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cultural geographies in practice

Walking and looking

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Two years ago, extremely pleased to be asked by David Pinder to contribute to a session on ‘Urban explorations’ at the annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), I gave a short paper designed as a comment on Tim Brennan’s work, *Mercator manoeuvre*.¹ In the paper, which I delivered after Brennan’s work and to the same people who had experienced it, I attempted to raise some questions about the relationship between walking and looking. Brennan’s work, which often uses the form of the guided walk and usually involves an audience following the artist on a route established by him, is intent on offering a number of overlapping critical perspectives on historical and geographical organisation. For example, in *Mercator manoeuvre* the artist takes his route from the line of sight offered by a statue of Ernest Shackleton on the outside of the RGS building, then proceeds to take a tour of certain monuments in Hyde Park opposite. Brennan links many of these monuments thematically to concepts of historical and contemporary colonialism, suggesting that architectural and design decisions made over centuries can be read as an index of cultural and political power.

We walk with Brennan until he stops by a statue, a lake, a tree, a signpost, to read out a quote. The quotes are usually tangential in their relation to the object or view we are contemplating at the time and chosen to make us make connections: each one is cleverly woven into the fabric of an overarching concept, which we pick up, in time. My paper attempted to link the various concepts of geographical and architectural hegemony suggested by Brennan in his performance to a series of broader concerns about the ways in which walking has been and is being conceived as an artistic device. Of great interest to me are the similarities – and differences, as I hope to begin to explicate here – between walking as an activity that is seen to open up previously inaccessible spaces to research, and walking as a mode that demonstrates the limits of, or homogeneous construction of, such space. When we experience – ‘participate in’ – a walk such as Brennan’s, we are asked to walk, look and think simultaneously across a historical breadth. This is a profoundly demanding thing to be asked to do; it is certainly not a natural or easy procedure. In histories of art, any attempt at an easy confluence of looking and walking, or looking and moving, is unsettled by such difficulty. How might such an idea effect contemporary cultural geographic thought?

I delivered my paper under the Albert Memorial, which felt uncomfortable. This discomfort is telling, and not simply because I have an aversion to the way in which contemporary academia has so readily grasped a performance register which it is often ill equipped to inhabit. My more conceptual discomfort forced questions of looking, walking (and at this point listening) to the fore as difficult and contradictory modes. These questions, ontological, political, drive a confrontation between recent forms of contemporary art that use walks and tours as material and broader shifts in humanities research that have sought a more intimate relationship with their subject. Within contemporary art, there is a movement towards producing work that is, to use current jargon, 'socially engaged' and 'relational'. Work produced, as many commentators have pointed out, often resembles anthropological, ethnographic or sociological fieldwork in its methodology and outcome. This mode of production often makes assumptions about artistic access to concepts of sociality, and the way in which 'everyday life' might be utilized as part of an artistic affect. Walking is often a mode or methodology of such work. And ontologically, politically, the specific problem faced by an artist is made manifest in questions of outcome: how to cross the divide between fieldwork and representation, if the economy of your profession demands enunciated product? The ethical concerns that lie behind such questions have also forced geographical research to shift ground.

Over a number of years I have been gathering information on artworks that are either produced or experienced by walking, sometimes both, and have been thinking about how such works are translated, sometimes in a contradictory fashion, into wider paradigms of travel, movement and social access in contemporary culture. Most but not all of these works have at some point been described as 'public art'. Some take place in the countryside, most take place in or on the outskirts of cities. Many of the works are seen principally not as live actions 'in the field' or 'on the street' (to bring in two 'sites' of what might be termed cultural-geographical activity that have provided for an amount of contemporary art-theoretical fetishisation), but as documentary evidence, graphically rearranged, modelled and displayed in the gallery or studio. All, intentionally or not, draw in ancient and modern mythologies of walking – from pilgrimages and diasporas to flâneurisms and dérives – as part of their effect.

