



## Blindly walking in the continuous city. On “Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)” by Myriam Lefkowitz

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Translated by Anna Pakes from : « Traverser la ville ininterrompue : sentir et se figurer à l'aveugle. À propos de *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* de Myriam Lefkowitz », *Ambiances. Revue internationale sur l'environnement sensible, l'architecture et l'espace urbain*, [En ligne], n° 3, 2017, URL : <http://ambiances.revues.org/962>

# BLINDLY WALKING IN THE CONTINUOUS CITY.

Julie PERRIN

ON WALK, HANDS, EYES  
(A CITY) BY MYRIAM  
LEFKOWITZ

Translated by Anna Pakes from :  
« Traverser la ville ininterrompue :  
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Dance research would have no reason to take interest in the contemporary city or public space if choreographers themselves had not already chosen to intervene there. By inscribing choreographic action in the city, these artists enter into dialogue with it: they intervene in urban reality in the distanced mode characteristic of art, a kind of distance that enables a rethinking of the contemporary world. Unlike that of the sociologist, architect or urban planner, the dance researcher's methodology is not specifically designed for urban investigation. She takes a primarily artistic perspective on the city and public space, one shaped by experience of choreographic works. And if the dance researcher is also a city dweller, she takes a particular risk in thinking the city via the prism of art. Perhaps her research approach seems too specific and limited, and the resulting discourse on the city insufficiently specialised. But this way of entering into the heart of experience allows one to grasp the issues at stake within it, and to understand what that experience might specifically contribute to conceptualising the relation to public space.

Artistic experience is based, first and foremost, on a sharing of sensation. This is especially the case with urban choreography that has sometimes – and this is true of the work of Myriam Lefkowitz – chosen

to abandon representation (dancing to picture or express something) in favour of a mode of exploration drawing on the sensory and motor knowledges that ground the invention of gesture. These knowledges have been developing since the birth of modern dance at the beginning of the twentieth century and have been extended by contact with somatic practices which accord a key role to sensation and perception<sup>1</sup>. Dance knowledges also involve responsiveness to weight, a renewed concern with postural balance, and processes of body and movement visualisation that depend on an inventive poetic imaginary. Most often, these practices generate a relation of sensory reciprocity with the environment which finds a fitting articulation in phenomenology<sup>2</sup>. By offering spectators or city-dwellers the chance to explore the urban environment through these knowledges, choreographic action aims to give form to sensory experience in ways unique to each performance. In other words, choreography organises the thickness of sensation by playing with the possible combinations of sensing and acting.

In this essay I explore a case study: the piece *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* made in 2010 by the choreographer Myriam Lefkowitz. I also, ultimately, reflect on the theoretical issues raised by aesthetic experience of Lefkowitz's work. The latter takes the form of an urban walk. But "walking" can take a variety of forms. And so I will be concerned here with reflecting on the various modalities of movement and with understanding, on this basis, how capacity for movement and knowledge of the city are connected.

This project could of course be situated within a wider context of art work that explores urban walking in various specific ways. The history of walking artists in the twentieth century has been recounted in some detail by Francesco Careri (2002) and Thierry Davila (2002): it includes Dada and the Land Art of (for example) Richard Long and Hamish Fulton; the surrealists, Fluxus, and other performance artists of the 1970s like André Cadere, Yoko Ono and Vito Acconci; and it involves also contemporary artists, such as Francis Alÿs, Sophie Calle and Stalker. Each practice accords a particular role to the city, revealing different ways of interpreting, producing and understanding the urban environment, as well as ways of engaging spectators and users with it. These different forms of walking are also shaped by, and lead to, particular conceptualisations of art alongside the city. Histories of the performative practices of visual artists often ignore the work of walking choreographers, however, with a few exceptions (de Morant 2013, O'Rourke 2013, Perrin 2015). And yet the art of theatre dance is distinctive in according significant attention to walking – its expressivity, its style, its dynamics – which dancers continue to investigate through exercises and practices that contribute to modifying the dancer's posture as well as the spatial imaginary he develops. This distinctive context gives hodological choreographic experiment a particular quality that rests on knowledge of movement and of space. My analysis here will begin by situating itself within the field of dance research specifically, leaving others to make the connection with the broader history of walking artists. But it also has in view a dialogue with research in relation to urban space and to perception.

