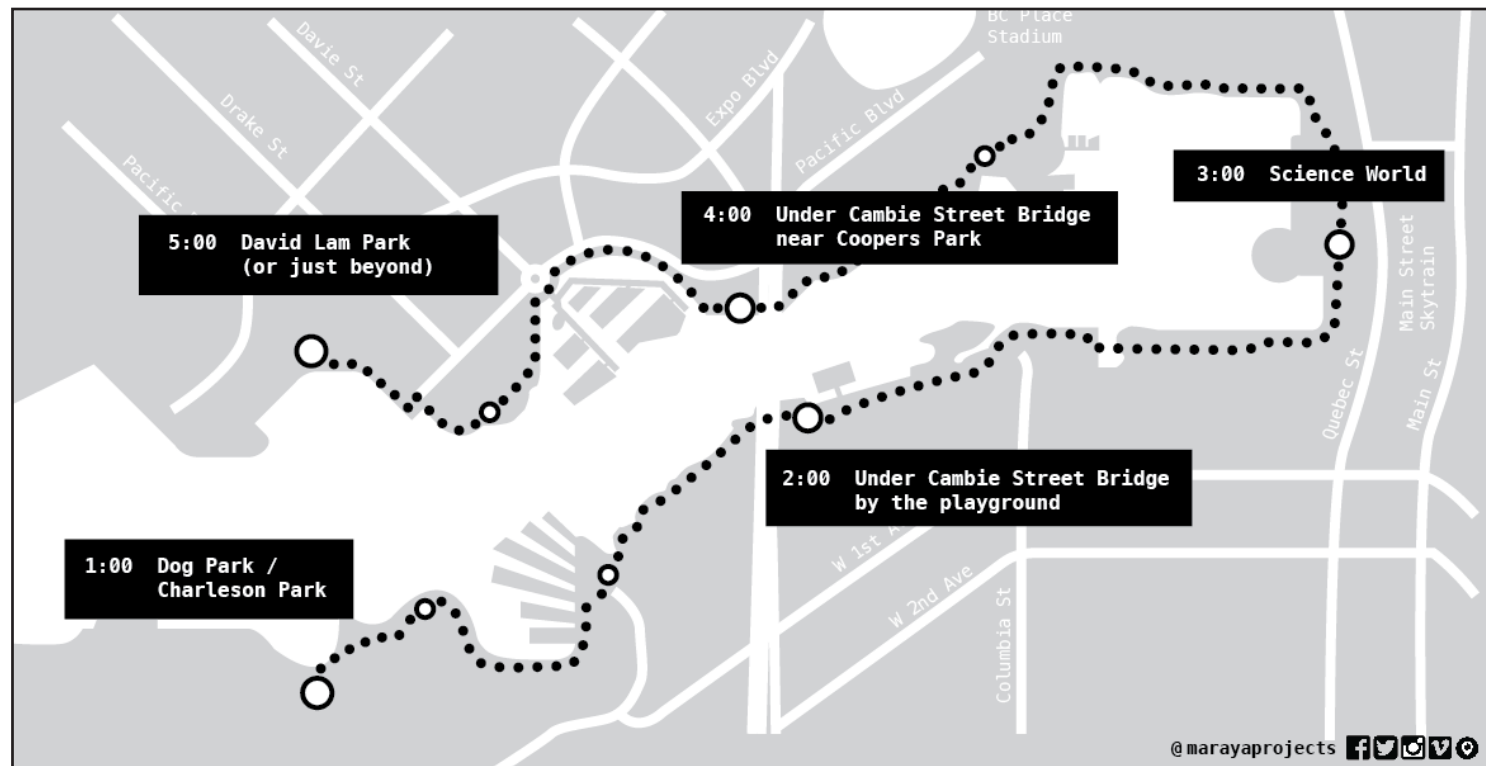


Free Public Programs



MARAYA: SISYPHEAN CART

M. Simon Levin,
Glen Lowry and
Henry Tsang

August 4 – 29, 2015

August 7, 7pm – Opening Reception
August 8, 2pm – Artist Talk
August 16, 1pm – Sisyphian Cart: False Creek Long Pull**
August 17, 7pm – ISEA Reception
August 22, 2pm – Roundtable with Trevor Boddy, Robert Ferry
& Elizabeth Monoian

**August 16 Sisyphian Cart: False Creek Long Pull
Join us at one of the locations below to take part in the
long pull around Vancouver's False Creek.
For more information please visit 221a.ca/maraya.

