

“Virtual walking”

Olya Troitskaya

Thesis

Mentors:  
David Bennewith  
Louis Lüthi

Graphic design  
department  
Gerrit Rietveld  
Academie 2013

## INTRODUCTION

Walking is most commonly thought of as “a physical process of moving over a surface by taking steps with the feet at a place slower than a run”.<sup>1</sup> But the term can also be used to describe more psychological process of going on a journey. In the past a walk was a necessity, a way of moving from point A to point B. In the present it is rather a decision of taking a walk when other means of moving in space are available.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/walk>  
Accessed: 15.11.2012

## A WALK AS A DELIBERATE GESTURE

One of the historically important concepts of the deliberate walk was developed by french poet and critic Charles Baudlaire (1821 – 1867). It was described with the French masculine noun *flâneur* (which has the basic meanings of “stroller”, “lounger”, “loafer” and coming from the French verb *flâner*, which means “to stroll”). Baudelaire developed a derived meaning of *flâneur* — “a person who walks the city in order to experience it”. The *flâneur* was, first of all, a literary type of person, associated with 19-th century Paris. It carried a set of elaborate associations: the man of leisure, the idler, the urban explorer, the “connoisseur” of the street. The *flâneur* would leisurely stroll through the streets of the city and especially its arcades — lively modern rows of shops covered by glass roofs, early centers of consumerism — with no intention to buy, “an intellectual parasite of the arcade”. Later the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) in his *Arcades Project*, (1927 – 1940) points out how the figure of the *flâneur* had been co-opted and degraded by capitalism into the figure of the shopper, aimlessly following points of purchase.

*Arcades Project* was an unfinished project of German literary critic Walter Benjamin, written between 1927 and 1940. An enormous collection of writings on the city life of Paris in the 19th century, it was especially concerned with the iron-and-glass covered “arcades” (known in French as *Passages couverts de Paris*).

The radical political update of the nineteenth-century figure of the *flâneur* arrived in the 1940s with the concept of *dérive*. The “*dérive*” or “drift” is “a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”, the definition given by Guy Debord (1931 – 1994), a french Marxist theorist, writer, filmmaker and artist. “It is an unplanned journey through a landscape, usually urban, on which the subtle aesthetic contours of the surrounding architecture and geography subconsciously direct the travelers, with the ultimate goal of encountering an entirely new and authentic experience.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dérive>  
Accessed: 20.11.2012

Guy Debord, founding member of the Situationist International, an avant-garde group active between 1957 and 1972, developed a notion of “Psychogeography”, a subfield of geography, that was defined by him in 1955 as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” Debord and the Situationists were looking for ways to break the herd-thinking of the urban masses, and to disrupt their choreographed obedience to the sign-making habits of capitalism.

Since the 1990s, as situationist theory became popular in artistic and academic circles, avant-garde, neoist and revolutionary groups emerged, developing psychogeographical praxis in various ways.

Interesting further exploration of the urban landscape and the ways contemporary walker is moving in space can be seen in the work of Nils Norman (born 1966), an artist living in London, who works across the disciplines of public art, architecture and urban planning.

In last decade he has been photographing the ongoing changes made to the design of street furniture and other elements of public space (bollards, lampposts, pedestrian barriers, flower beds, city squares, bus stops, street signage, CCTV cameras and many preventative designs implemented to displace unwanted groups and activities in cities).

In the essay connected with his project “Urbanomics” started in 1995, he writes “What is interesting to observe is the shift from an ‘uninterrupted’, bourgeois public sphere to a more contemporary, contained corporate urban space. The ongoing cliched theme is a Disneyfied version of Hausmann’s Paris. From Hausmannization free enterprise and the creation of the middle class consumer—the new designs reflect a redevelopment in distribution: Disneyfication and the creation of a corporate consumer class. Spaces are redefined to control and corral users. As city spaces become cleaner and more ‘safe’, designs become more abundant and paranoid, the evocation of fear more predominant within designs that more often than not have no other proven function.”<sup>1</sup>

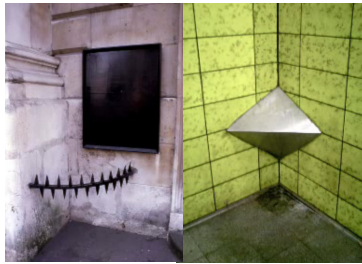
Norman points out how city spaces have changed as capitalism updates itself, how designs reflect these changes and an aimless strolling in the streets becomes controlled, directed and more and more impossible.