Indeed Myriam Lefkowitz has developed a choreographic protocol which combines work on posture with a practice of urban exploration. This has been evolved over a number of years. She has been experimenting

<sup>1</sup> Somatic practices have been developing since the 1920s and include Alexander technique, Irene Dowd's Ideokinesis, Feldenkrais method, Joan Skinner Releasing Technique and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering. In the 1970s, Thomas Hanna used the term "somatics" to describe this field of practice where the body is conceived and perceived "in the first person" rather than observed objectively from the outside "in the third person" (Hanna 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The phenomenology of Erwin Straus, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jan Patocka is widely invoked by researchers in dance and philosophy (including, in France, Laurence Louppe, Véronique Fabbri, Paule Gioffredi, Romain Bigé and Katharina Van Dyk) but also by dancers (see, for example, Van Dyk 2014).

with partnered walking since 2008, progressively uncovering its artistic interest and limits. Her practice has been refined through transmission, exchange and dialogue with other dance artists who have also taken on the role of guides within the project. And that process has been extended through publication of a book in 2015 that bears the same title as the project itself. The texts making up this book testify to a sharing of knowledge. My own analysis draws from these traces and selected transmissions. It is not based on a sample of spectators whose responses have been systematically analysed, or whose walking I observed from beginning to end. In fact, I only once followed a walking duo (and, even though I did not disturb them, in this departed from the rule that says the walk is not intended to be watched). Rather, my analysis of *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* examines successive and complementary strata: my own experience as a participant in the work; informal exchanges and interviews with the choreographer<sup>3</sup>; involvement in a week of workshops led by Myriam Lefkowitz in 2016 for Masters students within the Dance Department of the University of Paris 8 Saint-Denis, as part of my seminar on spatiality; published interviews (on radio and in print, particularly the interviews in the *Journal des Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers*); and, finally, Lefkowitz's book, which is itself composed of intersecting narratives of artists-guides and guided spectators – stories collected at the ends of their walks, then filtered to create a polyphonic text constructed of smaller successive units. My aim is to stay as close as possible to the experience and the discourses it generated. And to try to unpack what is at stake in a sensory experience that engages the walking subject and perceptions of the city.

## Forms of walking

I sign up with the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers for one of the available timeslots (I could have made an appointment directly with the artist via email). My appointed time is during the day. I am told that I should come prepared to walk outside, wearing comfortable shoes and appropriate clothing. Myriam Lefkowitz (but it could just as well have been someone else from her team<sup>4</sup>) is waiting for me at the Laboratoires, the art institution where she is researcher and writer in residence for a two years period (2013-2015). I know the institution well, although I am not so familiar with its surroundings, except perhaps for the ten-minute walk from the underground station Aubervilliers-Pantin 4 chemins to the Laboratoires. I already know something about the project, particularly from having heard a conference paper by Myriam Lefkowitz and Anne Gonon.<sup>5</sup> I leave my bag at the Laboratoires and we exit to the courtyard. After a simple, direct and cordial greeting, Myriam gives an instruction along the following lines: "there is only one rule: this is a silent experience. But if anything bothers you, don't hesitate to say so. You can stop the experience whenever you want. To begin, I'm just going to ask you to close your eyes" (Lefkowitz 2015b, p.9)<sup>6</sup>. *Walk, Hands, Eyes (Aubervilliers)* is thus described as an experience which obeys two explicit guiding principles: staying silent and keeping eyes closed. Already, though, it seems there are other rules in play, which do not

<sup>3</sup> Lefkowitz, Myriam; Perrin, Julie. 2014. Interview at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers (17th March 2014), unpublished.

<sup>4</sup> The team varies in composition but has included Jean-Philippe Derail, Julie Laporte and Yasmine Youcef.

<sup>5</sup> On 15th June 2012. The paper was titled "La balade des yeux, machine à percevoir le réel" ["Walking the eyes: a machine for perceiving the real"] and was presented as part of the conference *Staging the Land – L'enjeu de la perception dans la création contemporaine in situ [Perceptual issues in contemporary site-specific art]*, University of Avignon.

<sup>6</sup> Citations are from the bilingual French / English edition of Lefkowitz's book, with occasional modifications made here to the English translations as published. These are indicated by the inclusion of square brackets around the modified words / phrases.

really need articulating. The task is to be open and playful (there is already something playful about the protocol thanks to the distance from everyday behaviour that it establishes). And, particularly, our task is to discover how to wander together.