Maraya: Sisyphian Cart is a mobile 'sousveillance' cart that conducts a site-specific participatory spatial investigation of Vancouver's False Creek and the Dubai Marina. It premiered at the 20th International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) in Dubai in November 2014, and completes its second leg for ISEA 2015 in Vancouver. This custom-designed hand-drawn cart is mounted with an automated pan-tilt-zoom (PTZ) camera and pulled along both waterfront seawall paths. Imagery produced by the skyscraper-facing camera will provide alternative perspectives on this built environment, from vantage points that intentionally torque a conventional street-view perspective. Through a custom designed program, the PTZ camera searches for connections, similarities and anomalies, generatively remixing its HD video capture with imagery from its doppelganger. Archetypal architectural forms surround the camera, reflecting the master-planned urban landscape that in turn reflects the design and desire of lifestyle and capital that is so fluid and mobile in today's globalized economies. The cart itself, and significantly the pulling of it, invokes the spectre of labour—purposeful walking as a form of resistance to readily consumed images of idealized leisure—and the Sisyphian weight of this vision.

Meaning mirror or reflection in Arabic, *Maraya* focuses on the re-appearance of Vancouver's False Creek in the Arabian desert as the Dubai Marina. The Sisyphian Cart is the culmination of an ongoing investigation of these large-scale urban developments that share the same architects, engineers and urban planners by the Vancouver-based collaborative team of artists M. Simon Levin and Henry Tsang and cultural theorist/writer Glen Lowry. Previous projects by the *Maraya* project have included exhibitions at the Museum of Vancouver, ISEA2014 in Dubai, Art Dubai, Centre A, Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, outdoor projections and installations, public talks and walks, and an interactive online platform (marayaprojects.com).

The neighbourhoods of False Creek represent a new form of urbanism, heralded by architecture critic Trevor Boddy and others as Vancouverism, a homegrown response to an outmoded Manhattanism. Indeed, it was the transformation of the post-Expo '86 lands that attracted the attention of Dubai-based EMAAR Properties to realize a new version of False Creek in the Arabian Desert. As a result, Vancouver's towers of glass and steel set amongst urban waterfronts have become synonymous with an emerging global city built for and populated by newly mobile middle classes from the Middle East and Asia.

Against this backdrop, the Sisyphian Cart functions as a foil that challenges the audience to consider the vital social processes that are lost behind the proliferation of glass and steel facades. Cities as apparently distant and disparate as Vancouver and Dubai have become key sites in unfolding the narrative of neo-liberal mobilities. The historic flow of ideas, people and money between Vancouver to Dubai is a story that binds developers and planners to the goals of capital; it chronicles a zealous faith in returns on investment—rather than addressing concerns around affordable housing, public amenities and usability and the importance of growing civic involvement. We ask, what is missing in this spatial collusion of urban mega developments, real estate speculation and city planning? Is the promise of the livable city another marketing ploy to lure tourist dollars and the capricious flow of international investment? Set amidst the false "green" of Vancouver and the genuine "bling" of Dubai, the Sisyphian Cart reflects the desires of these cities to compete for attention on the world stage, upstaging the local inhabitants in the search for global capital.

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221A

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Tues–Fri 10am–5pm
Sat 12–5pm

Maraya: This Mirror or That? Urban Selves in Reflection

How do we see the city? How do we see ourselves reflected in the city? The conflation of subject (the one who looks) and object (the city s/he sees) is a central modernist concern. Defining the urban, understanding the impacts and advantages cities afford, remains crucial to informed debate about our political present and future. Given that the majority of artists, planners, architects, developers, entrepreneurs and academics choose to live and work in cities, it is less than surprising the discussion is sometimes heated. After all, seeing the city—taking up the task of representing urban space—often boils down to defining home (as unwieldy, psychologically disorienting, or politically conflicted as that might be). Entering into this space of dialogue and conflict, Maraya takes up the trope of the mirror. Featured in this installation, the mirror functions as a framing device, to think about questions of technology or know-how. By what means does one see—comprehend and talk about—a city? What language or languages do we need to bring to the table? How does a given verbal or visual vocabulary add to the conversation?

