

Making Things Out Of Surroundings.

The Art of Walking and Talking, Seeing and Sensing in Ruben Steinum's and Jon Benjamin Tallerås' Street Sculptures.

What we find when we pay attention to the invisible, as it were, to the overlooked, is an opening of the seeming “triviality” of things to the marvellous.

- Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*

Consider for a moment the pattern of a city: See it as a more or less vast stretch of terrain, scattered with a varying number of rectangled boxes of different heights, which, in turn, are laced together by all sorts of trajectories and patched with domesticated remnants of nature in the form of arranged trees and grass and flower beds. Picture then the city as an area which - ideally - buzzes with organic chaos, almost like something living. A curious effect which is provoked by the comings and goings of people and animals, by the changing of light and weather, by movement of air as well as the stop-and-go of all kinds of vehicles. Then, there is the multitude of material traces to be considered. Traces and imprints of the things that people, their animals and cars leave behind in the course of their activities. To the observant eye, the resonant body and the imaginative ear, the city is also a discreet forcefield created by the brief chance interactions of our everyday life, by interpersonal encounters of varying degrees of intensity. Or – even more discreetly - by the inaudible whirls of energy created by the inner voices, the wishes, hopes and sorrows of the city dwellers. Remem-

ber the opening shot of Wim Wenders' film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*)? The one in which the camera pans over the antennae "Haus des Rundfunks" (Berlin's modernist Broadcasting House building), then over the nearby roaring ring road to slowly focus on an apartment block, while all the time collecting scraps of radio voices, of disembodied talk and inner monologue as if the camera was both a devouring eye and a magnetic ear. That scene about captures what I mean: for the purpose of this short essay I would like to see the city as a place for the senses to act in; a three dimensional palimpsest, a kind of spatial "text" which is constantly being written and re-written by the procession of its users. A text that remains forever open to additions of new layers of text.

The fundamental structure and set up of the city have, of course, not really changed since the beginning of its success story roughly 11000 years ago. And neither have the primary demands of its inhabitants: a city is supposed to offer collective safety and the opportunity for mutual support. This is expressed, for instance, by the exchange of goods and skills. Then again, people need quiet places to sleep in and seek shelter from inhospitable weather. But beyond this functional set-up lies something else, and this "something else" has fascinated thinkers and artists, as well as writers and chroniclers here in Western Europe since the emergence of London as a megacity in the

Renaissance era. This “something else”, then, is the city as atmospherically thickend space, a space which is animated by unseen rhythms (biological, psychological and social) and which is invisibly constructed by us through our commerce, our needs and movements in and around town as much as they, in consequence, direct our movements. Looked at in this way, a city’s world is a communicative system: its houses, streets and objects may be made of concrete physical matter, but are also emotive raw material and an occasion for mental travels into other spaces such as, personal and cultural memory. Seen from this angle, the urban environment has a vast creative potential, it is a suggestive *ambiente per se*, and as such not far removed from the romantics’ vision of the forest as an area of magic encounters, of discovery and immersion. Although we constantly feel our way through this invisible energy field, most of us are too immeshed in the practicalities of our daily lives to be aware of this fragile aspect of the city.

With the creative insight typical of his generation, social philosopher Henri Lefevbre (1901 – 1991) put his finger on it: for him, these said rhythms form the invisible envelope of a city, its force field of potential which establishes and influences our actions, dreams, life-plans and visions¹. Recent urban research, too, has become interested in the fact that cities speak a language of emotions. But then, as in the project “SENSEable City”(housed at the MIT), they seem to proceed

in a naively functionalistic, rather eerily exploitative way by monitoring, analysing and putting at the use of administrators and commercial strategists the data streams we leave behind through the use of our handheld electronic gadgets ².

But artists and writers have tuned into urban environments in a creative and constructive way long before sociology and cultural sciences discovered it as a potential field of action. For Virginia Woolf, to immerse herself into the buzz of London was to experience the “pure process” of being, and to walk around the place was to come to terms with a powerful sign system. Hear what she has to say on the subject: “I stop in London sometimes & hear feet shuffling. That’s the language, I think; that’s the phrase I should like to catch”³. In later referring to the city as being “full of signs”, Woolf understands the sensory undercurrents of the urban, and in doing so, she picks up a thread that Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Weelkes started weaving in 1700. With *The Cries of London*, a series of compositions, they shaped found sonic material of the time, like market cries or the shouts of beggars, into an art, eligible for educated audiences. In both cases – with Woolf and Gibbons / Weelkes - we witness a physical artistic sensibility at work, which informed Paul Klee’s theory of the creatively *Thinking Eye*⁴: here, the artist’s greedily perceiving, *walking* eye, leads the way and guides the viewer through an artwork, and by these mutual walks

at different paces combines body and soul in a joint process of creation.