In silence, I close my eyes, standing upright and still. She places one of her hands between my shoulder blades. Her touch is calm, like a way of initiating contact, or assuring one another of our respective presences. Her other hand leads my forearm forwards. We begin to walk. I have to get used to walking with my eyes closed, and to regain the balance that has been upset by losing the dominant sense of sight. Feeling one's way with eyes closed is a common task in dance workshops, most often with the assistance of a "guardian angel" who discreetly – and often at a distance – helps avoid collisions with the walls and especially other participants. The geometrical contours of a dance studio can be identified at a single glance: it is a protected space with smooth surfaces and no obstacles. Aubervilliers is very different: this is a complex and busy space, whose general shape and specific limits are both impossible immediately to grasp. We discover this space gradually, one step at a time.

My attention focuses first on the ground: the lawn at the front of the Laboratoires; the tarmac; the pavements and their differences in level, their bumps, their troughs; paving stones sometimes. I have to check my footing to be sure to keep my balance. In focusing on the foot and its supports, a new relationship to weight is established. I plant that weight on the ground as I listen intently and become more aware of my tangible points of contact with Myriam. These are the new modes of orientation that allow me to advance, or rather to stay upright and to orient myself in space. I walk slowly to begin with, savouring this exploration of supports as I discover different material textures and their resonance. Myriam uses her voice to tell me when there are steps up or down: "one step up, another ... the last one". Sometimes I can follow her simply by sensing her own changes of level. Myriam is a reference point, an accompanying presence, but not a gravitational support. I do not lean on her, but she does ensure a feeling of calm in relation to the situation. In interview, she confirms this intention:

*I don't take charge of the weight of the person I am guiding. He/she is responsible for that, he/she is the one walking. The task here is precisely to activate available physical supports (skin, awareness of the body's volume, the vertical axis, and so on) so that the person I am guiding can discover how to organise him/herself through this walk. (Lefkowitz and Lavergne 2014, p.8)*

These actions of checking one's balance and activating the capacity to move with eyes closed are not performed just the once at the beginning of the walk. Of course, trust is established early on, which facilitates responsiveness to each new situation. But one also has continually to adapt oneself both to new events encountered and to the walk's duration which produces fluctuations in muscle tone<sup>7</sup>, mood and sensory channels. It is difficult in retrospect to retrace the arc of these variations of posture and attitude throughout the whole experience. Posture offers a snapshot of our relation to the environment in a given moment (Launay and Roquet 2008), reflecting both the sensory engagements and affective charge of that instant. Indeed,

<sup>7</sup> Christine Roquet and Isabelle Launay recall how the neurophysiologist Frans Veldman distinguishes three types of muscle tone: "background tone" [*tonus de fond*], or the basic tension of muscles waiting to be activated whose degree "depends on the psychic state of the individual"; "active tone" [*tonus de vigilance*] which is relative to position and which allows the different parts of the body to adapt to a situation; "extended tone" [*tonus d'extension*], which is specific to the muscular activity of the body in contact with an object; and finally "eutone" [*eutonius*] which describes a degree of muscle tension effectively regulated or adapted to a goal (Launay & Roquet 2008).

it soon becomes clear that this is the key concern of the walk: not to reach a particular destination but to move through the city, exploring it through a deployment of my own perceptual capacities. Movement is in the service of sensory experience, as the way I walk modulates my perception of the environment and vice versa. Given this entanglement, it is difficult to understand, let alone articulate, how attention to how I am walking is strangely suspended to make way for perception of my surroundings.

Indeed, there are constant fluctuations in mode of attention: I pass from focused concentration to peripheral awareness, to moments where my mind wanders into evenly-suspended attention, distraction and necessary loss of focus too. Indeed, I began to feel a kind of fatigue, linked to the tension created by acute awareness of the surrounding city – a listening that is simultaneously gravitational, kinaesthetic, sonic, haptic and olfactory. Myriam accentuates these fluctuations: throughout the walk, she continually varies how she walks with me. She too circulates, like an attentive but autonomous partner. She has become my immediate environment: she changes position, the distance between us and her manner of touch or hold. These three levels of variation strongly impact the configuration of our partnership, and, with it, perception of the surrounding space.

