

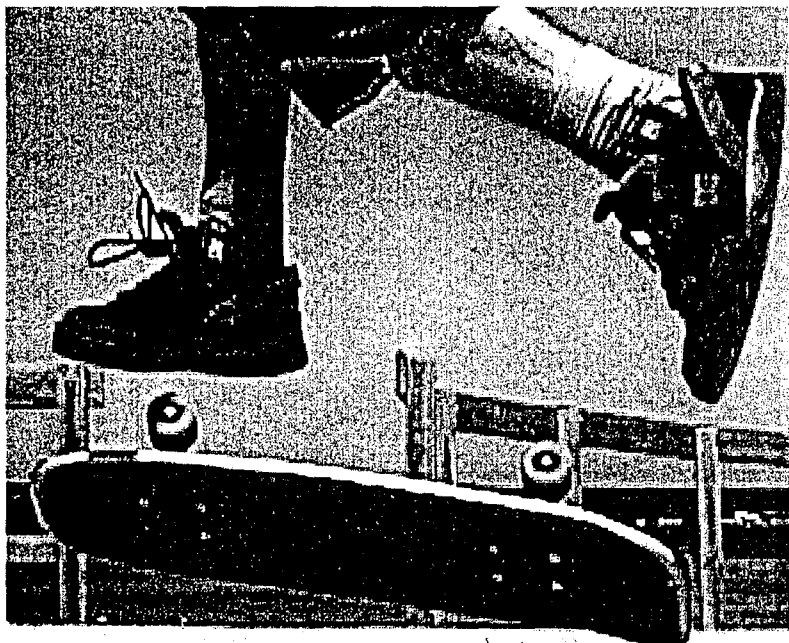
## Practices of the City and the Kickflipping Flâneur

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In his current and ongoing work, Shaun Gladwell more than demonstrates his skill as a former skateboard champion. In *Kickflipping Flâneur* he presents three segments – *Kickflipper: Fragments of a Ballet*, *Linework: A Road Movie* and *Sydney: A Guide to Recent Architecture*. Each segment is a sequence of vignettes focusing on different skateboarding genres and each can be usefully read at a number of levels. We can read his video work on the level of the aestheticisation and contemplation of a commonplace urban practice. The slowing of the motion and the music during some sequences gives this pursuit a monumentality. For example, the segment *Kickflipper: Fragments of a Ballet*, problematises the familiar high-culture/low-culture dichotomy, it slows skateboarding down in a way which brings greater attention to its technique, skill and grace. However, *Kickflipping Flâneur* as a whole does more than merely tackle that old Greenbergian chestnut. There are far more vital and interesting cultural resonances in this work. Importantly, Gladwell's skateboarding cuts across the psycho-geographical body of Sydney, fragmenting, subverting and reclaiming its spaces. His video works simultaneously document this act and open up this activity as a discursive tactic in the context of art.

Skateboarders are a source of public annoyance and irritation as they weave through crowded footpaths as though pedestrians are obstacles, they ignore traffic rules on roads and infect the seriousness of public spaces with slacker hedonism. They *misuse* public thoroughfares, street furniture, spaces and features – for example, when Bert Flugelman's large public sculpture was installed in Martin Place, in Sydney, in 1979, its sloping base quickly became a makeshift skateboarding ramp. Indeed, there are many reasons to dismiss skate-



boarding as time-wasting and illegal youth culture. However, Gladwell's work critically activates this practice in order to contemplate a re-imagining of his home city, Sydney. He takes this pass-time and considers its tactical capacity to intervene in the practices of the city.

Cities are not merely assemblages of buildings, streets and people. Cities are psycho-geographical spaces with profound social and political dimensions. From the Manhattan grid to Haussman's Paris, urban planners have attempted to quantify and organise the chaotic underbelly of Modernism as towns exploded into cities. Since their beginnings, the creation of architectural spaces has also been the systematic physical production of knowledge. That is to say, a city is the geographical expression and reification of discursive power, in the Foucaultian sense. City streets are not only channels of motility which take certain bodies to certain sites, but are also 'power cables' linking sites intended for certain kinds of bodies. In turn, city sites (parks, malls, civic buildings, office blocks, lobbies, train stations, etc.) organise and produce knowledge in relation to the kinds of bodies and activities permitted within those sites, in terms of nomenclature, function and jurisdiction.

