A cat leap and a precision.

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Free Running and the Hugged City

Parkour, le parkour, freerun, free running, or PK. Whether you refer to this new urban practice as a sport, a risky pastime, or an art, it rapidly grows and constitutes microcosmic sites in cities worldwide. Free running corrupts the original uses of spatial structures. It is dedicated to moving across obstacles designed to restrict or that restrict by nature. Walls, fences, gaps, or rails become a kind of urban furniture. Moving fluently across any obstacle with as much agility as possible, parkourists employ no tools other than their own bodies, since the aim of parkour is to enjoy maximum freedom in one's environment.

> Draw a straight line on a map of your home town. Start from point A, and go to the point B. Don't consider the elements which are in your way (barriers, walls, wire fences, trees, houses, buildings) as obstacles. Hug them: Climb, get over, jump: Let your imagination flow: You're now doing parkour. (Jeremy, Urban Freeflow website, 2005)[1]

A mix of physicality and philosophy, this is a movement, informed by a diverse set of modern cultural reference points including video games, movies such as *The Matrix*, break dancing, and Jackie Chan. Parkour happens locally – on playgrounds, school yards, housing estates or in and outside of public buildings – but it is disseminated mainly through global online communications and media representations. Free running thrives and prospers through a rapidly growing network of non-profit and commercial websites offering links to local groups, maps, forums, training advice, articles, clothing merchandise, videos and advertising clips. There is an intrinsic proximity to a visual culture which has emerged in blurring the boundaries between various representational genres characteristic of today's urban texture, including videos, billboards, computer games and mobile phones. The ultimate aim of these emerging urban formats is to cross physical thresholds and to extend the possibilities of urban conduct. Similarly, free runners perform moves that belong to the imagery of fantasy films, extreme sports or video games. Serving as living imagery, they bring together the ordinary and the extraordinary. They emulate spectacular moves by taking them out of their fictional context and inserting them into the mundane world of everyday suburban life.

Free running originated in the suburbs of Lisses near Paris in the late 1980s. It was created by David Belle and Sébastien Foucan from a mixture of elements which are sports in general, and particularly urban sliding sports such as skateboarding and martial arts. The inspiration came from many sources, not least the *Natural Method of Physical Culture* developed by George Hébert (1875-1957) in the early twentieth century.[2] A physical education tutor and former naval officer, George Hébert combined various elements of 'natural' training (i.e. parcour training in non-designed environments) aimed at achieving a better balance of physical, energetic and moral virtues, which proved influential for a new ethos of physical education at the time. David Belle was introduced to these concepts by his father, a Vietnam veteran. A small group of local adolescents formed to practice more specific moves and became the epicenter of what turned out to develop into a global urban movement.[3]

Questions of authenticity have arisen alongside authorial issues, as part of the group split off from the original parkour scene, rebranding themselves as yamakasis (meaning strong man, strong spirit) for a feature film[4] in which they acted

as urban stuntmen, carrying with them a certain kamikaze attitude. In contrast to the image created by the film, free runners (or traceurs, as they prefer to call themselves) insist that they are not basically anti-police or anti-society, that they are not just kids from housing estates, but that they respect their environment. Parkour means more to them than pursuing a new urban sport or upsetting passers-by. And it does so to an increasing number of followers and audiences, large companies and the media.

Inhabiting Urban Cultures

Key urban theorists in the humanities and social sciences, including Edward Soja, Saskia Sassen and Mike Davis, have noted that the contemporary period of global restructuring has been accompanied by an accentuated consciousness of spatialization and regionalization. This process reinstalls the local as a new sphere of activities which can only be understood through its network of relationships with other localities[5]. The significance of geographical location is being transformed and rewritten by an unprecedented dialogue with global activities. Crucial questions addressed by this phenomenon are: What is the extent to which local individuals actually participate in this process? How can they take part in the development of new infrastructures devised by planners, politicians and municipalities? How can they relate to the environments, concepts and images produced for culturally specific groups to which they belong or to which they do not belong? How can they reclaim local spaces as networked sites of enactment and agency? And how do companies pressurized to capture consumers' imagination sit in relation to this desire for co-operative experience?