At the first level, Myriam remains on one or other side of me, causing my attention and the space to tilt one way or the other. In effect, her presence generates a protective shield, but also a kind of closure of spatial extension on one side. Her mobility reorganises spatial extension and my sense of the territory's dimensions. She encourages me to reorganise myself laterally too. Myriam can choose to stay in front of me or behind. Either I follow her or she follows me. This shows the extent to which even the terms “guide” and “guided” are inadequate in describing the relationship we establish. It is not always obvious who is accompanying whom, nor who takes the initiative in relation to the walk's rhythm, moments of arrest, speed, direction and trajectory. I often allow myself to be led in one or another direction, but also sometimes feel that it is me choosing where to go. Our pathway is jointly negotiated, as Myriam testifies in her account:

*Who chooses the directions? Her? The other? A third party? She visualises it as a block of sensations which gradually weaves itself between their two bodies. The block shrinks, stretches out, becomes compact, dissolves, accelerates. It walks for them. It is so strong that she can begin to loosen her concentration and to fill the space with other things. (Lefkowitz 2015b, p.42)*

The spatial position of the guide in relation to the guided participant is crucial to the apprehension of space, but also bound up with a complex variety of intentional attitudes: should I follow, escape, allow the movement to happen or take the initiative? An imperceptible but constant process of negotiation between these attitudes is even more apparent in the variable distance between us.

The second level of variation is this relative distance, something which alters constantly. Narrow passages bring us close together. We squeeze in. We edge through. I stay close to Myriam to avoid collisions. We step through doorways, walk down corridors. By contrast, other situations invite separation: they open a distance between us that can extend far enough for us to let go, relinquishing contact by touch. In these situations, I move forward as if alone and autonomous. The city enters into the gaps between Myriam and me: sometimes I have the impression of a wide stretch of space confirmed by sounds made by other inhabitants (a marketplace? A pedestrian square?). By contrast, I might find myself surrounded by the cold or dark of an isolated and silent place (a carpark?).

The third level of variation concerns the very diverse modes of touch that Myriam proposes. Thus, the

action of being “taken by the hand” continuously evolves: my hand sometimes rests on her upwards-facing open palm; sometimes just her fingertips touch my fingers or the back of my hand; and sometimes we grasp one another’s hands firmly, like a couple of girlfriends. She sometimes delicately grasps my wrist, encircles my forearm, grips my elbow, or merely places her palm or fingertips on my back (offering a mode of support that leaves my arms free). She sometimes places my hand on her shoulder, or vice versa. These variations in touch present a further source of information about the symbolic dimension of our relationship as well as the plasticity of the senses and the reconfiguration of my posture.

These three levels of variation combine in organising the very subtle action of accompanying the other, such that my attention focuses by turns on the relationship we establish and on the wider context. The experience this walk offers arguably consists in this alternating pattern of attention. What makes the guided spectator turn his attention towards the mutual relationship? The rich exchange of tactile and proxemic information, as well as the augmentation of proprioceptive activity<sup>8</sup> through the privation of sight, orients the guided participant towards an imaginative world conjured by everything at play in this relationship. The guided participant answers to the appeal of his body’s sensory surface (via the tactile zones of contact with the guide), of modulations in how he organises himself in relation to gravity (via the indications that the guide gives), and of his augmented sensory awareness (via the privation of vision). In other words, this moving relationship with the guide is in large part what surrounds the guided participant and constructs his world: the interaction mobilises a process of sensory and affective attunement in each party (Stern 1998), which combines sounds, breath rhythms, mental images, internal visualisations<sup>9</sup>, the musical resonance of the walk itself, perceptions and changes in muscular tension. And the relationship itself is woven from diverse imaginary threads.

What guarantees the nature of this exchange and the quality of this aesthetic interaction? Specifically, the walk engages a process of aisthesis, understood in terms of the forms of sensory experience, or modes of perception and affect (Ranci re 2013). In fact, Myriam Lefkowitz has developed with her group of guides a series of preparatory exercises described at the end of her book (Lefkowitz 2015b). These show how a profound engagement with the sensory and the kinesic grounds the interaction and its imaginative charge. Described here is a labour of proxemic attunement, also discerned during the course of the walk: “Notice the distance [at] which you stand from the body you’re touching. Play out this distance. Play out the volume of air circulating between you two” (*ibid.*, p.120). There is an attunement of the breath too:

*Notice how this breathing is alternating your touch. Where is your rib cage? Can you draw a continuity between your cage and both your hands resting on the rib cage which you touch? Imagine two rib cages connected by the circulation of one single [breath]. Are your eyes closed or open? Are they looking at what you are touching?* (*ibid.*, p.116)

Here there are instructions for the person touching as well as the one touched (anticipating the reciprocity between guide and guided). These are linked directly to the body’s imaginary, to the plasticity of its contours and limits:

<sup>8</sup> Proprioception is the sensory apparatus whereby we perceive our own bodies (their internal organisation, position, and so on) on the basis of kinaesthetic, postural and gravitational sensations. Proprioceptors are located in the inner ear, the joints, the tendons, the ligaments and the skin.

