

“Walking is mapping with your feet.  
It helps you piece a city together,  
connecting up neighborhoods that might otherwise  
have remained discrete entities,  
different planets bound to each other,  
sustained yet remote.  
I like seeing how in fact they blend into one another,  
I like noticing the boundaries between them.  
Walking helps me feel at home.”  
Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse*

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## Embodying Public Space: Living Subjectivities and Relational Practices of the Flâneuse

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[about](#)

The following development is an attempt to define my own practice of flânerie – the one that I strive to embody in my life. There are as many ways of strolling as there are subjectivities in motion, each with its own tendencies, modes of being, and capacities for affect. For me, flânerie is an attempt to be present and attentive, both to perception and to emotion. The flâneuse soaks in, absorbs, drinks up her surroundings; she catches echoes, lets her ears drag behind, inhales deeply, feels, brushes, and snatches

at what she passes. Hers is a bifurcated disposition—at once wired to the world and profoundly elsewhere: detached, vacant, available. This is an attention that haunts the route.

### Looking not looking

“The sleepwalker is someone whose life of relations persists even in sleep. An outsider by definition, they wrench us away from the inverted ordeals and inner states of existence to render palpable the formal richness of simply existing. The aesthetic function of the sleepwalker: through an experience of relating to ‘that which forever eludes us’” (Isaac Joseph, «The Considerable Passerby: Essay on the Dispersion of Public Space»). This figure has dissolved in its total availability, its perpetual openness to everything. The flâneuse maintains a floating attention, at times sustained through simultaneous points of focus. I have developed these notions elsewhere, in an article analyzing the opening sequence of Chaplin’s *City Lights* for the journal *Multitudes*. [Link](#)

She meanders, she softens rocks, she knows how to infiltrate. The flâneuse is a hypersensorialist. This sensitive availability is characterized by a posture of discovery, attuned to the milieus explored, curious about “what is happening,” the life that proliferates, the maintenance of places—and so forth. This “etcetera” is crucial: it is the very abundance of attention that defines this stance. This investigative state

accumulates numerous data, “remarks,” capturing both phenomena and details, gleaning rather than labeling. Whereas public words are primarily indications, orders, or advertisements—taxes on perception, as Yves Citton calls them—the flâneuse resists fixing things in language. Her anarchic way of gathering and integrating sonic, visual, olfactory, tactile (and why not gustatory?) motifs deploys a network of information, or generates a cloud of thoughts, untreated and unprocessed into conclusions. This corpus becomes the potential material for sculpting a new intervention in public space—who can tell?

A complicity with the landscape emerges; everything becomes spectacle, the banal achieves the dignity of attention.

### Walking as Speaking

“I walk because, in a certain way, walking is like reading. One is present, but not entirely so. One eavesdrops on conversations that do not concern us, yet which we may nonetheless catch as they pass. We can imagine the lives that lie beyond the fragments we observe.” (Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse*). Here, we encounter Michel de Certeau’s “pedestrian enunciations” from “The Practice of Everyday Life—an art of doing”. Simply put, our ways of navigating space are to movement what speech is to language: both are modes of appropriation. “Walking affirms, suspects, gambles, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (p.9). “The paths of passersby offer a succession of twists and turns analogous to ‘turns of phrase’ or ‘figures of style.’ There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of turning sentences finds its equivalent in the art of turning corners. Like ordinary language, this art combines style and usage. Style specifies a linguistic structure manifesting

on the symbolic plane a fundamental way of being-in-the-world; it connotes singularity. Usage defines the social phenomenon by which a communication system is actualized; it refers to a norm. Both aim at a ‘way of doing’ (speaking, walking, etc.), one as a singular symbolization, the other as an element of code. They intersect to form a style of usage, a mode of being and a mode of doing.” Thus, we each practice subtexts through traversals—exerting a certain rhetoric of action. By “subtext” I refer to James C. Scott’s “Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts”, a text that maps the inventive tactical responses of subalterns to domination—a repertoire of practices that mutate relationships of power.

### Embodied playground

Such gestures mark a form of subjectivation—a self-articulation through choices and embodied acts. As an inspiring figure, let us recall Pippi Longstocking, as described by Christine Aventin: “She wears a dress (her way), long hair (her way), she cleans, cooks, shops, she is coquettish (her way), she dances and sings (her way), jumps rope, plays hopscotch, takes tea. She borrows nothing from the masculine, refuses nothing of the feminine. There is no wish to negotiate with the social attributes of gender; rather, she exceeds them.” This reappropriation is not solely reactive or subversive but invents itself anew.

The process of subjectivation is nourished by Foucault’s “practices of freedom”—an ethic of care of the self. Summarily: caring for oneself, taking the time to reflect on one’s life ethics, is an exercise of liberty and a deployment of agency. An ethos forms over time, rooted in one’s comportment for oneself and with others, giving rise to habits. To do things “one’s own way” is thus

a stance, a potential form of emancipation. This perspective—of words, usages, with an attitude at once sensitive, symbolic, and transgressive—is the framework in which I wish to consider the flâneuse.