Since the mid-20th century, the visual arts have re-appropriated the field of urban intervention. As opposed to the modernist's use of the city as a backdrop against which to act out technological power and fiercely threatening social energies (Futurism), or the spectacular impact of anti-bourgeois immorality and (formal) shock (Expressionism), an immaterial and, on the whole, low-tech art form has taken shape over the last decade: an art of wandering and walking in urban environments, an art of *being* in open public space. It is low-tech in the sense that, at first sight, all it takes is the artist's moving body, his or her perceptiveness and creative gaze, and a willingness to heighten the awareness of Virginia Woolf's "pure process" of city-life. At times these works implement an imaginative inner story-telling voice to guide us (Janett Cardiff, Susan Philipsz, or the social interventionists LIGNA), a few rearrangements, mouldings or displacements of familiar *objet trouvés* (Francis Alÿs, Iepe Rubingh, Roman Signer, Michael Sailsdorfer), plus some sort of recording device to turn the rich material density of our everyday environment into an art piece. The art form of walking acts on the border of the invisible, in that it spies and eavesdrops on the easily overlooked and overheard. Like the Situationists' psycho-geographic experiments under Guy Debord in the 1960s, the varied practices of the new walkers sensitise their own as well as their audience's

perception and, at times, productively desorient them.

Jon Benjamin Tallerås and Ruben Steinum are two young artists and urban roamers who work within the framework of this artistic movement. In preparing, structuring and acting out their walking routines, the artists set up fragile and unobtrusive test arrangements. They take off, “switch on” their sensibilities and register the surprises, which their urban context has in store. In doing so, they probe into the city’s sensory fabric, its consumerist temper, and take its emotional temperature. Like hunter /gatherers they collect the materials, as well as the structures and visual patterns a city itself has on offer.

With playful humour, an openness to chance and at times with a liberating, irresistible silliness, Tallerås and Steinum re-shape the appearance of the objects they find on their rounds - in streets, on playgrounds, patches of city-green, and building sites or in all kinds of urban no-man’s-land. The team either displace practical objects such as street signs, pallets and crates, and in displacing them they redirect their original message into something new, often absurd, thereby questioning the authority of an official urban sign system. Then again, they save carelessly discarded objects which formerly had a life in somebody’s home: in an act of spontaneous sculpting, those things are lovingly rehabilitated and given a new, if only momentary, meaning.

By turning what they find into assembled objects of uncertain durability Steinum and Tallerås guide our eyes to notice fleeting “trivialities”, to “the overlooked” (Henri Lefebvre), thereby changing the city into a curiosity cabinet and allowing us a glimpse of the marvellous: An ordinary boot and a sneaker start a shy, nocturnal, flirty dance. Two bicycle carcasses get at each other in an aggressive fight. A rectangular metal structure sits in the snow without a sign of how it got there – like something straight from outer space. It sports a tiny red plastic ring and casts numerous shadow-lines, drawn on the surface of the snow by different angles of the sun and its reflection on various shiny surfaces. Or the two skimpy, reddish-brown plywood boards on a tired, balding patch of grass are turned into the illusion of a rusty iron Richard Serra -sculpture (an amused nod to official public sculpture).

Particularly lovely are those moments when the beholder’s eye runs freely into areas that the artists themselves have maybe not intended. When it wanders off and starts creating a graphic story of its own. What about this imprint of snow on the brick wall there? Is it part of the street sculpture? Or did it just slide there on its own accord, driven by the force of gravity? Does the exhausted, damaged palette get the rest it needs on that bench over there? It is this animation of the inanimate which ensnares us. By choreographing a dramatic dance for

two walkers and five senses, numerous *found objects*, light and weather in urban space, Steinum and Tallerås comment on the reflexes and mechanisms of our everyday life. What is it we throw away and how and in which place? How do we act upon the surface of our environment?

Despite the obvious fun with which this body of work is created, the sculptures turn out to be serious comments on art historical themes and concepts which have occupied artist's minds since the Renaissance: they are attempts to stop the passage of time (as seen in the pink comforter caught up in the meshes of a fence), there are studies of triptychs, of the vanishing point, the exploration of figure, space and volume, of line and plane, of shadow and light and many more. When they take to the roads, Steinum and Tallerås get into a perceptive groove by talking, walking, eating in their preferred place. As such, theirs is a social as well as a physical and psychoaesthetic exercise. As in their times as Graffiti-artists, they act as sensitive scouts: seeking out a perfect moment and place in which to strike with a combined gesture of lightness, quickness, exacitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency. It is interesting that in doing so, they should act out precisely the values for an art of the 21st century that Italo Calvino sketched in his fascinating lecture-series *Six Memos For The Next Millenium* ⁵.

What may, at first glance, seem a self-centered artistic ac-

tivity, thus turns out to be quite the opposite. Not only do the street sculptures draw from the cooperation of an audience in making the work complete (what would happen if there was no eye-witness, no one to see the work?), they are refreshingly enlightening, funny, critical and socially revealing. In letting us participate in their constant act of defamiliarisation and displacement, the artists trigger our curiosity, display the city surface's permeability, and show us, that the evanescent and the monumental, the fleeting and the static can be experienced in a single walk with open eyes.

Steinum and Tallerås tell us that objects and places have a secret language. They say: the city speaks, but are you listening?

Gaby Hartel 2012

Thanks to my nephew, Timm Hartel, for an enthusiastic conversation.

¹ See, for instance: Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmoanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life*, London 2004.

² <http://senseable.mit.edu/>

³ in: Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, London 1996, p. 552 / 553

⁴ Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, London 1961. Régine Bonnefoit, „Der ‘Spaziergang des Auges’ im Bilde. Reflexionen zur Wahrnehmung von Kunstwerkern bei William Hogarth, Adolf von Hildebrandt und Paul Klee“, in: *Kritische Berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst und Kunstwissenschaften*, Frankfurt a. M. 4/2004, pp. 6- 19.

⁵ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos For The Next Millenium*, Cambridge / Mass. 1988.