



Writing around a practice: walking around the city

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Abstract

This paper posits artist's writing as a form of wandering. The artist/author uses wandering as a methodology for the conception and realisation of his visual works. The paper wanders through the three fields of inquiry the artist sees recurring in his work; it explores the geometries of the urban grid and its architecture, the historical and critical significance of Minimal Art and the haptic and aesthetic experience of walking in the city.

The paper considers the historical developments leading to the adoption and proliferation of the grid as the dominant organising principle of the modern city and it reflects upon the effects such a totalising structure has on its inhabitants and subsequently on artists. It looks at instances in literary and art history when walking in the city was seen to have the possibility to be an aesthetic practice. Finally, it reconsiders the phenomenological presence of the Minimal Art object and question whether it can be ascribed to the experience of walking in the city.

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I had originally intended to photograph one window, the same window every day, over the course of 348 days. These 348 windows would be reassembled to remake the building's structure. I had wanted to explore how modernist architecture was made up of the same element repeated many times.

As I was not using a telephoto lens, I framed a photo that showed several of the windows of a section of the Berolinahaus. I took the picture from one end of the Alexanderplatz S-Bahn platform. A small portion of the 'Platz' of the Alexanderplatz is also seen in one corner the photo. I took a series of four photos, putting the camera down and lifting it to my eye between each shot. When I returned the next day I positioned myself at the same spot and took a new series of three photos, all of the same view as the day before.

My task soon became one of gathering as many shots as possible from this same spot. I limited myself to a series of two to six shots per visit and one visit per day. I returned whenever it was possible to take a new series of photos. The process began in September 2006 and ended when I left Berlin in the summer of 2007. In all, I took 159 photos.

As the photos show, the same spot was always the same, yet different, continually changing with the time of day, weather conditions, the seasons and with the passing of traffic and pedestrians. Not to mention with the different marketing campaigns of the clothing retailer in the Berolinahaus. In the background the urban renewal of Berlin reveals itself as a fluctuating landscape of workers' caravans and construction equipment.

Through the process of shooting these 159 photos, I took on a manner of interacting with the movement, rhythm and repetition of the city. I followed the pattern set by commuters as I walked from my home to the railway station, but I broke with the pattern, as I stopped at the platform without boarding the train. Also my visits to the spot on the platform had no regularity. I took the photos at different times of day, and with very little regularity to the days on which I did, or did not, shoot. While the pictures I took were framed spatially by the rigid architecture and layout of the city, I let my own schedule and intuition direct the timing of my actions; the temporal framing of the shots came from a random and spontaneous approach.

As with the project described above, I often gather material for my artwork by wandering the city. Cities that I have lived in and the cities I visit. I look for, record or draw upon the everyday, the unnoticed, the repetitive and relentless phenomena that constitute the urban experience of modernity; I look to places and situations where I believe the underlying structures and unstated interests of the city are revealed. For the most part, my wandering is done on foot. Although I use different media and different approaches in my work, walking is the underlying recurring motif of my practice and also its dominant media.

In order to further explore the mobile wandering gaze of the urban walker, I deliberately avoid exhibiting work in a way that requires a stationary listening place or prolonged watching from a fixed position by the viewer. In the presentation of my work, which often takes the form of room-sized photo, video or audio installations, the visitor will have to walk through or around different elements and structures of the installation to watch, to see or to listen.

The 159 photos are regularly arranged and evenly spaced over a four metre long wall in the art gallery. They are hung in columns that stretch from the floor to the ceiling. The three-centimetre gap between the images makes for a near perfect grid that covers the entire wall. When one is faced with the challenge of looking at all the photos of the same view, one tends to let one's gaze wander away from the individual images to the larger structure of the exhibition. The scale of the work (each of the photos measures 30 x 45 cm) acts as an invitation to the spectator to walk into the space, to see all the photos, but also to experience the grid of images as an entity unto itself, an entity which reveals itself in the spectator's presence, through their perceptions and following their movements.

My practice as a visual artist lies somewhere within a triangle, whose three corners point to: the geometries of the urban grid and its architecture; to the history of Minimal Art; and to the experience of walking in the city. Writing about (and researching) each of

these as cultural, social and aesthetic phenomena is a means to negotiate the triangle; I use writing to make the connections that allow me to find a space in which to work.¹

Writing around my practice, a bit like walking in the city, is a process of wandering; wandering through different moments in art history, through a diversity of artistic practices, through an array of aesthetic, social and cultural references. This ‘wandering through writing’ allows me to collect fragments, which I subsequently link together to form a cultural and historical context for my art practice.

