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Walking the City: Manhattan Projects

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How do we know and position ourselves within cities? How do we lay claim to belonging in complex urban landscapes? Quite simply, we walk: we survey terrain. We wander, we see, and we are seen.

Today, however, the walking city is largely the city of the past. In urban landscapes dominated by traffic flows and transportation networks, automobiles and mass-transit systems, walking can be alienating. We may now experience urban spaces in frag-

ments through walking; but to begin to assemble a sense of a city, region, or territory requires sorting through layers of abstraction. The contemporary city is an assemblage: fractured parts of the traditional walking city, districts of modernist reform, and jumbles of late-capitalist consumer “experiences.” Simultaneity, fragmentation, and ephemerality characterize this postmodern condition. Can walking, an old way of laying hold of the city, still help us in this altered spatial, temporal, and conceptual field? This survey of intentional walks in Manhattan suggests walking does still offer a valuable means of understanding cities.

Choosing to Walk

Intentional walking projects by individuals and organized groups range from whimsical undertakings to acts of political protest. I selected the projects described here because they represent a full range of realized possibilities, because each is well documented, and because they suggest unusual ways we might see, know, understand, and advocate for places and cities. I also chose to limit this survey to projects circumscribed by Manhattan’s shores. Manhattan embodies many of the postmodern city’s characteristics: an extensive, fragmented, and alienating grid; a

Above: A cast-iron staircase leads down to High Bridge, the oldest bridge in Manhattan. Photo by Caleb Smith.

juxtaposition of old and new; a rich and complex historic landscape; an existing fabric reconfigured by urban renewal and transportation infrastructure; a dramatically increased security state apparatus; and extensive environmental degradation.

Although walking projects have been undertaken all over the world, each selection here is distinct, representing a particular kind of undertaking. Together, the projects shed light on the territorial practices of laying claim to the postmodern city, and suggest ways of embracing and rethinking urban landscapes.

Walking has captured the imagination of artists and writers in a variety of ways, places and eras. A contemporary way of thinking about walking, begun in the early twentieth century with dada and the Surrealists, and continued by the Situationists, is as a subversive activity. But the idea of subversive walking also obscures its ordinariness. Elsewhere I have described how ordinary walking practices might lead designers and citizens toward a greater aesthetic and social vision.² Here I describe how these particular walking projects work as territorial practices.

Even in the absence of explicit politics, intentional walking represents a means of reasserting a territorial hold in response to current conditions; the walks attempt to deal with the daily challenge of alien and alienating territory. Through these projects it is possible to see the coalescence of communities around what urban geographer Edward Soja calls “shared spatial consciousness.”³

To theorize their activities, many contemporary enthusiasts of walking as a critical spatial practice recall mid-twentieth century Situationist ideas such as psychogeography and the drift. Psychogeography broadly refers

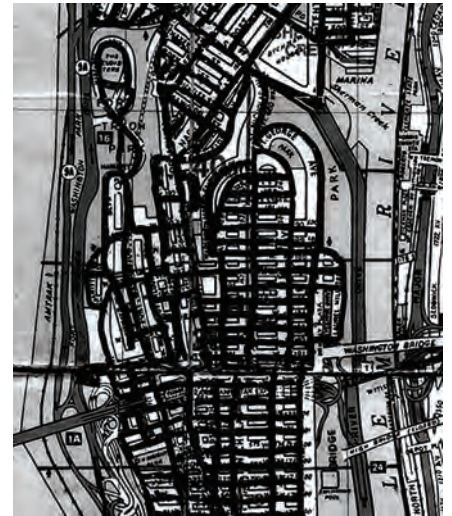
to the study of the effects of the physical environment on individuals. The drift is an intentionally aimless walk, involving both structure and chance, designed to provide a fresh encounter with the city and uncover its fragmentary nature.

Also inspiring to contemporary walkers is the work of mid-century theorist Michel de Certeau. De Certeau described the potential of the tension between the established order and what people do in their everyday lives.⁴ He opened his essay “City Walking” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, for example, from a vantage point on top of one of the two World Trade Center towers.⁵ He then took on for a moment the role of the all-seeing scientist content (or stuck) within the frame of the dominant “rational” consumer-capitalist order so we might be able to see beyond the official frame. By illuminating people’s everyday practices, de Certeau hoped to expose the myriad ways the weak (most of us), trick, trip up, and play with the system. The order that threatens to oppress, he noted, is a “sieve order,” shot through with holes, between and within which individual maneuvering is possible.

