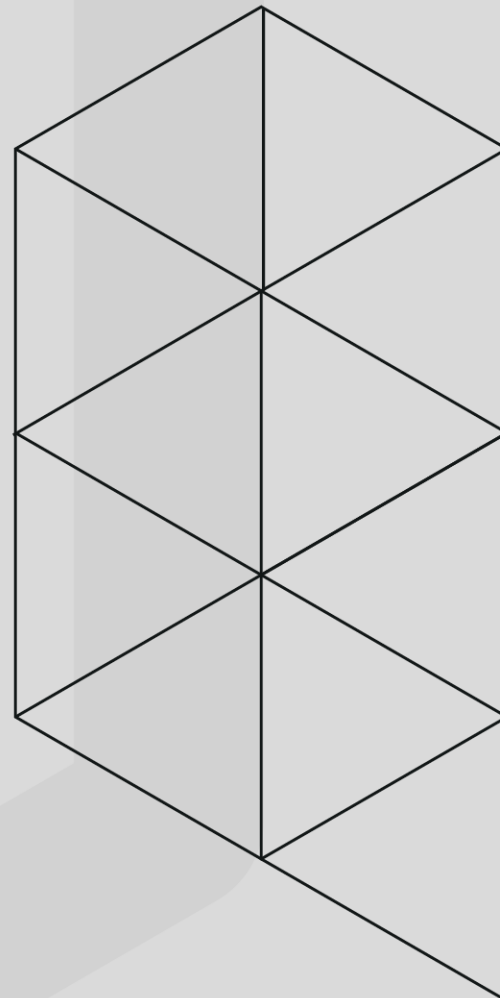


A Shout in the Street: Some artists' dialectical theory of urbanism

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As much as city space has been constructed to suit the needs and wishes of its publics – mostly privileged, dominant publics – it can just as much be imagined and counter-constructed to further other, improvised aims, struggles and methods of community-forming. Artists and other creative city-dwellers have been important in envisioning other uses for space, as well as alternative forms of value and focus points. Such instances often highlight the areas of process, micro history, prefigurative case study of other-than-capitalist living and aphoristic format, rather than a more stable, linear narratives. When Walter Benjamin began writing about the *flâneur*, asserting his individuality onto Paris' commodified spaces as transformed by the city's Haussmannisation (street-widening), he maintained the certainty of being someone who could command space, who would be seen and listened to. The world was his, and for those of his kind, educated, white, young and male, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

When he was no longer belonging to this dominant group and had to flee those who sought to endanger his life on account of his being Jewish and harbouring other-than-Fascist thought during the Second World War, he wrote differently. Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, or Arcades Project, began in 1927 and remained unfinished at the time of his suicide, on his flight from the approaching German army in 1940. The work departs from an investigation of the roved commercial spaces of the *flâneurs*, the Parisian passages, a space where economics, history, literature and art intersect. But the book, or better, the accumulation of quotes and aphorisms, with additional notes and a system of visual cross-referencing, acts instead as an accumulation of voices, a collection of citations that conjure other authors, other presences and – most importantly – notable absences. The *Passagen-Werk* is a collective enunciation, immediately political, even if not directly so. Its contents are “deterritorialised”, removed from the centre of power, or, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call it, “minor literature”. The absence ultimately concerns the author / collector, Benjamin, and though the text allows for his voice

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to retreat, particularly at a time when he could no longer safely be heard or seen, his longstanding endorsement of directly political art channelled through broad distribution is apparent through the selected voices of the other authors presented in the collection, as well as his desire to continue scholarly work, and to nurture analysis and stewardship over the voices of others, even when (or because) academic institutions and libraries were no longer a second home, and the refugee's job of daily survival consumed more and more time.

This absence, by extension, concerns all of those who were "collected", in order to be put on trains to extermination camps, or those who were hidden in the houses in German-occupied France. Old houses and windy streets lent themselves better to hiding, to finding a "shell" the size of one's body to retreat into when the SS stood in front of the door. The *Passagen-Werk*, I therefore claim, despite the canonicity of many of the authors quoted, is an intellectual project of the multitude,ⁱ claiming the creativity of "street culture"ⁱⁱ even despite – and within – the regulatory uniformity of capitalist urbanism.