It is believed that a traveller brought the urban grid layout from Mohenjo-daro in the Indus valley to ancient Greece. When the Greek city of Miletus was rebuilt between the Fifth and the Third centuries BCE, it was designed in a regular grid layout. The ancient Greeks used the grid as a means of harmonising their cities with nature by aligning the streets so that they opened unto views of the surrounding landscape, thus bringing nature into the rationalised matrix of the city. While the modern grid, in Rosalind Krauss’s words, “turns its back on nature”,² the regulated street layout of ancient Miletus was aligned so as to unite the city with its natural surroundings.

When the newly independent United States of America appropriated parts of the colonial Spanish law of the Indies as guidelines for the urban planning of its rapidly emerging and growing cities, the grid layout became the archetype for the spatial form and organising structure of the modern capitalist city. And the continental dominance of rationalised, compartmentalised and regulated city layouts was put into motion in North America.³

In 1811 the Commissioners’ Plan for New York City was drawn up for the development of the city above Houston Street. The one hundred and fifty-five numbered streets and twelve numbered avenues not only assured ease of orientation for the city dwellers and visitors in New York, it also facilitated commerce and the buying, selling and development of real estate. In *The Grid Book*, in her chapter on the urban grid, which she calls the gridiron, Hannah Higgins summarises the critique of the rationalised efficiency of the American city layout “...the gridiron in the United States of the Industrial Revolution embodies the mechanical efficiency and rational organization of the mass-production enterprise.”⁴

1. As a visual artist, I work with, in this order of frequency, video, photography, sound recording, film, text and drawing. At times I will also use other techniques, drawing from traditional art making processes, to new media technologies. While my work will at times incorporate textual elements, both original and borrowed, I also use writing, as in this case, as a process by which to better understand and communicate my practice.
2. Krauss, Rosalind, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 9, Cambridge, MIT press, 1986
3. In 1573 Spain adopted the Laws of the Indies to regulate the governance and urban planning of its colonial communities in the Americas. According to Wikipedia “The Laws specified a square or rectangular central plaza with eight principal streets running from the plaza’s corners.” Most of Spanish America’s cities were built to this form, which echoed the layouts of the pre-colonial settlements of South America.
4. Higgins, Hannah B., *The Grid Book*, pp. 70-71.

Growing up in North America, I first experienced the modern city as a vast and complex three-dimensional grid based matrix, its centre composed of towering steel and glass rectangular cubes, grid based forms. Re-examining the gridiron layout of the American city and the rational geometry of modern urban architecture, I now understand them as at once accommodating and concealing abstract power structures. Invisible yet present, these structures manifest themselves in uniquely modern urban spaces, which fulfil neither the societal nor familial roles that the streets and squares of older urban models did.⁵

Both the layout of the modern city and the dominant architectural paradigms of the Twentieth Century⁶ have helped to produce new kinds of space. The rationalised and controlled nature of the modern city has led to the development of urban spaces characterised by what Henri Lefebvre called “homogeneity and fragmentation.”⁷ These are characteristics, due in part to the industrial mass production, of architectural elements and building materials, but also to modern mechanisms of control and surveillance.

In the modern city, whose spatial efficiency is based on a logic of regulation and conformity, the repetitive nature of architectural forms and urban space permeates the temporal landscape. Modern architectural forms and the regulated grid layout are coherent and repetitive in their structure. They, and the automated forms of traffic control, not to mention mechanised transport, impose a regulated temporality on the individual’s movements and experience of the city.

