

by Paul Halliday

Urban Detours

This summer will see the completion of a twenty-year photography project focusing on London's streets and public places. I decided to initiate the project whilst completing the London College of Printing (now the London College of Communication) diploma in photojournalism in 1986. I had just quit my job as a development worker in a South London housing and homelessness project, primarily as a result of the senseless and appalling murder of Fred, a young homeless man who frequented the centre's social and education club, and with whom I had worked closely.

My intention was to take a year away from the stresses associated with such work and focus on a long-held ambition to develop the passion I held for photography and film. The theory was that I would return to the 'real world' of adult education and perhaps find a way to incorporate my newly acquired range of skills, either pedagogically, or within a media and social issue campaigning context. Before my involvement with the housing project, I had formerly worked for the Greater London Council (GLC) as a community education worker in Greenwich, and recognised that the area of urban studies presented a number of possibilities for those photographers, artists and film-makers interested in making socially-connected work that explored the nature of the society that we lived in.

On enrolling at LCP, I made the decision to spend as much of my spare time as possible walking the streets, partly because I was fascinated by how one might explore the 'non-existent society' that Thatcherism fulminated against as it appeared on the street within its public spaces. It was around this time that the then prime minister had famously and controversially pronounced that there was no such thing as 'society'. I set myself the task of walking the many and varied routes in central, middle and outer London in the naïve assumption that such tours would add to my understanding of the great metropolis. I became, in the Baudellairean sense, a neophyte flâneur, although at the time I didn't attach such a theoretical articulation to what was after all simply walking. Initially, I thought that a geographic or spatial method was starting to materialise but it didn't take too long to disabuse myself of this illusion. Like the good social scientist that I had been trained to be, I tried to rationalise the process of walking so that I developed a balanced spatial and temporal grid involving sustained periods of visual research in specific sectors of the city. The sheer lack of spontaneity and mind-numbing bouts of boredom forced me to re-assess this approach a couple of years into the project, and thereafter I decided to submit myself to the methodology of the detour.



The man holding the bouquet of flowers is Richard Adams, the father of the murdered black teenager Roland Adams. The image, made in the early 1990s was the first from a series recording the impact of the activities of the far-right in the area of South East London, and gives a sense of the spatial alienation and bleakness of the area. Compositionally, the intention was to emphasise the collective sense of grief at the loss of Roland, set against a sense of private space within which Roland's relatives are lost within their own memories. In the foreground there is an informally dressed security guard who was constantly on the look-out for neo-nazis who had threatened to disrupt the memorial.



I was interested in the relationship between this man and the art exhibition still under wraps. He lingered in front of the images for a while and then, unable to contain himself any longer, darted under the sheets to have his own private viewing. I thought there was something of a surrealistic quality to the moment and this was reinforced by the way in which the sheeting obscures his head, almost as if he were in two dimensions at the same moment. I suppose it is a comment on what art reveals and what it chooses to obscure.

The detour has at its core the assumption of randomness – rather than attempting to be ‘scientific’ about the visual representation of a city space, the detour is all about engaging with the antithesis of geographic rationality. Detouring is concerned with ‘the flow’ of city life, embracing its rhythms, contours, personal histories, idiosyncrasies and contradictions and most importantly, it is deeply intuitive by nature and practice. The ultimate aim of such an approach is not to establish an objective truth of the city, rather it is to construct a personal narrative of urban space and one’s relationship with it through the practice of walking. In Michel De Certeau’s conceptual framing, walking might be thought of as an ‘everyday practice’ or what he calls ‘a space of enunciation’, not necessarily burdened with the psychological intentionality of leaving in order to arrive, of moving from place to place, but rather, photographic walking might be thought of a means by which the city can be experienced and made sense of through the medium of the camera. Such a journey’s primary motivation is that of looking wherein the passage becomes the event.

During these walks I came to understand and re-establish a connection with my former self as a young teenager who had developed more than a passing interest in photography, not just the technology, chemistry and physics of lens construction, but also the geographic and social possibilities it afforded by means of its inherent perambulatory and interactive qualities. I was interested in what a camera allowed the holder to do; the access, rituals and social connectivities associated with the act of image-making. I retreated to the safety of the art, English and music departments spending most of my time either studying Bach and Bartok, reading Chaucer, or sloshing noxious chemicals around ancient nicotine-coloured developing trays. The darkroom became a kind of sanctuary with its own community of serial absconderers, misfits and lost-boys. In many ways my secondary schooling was essentially a sustained exercise in non-schooling as I somehow managed to miss large chunks of the formal curriculum with very few people noticing.

Eventually, the head of art took me aside and confided that he no longer knew how to teach me photography as he had exhausted his knowledge of processes and photographic history. He pointed me in the direction of some galleries and asked me how I spent my time outside school; I replied that I had always enjoyed walking and discovering places that were often hidden from view. My teacher, perceptively and presciently, started to set me some walking assignments, designed, I now suspect, to get me away from the darkroom and its foul-smelling fumes, into the open air of suburban Greenwich. During one such walk, around Woolwich, I came across a second-hand shop selling musical instruments, super-8 and stills cameras. On entering, my eyes were drawn to a row of range-finder and 35mm cameras. The following weekend, I convinced my father to accompany me on a walk to the same area and conveniently happened again on the shop. Christmas was fast approaching and I knew that there as a good possibility that my parents might be persuaded to consider buying me a ‘proper camera’, with a real lens, shutter control and perhaps even a light-meter.