A very vivid example of this controlling of space is the installation in Hamburg and Copenhagen’s railway stations of a constant loop of high pitched electronic classical music — beamed in by satellite (reminiscent of the soundtrack to A Clockwork Orange) that has become a very simple and successful device to deter loitering.

## WALKING IN CYBERSPACE

The ‘cyberflâneur’ — spaces and places on the internet.

As capitalism develops, flânerie becomes increasingly restricted. Our activity in real space has decreased significantly as cyber space was introduced in the beginning of 1990-s. With increasing restrictions on physical space, cyberspace could become a more popular place for flânerie.



Nils Norman began the Urbanomics Archive in 1995. It is an ongoing photographic archive and research project investigating the changing developments in defensive design and security architecture.

Georges-Eugène Haussmann, (1809 – 1891) commonly known as Baron Haussmann, was a French civic planner most responsible for the rebuilding of Paris in the 1860s. Critics forced his resignation for extravagance, but his vision of the city still dominates Central Paris.

<sup>1</sup> N. Norman, Urbanomics, p.36  
<http://friklass.dk/files/Urbanomics%20-%20Norman.pdf>  
Accessed: 15.11.2012

The term Hausmannization is used to refer to rebuilding of 19-th century Paris due to social and economic change the city was undergoing. Demolition of small medieval streets, building of wide, transparent boulevards (built to avoid revolutionary blockades, as it is more difficult to blockade wide streets), replacement of arcades with utilitarian department stores, intensification of street traffic, significantly changed strolling in the city.



Cyberspace is a new space that you can compare to social space. It is an update of a personal space, bodily space, architectural space. But experience of virtual geography is closely connected to perception of real space. This similarity in our perception is even seen in names we use in the cyber space. Referring to the on-line “community” the words “Global Village” are used. Information on the World Wide Web is published on “homepages” or “sites” that have “addresses”. Information Space is referred to as the “Information Superhighway”, when we travel on the internet we use words implicating real space movement, we “surf” or “browse” the Net. We chat in “chat rooms”, leave comments on “walls”, we used to have a profile on “Myspace”.

In the essay from 1998, published on the website Ceramics Today<sup>1</sup> the term “cyberflâneur” is discussed. It is argued that today’s flâneurs can be found in Web space. “What the city and the street were to the Flâneur, the Internet and the Superhighway have become to the Cyberflâneur... The Cyberflâneur ‘strolls’ through information space, taking in the virtual architecture and remaining anonymous”... as the 19-century flâneur would mingle with the crowd, endeavoring to remain anonymous, seeing and being seen, but not recognized. If the flâneur was a “decipherer of urban and visual texts”<sup>2</sup>, then the cyberflâneur is a decipherer of Virtual Reality and Hypertexts. He is the voyeur of the post-information age.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ceramicstoday.com/articles/051998.htm>  
Accessed: 20.11.2012

It’s easy to see, why cyberflânerie seemed such an intriguing activity in the early days of the Web. At that time it seemed like the Web’s future was filled with playfulness, intrigue and pleasant surprises. The romantic idea of exploring cyberspace as new territory, not yet colonized by governments and corporations, is even reflected in the names of early browsers (“Internet Explorer,” “Netscape Navigator”). Less than a decade later Apple launched their internet browser Safari, a name suggesting a more restricted touristic experience than the Navigator’s and Explorer’s that preceded it, perhaps an indication of the already changing nature or the Web.

“Online communities like GeoCities and Tripod were the true digital arcades of that period, trading in the most obscure and the most peculiar, without any sort of hierarchy ranking them by popularity or commercial value. Back then eBay was weirder than most flea markets; strolling through its virtual stands was far more pleasurable than buying any of the items.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Evgeny Morozov, New York Times website, published: February 4, 2012  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/the-death-of-the-cyberflaneur.html?pagewanted=all>  
Accessed: 15.11.2012

Tripod.com is a web hosting service, originally aiming its services to college students and young adults, it was one of several sites trying to build online communities during the dot-com bubble. Tripod formed part of the first wave of user-generated content. Tripod originated in 1992 with two Williams College classmates, Bo Peabody and Brett Hershey, along with Dick Sabot, an economics professor at the school. Although it

would eventually focus on the Internet, Tripod also published a magazine, Tools for Life, that was distributed with textbooks, and offered a discount card for students.