Most of us, as city-dwellers ourselves, have perhaps a less abstract and theoretical understanding of the discursive practices of city spaces. Sure, we may talk of illustrations and plans of Le Corbusier's visions as 'fascistic', but perhaps it is not until we directly experience familiar public spaces that change against our wishes that we understand the political dimensions camouflaged within those spaces. The controversial construction of the Beach Volleyball Stadium on Bondi Beach for the Sydney 2000 Olympics is a clear example of this. Such changes to public spaces concretely demonstrate what the new spaces afford and what they restrict.

Importantly, Gladwell's videos are produced in the context of Sydney in 2000 – a city ideologically and psychologically immersed in Olympic fervor. Banners, flags, billboards and building-sized images of athletes combined with 'Olympic-positive' media publicity have attempted to create a city which is physically, psychologically and ideologically homogeneous. Nick Bleasel, a Sydney artist, lampoons this homogenising of Sydney with his posters and postcards which read "Keep taking your medication – Our Olympic visitors must suspect nothing".<sup>1</sup> A city is always more than merely an aggregate of spaces, but for the Olympics, Sydney has been thoroughly organised and functionalised as a classical 'body' – singular and clearly defined in its geographical and psychological identity. That which defiles this Olympic body, such as derelict sites, the homeless and skateboarders, has been progressively rubbed-out.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently Sydney is experiencing unusual security and crowd-control. In the time leading up to and particularly during the Sydney 2000 Olympics, the public spaces of the city have been secured, recategorised and reauthorised accordingly. People and vehicles have been variously 'accredited' and tagged with identifica-

tion stating their degree of authorised access. Movement within city spaces has been channeled, directed and organised in terms of each body's function within the larger corpus of the Olympic City. City spaces and functions are temporarily transformed: commuter transport as Olympic transport; shopping malls as entertainment spaces; roads as Olympic arterials.

Under these circumstances, the usual structured psycho-geography of any city intensifies to become stifling. Any *play* within city spaces becomes tightened. That is, spaces are unequivocally defined, eliminating any slippage or indeterminacy in their capacities and functions. Also, play (in the sense of recreation) is subject to what Gladwell calls "the Olympic crack down on fun."<sup>3</sup> 'Carnival' is permitted and generated in the six Olympic 'Live Sites' in the city, but it is not 'carnavalesque' in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense<sup>4</sup> – it is officially sanctioned rather than being spontaneous, chaotic and unauthorised.

In previous research, Gladwell considered the tactical interventions of graffiti in the practices of the city. Graffiti, as Norman Mailer argues, is "your presence on their presence, hanging your alias on their scene."<sup>5</sup> Both graffiti and skateboarding are Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque' forms: they parallel and travesty 'official' culture with the Dionysian.<sup>6</sup> They impose their practices in a way which counters the official intentions of public spaces. Like graffiti, skateboarding is illegal and unauthorised, but it is about exerting a more active, if perhaps even more fleeting, presence on someone else's scene. Moreover, because graffitiists anonymously mark someone else's scene, it is a practice that succeeds only if the perpetrator is not caught in the act. Graffiti is necessarily a trace of the graffitiist – meaningful only through absence of the body that causes it. Skateboarding, on the other hand, is directly concerned with the unsanctioned movement of bodies, activating authoritative spaces with their dynamic presence. Skateboarding is a kind of corporeal graffiti with an evanescent calligraphy – 'your presence on their presence'.

It is in the interstices of the city's channels and sites that skateboarders do their thing: the forecourts, the gutters, at the side of entrances, the edges of railings, walls and benches. These margins are important because they ideologically 'frame' spaces; they give a city its structure. However, skateboarding is a practice that parallels, cuts across and runs counter to the grain of the city and mocks its planning. In the *Sydney: A Guide to Recent Architecture* segment of *Kickflipping Flaneur*, Gladwell 'surfs' through the water of a fountain in Cook+Phillip Park, a new public space in Sydney's city centre. In the same way that 1980s skateboarders in Martin Place turned the austere formalism of Flugelman's sculpture into a ramp, Gladwell injects tactility into a visual feature and activates it as a corporeal rather than merely ocular space. In the same segment, he skates across the forecourt of an office block. Again, a formal architectural feature is *mis-*

*used* and becomes a ramp. As Gladwell says "street skating is a genre more directly recoding architectural forms and presents the greatest point of conflict with security and property owners."<sup>7</sup> The security guard shooing-away the skateboarder literally polices the coding of the architecture. In a very concrete way, Gladwell subverts the uniform purpose of the space or, in Deleuzian terms, he creates 'lines of flight' from it.