Many of the currently evolving urban practices generate affiliations to culture, which emphasize the performative nature of an engagement with the urban. Therefore, questions that address participation in urban culture and what it means to belong to a culture need to be solidified through the performative acts (i.e. through spatial practices, cultural affects, aesthetic situations, etc.) in which they are expressed (and not through static representations, objects, territories or built architectures). As performance theorist Gavin Butt argues, these affiliations can be understood as performative because they come into being only in and as the acts themselves. They are concerned with "the production of new forms of cultural affiliation which attend the scene of an engagement with art; ones which eschew the established and formalized structures of identity and belonging."[6]

Such engagements with the built environment move the focus from space as a container of pre-determined activities to emerging practices of temporal inhabitation. With advanced technologies and the onset of Internet culture in the early 1990s inhabitation is becoming less about doing what a designer or architect intended in a space and ever more about decentered, deregulated and almost aggressive appropriation. In the light of increasing virtualization and mobilization, the premises of inhabitation are changing ever faster. The complex ways in which virtual and physical arenas, as well as global and local scenarios are interwoven and how they mutually shape each other around public fantasies are central to the understanding of the emergence of novel practices of imaginative, ad-hoc appropriation of space for unanticipated purposes. We can contextualize them in the histories of non-plan, French Situationism and other cultural movements through which groups of people have sought to regain some control over the built environment.[7] Maps and experiences produced by parkour share much common ground with the Situationist tactics of *détournement or derive*, with Henri Lefèbvre's notion of spatialization[8] and with the moves and leaps of skateboarding on which it is modeled

to some extent. They are situated through a continual re-living of the city.[9]

This leads us to a paradoxical image of the city as a scene of simultaneous refusal and embracement evoked by free running; one of the defining characteristics of free running is that it takes on a form of disruption. It is a disruption of urban realities, within which people find themselves trapped for a variety of reasons. A possible reason may be the experience of local and cultural exclusions, another one the experience of one's identity being subjugated to limiting definitions. Free running offers a way out of these identity deadlocks regarding both the environment and the people inhabiting it. At the same time, free running exhibits a deep sense of aesthetic engagement with this very same environment, an almost mythical encounter and closeness with its present materiality. It is a paradoxical movement of seizing and celebrating something, while giving it a new form of aesthetic presence. It is a rewriting which is in love with a form of cultural affiliation whose conditions it constantly undoes. This aesthetic presence becomes constituted not by designing new objects or other elements of a similar order or by adding new layers of substance, color or texture. It is brought into existence by way of touch. It is the fleeting physical contact of the free runners with the urban, which is the defining moment of its aesthetic production and transformation. Never fully inhabiting a place, never being fully contained by it and always on the move, this is the unsettled and unsettling position free running occupies.

The City is Your Playground

There is a secret adoration in architectural discourse pertaining to parkour's apparent effortlessness to rewrite spatial systems of signification. In an interview for a Channel 4 documentary on free running, British architect Will Alsop recently said, "I am sure there is all sorts of other people waiting in the wings to come in and corrupt our spaces in all sorts of different ways that we have not even thought of yet. We spend millions and millions of pounds to build all this stuff, and what else could that stuff be used for – that's the key question."[10] The potential of architecture seems to lie neither in planned use, nor in current use. It is concealed in the *something else* of which free running is a very powerful reminder. While this vague notion of a third use, which differs from both the original use and the present utilization, may not give us many

clues as to the coming materiality of cities, it provides for a thinking which acknowledges the value of gestures to forge identifications and a sense for community. According to Giorgio Agamben's understanding, the gesture is a means without an end. Therefore, it opens up a space for participation in communal life without resorting to consolidated, deeply-rooted identities. The gesture refers to a way of inhabitation, which is less prone to the surrender of the functions and rules of cities or other shared environments. It indicates a means of corrupting the city while hugging it. The point of this aesthetic mode, as the Dutch philosopher René ten Bos argues, is "to completely change the world without violating it."[11] In other words, the paradox of free running consists in the fact that its refusal to exclude or oppose other identities – something which is echoed in frequent claims on parkour websites to foster friendly and welcoming communities – is based upon a refusal to accept form as a determining condition. Free running as an act of participatory inhabitation becomes possible not so much as a process of top-down authorization but through being enacted. In doing so, it creates participatory geographies open for anyone to intervene. Like the success of a gesture that creates its own possibility, it is the bodily articulation of free runners, the act of doing parkour, which evolves the core of its own political and aesthetic condition.

It's the unhinging of the links between our imagination of the urban (and the fantasies we live out through this imagination) and the architecture that sustains or promotes it, which is an important part of this articulation. While everyday conduct assigns particular roles and concepts to particular buildings and places, free running challenges this long sustained order by exerting a particular form of intrusion upon these architectures. Unlike graffiti or similar aesthetic interventions in the built environment, it is not an intrusion which manifests itself through legible marks. It is more of an intrusion into a commonly agreed notion of the urban and its physical and spiritual relation to the built environment. Free runners do not question the materiality of physical space and therefore they don't need to act out violence upon its substance. They question and unhinge our conception of built space as such: the creative processes through which the elements designed by architects, regulated by municipal boards and used by millions of people, come together as the *idea* of the city. In using the power of the body, that is to say in stretching the idea of what bodies are able to do with the things

On top of the London School
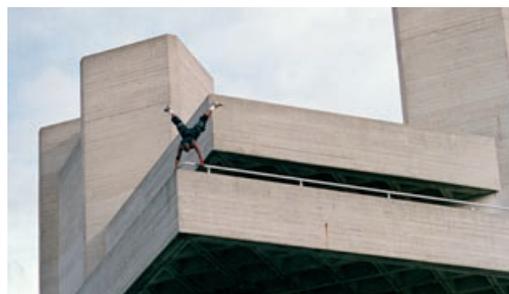
Sebastian Foucan performing

At the Imax subway, Waterloo

architects build, free running introduces a hitherto unknown corporeality to the city. Although this new corporeality borrows from a set of fictional genres, it remains closely connected to a true engagement with the city, amplifying the human body as one of the most potent signifiers of the idea of inhabitation.