<sup>9</sup> “A few moments later, she saw her skeleton. She had a vision of her body from behind her eyelids. Her gaze settled elsewhere than in front of her enabling her to see from within, towards her pelvis” (Lefkowitz 2015, p.57).

*Let your attention shift from one scale to another, from one [point] of contact to the other, from one rhythm to the other. Let your attention get distracted, leave, come back. Can you demultiply your [points] of attention? Imagine once again that each [point] of contact is an extension of your own outlines.*

*Can you rely on a micro scale of contact to send your attention beyond the space where you are located?*

*Where are you? (ibid., p.121)*

These preparatory guidelines clearly silently inform the actions of the guide during the walk. They engage her own corporeal imaginary and shape the way she interacts with the guided spectator. They link sensory experience to an imaginary that is essentially proprioceptive (involving the body's contours, possible extensions, even its dispersive quality) and spatial (concerned with distances, volume, variations in the density of air and localisation). The individual's own representations can be superimposed on these guidelines, drawing from more circumscribed cultural images. Thus Myriam Lefkowitz tells me at the end of my walk that, as a guide, she assumes a variety of roles: she is the dog on a lead, lover, child held by the hand, nurse, and so on.

The guidelines are distinguished by a constant fluctuation aimed at making the guide a kind of intermediary with the environment. She awakens and encourages in order better to lead elsewhere. The exercises give the guide, in line with the variations in mode of attention suggested, the role of connecting with the surrounding space. The question "are [your eyes] looking at what you are touching?" (*ibid.*, p.116) indicates how a form of multidirectional attention can develop. Indeed, the gap between the location of the guide's touch and the focus of his gaze is where distances, sites and projections into the beyond materialise for the guided spectator. The guide also becomes someone who ferries that spectator towards the outside, towards the surrounding world. This seems to be the aim. And so it is that, equipped with this new corporeal awareness forged in partnership, I apprehend the city.

## *Modalities of the city*

The title of the work indicates its inscription in a particular location: it was *Walk, Hands, Eyes (Aubervilliers)* that I experienced on 4th February 2014. Is the adjustment of the title to assign a named city to the project intended merely to categorise different iterations of the walk (as an artist might number her works)? Or does it suggest that the project becomes rooted in a specific location, that it is redefined for each new site? Several different cities have hosted the project since 2010, including Karlstad, New York, Vilnius, Venice, Brno and Buenos Aires, presenting a variety of architectures, urban histories, cultural environments and social contexts. It is normal (and desirable) that works of art circulate between locations. In the case of choreographic works, this implies adapting to new spaces (to variations in the dimensions of the stage, proportions of the theatre and location of entrances and exits). But the circulation of a site-specific work is more problematic. When she mentions the host location in the title, Myriam Lefkowitz seems to insist on siting the project. So what role is actually played by the city and how does it take shape?

In *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)*, answering the question "where are you?" (see above) becomes a very complex process. Artist-guide (who walks with eyes open), guided spectator and passers-by or city-dwellers happening upon the unusual duo will find the question difficult to answer. During the walk, I quite quickly become uncertain of where I am. This is not just because I do not know Aubervilliers very well or because

I have my eyes closed. It is also because the path we take seems deliberately sinuous. We enter a space, we leave, we retrace our steps. The three levels of variation in our partnership also contribute broadly to the instability of the urban space as I experience it. It becomes clear that we are moving forward but without a particular purpose in mind; or, at least, every effort is being made to make the purpose difficult to grasp. In this, the walk has the wandering or drifting character of much artistic walking which, as Thierry Davila reminds us, offers an “active critique of the linear and the geometrical, of rationalised travel [...] by encouraging the generation of interweaving pathways, of circumstantial, fluid and unplanned trajectories” (Davila 2002, pp.168-9). And it is important to realise that this wandering has little to do with how the city itself is configured.<sup>10</sup> Rather, this is a mode of wandering in and of itself, which partly derives from ordinary behaviour (we are often diverted by different obstacles or whims) but also contrasts with such behaviour in its purposelessness. In this respect, Myriam Lefkowitz emphasises the shift from intention to attention: moving away from the model of purposive movement allows a profound relaxation of muscular activity and tension.