In the *Kickflipper: Fragments of a Ballet* segment, Gladwell's skateboarding is returned to the congruous and familiar environment of Bondi Beach's promenade. At all times, Bondi Beach possesses a certain 'aura' for international tourists. Tourist attractions have a kind of auratic intensity that, for the usual residents, makes those site 'unhomely' (certainly 'uncanny' in the psychoanalytic sense). Bondi residents are only in part-possession of their home while also being partly alienated from it. Despite this, the beach promenade is a site with personal and subcultural significance for Gladwell, as well as being the site of a freestyle skateboarding stage. At least in part, this site is an expression of skateboarding culture and its officially sanctioned space - skateboarding within this designated area is not a carnivalesque subversion.

Bondi accommodates skateboarding more than most areas of Sydney. Likewise, the graffiti in the background is indulged without official resistance and without resisting a hostile context. Accordingly, there is no need to fleetingly dissect the space. Rather, this is a 'homely' space for Gladwell. It allows him to slow down, meditate and revel in a freestyle skateboarding 'dance'. However, it is significant that in the months between shooting the footage and Gladwell's exhibition, this is the very site of the Olympic volleyball and has been subject to the Olympic 'lock-down'. Bondi Beach has become a restricted Olympic space as well as being *more so* permeated by the alienating aura of a tourist attraction. With this in mind, the *Kickflipper: Fragments of a Ballet* segment testifies to the volatility of all public spaces. As the dissenting residents of Bondi discovered, their familiar spaces can be abruptly rezoned and reconstituted.

In contrast to the *Kickflipper: Fragments of a Ballet* segment, *Linework: A Road Movie* is an expedient flight through inner-city suburbia, back onto the streets. This segment is a skateboarding sortie similar to *Sydney: A Guide to Recent Architecture*, but the stakes are raised. Gladwell works on a larger scale, skewing the psycho-geographical lines that interconnect Sydney's suburban mosaic. On his forays, the skateboard displays a white infinity symbol at its helm. This is a deliberate homage to the now-famous chalked graffiti of the late Arthur Stace, which simply read "Eternity". Gladwell rides the same streets and pavements that Stace once graffitied. In the mythology of Sydney, Stace's chalk "Eternity" has been commonly understood as a kind of contemplation of the impermanence of existence, but ironically it has become a permanent and constitutive part of the City's identity. It was displayed on the Sydney Harbour Bridge during the



Millennium fireworks and again in the Opening Ceremony of the Games on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Gladwell's infinity symbol returns Stace's "Eternity" to its original ephemerality on the streets. This segment of his work addresses similar issues of the profound importance of movement, impermanence and flight.

In its course, *Linework: A Road Movie* deals with two lines – the blue line of the marathon course for the Olympics and a more indeterminate fleeting line. The marathon line is one of the more intriguing effects of the Games upon the City. Making a fairly straight-forward journey across the city and inner suburbs, it is possible to cross the marathon line numerous times in places that seem curiously disconnected. It is common knowledge that it runs from North Sydney to Homebush Bay, but it still turns up in surprising places. Psycho-geographically, it is a very creative route – it lays-down its path regardless of the existing lines of the city, it meanders, ingores habitual and logical routes. It is like a runaway taxi-ride. However, while it is an authoritative line which is legally sanctioned for marathon runners, Gladwell misuses it. He playfully follows its course, literally subverting the authority of the *thin blue line*.