While repetitive elements incessantly punctuate the timescape of the post-industrial city, time is also rhythmic in the modern urban landscape. The city is characterised by a complex *mélange* of rhythmic and repetitive temporal forms.⁸ The rhythmic movement of the sun as it casts changing shadows on the streets and architecture counterbalances the repetitive temporality of the mechanised city. Our own bodies also impose their rhythm on our experience of the city, at times we are keeping step with the city’s repetitive structure, at others, we lose sync and improvise to our own (heart) beats. Walking, as a means of traversing space with our bodies rhythmically, perhaps offers us the most efficient means of connecting ourselves with the rhythm of the city, potentially a way of

5. Henri Lefebvre (who wrote primarily about Paris after Baron von Haussman’s social and political rationalisation of its street plan) wrote this about the modern city street. “The medieval city was not a site of circulation, but an interconnected complex site of (familial, social and economic) exchange. The modern city (street) is dominated by the (abstract) circulation of goods and people.” (Lefebvre, Henri, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, p. 90)

6. Here I am referring primarily to the influence of the Bauhaus school.

7. Lefebvre, Henri, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, p. 210.

8. Henri Lefebvre in his essay “Rhythmanalysis”(Lefebvre, Henri, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, p.191) differentiates between rhythmic time and repetitive time. While rhythmic time is cyclical, repetitive time is regular and quantified. Rhythmic time, in the form of waves, vibrations or revolutions generally has a favourable effect upon us. Repetitive time tends to be monotonous and annoying.

subverting the fragmented homogeneity of its mechanical, repetitive elements.⁹

While the regulated, coherent forms of the urban grid and modern architecture control and affect our experience of the city, the complex articulation of these structures allow for gaps to appear within their geometry. It is in these gaps, these spaces between the lines of the grid, that the disinterested urban walker, the *flâneur*, and the artist will feel free to wander.¹⁰ Historically, we can identify moments where walking in the city became both a subversive and an aesthetic act. The first modern appearance of the aesthetic walker would have been the *flâneur*, identified by the poet Charles Baudelaire incarnated through his life and writings. The *flâneur's* economic disconnectedness and moral indifference¹¹ allowed him to roam the streets of Nineteenth Century Paris, without apparent purpose.¹²

In the Twentieth Century, the Paris Dadaists proposed excursions to overlooked places in the city, transforming insignificant urban space into art by simply occupying it temporarily. Affected by the, then still present, technological destruction and moral devastation caused by the Great War, the Dadaists saw walking as a way of claiming Paris as a readymade. For the first Dada excursion, the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre was chosen as the most suitable destination, for its banal uselessness. Banal, as it was familiar, situated in the Latin Quarter and not far from where the participants lived. Useless, as it was abandoned and of little historical or architectural importance.¹³

In the 1920s, André Breton, influenced by the Dada excursion, proposed the Surrealist *déambulation*. The Paris based Surrealists looked for spaces outside the city in which to wander (or *déambule*). The *déambulation* took place in the non-space of the countryside, (the sites were chosen at random) as it was seen as space lacking referents, more conducive to getting lost, to unconscious wandering.

After the war, the Situationists proposed an experimental way of transgressing the rational logic of the modern city. The *dérive* as it was named, and practised, was described in the journal *Internationale Situationniste* as follows: "A mode of experimental behaviour

9. Michel de Certeau describes walking in the city as an individual's negotiation of an abstract power structure. By walking in the city the individual can renegotiate and circumvent that structure of power. (de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 84)

10. Referring to Michel de Certeau's concept of space, Marc Augé writes that space is more abstract a term than place – it is a distance between, or a non-defined area. The space of the city thus implies our moving through it. We can only understand it by traversing it. (Augé, Marc, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, pp. 83-85)

11. Walter Benjamin saw this uniquely urban, and uniquely post Eighteenth Century figure as possessing new, modern, forms of behaviour and response to his surroundings. He sees the *flâneur* as being a historical first, an individual totally disconnected emotionally and spiritually from his social, familial and cultural environment. (Benjamin, Walter, *Reflections*, p. 156)

12. I write of the *flâneur* here in the masculine gender, as in Nineteenth Century Paris it was a behaviour permitted only to men and only to a certain class. For a feminist reading of the *flâneur's* female counterpart the *flâneuse*, the Parisian prostitute, please see Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity."

13. Although now, because of the Dada excursion, that may no longer be the case.

linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances.”¹⁴ This behaviour bypassed the accepted rules of urban geography proscribed by capitalism and replaced them with a ‘psycho geography’ of collective and individual thoughts, affections and ambiances.