Yet, this balancing act between refusal and embracement is currently facing a new level of contestation. Core Design, the computer game company behind *Lara Croft* has developed a parkour game called *Free Running*, released worldwide on Play Station (PSP™) in fall 2005[12] , which features virtual look-alikes of the most prominent traceurs. Press statements claim that "*Free Running* offers authentic, intense excitement which is true to the spirit and art of parkour".[13] An ad campaign for the game is intended to run on screens in 500 European outlets of retailer Footlocker, which has exclusive rights to sell a new Adidas PK-shoe.[14] The trailer will feature a mix of the real-life exponents of free running and their computer-animated alter egos from the game. But these are not the only incidents by far in which free running organizations and companies have teamed up to promote a new image of the city. Urban Freeflow are proud to announce that they have carried out high-profile projects with a number of the world's most innovative companies, including Nokia, Toyota, Siemens, O2 and Eidos. The bigger the better. It is nearly impossible therefore to think about free running without noticing its complicity with the value systems that underpin the lifestyle industries and representational economies of contemporary urban life. This complicity offers an easy way into arguing a certain corruption of interests: free runners have begun to use the city much as companies use advertising – as an occasion to offer services for money. But drawing up a critique of this kind is not my intention here, nor would this be a particularly helpful point to make about today's urban culture. While the easy absorption of free running into the economy market may be indicative of a series of interests shared between free running organizations and the leisure industry (most notably a common interest in recognition and power), we may misunderstand the urban as an essentialist or constructed enclosure sustained by ever-persistent narratives.

What parkour mobilizes is a powerful rearticulation of the urban as a contested field, both physically and virtually. That is to say, parkour facilitates a certain notion of the urban as a site of struggle. More particularly, it presents urban experience as a struggle between different narratives and players caught up in a game of mutual attraction and rejection. It thus supports an unframing of dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion, local/global and audience/performer by exposing the dynamic fabric of the city in which inside and outside are not places assigned to particular practices or particular groups of individuals. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben points out that the threshold is not to be conceived as another thing with respect to the limit. It is rather "the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-*within* an *outside.*"[15] Thus the space of free running is always already the space of the city, a space whose threshold is in constant negotiation. What free running, along many other unscripted attempts of overcoming obstacles in the urban realm, offers to contemporary theory, is a stimulus to recover a complexity of the urban in which alternative practices are situated as possibilities co-existing with the city and not as its abuse, counterpart or outside. The achievement of free running is thus less the excitement produced through representations of breathtaking moves performed by a couple of attractive young people in spectacular environments. In this regard, it merely adopts the pose of a critique of the built environment whose power can be quickly dismantled by the media market. The merit and effectiveness of free running lie, from my perspective, in the tremendous amount of belief in the realities it has invented (let alone the reality that there is something named parkour) and in all realities to follow. In this sense free running is particularly successful among many narratives about the urban which have been presented as the truth and mistaken for fact. Its ability to win extraordinarily large audiences of believers may be partly founded on media response, but it is equally based on the dialogues it is able to create with a genuinely raised awareness of how much of our reality is open source. Collectively shared narratives that once seemed to explain the world have turned into networks of stories we use to create our own way of inhabitation. *Defy rules, defy gravity, climb higher, jump further, run faster* – the commands hurtling towards us in the free running computer game are not commands directed at our corporeal presence. They instead speak to our imagination. To mistake the computer game for reality would be to mistake the map for the territory. Equally, the thrill of free running attends less to the actual space captured in glossy photographs or sophisticated animations than to the space these images open up for something else.

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Store front in Nottingham

endnotes

1 Jeremy, 2005. *Art in Motion*. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.freerunning.net/ [online], accessed 04 June 2005. Urban Freeflow was founded in February 2003 and is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing free running communities. With over 20m hits a year, United Kingdom Parkour Association (http://www.parkour.org.uk), founded in November 2003, is the UK's national non-profit parkour organization and bills itself the #1 website for parkour worldwide.

2 George Hébert, *L'Education physique virile et morale par la méthode naturelle* (Paris: Vuibert, 1936).

3 The word parkour derives from "parcours du combatant," the phrase referring to the obstacle courses of Hébert's method.

4 *Yamakasi*, 2001, directed by Ariel Zeitoun and written by Luc Besson.

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