Christmas day arrived, and with it, a black and chrome Praktica SLR camera. I sat and stared at it for several hours and then started to imagine what I would be able to do with such a beautiful thing. Shortly afterward, Tom - my late adopted father - started accompanying me on my photographic trips around Greenwich. He liked to walk and would often tell me stories about the area; about the Thames, the ancient forests, the streets and the architectural details. His knowledge was uncannily encyclopaedic and would be triggered by the process of moving through a specific space known to him. Such local knowledge contrasted sharply with the stuffy, soul-less diet of battles, kings and queens and rote learning served up in its most unappetising form within the history classes at school. History, geography and sociology became something alive and creative during those walks and without them I know that I would, in all probability, have never developed the interest in urbanism that would consume much of my adult life.



This image was made in Brixton's Brockwell Park in the mid-1990s. There had been torrential rain and these men decided to make a break for it to get to the beer tent - by the time they got there, they were absolutely soaked to the skin. Fortunately, I had taken a large umbrella with me that day and was able to stand in the middle of the field, photographing people as they ran past. I heard comments to the effect that they thought I was barking mad standing in the middle of a field in a storm.



Made in the late 1990s as part of an Italian street festival, I was fascinated by the bored figure of the angel who was waiting for the procession to start. I set the 28mm lens on infinity focus and waited to see what would happen in front of the lens. Suddenly, a young child walked past with an inflated plastic dog and at that moment, I recognised the concept for an image; the Dalmatian looking up to heaven, the bored angel and the sign with the legend – the visitation.



There is something disturbing about the figure on the right of the image who appears to be full of malevolent intent. I was interested in the level of pictorial depth within the scene as it appeared – we are not sure of the spatial relationship between the inside and outside of the restaurant and street; a blurring takes place. Also, there is something ambiguous about the way in which the woman is holding and studying the fork – has she spotted the remnants of a previous meal, or is she about to commit an unspeakable act of violence on her companion?

One of the most memorable walks was to the grounds of an old abbey on the Kent borders, a site known for its rich archaeological deposits. Tom rummaged around within a pile of archaeological debris and produced some beautifully preserved sharks' teeth. Later, when I was to study anthropology and archaeology, I was to recall the sheer pedagogic brilliance of that journey as we walked from the river delta up the hill to the prehistoric forest. He introduced the notion of history folded in on itself; of history layered and undulating, of memories and meanings buried beneath the surface and of the urgent need to look beyond the appearance of things. To my knowledge Tom never read social and critical theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault, and yet right at the heart of his 'talking walks' was an active and passionate engagement with local knowledge and oral tradition. There was, for want of a better description, a kind of cultural practice unravelling before my eyes with each footfall, a practice that didn't feel the need to define itself in the often elevated and self-referential language of the social sciences; that made no claims to objectivity but readily embraced the subjectivity of experience and the personal account.

After completing a masters degree in social anthropology and a film for Channel 4 TV about the political geographies of the far-right in South London and the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, I was invited to apply for a visiting fellowship at the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR), part of the sociology department at Goldsmiths College. The main purpose of my research was to explore the interconnectedness between qualitative urban ethnography – social research concerned with how people experience living in urban spaces – and the ways in which photographic media might contribute towards an understanding of such experiences. One of the really exciting prospects of being based in the centre was not only the intellectual hot-housing associated with such an academic institution, but also that it was the first time in my academic career I found myself in a truly interdisciplinary centre where sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, urban theorists, education specialists and media arts practitioners interacted, collaborated and exchanged ideas about the nature of the city and how it might be understood. Central to this collective project was the development of visual languages within disseminatory practices associated with urban ethnography – social researchers were starting to rethink how such knowledge could respond to an expanded notion of narrative beyond that associated with traditional academic writing. The impact of digital and media convergence was starting to have a profound impact on the very basis of the sociological imagination itself; to invite not only another way of seeing urban and cultural life, but also to think about other ways of telling.

What was initially intended to be a fellowship lasting a year or two became an extended period involving the establishment of a popular seminar series, a number of visual and research collaborations, and of utmost importance for my London project, I was able to have access to a desk and to the libraries of the university. After seven years 'fellow-ing' in the centre, and as the London project moved closer to completion, it became apparent that we needed to bring together many of the intellectual strands involved with such a research culture in order to offer a postgraduate course for urban photographers, artists and those social researchers similarly interested in the visual evocation of urban spaces. The centre developed an MA degree in photography and urban cultures that enabled students to pursue an advanced theoretical training in urban theory, research and visual methods based on the production of a dialogical visual research portfolio.

Dialogue is right at the heart of what this visual project is about – an archaeology of seeing, a cultural geography of walking, a visual poem concerned with the fluid, chaotic, impossible spatial and cultural mass that we call 'the city' with its in-built tendency towards incomprehensibility, ambiguities, paradoxes and misunderstandings. In an age where the cacophonous rants of outmoded and conceptually myopic critical photo-phobia seem to constitute many of the dominant voices within the academy and art schools, it seems to this author that many visual artists and photographers are rediscovering what Walter Benjamin has termed the 'botanising of the asphalt', and with it a sense of engagement with the lived-in-ness of city spaces. We are witnessing an increasing rejection of those critical souls burdened by the weight of pre-packaged, self-referential, inward-looking and tautological theory whose primary aim appears to be the joyless 'interrogation of the image' and perhaps moving towards a moment where visual artists feel better able to rediscover what Dolores Hayden has termed 'the power of place', combining the aesthetic, ethical and epistemological possibilities afforded by a re-defined notion of detouring as a form of praxis.

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He will be discussing developments in street photography at The Tate Modern on the 28th of July 2006.