On screen, in magazines, art books, postcards, advertising posters and brochures, viewers are encouraged to view the city as a skyline. Our visual impressions of a city are informed by the view from a strategic vantage point—across a river, from a ship in the harbor, down from a mountain or tower. Seen from afar, the city appears to float, magically or majestically. It shines or menaces: Jerusalem or Babylon. Linking technology and urban representation, geographer Edward Soja suggests that the invention of the hot air balloon provided a radical new means of seeing the city; suddenly, planners and architects could approximate the bird’s eye view. Seeing their work from above, they might approximate an omnipotent perspective to map the city. Michel de Certeau’s canonical “Walking in the City” uses the example of Manhattan seen from the top of World Trade Centre to trouble a dominant perspective, and he reminds us that from this distance, the experience of the people on the streets—the walkers whose everyday experiences comprise the city as living organism—are lost. Their movements—our movements—are words on a page that are constantly written and rewritten, words beyond the grasp of a single set of eyes, beyond rational comprehension.

Different ways of seeing the city suggest different forms of technology—different prosthetic devices. Historically, artists have appropriated the bridge, boat, mountain path, road to help us see. Cameras affixed to cars, trains, planes, elevators, helicopters or airplanes have ensured that certain, perhaps privileged, cityscapes have become iconic. For example, visualize London across the Thames, Paris from Montmartre or the Eiffel Tower, New York City from the Brooklyn Bridge or Staten Island ferry, not to mention the Empire State Building or World Trade Centre, Hong Kong from the Victoria Harbour, or Rio de Janeiro from Corcovado mountain as seen over over the shoulder of Paul Landowski’s Christ the Redeemer. We might think also about how Vancouver’s False Creek, framed by the north shore mountains, or Dubai’s Burj Khaleefa, floating in the clouds above a sea of exploding developments that reach from the Persian Gulf back into an expanse

of Arabian Desert, strive to function within this visual realm. The city framed against a picturesque backdrop keeps the photographer out of view, eliding the seer.

Maraya’s mirrored imagery asks viewers to see themselves reflected in a process of urban development. In so doing, Maraya has sought to examine citizenship in relation to everyday experiences of being out in the city, or more concretely along its urban waterfront walkways. Taking the problem of seeing the city as not only a question of power, culture, or finance but also access to technology, we are interested in how new networks and electronic devices connect people and places. How do the mirrors we sit in front of during the day or those we recreate in front of at night provide new ways of seeing the city? How do the mirrors we carry in our pocket produce and ameliorate twenty-first century fragmentations of urban life and experience? How do these mirrors provide access to the old mirrors of knowledge and power? How are hopes and fears encoded in the hard surfaces of our mobile devices—glass, steel, and aluminum? de Certeau’s urban walkers who are constantly revising the urban text—visible but unreadable—now wander the sidewalks of every city armed with devices that add to a proliferation of urban images that over-saturate our outmoded imaginary.

Maraya began as a proposition, a research proposal in fact. The desire to collaborate and investigate questions of local urban culture brought together a team of investigators to look at questions organized around the specificity of urban growth. We were interested in how similar built forms were being developed and translated across a Vancouver-Dubai network. How might this example of global urbanism and mobility be seen in a mirror contorted by distance and the cultural differences separating these two cities? The cultural historians, geographers, theorists and other artists the project brought together have helped to consider how we see ourselves making work about the city or cities. As we have come to know the spaces around the urban waterfront in Vancouver and Dubai; we have to come to see how planned developments in these two cities fit within larger discussions of urban growth and twenty-first century geopolitics. Negotiating the literal and figurative distance between cities that are twelve time zones apart, with significant cultural difference, and a variety of other challenges, Maraya has come to see our own limitations as a crucial element in the project. This is the point at which you, the viewer, enters the frame.