In contemporary debates about the ethics of public art and 'social engagement' (i.e. what public art should be seen to do and not do 'for' its audience), walking-as-art has been proposed as a radical method of reconceptualizing the way in which images in and of public space are produced (e.g. Debord's *Naked city*, Acconci's *Following piece*, Long's *A line made by walking*, Abramovic and Ulay's *Great Wall walk*, Wodiczko's *Alien staff*, Muller's *Border crossings*, Alÿs's *Paradox of practice*, Cardiff's *The missing voice (case study B)*, Tiravanija's *Untitled (from Madrid Airport to Reina Sofia)*). Yet the push-me, pull-you effect of making an ordinary task such as walking into an artwork is illustrative of the many contradictions inherent in contemporary discussions about aesthetic practices and their ability to transform social life. Making an 'art' out of something ordinary – making it 'artful' – implicates the maker in the production of objects with special, but perhaps mendacious or illusory, status. The art of modernity can in many senses be read as a battle between the ordinary and the

specialist, between new forms of elitism and constant attempts to emancipate such forms. On the one hand artworks define their own unique space, and on the other they are designed to tackle the accusations of irrelevance levelled at them by new modes of social and philosophical thought – indeed, since the 1960s, artworks have often developed into (close approximations of) social and philosophical thought. Which is why walking, as an activity that is usually invisible but that can become visible, that is usually unremarked but that can become fully choreographed, that is usually useful but that can become useless, and that always dallies between conscious and unconscious decision-making, is attractive. This attraction is partly based on a desire to avoid stabilizing or reifying forms of representation (and here contemporary artistic practice is, like many other cultural practices, influenced by 20th-century political and philosophical shifts). Many of these artworks are made by artists who grapple with the efficacy of public and site-related art and the ethical suppositions that surround these complex and often ambivalent forms.

Walking, in this sense, is one marker of an economy of art in which the desire for process-based, participatory, embedded experience has replaced ideals of abstracted contemplation for reasons that compound a schism between ethical engagement and aesthetic representation. Walking has enchanted us precisely because of its own unfinished nature, because it does not seem to acquire a regulatory air, because it is a proposal, not even a maquette or a map, that which Giorgio Agamben would call a ‘means without end’. It offers no problematic resolution, and so ties in with a whole series of philosophical strategies of undoing, evading, revoking the legislative. It is enchanting because it offers a way of ‘writing’ the landscape that does not seem to be colonial; that does not striate (c.f. Deleuze and Guattari). Writers such as Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, James Clifford and Michel de Certeau have proposed this unmarking or sub-legally arranging strategy as an alternative to more Foucauldian analyses of spatial discourse. Passing through yet knowing space intimately, engaging in primordial acts that resemble processes of democratic urgency and yet refraining from any ensuing systematization, it is assumed that the artist/walker comes and goes, does no harm. It is assumed that the artist loves and seeks to protect the landscape through which he moves. Walking, it is presumed, produces choreography that is inflected with, but not controlling of, the social.

Thus, at the 2003 RGS conference, we meet in a park, below a Prince Regent, to share a concern with the broadly connected though specifically articulated empirical heritage of our disciplines in order to advance a more radical poetics, once on the edges, but now very much part of the mainstream of our theoretical economies. Superficially, walking connects us as an audience. We are also connected by a desire to loosen certain affiliations, in each of our disciplines, with monumentalism. These connections, this transdisciplinarity, produces conceptual movements that seek to undermine the static terms of representation that dog us all.

In his contribution to the anthology *Occupying architecture* (the title of which intends already to unpick a concern for the represented in building design), Mark Cousins describes architecture as a ‘weak’ discipline. He suggests that architecture’s weakness,

far from structural, is conceptually definitive. Architects are reliant on others, the work is collaborative, process-based, it comes as a supplement to more stable disciplines.

The practice of any 'weak discipline' is authorised not by the formal knowledge but by the subjective and ultimately unconscious relations to that knowledge. I am trying to put this in as formal a way as I can so that it does not sound just mystical. It is not mystical at all. It is real and it is absolutely intelligible.²

This concept of weakness is of course for Cousins extremely positive – it is, indeed, a factor that defines architecture as a very contemporary, ethical idiom. In this way, he suggests that we might be able to experience architecture outside its previously monumentalizing orthodoxies. Weakness is useful, as it positions the designer, the maker, in closer relationship to those bodies that use the building; it draws two important bodies together, in occupancy, in space.

This concern with weakness, brought up by Cousins in relation to architecture and by many before him in relation to physics, philosophy, mathematics, social organization, is also a major metaphor in contemporary art where, in certain types of practice, particularly those concerned with social engagement, it remains an undisclosed truism. The choice of weakness as a stance or position from which to enunciate or act is usually political, in that it challenges previous forms of 'strength.' It is thus an ethical choice, and one that might be said to have racked disciplinary (and some interdisciplinary) procedures over the second half of the 20th century. Weakness legitimates uncertainty as a guiding factor, and privileges a concern for the small-scale over the large and the local over the global in relation to research across a variety of disciplines. Weakness has been imagined as a mode in which small and local gestures would take precedence over large and imposed value systems, in an interdisciplinary arena that values the aporetic over the semantically and politically closed.

