

Artist Collective Broken City Lab attempts to achieve civic change through their social practice and creative research. How does their work compare to the way the Situationists attempted to change the way we experience and/or engage with the city? Discuss why the Situationists are still relevant today, and are influencing social practice groups like Broken City Lab.

Poetry is in the Streets: Broken City Lab

If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus, the very kernel of the aesthetic regime: artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination¹. –Ranciere.

Broken City Lab is an interdisciplinary artist-led creative research collective and non-profit organisation from Ontario, Canada. The organisation attempts to achieve *civic* change in the city of Windsor through interventionist tactics so that the city can be encountered from a new perspective. Windsor is a collapsed post-Industrial city at the Southern most part of Canada. Their practice can be linked to that of the Situationists: it is intentionally not didactic, embraces intuition and freethinking; and focuses on the process, rather than the outcome.

The Situationist International were a group of artists, thinkers and revolutionaries formed in Paris in 1957. They were inspired by Dada and were extremely radical in their approach to art and life in general. They were highly influenced by Marx. The *Society of the Spectacle*, written by Guy Debord in 1967, is one of their most famous writings. In May, 1968, huge protests and strikes in Paris occurred due to general dissatisfaction with the Parisian government, western consumer capitalism and authoritarianism. Eleven million workers were on strike continuously for two weeks and the government almost collapsed.

There are similarities between the Situationists and current social practice groups, but also integral differences. Firstly, the Situationists intended to bring art closer to life: to blur the two. They have not been labelled specifically as an art movement (it is difficult to categorize them at all). Social practice groups also

¹ Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum International Publishing group, 2010), 140.

blur this line between art and life; though, with the Situationists, it is said to be more out of boredom and the desire for play than anything else. 'That which presently characterizes our public life is boredom. The French are bored. . . . Youth is bored. . . . General de Gaulle is bored.'²

Like the Situationists, social practices encourage a difference of opinion and are not didactic. However, they are not so much about boredom and play but are also not as overtly political. The Situationists used slogans such as, 'In a society that has abolished every kind of adventure, the only adventure that remains is to abolish the society'³. Though this is a specific message, they were encouraging independent thinking, anti-authoritarianism and difference of opinion through their perversity. Social practice groups like Broken City Lab take a more subtle political stance. They are implementing and developing new ways of doing things not simply to critique the government, but out of necessity. When people start implementing their own community projects/organisations without the aid of the government (or which are opposed to), the government is doing something wrong. The government is meant to be for the people. If the people aren't happy with the way it is, its purpose is lost.

Broken City Lab gives the city a kind of personality: the city 'speaks'. The city as a living being could be a metaphor for its people and history. Or even that the city really does have its own 'voice'. If we take the time to look at the *state* of the city, we can see a lot about what's going on socially, economically, politically and so on. Unfortunately most of us probably don't take much notice unless it gets in our way whilst we continue to 'commute, work, commute, sleep'⁴.

One of their projects involves making 3D retroreflective handmade cardboard letters and putting various sentences in particular places around the city. This

² Christine Harold, *OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.

³ May 1968 Graffiti". Accessed 24th of October, 2011. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>

⁴ "May 1968 Graffiti". Accessed 24th of October, 2011. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>

project is called *Make This Better* (2010) which is spelt out in a grassy area beside a derelict children's playground. Broken City Labs *poetry in the streets*⁵ takes a more passive approach than the Situationists. Though it could be seen as a kind of street art or graffiti, it is not at all crude or too in-your-face. It simply prompts a contemplation of the state of the city in the passers-by.



Broken City Lab, *Make This Better* (2010)

As simple as it sounds, it may often cross our minds that we created this 'civilization' for ourselves. Cities have been designed to somehow make our lives better. But how often do we dwell on the ease to which we can get around because of these developments? It is more common that we criticise the city and the transport that we use. People are often complaining that they cannot get to work quickly enough, that public transportation is not good enough. More highways are built so that people can travel more easily. We then wonder how

⁵ "May 1968 Graffiti". Accessed 28th of October, 2011. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>

the world became the way it is. We wonder how we have gotten to this stage where the natural physical world is *virtually* non-existent.⁶

The Situationists wanted to change the way people interacted with the city. They were concerned that due to capitalism and commercialism, people were living through the spectacle: rather than being active participants in their environment. Their idea of boredom is not as self-indulgent as one might think. Part of the problem of the spectacle, manifested by capitalism, is that life *can* be too easy. As the Situationists said, 'we don't want a world where the guarantee of not dying of starvation brings the risk of dying of boredom'.