The projects that follow reveal the challenges and opportunities for intentionally entering, maneuvering in, and laying claim to the spaces of the everyday.

Caleb Smith: “Every Street in the Grid”

The idea of walking every street in the grid of Manhattan occurred to Caleb Smith as the result of coming across a church—the Church of the Transfiguration, “The Little Church Around the Corner,” on 29th Street near Fifth Avenue. The church is set back from the street, and it occurred to Smith that countless other such



jewels lay hidden on the more than 3,000 blocks of Manhattan. He would have to walk every block if he hoped to discover New York’s hidden treasures.

Accomplishing the task of walking every block was not Smith’s goal particularly—but rather exploring, “sightseeing,” and reveling in what he considered the “celebrity” and “glamour” of New York in contrast to his hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Wandering off the beaten track was also something he had learned from his parents in the open spaces of the West, and urban exploration was just an extension of that early experience.

Smith began by walking in a new neighborhood every time he went out of his apartment and then reading about it when he returned home. Then he began marking off on a map every block he had walked. Soon he decided on a few rules: he would always walk alone, and he would carry a camera, a notebook, a map, and a

Above: Caleb Smith carried a map and a pen to record his progress walking every block in Manhattan. Courtesy of Caleb Smith.

pen to mark off completed blocks. For Smith, these rules defined his “official” walking, in contrast to other walking he might do. The project took him two and a half years to finish, and he has now written about the walk and his favorite places, and posted his map and photographs on his website.⁶

Smith’s walk was motivated by a love of the city and a willingness to explore, and he documented it

Jim Naureckas: *New York Songlines*

Another project insisting on the knowability of the city is *New York Songlines*, an interactive map of Manhattan in the form of a simplified grid organizing a collection of hyperlinks.⁷ The preamble to the map compares Manhattan’s straight streets to Australian aboriginal songlines, and explains how the song-stories of Aboriginals guided people across the land by way

and taxis. In answer to this condition, *New York Songlines* offers “virtual walking tours of Manhattan’s streets” that uncover New York’s own giants, heroes, and monsters. The walker is not following a path by remembering landmarks, but rather uncovering landmarks and stories by following a path.

New York Songlines is the result of a kind of reverse engineering of grid organization: its power comes from the combination of the hyperlinked Web and the city grid. The result is a convenient way to organize a map of Manhattan that can afford to ignore conventional cartographic representation. By emphasizing the grid as an organizer of texts, the map creates and advocates a rich reading of urban landscape and place.

Shorewalkers: *The Great Saunter*

Shorewalkers, a nonprofit environmental and recreational group, takes an on-the-ground approach to knowing Manhattan. Since 1985 it has organized *The Great Saunter*, a walk around the approximately 32-mile waterfront edge of the island.⁸ The event begins early in the morning at South Street Seaport and proceeds clockwise, ending just after dark. The event has involved as few as seventeen people, to one year more than 500. Volunteers scout the route in advance for barriers and bathrooms, and plan the walk as close as possible to the water’s edge.

Shorewalkers’ mission is “to enhance, enjoy and protect the parks, promenades, and paths along the waters throughout the New York metropolitan area.” The group’s activism has contributed to the establishment and development of the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway, a continuous path around Manhattan linking public parks, providing recreational opportunities and waterfront access.



without a trace of irony or political posturing. By walking every street, Smith uncovered layers of past and present city life, linking places with public events and memories. In his description of the walk he expresses his particular enthusiasms: objects in cast and wrought iron, boot scrapers, coal hooks and chutes, uniquely regional and hybrid ethnic foods, and the physical evidence of historic events. The work not only documents treasures hidden within the grid, but draws attention to the idea that individuals can connect with authentic urban spaces and places through walking.

of physical features. Concluding that the aboriginal songline was a way of organizing large amounts of information—through myths, rituals, and sacred sites—the site’s author, Jim Naureckas, argues that “the Web is our technological society’s closest equivalent.”

