

Once Around the Block

By Rita Zúñiga

Today I moved into a new apartment. The move wasn't much of a hassle, save for transporting a piano to the third floor and the slow monotony of sticking labels on boxes...

The seemingly mundane acts of cataloguing, packing and hauling our closest possessions a few times over (whilst putting up with unfavourable traffic and even more unfavourable moods) are an unavoidable ritual in finding another space where we can quietly recompose ourselves from everyday life. To repossess such a space provides us moments of shuttered reclusivity; to patchwork our better egos under new interiors surrounded by old guises. But what about the journey?

Perhaps in raw simplicity, the physical activity of 'the move' allows us to comprehend ourselves in a more truthful light amid stress and fervour. For a brief moment, even just for a day, we walk the non-place between two worlds with no intentions in our movements besides to repossess ourselves. Traversing the unpredictable system of a city that is in constant flux; once again I found myself changing my address. "The world stops being inhospitable because we know its dimensions, we draw the paths, we will know the dangers and how to avoid them, the bends where we can take shelter," wrote Francesco Careri. I suppose my interests were not so much about 'the move' more than 'moving' itself, with paths still yet to be drawn.

I had made myself comfortable in a lowly reclined chair, looking through the living room window, half opened — with the view of the Town Hall, a two-story building with a large winding staircase. After a long day of unpacking boxes, I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to leave my apartment. There is a certain kind of freedom that comes with a spontaneous walk. To go out, leaving things behind with no knowing how long I might be; escaping the unfinished things and aimlessly wandering, was my own form of benign rebellion.

I left my apartment at a time I don't know what and followed the stairs down to the street, passing by a variety of the old and new edifices that made up my new neighbourhood. After a while I had arrived, a little lacklustre, at London Fields park. Trudging for a few instances along the green, I found myself quickly back onto cemented roads. These green spaces or 'city gardens', were designed for a 'guided' leisure, a short path limited by lines that connect these spaces to the streets, consistently walking us back to our places of work or our homes. Guided leisure lines reflect the act of walking in a city as a means of repetition, a transition from A to B and back to A. The everyday London commuter lifestyle seemed to lend itself to repetition for sake of efficiency; for an individual to trace their daily routine to work while everyone else is guided through theirs by those same lines.

To walk simply as a means of transitioning through space felt like an odd concept to me.

Escaping the leisure lines of the parks, I walk towards Broadway Market. Weaving past shop fronts, around stooped-over smokers and through crowded corners I capture the small vignettes of every individual that passes in their walking gestures. The rhythm lasting from an identity formed at an early age, influenced by this concept of gender that charts the course of our passage through the geography of a busy street.

Amid the bustling market scenes, I find my fatigue and listlessness slowly lifting, embellishing in me a confident strut. It is hard to say how much of this feeling is influenced by my fellow pedestrians, but in this present moment I feel myself emulating 'la actitud despreocupada' of the catwalk. My mind is cast back to a conversation I had over the phone with Saskia de Brauw, a few days prior to the 'big move'. De Brauw, a highly successful runway model, has increasingly shifted her focus to exploring the physical body as contextual to its environment. In her multi-media work 'Ghosts Don't Walk In Straight Lines', she walks in a straight line from 225th Street and Broadway to Battery Park in Manhattan. Her sentiments for walking as a meditative process is reflected in her relationship with New York itself. "When you cross each other on the street, there are these little moments that are in a way insignificant yet can also influence your life. In New York there are these points where people meet all the time, where moments intersect. You are connected, then, you disconnect again."

These small moments that de Brauw speaks of, even if it's just a few seconds of eye contact, are ubiquitous to walking regardless of destination, underpinning the fabric of daily social life from New York to London and affirming what we'd all wish to be heard, that simply 'I am here, and you are there!'

De Brauw is keen to draw a distinct line of separation between walking as a meditative process and the runway, where walking with an intent that is purely functional. Walking with no specific purpose or destination, leaving the city-structured boundary lines for a moment of solitude, is an act of liberation in itself. Frederic Gross in 'A Philosophy of Walking', explains how, if you walk long enough, you can escape your identity, as there is a moment when you are only a body moving. Past judgement or social obligation "by walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name, and a history", explains Gros. "The walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life."