In this way, Benjamin developed what Joseph D. Lewandowski calls a dialectical theory of urbanism:

[...] for Benjamin street culture is both an embedded sociocultural art and a profoundly situated political practice. Such an insight is the very hallmark of Benjamin's dialectical theory of urbanism. [...] Benjamin makes explicit the context-transforming potential of the improvisational actions empirically enabled by such locations: streets provide, quite literally, the material resources for shared ways of dwelling and struggling.ⁱⁱⁱ

This was necessary for Benjamin to believe in, of course: that there would continue to be others among those who could still walk the streets, who would be willing to shelter those who couldn't and improvise to make the communal "context-transforming" struggle successful. Yet for him, that success came too late.

What applied to Europe in the late 1930s can be considered transferrable, Isabel Wilkerson tells us: from the USA to India, to Nazi Germany, via the concept of caste. Streets do not belong to subordinate members of society, still impacted by the effects of caste

thinking. This has been seen throughout history, when one has to carry a branch of thorns to erase one's footsteps, lest a Brahman would be offended at an "Untouchable" having stepped on the same spot of ground in the street; when a descendant of an enslaved person has to cross the street to leave the footpath available for the white person claiming to own it, despite the country's Constitution claiming equal rights; or for the Jew, whose Star of David badge signalled sub-human status and impending death, despite (or because of) high academic or other achievement. Wilkerson develops that social relations built on the delusion (Benjamin's word would have been phantasmagoria) of caste have damaging effects for whole societies, not just victims and their heirs. City space shows how societies either adhere to these damaging feelings of superiority by erecting statues of perpetrators, or insist on them continuing to stand, performatively, to exercise violence by still commanding space. On the other hand, Wilkerson also uses public space to show how caste thinking can be overcome: Peter Eisenman's monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Berlin is one strand to her argument, and the other is the carpark near it: without plaque, covering over Adolf Hitler's bunker and site of death.^{iv}

Walter Benjamin's Paris could continue to serve this short essay as a focal point by referring to the Situationist Internationale and *banlieu* inhabitants who have found their living spaces erased from some city maps, or by linking him to the *gilets jaunes* reclaiming the city. But an experience of space is always personal – and my personal history takes me to Ireland. I will therefore turn to a contemporary of the *Passagen-Werk*, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* from 1939, a multi-lingual and non-linear account that was similarly constructed with visual clues ("sigla") as structural devices.^{vi} It is an epos of not-so-privileged people in Dublin, which to a certain extent continues its predecessor *Ulysses*, 1922. The "novel" is split into 18 episodes that could possibly be read as the story of two *flâneurs*,^{vii} Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, who are roaming the city as decidedly anti-heroic characters. Both books Joyce wrote as an emigrant, outside his native, longed-for city, which, in writing, he came to "own" in other than standard, monetary ways. The books have thus the distinct advantage of not fitting any dominant conceptualizations of city and national space. Joyce subverted both colonial and Celtic, nationalist reimaginings of his home, but, with his loving attention to "normal people", also steered clear of what the rising Eastern Bloc embraced: his characters were not normative workers either. That they are not

well-functioning capitalists is a matter of course. And despite the present-day commercialised frolicking in period costume along Dublin streets on 16 June, what Joyce's books, especially *Finnegans Wake*, are essentially asking of its readers is to find as many differently socialised people and engage in shared meaning-making with them. Essentially, to build reading groups.^{viii}

Dora García has taken Joyce's works into art and city spaces in this spirit. Her delegated performances in the streets, one of which is Muenster, has left passers-by uncertain as to whether they had just engaged in a pleasant exchange with a beggar, or whether they had become part of an artwork. The kind of attention to life that is recalibrated by art and that has become a "territory" for artists to explore, particularly artists with a formative experience of reading Joyce. One of these artists was Joseph Beuys. Beuys had politicians in Germany quite paranoid: they knew they had to engage with this world-famous artist, but did not want to be made part of his artworks. His strategies, at times, took the fairly spectacular form of sit-ins at the Dusseldorf Academy, from which Professor Beuys was dismissed for accepting anyone who wanted to study with him into his class. In the Northern Ireland of the "Troubles," in 1974, he intervened by making friends and establishing an educational network, the Free International University for Interdisciplinary Research.^{ix} 1972 had seen Bloody Sunday in Derry, where the British Army shot 13 unarmed civilians demonstrating for Civil Rights, including the right to education. The Protestant / Loyalist government, in the hope of cementing caste privilege, had decided to establish a campus of the local university in a rural Protestant area, rather than in the historic city of Londonderry / Derry with a Catholic / Republican majority. Beuys, by establishing alternative institutions (he paid the initial rent for a performance and exhibition space and artists' collective called Art and Research Exchange) and using the local museum for a 3 ½ hour lecture and discussion, accounted for the fact that city streets were dangerous places, but communication had to happen to overcome divisions.