Naureckas contends people don’t have much of a sense of place and may go past the same buildings hundreds of times without ever really looking at them. A certain mindlessness has developed because it is so easy to get around the city using knowledge of the grid, a few signs, a subway map,



Walking can be a kind of physical manifesto. In the case of *The Great Saunter*, the walk, like much successful protest and advocacy, is explicitly for fun but also makes a clear political statement. Cy Adler, a founder of Shorewalkers, in his guidebook *Walking Manhattan's Rim: The Great Saunter*, remarks on the citizen's ability to speak out in support of the environment. According to Adler:

Above: Walkers on *The Great Saunter* in 2004, near 150th Street west of Harlem. Photo by Mark Lentz

Opposite: A schist outcropping in Hamilton Heights. Photo by Caleb Smith.

“No activity symbolizes the essence of conservation more than walking.”⁹

The act of walking the edge of Manhattan also suggests a city foundation ritual. In this case, the ritual has been repeated annually for the past twenty years, reflecting ongoing concern for the limits and environmental impact of human inhabitation of the Earth. As citizens and claimants, members of Shorewalkers walk to advocate an environmental understanding of territory.

Surveillance Camera Players and the Institute for Applied Autonomy
Shorewalkers is not alone in its

use of walking for political activism. Surveillance Camera Players (SCP) has protested the use of closed-circuit TV cameras in Manhattan since 1996, creating plays for “bored surveillants” (those who must watch the cameras), continuously updating maps of camera positions, authoring position papers, and encouraging other surveillance camera protesters. Beginning in 2000, it also offered walking tours.¹⁰ Each tour (nine were offered in the summer of 2005) is based on maps that identify all the known surveillance cameras in a particular zone of the city.

SCP reasons that cameras do not

aid in the prevention of crime; nor do their operators have much interest in preventing it. Rather, private security cameras are sold to document events surrounding insurance losses. Thus cameras proliferate in wealthy neighborhoods, where building owners receive insurance discounts for them; meanwhile, in poor neighborhoods there are few cameras regardless of the level of crime. Those in favor of

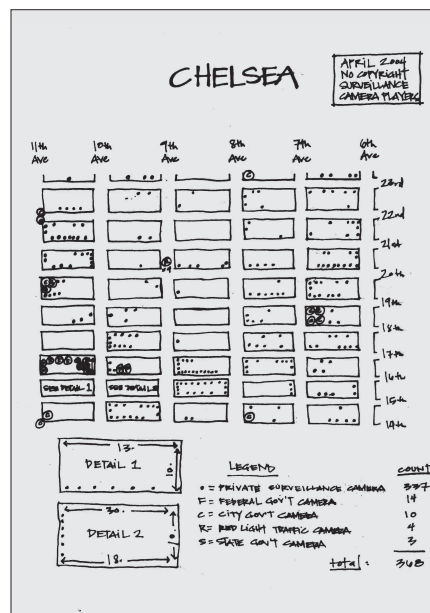
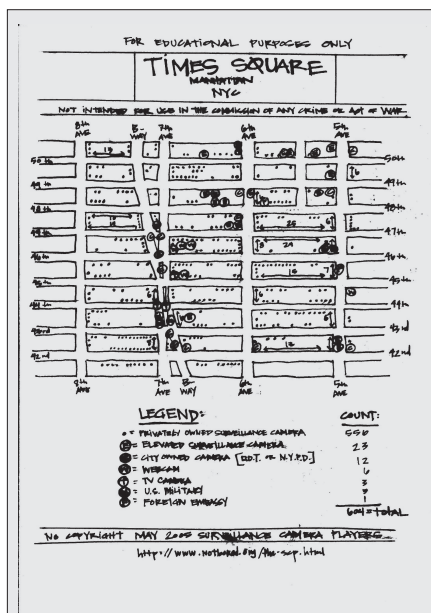
of more than 15,000 surveillance cameras on Manhattan streets. Activities such as SCP's help resist such a condition.

As the work of SCP makes clear, it is now almost impossible to walk in Manhattan without encountering a surveillance camera—there are on average perhaps five to ten on every block. But if one wanted to take such a walk, the Institute for Applied

appearance; women voyeuristically; “outsiders” (including people surveying for surveillance cameras) and activists engaged in legal dissent; and ordinary people who might be caught on camera kissing a lover or visiting a psychiatrist.