The images—video and still—installed here at 221A tell the story of getting to know many other people, or having the rare opportunity to learn stories that make up the space between two cities: Dubai and Vancouver. The photographs and projections collected here are fragments of an expansive dialogue with these overlapping cities. They are documents of an unfolding process. This montage of images refract and reflect across a network of mirroring surfaces that continue to shape and reshape our urban environment. One need only step outside this gallery to see how energetically this transformation of steel, glass and concrete continues. Against these hard edges, Maraya has sought to stage social interactions and

develop collective meaning. Numerous individuals have lent their eyes and ears, hands and voices, have walked with us these past years. Each talk, classroom presentation, workshop, studio visit, meeting over coffee, dinner engagement, or casual conversation along the seawall or marina walk, has helped shape this work.

There are far too many individuals to thank here. However, we need to recognize the many groups of participants who are reflected in Maraya. The artists, curators, writers, scholars who form our professional network, or community, have been vital to the project’s inception and transformation. The residencies, studio visits, presentations, symposia, and publications that we have participated in have been crucial to conceptual development of the project. There are also our students. Maraya was initially funded as an academic enterprise, and as university professors, we have had the invaluable experience of working with students and colleagues at a number of universities in Canada, the UAE and elsewhere. The feedback we received from the course taught and from our many classroom visits, lectures and hands on workshops has informed how this project might work and how it could be taken up. Maraya is also deeply indebted to the everyday users of the seawall and Marina walkways. Chance encounters, meetings and discussions have been vital to our understanding of what we do or could do. The initial confusion, bewilderment, and puzzlement that gave way to dialogue and led to engagement has helped us to refine and reflect on Maraya’s proof of concept: that people do have a lot to say about where they are and what it means.

Whenever the Maraya: Sisyphean Cart is taken out on the seawall in Dubai and Vancouver, powerful experiences happen. We have come to know the cities we are working in very different ways and the participants, those who have contributed to the project by pulling the cart and passersby who have engaged with the mobile event, have provided the most consistent foil for our understanding of ourselves and the urban differences linking Dubai and Vancouver. In this spirit, I would like to mention one group of seawall users who we met late in the project. Both visible and invisible, Paul’s Club has helped us to think about our project in relation to a different form of urban access. Paul’s Club is a walking group for people with young onset dementia. The opportunity to collaborate with the group gave impetus to think about the role of city development as it relates to health and well-being. Coming to understand that Vancouver’s seawall is more than leisure space, more than a luxurious gesture of the beautiful city, we were invited to consider how urban space functions for those who face considerable physical and emotional challenges. How are the spaces documented here crucial to their ability to remain physically and socially engaged? Interacting with this group, we had to ask how access to a contemporary art platform—representation in the white cube—might help those for who language and memory are daily challenges. Would the members of Paul’s Club be interested in helping to pull the cart? How might respecting their embodied experiences open up the space of dialogue we’ve sought to develop. Looking at our imagery, the video and

photographs they helped produce, would they see themselves reflected in our versions of this city? How might this artwork—the work of pulling the cart seeing reflections of themselves surrounded by the city they live in—help these individuals to maintain a sense of self and respect for their social identities?

As we thought about how this group of users, for whom health and wellness are matters of everyday concern—not an afterthought in a political stump speech or our public lecture—might come to interact with the project, we were confronted with questions about visibility (invisibility) and privilege, not simply who gets left off-screen or out of the picture, but how are those included read or seen.

The ideals Maraya worked with over the past seven years, based as they are in a desire to activate social engagement by providing a platform for democratic discussions of city building, raise difficult questions of inclusion. They also provide a vital opportunity for critical self-reflection, to see ourselves reflected in the mirror of urban development and the neo-liberal aspirations of a new urbanism captured here: call it, Vancouverism; call it, the Dubai phenomenon. Looking at these images, we are encouraged to reflect on questions of language and culture, expertise and knowledge, but also memory, ability and embodiment. Who else or what else do you see reflected in our urban mirrors? What role does memory play in these reflections? How does language enter the frame? Thinking about access to mirrors, the right to urban representations, what patterns of neighbourliness do we need to build to ensure that our cities preserve accessible blue spaces (water) and green spaces (parks)? What small gestures of recognition and acceptance do we need to perform daily to ensure that the Right to the City (Lefebvre) is not monopolized by the young and able-bodied: the hyper-kinect cyclists, dog walkers, roller bladers, school kids, and joggers? Standing alongside the many people represented here, can we ask again by what differences is one marked artist, curator, researcher, teacher critic, or friend?