The local performance art collective, Bbeyond, with direct links to the people who had worked with Beuys in the 1970s, have now, for more than 15 years performed together in public space at a specific time each month. Holding space, doing "strange" things in public, taking a durational approach: belongs, I would argue, to those strategies that do not let the always contested public sphere be "owned" by divisive

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political forces.^x In the Rights of Way exhibition, comparable and locally fine-tuned work is to be found in the contribution by The Dazzle Club, who adopt CV Dazzle face paint before enacting collective silent walks across key public and privately owned public spaces across London; or the work of Pauline Agustoni who collects oral testimony from interviewees who perform long walks whilst they talk, to tell both an individual and collective story of the public presence of lesbian women in space.

“A Shout in the Street” was the Northern Irish curator Declan McGonagle’s title for his instalment in a series of Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art (Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast). It is a quote from James Joyce that reflects how Stephen Dedalus, the alter ego of the younger writer, had defined God, knowing that the Catholic hegemony at the time would not have agreed. McGonagle, in his curatorial statement, writes of the responsibility people felt in calling anyone to gather and demonstrate in the streets.^{xi} Loss of life was a distinct possibility. Finding other forms of address, of constructing civic and urban realities, while not just occupying space, may also be a sign of caring. And art with that track record has something to teach to all those facing similar situations, due to Covid-19 and its succession of lockdowns. Starting with small groups: reading groups, educational initiatives, small and durational performance artworks, instead of politically charged mass meeting and “holding” space: this may be all that can be done in certain situations – and it is not insignificant. Rethinking the city through walks in brown, “unused” sites, singing together (at a distance), gathering the multitude’s knowledge of the space through hand-drawn maps: all values, raises awareness and exercises different ways of thinking. The hand-drawn map project, combined with gathering nicknames of places and walks, is Aisling O’Beirn’s in Belfast.^{xii}

There is also the work of, Anne Marie Dillon who tested the publicness of space by letting her horse graze in Belfast’s city centre: the space between court buildings that until only recently had been surveyed by a Police watchtower was less of a problem than the apparently public but, as it turned out, privately owned space outside the Waterfront Hall, a conference and concert venue with deceptively open security glass façade just like the adjacent office buildings.^{xiii} What can, it seems from these cases, help to speak of the love of a contested city is the gathering of local knowledge, of micro- history and small idiosyncrasies: archival projects, both in the sense of using

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existing archives and securing oral histories, gathering evidence of empathic human actions. Collecting micro-histories in that vein may take place in instances such as the work of Seamus Harahan, who has for years lived in Belfast's student area, rife with violence and neglect. He videoed from his window ordinary peoples' slightly extraordinary lives, little instances of "recreational rioting", or a 15-minute attempt at parking a small car. Such artworks might highlight, analyse and historicize conditions, collect evidence of communities re-envisioning a dysfunctional, policed environment as their space, but also show love: that of others and the artists' own.

Performance art can pay attention to the history of places. To small, usually unnoticed "cracks" in the city fabric, as well as the affects embodied in the non-normative bodies of inhabitants, including what they have witnessed and the emotional labour that is necessary for survival. Sandra Johnston is a Belfast performance artist, who sensitively responds to her home city's needs.^{xiv} She has carried out research on the potential of performance methods in relation to transitional justice. Gendered violence in Belfast has played a formative role, yet reading Joyce's writings has too: at an open window, while overhearing what ordinary people, similar to those in *Ulysses*, said, Joyce had given these "shouts in the street" the status of "epiphanies", revelatory moments about life, about people in/and cities.