In answer to the question, “But what’s the harm?” IAA points out that footage from surveillance cameras is mostly privately owned, and may be broadcast without consent. Increasing sophistication—networking and facial-recognition software—will only compound these problems. Perhaps of greatest concern to IAA are the social and psychological effects of a surveillance society. The *iSee* map is designed to mirror the use of surveillance cameras, paranoia for paranoia, social caution for social caution.

While the issues raised by anti-surveillance groups remain unresolved, the proliferation of closed-circuit cameras seems inevitable and unstoppable. Anti-terrorist intelligence-gathering efforts have expanded greatly in response to 9/11, including the coordination of cameras controlled by an increasingly covert and militarized New York police.¹² The projects by SCP and IAA, while expressing opposition to a state-controlled corporate landscape, point out the range of forces and interests, public and private, that contribute to the proliferation of surveillance cameras.



surveillance cameras argue that they reduce crime by inducing paranoia in criminals. But SCP counters that surveillance cameras cannot do so selectively, and are intended to induce paranoia in everyone.

Some press coverage, quoted on the SCP website, has attempted to position SCP founder Bill Brown and fellow members of the group as paranoid. In response, Brown has claimed both “I am *very* paranoid” and “the group isn’t and refuses to become paranoid.” Paranoia, in Brown’s analysis, is primarily a condition of those who support the present installation

Autonomy (IAA) has created *iSee*, an interactive Web-based map of camera locations.¹¹ The user can enter a starting and stopping point for a trip in Manhattan, and, provided the map data is up to date, *iSee* will generate a route that avoids them.

In answer to the question, “Who should use *iSee*?” the IAA website suggests “minorities, women, youth, ‘outsiders,’ activists, and everyone else.” IAA points out surveillance cameras are unregulated and do very little to reduce crime. Rather, police and security guards watch minorities and young men because of their

Above: The Surveillance Camera Players maps that were used on walking tours of Chelsea and Times Square. Drawings by Kelly Shields.

Opposite: Dario D’Aprile uses baking flour to create a pedestrian crossing in *Street Stripes with Memory*. Photo by Christina Ray.



Glowlab and Conflux

Explicitly inspired by Situationist ideas, the annual Conflux is a conference and public festival concerned primarily with “current artistic and social investigations in psychogeography.”¹³ Hosted by Glowlab and held in New York in 2003 and 2004, the conference seeks to bring together “visual and sound artists, writers, urban adventurers and the public to explore the physical and psychological landscape of the city.”¹⁴ Most conference events involve some form of walking around and direct experience of the city.

NewCopenYorkHagen, for example, a project of Anna María Bogadóttir and Malene Rørdam of Copenhagen, superimposed a tourist map of Copenhagen over New York to make an “investigation in the field of placement and re(dis)placement.”¹⁵ The tour defined by the reworked map led participants to a series of monuments and tourist attractions. In addition to the map, participants received postcards further identifying the tourist sites, which they used to write about their trip to “Copenhagen” and send home; and at each tourist attraction, participants were given a Danish

souvenir. The project intended to produce a feeling of disjunction and displacement, while spoofing the superficiality of the tourist experience, in direct reference to Asger Jorn and Guy Debord’s *Psychogeographic Guide to Paris* of 1956.

Odin Cappello’s *Navigazing*, while psychogeographically inspired, sent participants out into the city with viewfinder cards and chalk to view and share the aesthetic experience of framing.¹⁶ Cappello’s instructions included a suggestion that the city is filled with “narrative artifacts, points of visual, or aural interest that



example, deployed a backpack with a pedometer, a compass, a webcam, and a computer “to create a digital map of streets and public spaces by gathering ‘footprints’ of participants.”¹⁸ The collected walk images were then collated in a single map.

While most of these projects were conceived largely as discrete conference activities, some have also developed a continuing life on the Web. *One Block Radius*, a project of Christina Ray and Dave Mandl (founders of Glowlab and Conflux), involves a website to gather information on the city block completely destroyed to build the New Museum of Contemporary Art.¹⁹ Conceived as a navigable online map and database, the site collects “the amount of information one would normally find in a guidebook for an entire city.” People having direct experience walking the block contribute various kinds of material: photographs, video, artwork, historical narrative, and creative writing. The idea is to use a virtual environment to preserve an enormous volume of subjective information to re-create public space. The “multi-layered portrait of the block as it has never been seen before (and never will be seen again)” constitutes “an extensive psychogeographic survey.”