I learn that the walk is actually improvised. This means that it has no predetermined pathway, except insofar as one must walk in a loop in order to return to the point of departure. The duration is always roughly one hour. But the guide decides moment by moment on the trajectory and different stages of the walk. Sometimes it also happens that the guide gets lost (I witnessed this on one occasion), because he or she is so preoccupied with the spontaneous construction of an experience of winding and weaving. In other words, perceptions of the city quickly move away from a topographical mapping of axes, streets and intersections, and towards a more topological space that is constructed only gradually. The walk also emphasises the textures of the city rather than its forms: its atmospheres, its materials (their resonance and density) and, of course, the smells, sounds and temperatures to which one becomes so sensitised when walking with eyes closed. But this kind of description is not enough to highlight the singular nature of this walk. Rather, we also need to understand what relation to the city (or what idea of the city) underpins the project. Is the walk inscribed in a specific geographical location? How it is reinvented for each city? In other words, to what extent is the work actually improvised?

Lefkowitz clearly states that this walk is not a guided tour “aiming to discover the particular features of an urban area”, but she also says that the city “is the ideal terrain because of the different elements of which it is composed” (Lefkowitz and Villeneuve 2015, p.9). This suggests that the walk is concerned with a kind of generic city, described by the artist in terms of “its speed, aspects, holes, carparks, lobbies, doorways, chills, blasts of heat, silences, heights, narrow pathways” (*ibid.*). The forms of walking described above only make sense within a suitably heterogeneous environment, which creates potential for the unexpected: the walk does not work in locations like the beach or the forest which do not contain sufficient contrasts (Lefkowitz and Perrin 2014). These days, Myriam Lefkowitz might say that the city enables changes of course and an opening of “dynamics” which have “a very different flavour” depending on whether one is in New York or Buenos Aires (*ibid.*). She emphasises, for example, the different dimensions, the relative breadth of the streets, the height of the buildings, the volumes of sound, the particularity

<sup>10</sup> Paola Berenstein-Jacques (2008) has outlined three characteristics of urban wandering through exploring images of wandering in Brazilian and European history: a corporeal state of possibility, the capacity to become lost and a slowness of pace. Only the last of these is sometimes lacking in *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* which can include accelerations, even running.

of smells, and so on. To this extent the project draws on site-specific art, in the sense that the location becomes what motivates the experience. But here the location is already filtered through the singular protocol I have described and is folded into a pre-existing choreographic score.

In fact, the walk's matrix derives from another location which generated its parameters and probably gave it the particular characteristics it has. For several months in 2008, Myriam Lefkowitz experimented with guiding friends through a Parisian industrial space to which she felt a strong connection: it was "a symphony of neon, [with] wide corridors, a series of doorways, stairs, lifts, completely dark recesses" (*ibid.*). This suggests a matrix that is not urban so much as architectural, dark and fragmented. Arguably, this generated a kind of score that still governs the improvised structure of the walk today. It suggests a sort of perceptual coordination derived from attending to this particular location and foundational for the design of pathways, principles of orientation and other ingredients indispensable to the walk's score: total dark contrasting with naked light, thresholds that need crossing, recesses, uncouplings, alternation between internal and external, qualities of silence, repetition of motifs, changes of level, atmospheres of carparks, sudden expanses, contrasts in ambience, and so on. It was almost incidental that the walk should be programmed as part of a festival in the Swedish town of Karlstad in 2010, even though it had not yet been tested outside. *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* is designed to recreate in the urban environment something of this early experience. Experiments in the industrial building generated a particular configuration for the city (its constitutive ingredients, the modes of orientation it invites, the nature of the movements one can make within it). It also affects the scale, insofar as only a relatively small area can be explored in just an hour. But the way the "city" is constituted by this walk also derives from a new element absent from the prototype: a form of sociability that the industrial location lacked. The city's inhabitants themselves create unexpected situations, inadvertently construct scenarios and welcome the walkers amongst them in surprising ways.<sup>11</sup>