Art has possibilities, restricted ones, but also newly calibrated ones, especially if and when streets are not the inclusive, happy mingling spaces of which planners and politicians have wished us to view them as, and as which Walter Benjamin still longed to frame them, despite all their complexities. Artists from Hitler to Constant, members of the Situationist International, have sought to reshape our city spheres in remarkably distinctive ways. When Hitler's visions left not much more than rubble, utopian visions of car-driven lives extricated living, working and socializing spheres away from each other, while keeping property rights in place and conveniently disabling memory and mourning.^{xv}

The joint challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, ecological, huma, multi-generational family needs have to now be used to re-envision the spaces for our – and the planet's – lives differently: likely with fewer airmiles, closer to home, where neighbourly relations have changed, due to the needs to make do with what – and who – is

close by under lock-down: mending and helping, rather than depending on the spoils of “funshopping” (as the Dutch Prime Minister is calling it). At the time of writing, streets now belong to delivery drivers in precarious employment, others on the “front line”: those without the privilege of enough space behind closed doors, or remotely accessible work. Accessing some sites through literature, such as “Benjamin’s” Paris passages, might just be something, while reading in isolation, that feels like a shared experience through time and space: a joint intellectual investment that lets those with books in their hands (and time for reading) long for the meeting places that they love, and in reading at least affectively own.^{xvi}

Benjamin’s multi-layered exploration of the passages might also teach us more about the privilege of being on the street with others, but also about not being there. Such thoughts demand thoughtfully to be expanded or modified for other groups, e.g. women. What has been repressive about regarding women’s “place” being at home also reveals an element of privilege – and the worsening of instances of domestic abuse, along with regression concerning hard-won equalities. For many women, neither public nor private space has been and is particularly safe, not so much a space of individuation and exciting adventure, but of harassment.^{xvii} The scale of the effects of Covid lockdowns will only register, when streets are again “inhabitable” in the sense of the creative street culture that Walter Benjamin envisaged. Instances of absence from the streets, such as (self)protection during a pandemic, or dictatorial conditions, leave behind silence, but possibly, hopefully, also the evidence of live-saving improvisations:

[...] in the urban milieu it is not the idealizing, context-transcending norms of validity-claims but rather the practical, context-dependent ways of improvisational dwelling and struggling that bind social actors together. Hence the dialectic of urbanism presented in Benjamin’s *Passagen-werk* is not merely a blueprint for some future project. Instead, it is a material description of the persistent power, however attenuated, of urban collectives to transform the cities they inhabit, if only one street at a time.^{xviii}

The voices that have been silenced call for collection and scholarly or neighbourly effort, akin to the material gathered by Benjamin in *Passagen-Werk*, or an individual shout in the street. They call for

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collectives among residents – or among artists in an exhibition, such as *Rights of Way*. As Paoletta Holst researches and makes visible the segregational features in Dutch colonial landscapes (in Semarang, Java, Indonesia), spatial hierarchy becomes visible. Similarly, Shannon Finnegan, with their *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge*, shows who can and cannot go where in privileged Western spaces that purport to be open to all. Corinne Heyrman lends her mobility and that of the audience to those who cannot walk, while Elia Castino focuses on “rough music”, i.e. banging pots and pans, as means of protest. Such histories conjure global connections and possibilities for solidarity: women in Northern Ireland during the “Troubles” used metal dust bin lids to bang on the tarmac and warn their Catholic / Republican neighbours of approaching British forces’ raids. And I remember Alfredo Jaar, from Cuba, telling my Belfast students that this practice had deeply touched him, when he read about it in the newspaper. He referred to it in his early artwork: drawing bin lid-sized rings on street surfaces, claiming space for liberating causes on the other side of the world.

Artists of all forms are attentive to potential connections, to non-linear stories, to archives of multiple voices, connected micro- and macro-histories, education, traces of trauma and expressions of love. They can possibly forge new uses of space within or independent of sites with specifically complex constellations of need and opportunity – and enable thoughtful re-organizations more widely. This is what the curatorial statement to the *Rights of Way* exhibition calls a “civil choreography”.

Who can or will better listen to the shouts in the street? How, where and with whom will we walk and dance?

Notes

- i. See: Hardt, Negri
- ii. Lewandowski
- iii. Lewandowski, p. 304
- iv. Wilkerson
- v. McDonough
- vi. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*
- vii. Joyce, *Ulysses*
- viii. Lerm Hayes, “Mad, Marginal”
- ix. Lerm Hayes, Tate Papers
- x. Bbeyond / Alastair MacLennan

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- xi. McGonagle, n.p.
- xii. Chan, Lerm Hayes
- xiii. See Martin Krenn, Land's End,
- xiv. Johnston
- xv. Mitscherlich
- xvi. Solnit also makes the link between walking and reading.
- xvii. Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, "What Is the Nature of the Problem? Sexual Harassment of Women and Girls in Public Places" *UK Parliament Publications*, publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/701/70105.htm. This source was brought to my attention by the curator of the exhibition *Rights of Way*, Amy Gowen.
- xviii. Lewandowski, p. 305.

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