This focus on weakness is woven into histories of recent art. Examples of artistic practices that seek to offer alternative economies of production aimed at agencing everyday life instead of individual artistic practice include Thomas Hirschorn's 2002 *Bataille monument* at Documenta 11, Atelier van Lieshout's various constructions of social space, from mini-housing and office buildings to toilets and bedding, Nils Norman's 2001 *Geocruiser*, Artlab's outdoor cinemas and installation spaces, and Ella Gibbs's *Spare time job centre* at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, in 2003. Many of these works, be they real architectural or conceptually suggestive interventions in or outside gallery spaces (sometimes both), attempt to construct social spaces in which viewers control the way in which the work is read and produced. Superficially, these are attempts at a practice that replaces the authority of the artist with weaker or 'minor' structures of collective decision-making and living. Weakness, in arts discourse, is often linked to the status of the spectator, in architecture to the status of the user (of the building, of the street). To adopt the position of the spectator or the user, this logic suggests, is to assume a position that is ethically enhanced, since the weakness of the non-artist is more acceptable than the imposed power of the artist (power that is, to impose aesthetic judgements, to impose judgements of socioeconomic position on

those who do not necessarily share those things). The attraction of walking is that it is seen as a weak activity, and to focus on walking is to focus on spatial and social productions that are rendered weak or produced through a weak position.

Michel de Certeau begins to elucidate the paradoxes of such a weak position in relation to what he terms 'ordinary' subjectivity: 'The space of a tactic is the space of the other ... a tactic is an art of the weak.'³ He begins *The practice of everyday life*, in a reference to Freud, with a preface '[t]o the ordinary man'. He goes on: 'To a common hero ... I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents.'⁴ His initial concern is with the traditions of sociology, anthropology and ethnography that, despite a modern understanding of their role as part of an imperial classifying system, still look upon the subject of study as a grouped, identical representation; still use 'zoom lenses' to detect 'parts taken for the whole', cutting out 'metonymic detail' in favour of metaphoric assumption. This Certeau immediately equates with 'democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics', in which people appear like a continuous mass, 'who lose names as they become a ciphered river of streets'; and thus begins a study of people's existence in the (European, modernist) city, whose ability to become nameless – to lack 'proper name' – is tied inimically to ways of moving physically within a mass.⁵ This lack of a 'proper name' gives Certeau his key to describing certain ways of behaving in the city which he suggests resist classification. Ordinary man becomes for Certeau an 'oracle', and the desire is to write him in a way that shows him coming 'before texts', unavailable statistically, unaccountable and thus, for Certeau, resistant to the procedures of social and cultural governance from above. Like all guerrilla tactics, invisibility is a key to survival.

Certeau is well known for constructing an influential theoretical narrative on walking in the city, as David Pinder has pointed out in his introduction to this volume. Whilst there are clear links between Certeau's descriptive divisions between 'high' and 'low', scopic and immersive, experiences of the city and many of the ethical concerns of contemporary cultural practice, his use of ideas on visibility and blindness in *The practice of everyday life* exemplify a critical lacuna in most discussions of walking and cultural production. It is perhaps in this contradictory theoretical space that a difference between uses of walking can be examined, a difference that is demonstrated in the relationship between an artistically produced walk and a walk that is culturally significant in other terms.

Certeau begins his text 'Walking in the city' with a description of the change of view that occurs when one looks down on a city from a height. He accredits the formulation of a 'texturology' via this view.⁶ This ability to see the texture of the city is opposed to an ongoing, unconscious and non-institutionalized 'writing' that occurs 'down below'. Certeau suggests that to look is to know; to move is not to know, or to know differently. He details a contrast between low-invisible-moving and high-invisible-static that acts as a central metaphor throughout his writing. Further, he suggests that the low position is a position of blindness whilst the high position is one which uses the ability to see to further the production of power. Certeau uses the ability to visualize as a Euclidean form of spatial organisation in which 'visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions' are

placed together.⁷ Against this he posits the everyday. But might the everyday be imagined as more strategic than this?

