effects can be profound, in the simple way that a walker may take a detour or a bomb-squad may be scrambled.

These artists inhabit both a physical 'non-space' – in Marc Augé's definition, somewhere that defies definition due to its insignificance – and a space where expression intersects with theory and movement with interruption. They have developed a niche within which the urban spaces can be exploited to their limits, often ridiculing the environment while treating the city's power with the utmost respect. At the same time, the assumed rejection of theory, as well as categorisation and definition of their art, allows the artists to work in a way that rejects exclusion, forcibly including themselves within the canon of all sorts of art, further assisting us in the quest to know ourselves.



Zevs, *Visual Kidnapping*, 2002, Berlin, image courtesy of the artist