Like Jim Naureckas’s online project *New York Songlines*, *One Block Radius* supports an ethos of city walking. The project makes it possible to gather, interweave, and share information from individual pedestrian perspectives, celebrating the richness and complexity of urban space.

Above: Noriyuki Fujimura created a digital map of a walk using a backpack outfitted with a pedometer, microprocessor, webcam, and laptop in *Footprint Mapping*. Courtesy of Noriyuki Fujimura.

suggest the existence of a story, either real or fictional.” Participants were asked to use the viewfinder cards to frame such story elements, and to use chalk to record positions on the pavement, potentially drawing in other participants and passersby. At the end of the event participants gathered to talk about their experiences. Cappello intended that participants would develop a physical and psychological awareness of the environment that would be both “objective and artistic.”

Another project, Dario D’Aprile’s *Street Stripes with Memory*, used flour to stencil faux pedestrian

crossings. A video camera then recorded the effects over time of people and cars using the crossing. D’Aprile’s interest was in the “resistance time of urban furnishings made by flour,” and “to characterize and create traces and ways inside the urban space.”¹⁷

As a clear and significant change from earlier psychogeographical experiments, however, many Conflux projects also involved digital mapping, transmitted instructions, and other uses of computers as tools and as the medium of communication. Noriyuki Fujimura’s *Footprint Mapping*, for

Reconnecting the Urban Territory

The projects described here illuminate ways we might better understand, appreciate, or advocate for urban experience. Walking every street in the grid temporarily unearths a collection of memories in physical things. Walking around Manhattan reconsecrates the city and reestablishes human connection with the environment: the territory so described is called out as part of a natural ecosystem. Walking on a tour of surveillance cameras protests their proliferation, the police state, and the loss of civil liberties. Walking a Situationist-inspired psychogeographical drift makes a surprising poetic experience out of the raw material of the city. Each such act of walking reconnects us, no matter how temporarily, to where we are and who we are.

In “City Walking,” Michel de Certeau likened walking to reading, finding in both practices everyday opportunities for slipping the grip of the established order. *Tactics*, as opposed to *strategies*, are the weapons of the weak; tactics arise in everyday practices such as cooking, reading and walking. We walk and read and cook how we will, in the gaps left in the prevailing order of the expansionist economy, between and in spite of the strategies of the corporate order. Employing strategies and tactics has everything to do with knowing and belonging in territory, whether conceived of as the all-encompassing, ever-expanding territory of consumer capitalism and globalization, or the tactical territories of everyday life.

Quotation—“poaching,” to carry forward one of de Certeau’s playful ideas—is the backbone of walking, as well as of reading (and writing). Quotation empowers individuals. When we walk we are quoting walkers who have come before us, and perform-

ing turns on each quotation. In the process we create and claim the narratives and spaces of the city: abstract urban systems become habitable.

For urban dwellers and designers, walking is a fundamental tool for laying claim to, understanding, and shaping a livable city. Walking yields bodily knowing, recovers place memory, creates narrative, prioritizes human scale, and reconnects people to places.

The projects described here draw attention to everyday walking. Whether intentional or self-conscious, personal, activist, or avant-garde, they reaffirm lived experience.

Acknowledgements & Notes

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2. Ben Jacks, “Reimagining Walking: Four Practices,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (February, 2004), pp. 5-9.
3. Edward W. Soja, “Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination,” in Alan Read, ed., *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1996).
4. Simon Sadler, in *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 186 (n. 123), recognizes the relationship between De Certeau’s thought and the Situationists’ revolutionary ideas, commenting that De Certeau “vastly expand(s) upon and make(s) explicit what was only inferred in situationism.” Sadler remarks that De Certeau’s “tender, almost poetic tone” has made the constellation of situationist ideas “more palatable to academe.”
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14. Christina Ray told me in correspondence that Glowlab is now using the name Conflux for its annual festival instead of the more cumbersome Psy.Geo Conflux. In 2005, Glowlab did not hold Conflux in New York, but instead lent its support to a similar event, “Proflux,” held in Providence, Rhode Island. Conflux will take place again in New York in Fall, 2006. Glowlab is “an artist-run production and publishing lab focusing on public space as the medium for contemporary art and technology projects.” It produces a bi-monthly online magazine (<http://www.glowlab.com>).
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