If walking is a weak tactic in Certeau it is due to its invisibility, the way it is practised rather than represented. Any more strategic encounter in the city is unimaginable in Certeau's structure. The dream is 'always being in the other's place without possessing it', yet that place is not negotiable, as it is blinded, 'autistically' withdrawn and thus effortlessly disabled of any power to intervene structurally or powerfully.⁸ Certeau's walker moves because he cannot occupy space, is not an image-maker but is instead made by an image of invisibility, whether this is done by the sociologist or the 'Solar' eye. To imagine movement in the city on a different paradigm, in which encounters with and of the visual are recognized and taken into account, one would have to imagine a different walker altogether.

Certeau draws together conceptions of weakness and blindness with the action of walking in order to produce a description of everyday urban life as a potential heterotopia, a social space that thrives creatively through tactics that are unseen. Of concern in his construction is not simply the dis-enabling physical metaphors Certeau has to call into effect in order to pursue his idea but the fact that his 'subjects' are just that: denied their part in any proper citizenly recuperation of the visual, of the ability to take command of image production. (It is interesting to note that Certeau developed his ideas in the same city – Paris – and only slightly later than Guy Debord's theory of 'the society of the spectacle'.) On the one hand, in an important debate about subjectivity and citizenship within social life, pedestrian movement can be seen to open up individual experience to new and different ways of perceiving and designing the world – offering modes that, in Certeaudian terms, can shift and sway according to their context. On the other, a more critical understanding of pedestrian movement can be seen to inhibit the impulse to think in such fluid terms; to accept the criticality of the tentative, the hesitant, the speculative and contingent aspects of pedestrianism, and to see in it a form of protest against the streamlining and de-differentiating, or smoothing out, of urbanization that Certeau's ideas, in their championing of weakness and invisibility, emphasize.

This concern for the difference between invisible social occupation and visual spatial production is a double bind – a troubling, and thus potentially and productively disruptive, dialectic. In art this dialectic is apparent in the treatment of movement such as walking as both enabling and disabling representation – movement as both a criticism of representation and a critically weak form of it.

Moving back to the beginning of the 20th century, when walking competed in its poetic and political associations with developing narratives of much faster travel, Brennan gives us Shackleton as a starting point. This figure, of obvious interest to specialist and non-specialist audiences alike, artfully poised for exploratory take-off on the outside of the RGS buildings, is famous not simply for his endeavours at the South Pole but also via the photographers he organized to take images of his trips there. Arguably, Shackleton was the first truly modern, media-savvy explorer, who foresaw the power of images and their effect on the dissemination of information on his heroic story. A hundred years later, when walking can be seen as a quaint and weak practice,

superseded by many other travelling forms, Shackleton still seems modern as he captures images of his dramatic trudge to safety and has them published all over the world. Here is an example of the troubled relationship between walking and the visual. Shackleton's journey is seen artfully contrived for the camera, and his authenticity is both reinforced and questioned in this representation. These photographs seem to throw light, quite literally, on the many purposes of his journey – environmental, colonial, personal – as a set of competitive concerns.

In the same way that a photographer chooses his shot, Brennan edits together a story of Hyde Park, of exploration, of map-making, royal measurement and perspective. These are classical themes, but ones that the artist retells as part of a contemporary landscape, inspired by a concern for a critical walking and looking practice, rather than an autistic and immersive one. We walk and look and listen, following the political and social narrative that the artist unravels without recourse to tactical procedures. Brennan's edited version of history is entirely strategic, and designed to be observed as such. Brennan likes order and precision (just like a caricature of the values upstanding in the Albertopolis through which we move). And like Freud, that other figure emerging out of Victoriana, the artist pounces on unspoken geography in which the repression of the social slips out into the public realm via place names and uses, monuments and road directions. Brennan enacts an abstracted and non-naturalized interpretation of this material that is fundamentally resistant to the idea of walking as a natural and innate way of occupying space. Walking and looking, then, as a co-mingling of critical activities, each keeping the other in check from the romanticism of over-identification with the feet.

Notes

- ¹ See T. Brennan, 'Mercator manoeuvre', *cultural geographies* **12** (2005), this issue.
- ² M. Cousins, 'Building an architect', in J. Hill, ed. *Occupying architecture: between the architect and the user* (London, Routledge, 1998), p. 20.
- ³ M. de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, trans. S. Randall (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), p. 37.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. v.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.