The linework around Darlinghurst and Surry Hills, also lays-down a path that may contradict the sense of the city, but draws more heavily on the notion of the *flaneur*. Gladwell says that "both the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian flaneur and the contemporary Sydney street skateboarder emerge from radical architectural transformations."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Gladwell's skateboarding responds to the huge architectural changes brought about in the seven years leading up to the Sydney 2000 Olympics. However, his version of flanerrie plays fast and loose with the term in order "to further appropriate and re-invent this term."<sup>9</sup>

For the character of the Parisian flaneur of Baudelaire's literature or Caillebotte's paintings, the city streets are a place of comfort and familiarity, a kind of 'homely' space outside of the home. However, this figure of the flaneur as the leisurely middle-class stroller is no longer a familiar feature of contemporary city streets. As Matthew Steer, an artist whose work focuses on the public spaces of Sydney, notes: "The character of the nineteenth century Parisian flaneur has fragmented and dispersed in the flux of forces generated in society in the last century and a half."<sup>10</sup> Burgeoning European modernity generated the conditions for the flaneur. It created middle-class leisure time and wealth along with public spaces created specifically to accommodate them. The changes within cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced less amenable circumstances for the Baudelairean flaneur. As motorised transport developed, streets became more passages than sites in themselves. Hence, arcades and precincts such as Sydney's Pitt Street Mall, Melbourne's Collins Street Mall and Adelaide's Rundle Mall became the significant bourgeois public sites. Shopping has taken over from leisurely strolling and the closest the 21<sup>st</sup> century city-dweller comes to the flaneur is the window-shopper. Strolling is no longer a middle-class activity – contemporary wealthy lifestyles are measured in speed.



Gladwell's 'appropriation and reinvention' of the flaneur takes this now-dispersed historical figure and adapts it for the streets of Sydney in the year 2000. The Baudelairean flaneur was always someone who was content to be taken where the streets would lead, along the path most trodden, conducted through the predetermined channels of the city. Gladwell's contemporary flaneur is much less agreeable with the idea of these preset conduits, with the ideological organisation of spaces and the 'story' presented by the received thoroughfares of the city. Rather, Gladwell 'cut and pastes' the suburban map to suit himself, reclaiming the space and inscribing a line that is his own story.

In practice, Gladwell is executing a skateboarding version of Guy Debord's 'Theory of the Derive'.<sup>11</sup> 'Derive' is literally translated as 'drifting' and, Debord says:

*The derive entails playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects; which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey or the stroll.<sup>12</sup>*

Unlike the stroll of the Baudelairean flaneur, the derive is a tactical contradiction of the city. It is a purposeful abandoning of habits of movement in the city, aimed at discarding the ideology implicit in those habits. Gladwell's *Linework: A Road Movie* is a tactical derive, fragmenting existing psycho-geography and diminishing standard connecting lines.

In its entirety, Gladwell's *Kickflipping Flaneur* is a 'playful-constructive' intervention in the practices of the city in contemporary Sydney. It deals directly with the City's present conditions, as the Olympic City, and engages them head-on. Its tactical interventions are multilayered, effectively infecting serious spaces with carnivalesque play, resisting received conduits of movement in the City, bastardising the City's authoritative spaces and refiguring and reclaiming its psycho-geography.

- 1 Bleasel, Nick, <http://www.heynick.com>, accessed 24/9/00, 10:24am.
- 2 A number of artists in Sydney have directly addressed and resisted this homogenisation. For example see the postcard works produced by John William (distributed independently) or those by Nick Bleasel (distributed by Avant Card, Australia).
- 3 Gladwell, Shaun, email correspondence, 21/9/00
- 4 Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1984
- 5 Mailer, Norman quoted in Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen & Co.Ltd, London, 1979, p. 3.
- 6 Bakhtin discusses in detail the way in which medieval French folk culture created carnival events on official church days in order to subvert the seriousness of the church. See Bakhtin, *ibid*, p. 5
- 7 Gladwell, *ibid*
- 8 Gladwell, Shaun, *Production Notes to Kickflipping Flaneur: Four Balancing Acts* by Shaun Gladwell, unpublished artist's notes, Sydney, 2000
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 Steer, Matthew, *Pre-Millennial Flanerie*, <http://www.homepages.ihug.com.au/~matsteer/flanerie.html>, accessed 6:55pm, 23/9/00
- 11 Debord, Guy, "Writings from the Situationist International", *Art in Theory 1900 to 1990: An Anthology of Changing ideas*, ed. Harrison & Wood, Blackwell, Oxford & Cambridge, 1992, p. 696
- 12 *ibid*





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