Leaving the crowds behind me in search of a more solitary setting, I head to a churchyard situated on the walk back home, a quiet space overshadowed by newer, unattractive buildings. Through a small passageway, I arrive at a clearing where graves lie scattered in the earth. Desire lines branch like capillaries away from the main path through the overgrown grass, seemingly connecting one unknown grave to another. These lines are signatures of our subconscious longing to come together, identifying in this case a timeless connection between the dead by impulse of the walking living. The appearance of desire lines in the greater 'unseen'; the more natural spaces of wilderness beyond the concrete jungle, are testament to "the laws of nature [that] will bend and adapt themselves to the least motion of man" as phrased by David Henry Thoreau.



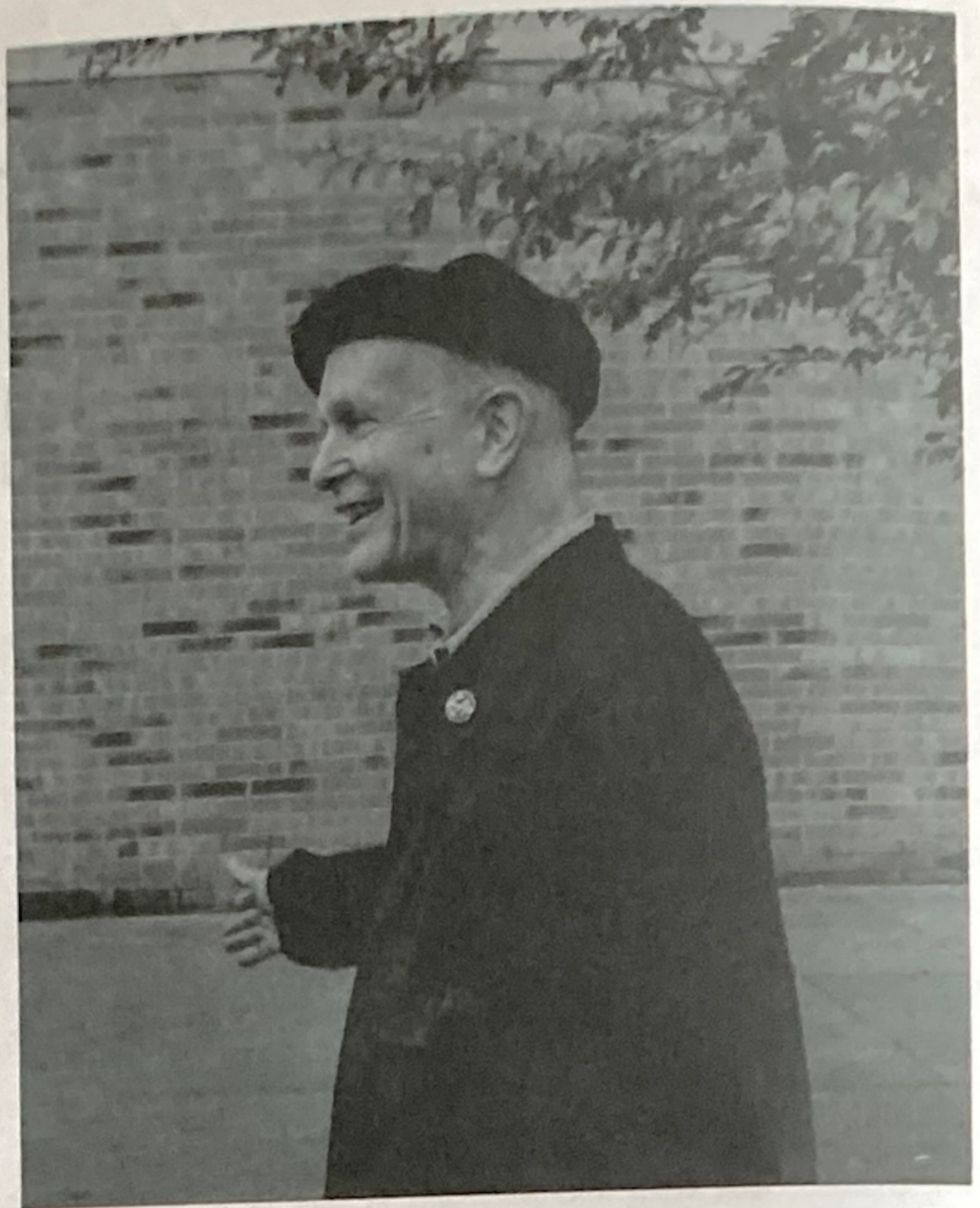
Dr. Paul Rennie is a tutor of Contextual Practice at Central Saint Martins and a leading academic authority on the historical development of graphic design in Britain. He is also very partial to shops and supermarkets; the modern high street bearing not-too-distant qualities to the more traditional promenade. I met with him on a temperate Monday morning in July outside the Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury. Almost as a rite of passage, we took to walking. We paced around the lofty Georgian terraces, with no particular direction in mind, he spoke at some length about how many of these promenades were originally private property of the aristocracy, designed to be shown off. "The aristocratic origins of the promenade where people would display themselves walking, and they did that formally, slightly separating [themselves] from the people around them."