GeoCities was originally founded by David Bohnett and John Reznor in late 1994 as Beverly Hills Internet (BHI), and by 1999 GeoCities was the third-most visited Web site on the World Wide Web. In its original form, site users selected a “city” in

McKenzie Wark writes on the notion of Cyberspace following: “We live every day in a familiar terrain: the place where we sleep, the place where we work, the place where we hang out when not working or sleeping. From these places we acquire a geography of experience. We live also every day in another terrain, equally familiar: the terrain created by the television, the telephone, the telecommunications networks crisscrossing the globe. These ‘vectors’ produce in us a new kind of experience, the experience of telesthesia—perception at a distance. This is our ‘virtual geography,’ the experience of which doubles, troubles, and generally permeates our experience of the space we experience firsthand. This virtual geography is no more or less ‘real’. It is a different kind of perception, of things not bounded by the rules of proximity, of ‘being there’.”

McKenzie Wark (born in 1961) is an Australian-born writer and scholar working mainly on media theory, critical theory and new media.

<sup>2</sup> On the the Flâneur: He “jealously guards his individuality and agency by obscuring it beneath the mask of the anonymous and insignificant ‘man of the crowd’, pursues a course which alienates him from even the possibility of a deeper intersubjective exchange with the other members of the crowd scene. ... flânerie is a sociability of Ones. (...) This is the life of watching the world go by, not ever exchanging a word acknowledging the presence of an Other.”  
-Rob Shields in “The Flâneur”, edited by Keith Tester, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 76-77

which to place their Web pages. The “cities” were named after real cities or regions according to their content—for example, computer-related sites were placed in “SiliconValley” and those dealing with entertainment were assigned to “Hollywood”—hence the name of the site. Shortly after its acquisition by Yahoo!, this practice was abandoned in favor of using the Yahoo! member names in the URLs.



For that moment in the mid-1990s, it seemed that the Internet was able to provoke a renaissance of flânerie in cyberspace. Has walking on the internet has changed since then?

In an article published in the New York Times in February 2012, Evgeniy Morozov, a Belarus-born writer and researcher who studies political and social implications of technology, draws a parallel between 19th century Paris and recent changes on the Internet. Technology, social change and further development of capitalism remodeled Paris. "Rationalization of city life drove flâneurs underground, forcing some of them into a sort of "internal flânerie" that reached its apogee in Marcel Proust's self-imposed exile in his cork-lined room (situated, ironically, on Boulevard Haussmann)"<sup>1</sup>.

Valentin Louis Georges Eugène Marcel Proust (1871 – 1922) was a French novelist, critic, and essayist, one of the most significant writers of 20th century.

<sup>1</sup> Evgeniy Morozov, New York Times website, published: February 4, 2012  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/the-death-of-the-cyberflaneur.html?pagewanted=all>  
Accessed: 15.11.2012

The original, more playful, identity of the Internet has changed as well, "it's no longer a place for strolling — it's a place for getting things done. Hardly anyone "surfs" the Web anymore."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The growing popularity of tablet and mobile applications that help to find information we need without opening the browser or visiting the rest of the Internet has made cyberflânerie less likely. Google's latest grand ambition is to answer all our questions by itself, "without having us visit any other sites at all. Just plug in a question to the Google homepage, and your answer comes up at the top of the search results."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Another interesting comparison is drawn by Morozov in this article: "If today's Internet has a Baron Haussmann, it is Facebook. Everything that makes cyberflânerie possible — solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking — is under assault by that company. ... Facebook seems to believe that the quirky ingredients that make flânerie possible need to go. ...It's this idea that the individual experience is somehow inferior to the collective that underpins Facebook's recent embrace of "frictionless sharing," the idea that, from now on, we have to worry only about things we don't want to share; everything else will be shared automatically."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In such a commercialized, capitalized, un-experimental and un-exciting reality of our present days Internet there are a number of artist practices being developed around exploration of walking on the Internet.

An interesting example of cyberflânerie in artistic practice is work made by Montreal-based contemporary artist Jon Rafman. His Google Street project, called 9-eyes, referencing the nine panoramic cameras on top of Google maps trucks, has recently received a lot of attention. This work is a series of intriguing and odd images he sourced from Google's street view map system.

"...This infinitely rich Google Street View material afforded my practice the extraordinary opportunity to explore, interpret, and curate a new world in a new way...."

