Excerpt from
“Walking Los Angeles: From Documentation to Performance”

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Documentation from the performance, “Walking LA| (Sur)facing the City”
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Having spent most of my adult life living in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, working as a choreographer and freelance artist, my experiences of urban space have been shaped by center-structured cities of Western Europe that invite the pedestrian to stroll. Relocating back to the United States in 2004, I was accustomed to a city designed with pedestrians in mind. Los Angeles, built with very different attitudes toward transportation, poised itself as an alien to my well-worn and, some might say, romantic notions of navigation and mobility within the city.

During the two years following my move to Los Angeles, I walked in the city in order to see it more slowly. I was looking to acquaint myself to the urban sprawl via a corporeal practice that allowed me to experience the foreign space in a more intimate way.

The film theorist Vivian Sobchack eloquently questions the relationship of self to space by asking,

> What does it mean to be embodied in the multiple and shifting spaces of the world – not only the familiar spaces that seem of our own making and whose meanings we take up and live as “given” but also those spaces that seem to us strange or “foreign” in their shape and value? (2004, p.13)

The geographic terrain of Los Angeles felt “foreign” to me because its shape and scope were unfamiliar and navigating or getting a sense of either posed a challenge beyond what I had expected. My need to walk in Los Angeles was not, however, in order to map out the city. It was a physical and neurological need to get out of the car, best understood by this journal entry from before my walking research, when I first arrived,

> Traveling the lines of Los Angeles as a passenger in a car, I witness the city at a speed that turns my desire for a close reading into an embarrassing, groping attempt. Looking through the pane of glass between my eyes and the city, I see it as a fast moving film. The film is coming at me, splitting in two, urging me into it and then whipping past me on both sides, spitting me out and disappearing instantly behind the tips of my ears, only to reappear, as a completely new and fat scene in front of me, beginning the dizzying cycle all over again. The only way to slow down this onslaught of imagery and text is to get of the car and start walking.

This peculiar and mostly unpleasant sensation is related to what Celeste Olalquiaga (1992) calls “psychasthenia.” In her book, Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities, Olalquiaga describes a physical and mental state wherein the body is incapable of distinguishing itself from the space it occupies. The borders of the body, where it meets space, are no longer defined and one perceives oneself as “swallowed up” by space and transparent to the point of invisibility.

My walking, initiated by my need to get out of the car, began with choosing to travel by foot and public transportation for my daily needs. It soon became a more structured and educational form of walking, incorporating guided tours with the Los Angeles Conservancy and Sierra Club. Expanding slowly, as I became more curious and independent, it came to include dozens of approximately two-hour solo strolls in Hollywood, Chinatown, Koreatown, Silverlake, Venice, Downtown, and other areas, during the day and evening.
Influenced by what artist and theorist Guy Debord called the dérive or “drift,” these later walks were without intention to get anywhere and attempted to tune in to my instinctual desires to determine direction. It was during these walks that various technologies became important for my artistic practice and the performance that I would make in response to walking in Los Angeles.

This piece considers the different technologies employed for documentation during and after these walks in Los Angeles, and how the properties of these specific technologies brought about particular readings of the sensory and cognitive experiences of my walking in Los Angeles. The walks and their documentation were the raw material for the creative process that followed, which led to a forty-minute, multi-disciplinary performance work entitled, Walking LA | (Sur)facing the City, which premiered at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, and in the gallery space of G727 in downtown Los Angeles in March 2008.

Three phases of my process in creating Walking LA are used to organize this article: “experience,” “discovery,” and “performance.” The first covers my initial experience of walking in the city, as well as how photography and writing were used to document it and later became material for the performance. Second, my discovery of Walking LA as a piece took place in the studio and employed digitally projected versions of the photographs, moving images, and writing as well as other text and live performers. Third, public performance brought this work in front of an audience and made visible the role of recording technologies as mediating layers of meaning.

In practice, these phases were not isolated chronologically as they overlapped, dissolved into and influenced one another. Aiming for a performance with many mediums at play, I hoped to make a work that also could be read in varied and fluid ways. Environments within the performance allowed the audience to sense and navigate intellectually, rather than enforcing a narrative description of my walking experiences onto them. Like the city of Los Angeles, this performance and the other phases leading up to it, consisted of complex ideas and materials as well as a shifting terrain of people, locations, and processes.

Writing, as documentation of the experience and as a mediating layer within the performance, was an important technology that resurfaces, of course, in this writing. I created a performance re-imagining the city as a surface space where personal meaning, emotion, and humor can be inscribed. And through writing and photography, I can articulate here ways in which my walking changed how I live in and think about the city of Los Angeles.

In the following text, influential theoretical references are woven into discussion of my artistic process, combining discourses to evoke a conversation between my writing and that of others.

Indeed it could be said that walking is a highly intelligent activity. This intelligence, however, is not located exclusively in the head but is distributed throughout the entire field of relations comprised by the presence of the human being in the inhabited world. (Ingold 2004, p. 332)

The performance re-interprets urban space in terms of what post-modern political geographer and urban planner, Edward Soja names “Secondspace.” As he describes, in Postmetropolis (2000), “From a Secondspace perspective, city space becomes more of a mental conceived space of the imagination, or what I will henceforth describe as the urban imaginary.” He later states, “Secondspace perspectives tend to be more subjective and concerned with ‘thoughts about space.’” (Soja 2000, p.11). In addition, I would argue that the conceived city expressed in my
performance work stems from a physical practice of space, a corporeal approach that encourages sensation as well as imagination.

In considering the urban imaginary, two questions emerged for me in the period of moving from my walking experience into creating a performance work based on it. Those questions were: can performance create new modes of thinking about the intersections of urbanism, mobility, practiced space, and place making, by using various technologies to overlap space, alter perception and support embodied practices? If so, can performance shape experiences of and sensory awareness in environments beyond the event and outside of the confines of the gallery space? These questions continue to fuel my artistic process. I begin here with the experience of walking in the city.

[1] Italics his.

References


