Surveillance & Society

Artistic Presentation

Artist, Robert Ladislav Derr uses die rolls and cameras to map his walk through cities worldwide

Robert Ladislav Derr

Artist

(edited by A.L. Foglesong)

Taking *Chance* to cities worldwide, [Robert Ladislav Derr](#) accepts thirty die rolls from viewers that determine his cartography through the streets in each city. This ongoing “psychogeographical”¹ walk performance project that he began in late 2005 and has completed in cities throughout the world, uses die rolls to determine if he proceeds forward down a street, goes right, left, back, spins or stands in place.

Chance: Harrisburg performance, 2008, (photo A.L. Foglesong)

¹ Psychogeography, term coined by Guy Debord to describe the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.

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You cannot miss Derr on his walks. He is the pedestrian dressed in a mirrored suit wearing four video cameras that capture the scenes from his front, back and sides. In the mirrored suit, his presence on the street has a dichotomous relationship between being real and illusionary given this oscillating dualistic character of mirrors.

When ‘spin’ or ‘stand in place’ are the command, Derr completes each for one minute. The directional commands take him to the next intersection, as he continues the walk for approximately forty-five minutes – the average amount of time that it takes to complete all thirty commands. After completing the walk with the video cameras, he returns to each intersection encountered and photographs the front, back, and side views, creating a photograph cartography as well.

Using the city as a fluid canvas, Derr moves through the streets with his cameras in silence capturing an unedited glimpse of the architecture and ephemeral characters that construct the ambiance of place and time. The videos record his physicality as he steps off of a curb, moves around geographical structures, traversing through the streets. Not only are his experiences captured, but also those of the fellow pedestrians on the street, who become the actors playing out their role in the daily life flow that is structured by the geographical environment in which they live. In *Chance*, the street scenes combine to create a narrative in the videos and photographs.

The crucial component in *Chance* is the die rollers, who develop Derr’s cartography. Derr is interested in the viewers being more than quiet observers of his works of art. His video and photograph installations and performances interrupt the traditional social and architectural structure of the white cube exhibit space.

The four-channel videos from the walk performances are projected onto four walls or rear projection screens that form a square. The [four projections](#) place the viewers in the center of the videos just as Derr was at the center of the cameras, connecting his second-generation viewers back to him. Since Derr wears the cameras, his footsteps during the walk create an arrhythmic motion that applies a tactical quality to the videos. This arrhythmia connects the viewers with Derr’s physical experience that took place during the walk.

Nato Thompson in *The Interventionists*² writes, “meanderings may seem fairly leisurely and not the least bit political, they propose the radical idea that ways of being in physical space (particularly in the cities) are political acts. The confluence of the *détourne* and the *dérive* manages to territorialize the visual. The spectacle is a territory. The city is a spectacle. Both tactics, *dérive* and *détourne*, take trespassing as their essential character. They must cross into the territory of others, whether these are the advertisements of Nike or the orderly storefronts of Paris, to produce new meanings”.

The Situationists³ used *détourne* to turn commodity and advertising on itself. Applying minor alterations to the iconic imagery, the Situationists could promote their own social and political messages. The *dérive* was a short predetermined meandering walk. Rather than a purely radical agenda, Derr returns to the *dérive* as a formal and conceptual investigation with implications of surveillance that lead to such theoretical discourse as the critical act of seeing, recording, and being in the canvas of the city.

² *The Interventionists* page 16.

³ The Situationists were a group of Europeans, who united in 1957 under the common interest for social and political change.

Chance: Vancouver video installation, 2007 (courtesy of the artist)

Something of a game, Derr hands the die to his viewers to determine the *dérive*. Entering the streetscape with the die commands, dressed in the mirrored suit with his four video cameras, capturing the minute details of everyday life, Derr adds to the spectacle. While the mirrors do reflect the scenes of the street onto him, for the most part, the mirrors oscillate toward creating a spectacle. His spectacle awakens the street – the pedestrians marvel at his presence. The bold approach him with their questions, while the inhibited, having obtained safe distance, turn to watch.

During a time of low technology, relatively speaking compared to current technology, the Situationists could use the spectacle against itself. Today, the ubiquity and sophistication of the spectacle requires more overt actions to connect us with not only ourselves, but also our surroundings. Utilizing the spectacle, Derr draws attention in not only his initial performance, but also the resulting four-channel video and photograph installations that immerse the second-generation viewers into the captured street scenes. Desensitized by the constant surveillance and hyper-reality that commodity and technology have created, the *Chance* performances, video installations, and photographs arouse awareness.

In each performance of *Chance*, Derr's cameras point indiscriminately outward onto society composing the narratives by means of chance rather than some conventional method. The die commands allow for a discovery of each city from a pure, non-commercial perspective. His four-channel videos and photographs depict the times in which he lives.

A recent performance of *Chance* was for *Playing the City*, an exhibition at the [Schirn Kunsthalle](#) in Frankfurt, Germany, curated by Matthias Ulrich. *Chance* was also featured in Volume 13: *Public* issue of

ASPECT: The Chronicle of New Media Art with commentary by Bill Arning, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

Chance: Rosario photograph, 2006 (courtesy of the artist)