Google Street View is another creation of Google. It is an enormous project, consistent with the company's mission "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful". It is also one of the most popular representations of the real world in virtual space. Walking on its virtual streets could be seen as an attempt to inform oneself on a walk in real geographical locations.

In an interview with Lodown Magazine, 2010 Rafman describes the way he would approach his hikes on the google street view maps remarkably close to real physical experience: "I have to mentally prepare myself before I go Street View "surfing". The process requires intense endurance and concentration. When I first started off, I would regularly go on 12 hour Ritalin-fueled marathon runs and about half way through the session I would enter an almost trance-like state. Usually it would be hours upon hours before I'd find anything worth screen capturing."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Rafman, Interview in Lodown Magazine, April-March 2011, p. 24-25  
[http://www.jonrafman.com/Rafman\\_Lodown.pdf](http://www.jonrafman.com/Rafman_Lodown.pdf)  
Accessed: 28.11.2012

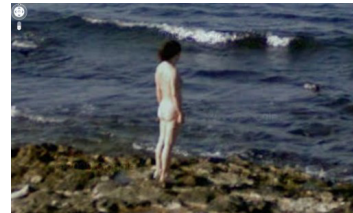
Another example of an interesting cyberspace is a game Second Life, a multi-player online virtual world. Its name reflects ambition to become an experience very closely connected to real life experience. This space is curiously explored by a Chinese born artist Cao Fei. The artist documents the path of her avatar China Tracy, "who acts as a guide, philosopher, and tourist"<sup>2</sup>. The journeys undertaken by this character expose the alternative life led in this virtual community and show relations that shape this world to be similar to those characteristic of the real world. Her video I. Mirror traces the love story that develops between avatars "China Tracy" and "Hug Yue." They walk together exploring the virtual landscape accompanied melancholic background music.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.art21.org/artists/cao-fei>  
Accessed: 28.11.2012

Another project connected to Google Street View is a work titled "The Mother Road" by Dutch graphic designer and publisher Hans Gremmen. It is a five hour compilation video made from screenshots of one of the most famous roads in America — Route 66, seen through Google Street View.

Hans Gremmen took 151.000 screen captures following the iconic Street View arrows up the Highway. Starting from Chicago, traveling down through the American landscape to Los Angeles like a true road movie. The duration of the video is 5hrs 11min 49sec, that allows to experience the 2500 miles route in a much shorter time (driving 60 mph it would take approximately 42 hours to accomplish this route in a real life).

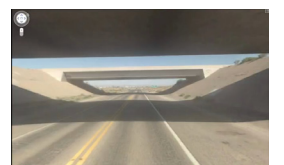
Watching this piece resembles a real car trip but also allows you to travel in time as the season changes while you travel. But in Gremmen's project flânerie for the viewer is already impossible. You travel on the road without possibility of taking an other street and wonder around being attracted by a cathy sign.



Second Life is an online virtual world developed by Linden Lab. It was launched on June 23, 2003. A number of free client programs enable Second Life users, called Residents, to interact with each other through avatars. Residents can explore the world, visit existing environments, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another.



"The Mother Road" (2010-2011) by Hans Gremmen. The screenshots on this page show the road between miles 1894 and 1931, outside Kingman (AZ).



There is a connection of this project with a reflection on how time and tempo is very different on Today's Web.

“A decade ago, a concept like the “real-time Web,” in which our every tweet and status update is instantaneously indexed, updated and responded to, was unthinkable. Today, it's Silicon Valley's favorite buzzword. That's no surprise: people like speed and efficiency. But the slowly loading pages of old, accompanied by the funky buzz of the modem, had their own weird poetics, opening new spaces for play and interpretation. Occasionally, this slowness may have even alerted us to the fact that we were sitting in front of a computer. Not anymore.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Evgeny Morozov, New York Times website, published: February 4, 2012  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/the-death-of-the-cyberflaneur.html?pagewanted=all>  
Accessed: 15.11.2012

It can be seen how age of cyberflânerie seems facing the same problems as the 19-th century flânerie. The cyberstroller, a figure that can be seen as a contemporary take on the flâneur, is being restricted and consumed by capitalism.

In past there were various practices developed as a reaction to changes happening to the the flâneur. Debord and the Situationists tried to challenge capitalism's hold over the city.

In present times it is worth to observe new practices being developed around the figure of cyberflâneur. What is the future of the cyberflâneur? Is it possible to learn from situationist's example? Where to look for the “dérive” in cyberspace?