Of Bloomsbury itself, "the dukes of the north developed, around Bedford square, a private garden in the centre, with terraces of town houses on each side. It was basically private property. It was only in the course of the 19th century that these spaces were made public." These public spaces are a much needed form of social service today. Raymond Williams in 'Culture and Society' proposed resignifications according to the emerging transformations in modernity and architecture in England, ushered in by the emergence of democracy as a social creation of proletarian origin. The idle 'right to a walk' had ceased to become a privilege of the aristocracy and rather a social right to the working classes, paving the way to the leisure spaces of the modern city-scape.

This aristocratic concept of the promenade, walking as a means of display, can be manifested in many forms; in the town, you would go out to be seen, to flirt or to show your social importance. This connects with the individual's style and manner of behaviour, a concept not too strange and distant from contemporary life in cities today: walking is also a performative act, an action in which we are aware of being observed, and we dress for the 'performance'. To walk in the city means you are, to some degree, on display. It is unavoidable to take pre-existing roads, to walk in parallel to others, transiting the urban landscape. To trace the disorderly streets, means you are submitting yourself to the absurd and improvisational. To be 'oh so pedestrian' on the public stage is to perform as a moving image, to be a kind of rendition of oneself.

This image comes in many different forms regarding the codes of conduct of walking as a woman, as a man, perhaps even as social class, informing one's own urban milieu. We define the space we live in just by traversing with our bodies, the full definition of the space is not necessarily realised consciously. As the city-scape expands, our bodies map the world in which we live, holding memory to the symbolic or aesthetic values of places. In Testo Yonqui. For Paul B. Preciado, one of the most intense experiences as a 'Drag King' is "to walk, have a coffee, take the underground, hail a taxi, sit on a bench, smoke a cigarette leaning against the wall, ... a new cartography of the city is drawn, till now, nonexistent for a body coded as feminine."

Abstracting my thoughts from my environment, I began to reflect on my diachronic journey of displacement. I grew up in the countryside of Spain, in a town not far from Barcelona, under the mountains of El Montseny. During childhood, I often spent time walking in nature, going to the river and walking the family dog. My father would encourage my brother and I to draw the plants we would spot during our outings, and write their names in a notebook. Those ambling walks through the countryside seemed captured perfectly by the words of Thoreau, where the mountain line of el Montseny never seemed to end. The solitude of the mountain landscape leads to a partial disconnection from our daily lives; there is always a hanging temptation beyond the desire lines we trace back home, that one can depart entirely.



Reflecting on the words of Friedrich Hölderlin, I finally walk home, exhausted. "I will not endure it any longer! Forever with childish steps, like a prisoner, with short, pre-measured steps, walking day by day, I will not endure it any longer!" When getting closer to home I share those sentiments of Holderlin; I don't want to suffer from the everyday walk anymore. Arriving home means to reestablish, inevitably getting prepared for the next 'performance' once back on the road. Conversely, my mind returns to my Bloomsbury walk. "Finding pleasure in everyday routine I think is very important," remarked Paul Rennie.

"We shouldn't position ourselves so the routines of everyday life, cooking, shopping, going to work, are viewed as a kind of punishment, it should be liberating, but you have to work at understanding that and find ways to be able to enjoy what I would call, 'the exquisite everyday'".