### Consciously abandoning the masculine approach to occupy space

To do so demands departing from the historically dominant figure—the “flâneur”: “as if a penis were an essential appendage for walking, no less than a cane or walking stick” (p.31, Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse*). The flâneuse, by contrast, takes up her staff—to bundle her belongings and set off on adventure. Yet we cannot simply ignore the historicity of the term, of the posture—even as we intentionally forgo mention of Baudelaire or the Situationists. Flâneuses inhabit an always-already engaged stance, having to navigate a world shaped by patriarchy—transformed by context and era, continually invented, playing with visibility or with concealment from the (male) gaze. Among the clandestine female explorers—through pseudonymity, androgynous cross-dressing, carnivalesque writing or autofictional performance—are Delphine de Girardin, George Sand, and Flora Tristan. Until recently, women’s access to space was

strictly delimited; when they did stroll, they were chaperoned—especially bourgeois women. In the eighteenth century, working-class women dominated most market stalls, and at home, they gathered with neighbors outside, operating as what Jane Jacobs would call, two centuries later, “eyes on the street”: they kept watch, often the first to intervene in disputes; their remarks on dress and comportment constituted a mode of social control. In nineteenth-century Paris, a woman walking alone was deemed imprudent; but the bicycle, the shopfront, cinema, trousers, the office—these changed everything.



### A situated walk and event \_ Paris 2024

Today, in Nanterre, where once the Rosière festival crowned a woman for her virtues, her values, I was last year invited to offer a public intervention as part of Nuit Blanche and the Parades festival. Inspired by feminist street collages denouncing violence against women—one letter, one page—I crafted a series in pink, in dots and dashes: fragments of women’s voices, mostly from songs: “everything is chaos,” “I have already known the scent of love,” “revolution grrrl,” “I will survive,” “if I die, it will be from joy.”





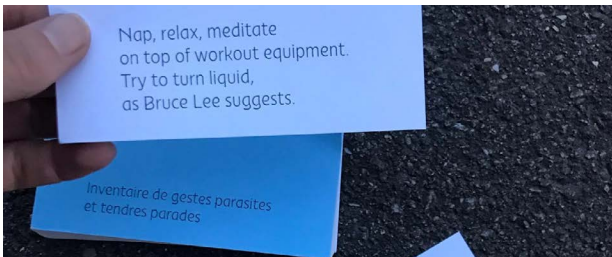
The last, from Brigitte Fontaine, encapsulates the emotional reversal, the retroactive inversion I often seek to evoke. It speaks of a desire to inhabit the street, to act, to display thoughts and feelings—not merely as a private room of one’s own, but as a public chamber—an antechamber to the world, in which to nestle. A place to pace, to explore, to invest. For the flâneuse is no dandy, nor does she aspire to be: she is an engaged walker. The flâneur is attuned to asphalt, transportation, sight; this is not the case for the flâneuse. Her approach is different—at most, akin, if without hostility, to Walter Benjamin, whom I wish to keep with us for the fragmentary quality of his method.

To situate oneself in immediate relation to one’s surroundings is also to make space for kairós: the opportune moment. The practice of freedom is found in the capacity to welcome surprise. The flâneuse is an enthusiast for serendipity, a research in which chance is embraced. Returning to de Certeau, if the vibrations of the voice in language parallel our ways of moving through and subverting meaning from space, then the very possibility of such movement is the presence of “spaces-between.” Flânerie is the offering of time to experience latency, the enjoyment of interstices. In opposition to poetic depictions of the flâneur as a phantom city-dweller, melancholic, steeped in gray romanticism if not intoxicated by it—the flâneuse is joyful – so here is also the flâneureuse! She celebrates the moment; she is alive and embodied. She connects, she relates.



Urban Maieutics, 2021  
 Creation para-urban tour, sound walk,  
 Syndicat potentiel, Strasbourg, Fr.  
 Sound walk guided by the question:  
 How can we define a fertile public space?  
[Link \(in French\)](#)





Feeling Liquid, Protocol, 2018.  
Activation during «Walking as a Method»  
in Nanterre, 2024.  
[Read more about the edition](#)



Plan B, performance, 2020. Flag raising.  
produced/photographed by [@mat\\_artspace](#)  
Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

## To propose collective alternatives through situated experiences and storytelling

The flâneuse creates connections and invents stories—perhaps this is what comes afterwards, maybe on the way back home. Yet the night in public space is not yet a comfortable terrain for women. Her key protrudes between her knuckles; clenched in her palm, she can no longer spare the psychic space for reverie. To stroll alone by night remains largely foreclosed. Looking further into urban exploration, the question is one of affordances: the multiple potential “handles” with which she can play. Her capacity to move, to grasp and attune to the specificities of place—urban furniture, flora—each presents new attentional challenges and ethical considerations.

This “action research,” this interactive relation with space and its devices, enables the composition of invisible, ephemeral connections based on perceived sensitivities. Her gestures “test” the permeability of the context, its alterability—transgressing only if the “milieu, natural or social, is susceptible to being affected and transformed by the activities of which it is partner (or parasite).” A certain plasticity is required. The human experience is akin to that of the earthworm: mixing strata, digesting and transforming ground itself (Joëlle Zask, “Ecology and Democracy,” p.76). But not every milieu is earthworm-friendly; art practice, after negotiating its intentions with the milieu, continuously readjusts its form.