The Dada excursion, the Surrealist *déambulation*, and the Situationist *derive*, are all examples of how urban walking can be seen as an aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) practice. They were, in essence, activities carried out by poets, novelists and writers. Baudelaire’s *flâneur* was essentially a literary figure; his aesthetic walks, and the examples mentioned above, were all derivations of literary practices. While these forms of aesthetic walking certainly influenced many fields of artistic practice, we have to look to the 1960s and 1970s to see the emergence of walking as an artform practiced by visual artists. I believe that we also need to look to Minimal Art to understand how walking could be construed as a visual art practice.

Walking, as an aesthetic experience, can be connected historically and epistemologically to the phenomenological and interactive presence of the Minimal Artwork. I would speculate that the experience of the walk resides in the distance between the walker and his or her surroundings. I link the experience of walking, the presence of the walker, with that of the viewer of the Minimal Art object. That is to say that the walk, (aesthetic or otherwise) is experienced in the space between the walker, through his or her sensory perception, and the landscape (urban or otherwise) the walker passes through.

In 1967, the art historian and critic Michael Fried published in *Artforum* his now famous essay, *Art and Objecthood*.¹⁵ In it Fried wrote about the theatricality of Minimal Art. Lacking ‘presentness’ a Minimal sculpture could not be understood as an aesthetic entity unto itself, but needed the physical and perceptual interaction with the spectator to be complete.¹⁶ Fried wrote of the relationship as theatrical. According to Fried’s critique, the spectator would become an integral part of the art experience. If the work was the

14. Careri, Francesco, *Walkscapes: Walking as an aesthetic practice*, p. 97

15. Michael Fried’s article was written partly in response to another article written in 1966 in *Artforum*. The sculptor Tony Smith wrote about a drive he took with his students in the 1950s along an unfinished section of the New Jersey Turnpike. He wrote of the journey along the dark, unlit, non-delineated strips of black asphalt as a “revealing experience.” He remarked on how, although the landscape was artificial, it was not art, yet it had the liberating effect of a reality that (until then) “had not had any expression in art.” (Careri, Francesco, *Walkscapes: Walking as an aesthetic practice*, p. 121) Smith’s drive along the unfinished, empty freeway was significant because it posited that the journey itself could be an art form. His journey, and his later account of it, are also significant in determining the development that Minimal Art, its later metamorphosis into Land Art, and I would argue, walking as an art form, would take.

16. Francesco Careri, in *Walkscapes: Walking as an aesthetic practice*, describes Minimal sculpture as an inert, dead object, an object that however had a new relationship with its space and its viewers. “But it is an object that imposes a certain distance and has a new relationship with its space, it is a character without internal life but, at the same time, it takes possession of the space, forcing the observer to participate, to share an experience that goes beyond the visible and that addresses, like architecture, the entire body, its presence in time and space.” (Careri, Francesco, *Walkscapes: Walking as an aesthetic practice*, p. 138)

stage, set, (and perhaps script), the spectator, by moving around the work, would take on the dual role of the audience and the actor. Defenders of Minimal Art subsequently appropriated Fried's criticism. In it, they found an argument for the phenomenological nature of the Minimal Artwork.

Setting this possibility for art to be experienced, as Michael Fried indirectly did, led to the development of visual art forms that would be based more on its own presence, its interaction with the viewer, and the space around it, than on any tendency towards craftsmanship, mimesis, figuration or expression. In the 1960s artists began to reduce their work to simple clean geometric forms. They sought to produce artworks that had virtually no 'artistic' presence, thus opening the artwork up to an interaction with the space around them and with their viewers.¹⁷

It is reasonable to assume that the rationalised geometry of the modern city influenced the form Minimal Art took. But if we liken the geometric structure of the gridiron city to Minimal Art forms, we can use Fried's model to describe the experience of the urban pedestrian. We can see the buildings and city streets, not as static forms, but as phenomenological sites of subjective experience.

We can look to the experience of the Minimal Artwork as a model for us to experience the city, as a means to negotiate the rigidity of its logic, and its complex socio-political structure. As a subjective experience, the city's presence is as much temporal as it is spatial. Through the fundamentally spatio-temporal activity of walking, we experience the city by moving through it. We know the city through our distance from it, through the space and time that separates us from its complex presence.

17. As an example of the form Minimal Art could take, consider Carl Andre's rolled steel floor pieces. These works served to define the space around them while themselves occupying the only the lowest periphery of the space. The viewer could enter and occupy the space, walking over the array of steel tiles. With Andre's floor pieces, walking becomes an integral part of the experience of the artwork.

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