The society of the spectacle is unarguably worse now, with many people being inward-looking and practically only living through digital technology. In the West, public spaces are filled with people on iPods, iPads or iPhones: instead of being places where communities interact with each other face-to-face and engage in critical dialogue. Instead, the place where dialogue is more likely to happen is through social media. One of the problems is that this is often an unrealistic representation of what is happening in the real world: as representations of things are fuelled by advertising and corporations who use the 'media' as a way to better the success of their multi-million dollar corporations.⁷

Dialogue through social media also means that your information and opinions are completely public (which is obviously good in some ways) but there is no privacy. Of course we have freedom of speech, but if everyone can see what we're doing and saying all the time it sort of defeats the purpose of free thought and therefore free speech. When thoughts and ideas become so public they become contrived and controlled. Broken City Lab and many other social

⁶ Obviously population growth is a huge factor in this and often city developments are made to accommodate a growing population.

⁷ An example of this is the *Occupy* movement where students (at least in Sydney and Melbourne) are notoriously using technology made by the '1%' they criticize to organise and publicise the protests.

practice groups encourage face-to-face-engagement. They are physically involved in the community.

Other than trying to *make things better* in their own city, Broken City Lab are also concerned that they don't have much contact with their neighbour, Detroit. Detroit (which is in the U.S.A.) and Windsor share a history of being automotive capitals. Though, plant closures and significant job losses in recent years have impacted their automotive manufacturing industries. Windsor has always been in Detroit's shadow, and now that Detroit's economy is falling so drastically, Windsor's future is looking bleak.

Broken City Lab organised to project a different message across the river once a week onto a building in downtown Detroit. This project is called *Cross-Border Communication* (2009). The first message said 'We're in this together'. All the messages are things Broken City Lab feels are necessary messages for Detroit. The *Windsor Detroit Border Crossing Micro-Grant* (2011 ongoing) is a project based on the concern that Windsor and Detroit have little communication and it is more difficult than it should be to cross from one city to the other. They are currently asking for people to give a reason (any reason) they want to cross the border. They will then give the participants a 'roundtrip tunnel bus ticket' to cross. They ask the participants to document their border-crossing experiences which they will then publish in a book. This project partly highlights the bureaucracy of something so simple as travelling a short distance.



Broken City Lab, *Cross-Border Communication* (2009).

Perhaps work like this is a reflection on the global financial crisis. Chair of the U.S.A. National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman, believes that social practices are in part a reaction to the government's scarce resources and challenged budgets (at least in the U.S.A.)⁸. The arts do serve a purpose politically, socially and economically and therefore the government are willing to support them. The arts can help to boost an economy, by attracting people to a particular place. Landesman says that where the arts are, the people come and where the people are the businesses come. In fact, this is the way gentrification happens- with artists first moving into an area, which isn't popular, that then becomes trendy because of the arts.

Another of Broken City Lab's projects was a collaboration with the Transit Authority called *Text In-Transit* (2009). Text-based works designed by members of the community were made to go on trains and buses. One reads, 'You made my day!' which is seen as a commuter looks up at the ceiling of the bus whilst travelling. The potential success of work like this is possibly greater than that of the Situationists because it is not as overtly radical.



Broken City Lab, *Text In-Transit* (2009).

⁸ ABC Radio National. "Supporting the US Arts Style". Rocco Landesman being interviewed by Amanda Smith, 10th of October, 2011.

One of the key practices for the Situationists is the theory of the *derive* which literally means 'to drift'. It is the act of wandering through the city and using only ones intuition as a guide: 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances'⁹. Like Broken City Lab, the Situationists wanted to explore the city in new ways, to see it through alternate lenses and to raise our awareness of its possibilities. The Situationists believed that cities have 'psychogeographical contours'¹⁰, constant currents and vortexes which almost completely prevent movement to or from certain areas. Chombart de Lauwe wrote in his study *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne* 'an urban neighbourhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighbourhoods have of it.'ⁱ

The Situationists were highly influenced by Marx. Though, they focused on critiquing consumer culture rather than the factory. In Broken City Lab, social practice and the situationist's practice, there is no hierarchy. Collaboration is very significant in social practices as it shows people 'working together' to achieve something. This is the case despite how big or small the achievement is. One of the best things we can do for society is set an example for which people may choose to live by. If we show something is possible, perhaps others will do it too.

Working as a group also goes against individualism and therefore could be seen as a socialist metaphor. Though, there is always a certain amount of individualism involved in any group situation. The individual is important in the collective just as the collective is important to the individual. Groups work well when there is an equal amount of input from individuals; each with their own ideas, decisions and input. Collaborative practices like Broken City Lab allow for each person's different skills to be utilised, for the benefit of all.

The Situationists have been a strong influence on Broken City Lab, and many other social practice groups. They all differ from other forms of art in that they

⁹ May 1968 Graffiti". Accessed 24th of October, 2011. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>

¹⁰ "Theory of the Derive". Accessed 28th of October, 2011. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>

are not didactic. Broken City Lab's work encourages and initiates a dialogue which may not have otherwise existed. It allows for difference of opinion, making it democratic and egalitarian. Both The Situationists and Broken City Lab focus on the process of their work, rather than expecting or hoping for a particular outcome. Broken City Lab's creative research and work within the community represent a new way of dealing with social and political issues that is both egalitarian and democratic.

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