However, this walk does not go looking for the picturesque. "The neighbourhood reminds her of another, bigger, city. More and more often, after all this walking, cities overlap in her mind [...] another city slips onto the cityscape of the one she is actually walking through [...] He could have been walking in several cities at the same time" (Lefkowitz 2015, p.16 and 26). This generic city, born from the matrix of an industrial space, maintains a lack of definition that inspires imaginary activity. The focus is less on recognising a defined city and more on deploying sensory capacities likely to generate fictions which themselves amplify sensations. We could say that the modalities of the city are created through a continuous loop linking the imaginary activity associated with the body and the relationship between partners; the sensations of the city and the sensorimotor experience itself driven by a process of simulation (Bernard 1993, p.62); and the involuntary memory of experiences lived and places visited in the past. Urban immersion, writes Jean-Paul Thibaud, produces an "imaginary openness of the surrounding world setting in motion processes of association, metaphorisation and sensory sedimentation. It proceeds from phasing bodies in close proximity and relating lived situations" (Thibaud 2013, p.17). Myriam Lefkowitz sets in motion a similar process in her book through the stories that she recounts and summarises in her own way: "the experience may happen in a defined topographical location, but this allows one better to depart that location and produce, via the

<sup>11</sup> In her book, Myriam Lefkowitz bears witness to the city inhabitants' gaze, alternating between the perspectives of the artist-guide, the guided spectator and the passer-by.

disengagement, a spatial fiction" (Lefkowitz and Villeneuve 2015, p.9). She adds that this is a necessary fiction, as soon as the guided spectator no longer knows where he is (Lefkowitz and Perrin 2014). So we can understand that the name of the city where the walk takes place should be in the title, but also that it should remain contained by its two parentheses.

## *Dreaming the city: flashing images and spectral gliding*

During *Walk, Hands, Eyes (Aubervilliers)*, Myriam suggests, on at most about ten occasions, that I open my eyes and close them again almost immediately. Sometimes she is careful to take hold of my head just before and orient it in a particular direction. "Open... and close". From these momentary glimpses, I recall: a view of other buildings from the window of a stairwell; two workmen in blue overalls repairing a car, who laugh when they see me; a dense hedge a few centimetres away; a pigeon taking flight; an empty, bland office space; the face of a black man in close-up, smiling at me; a cat; a church column; a tower looming up in front of me. These quasi-photographic snapshots punctuate the walk, interrupting and diverting the sensory flux already in flow. They are like sudden holes in the web of sensations and silent stories that the walk has woven. They might come to generate new fictions, or provide hooks onto urban reality. The way in which these snapshots take their place in the construction of the experience largely escapes the artist-guide's control. Here too, the duo is a partnership that implies neither sensory cohesion nor opposition in principle, but rather an entity generated through sharing and disjunction, empathy and independence. We are not prisoners of our reciprocal fictions. Myriam does not know how I responded to the discovery of these two workmen, just as I know nothing really of why she wanted me to see them. I can, however, say that these snapshots enable a kind of grasp of the real that tips it back towards the visual, installing an unexpected, irregular rhythm across these fleeting images. I live this as a rupture, an eruption even (which can be joyous, surprising or troubling), and not as the visual complement of an ambiance already grasped by the other senses. These glimpses do not combine in holistic perspectives: they do not lead me to a synthesis but contribute to a knowledge of the city which gradually develops but is also fragmented, drawing attention to everything that is likely to escape my perception.

Strangely, film metaphors are often used in the stories recounted in Myriam Lefkowitz's book, to describe these sudden visual glimpses, but also to articulate experiences of the walk more broadly. Testimonies mention both framing (including what is off-camera) and editing<sup>12</sup>. These film metaphors seem to me paradoxical, because the occasional visual glimpses appear rather to interrupt the flux of sensations experienced by the guided spectator. Yet the metaphors seem to collapse the flow of sensation into a flow of mental images, and imaginary activity into image production. Film is of course an important cultural reference point in the translation of atmospheres and narrative tensions linked to different spaces. So perhaps these metaphors are rather translations of the power of imaginary activity, its narrative potential and its potentially fragmented rhythmic structure. They contract the impression of a progressive unwinding

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Christophe Bailly emphasises how representations of the modern city are influenced by film: "It is the logic of the film-edit that takes hold of the city, stretches it out and knits it together" (Bailly 2013, p.105). Myriam Lefkowitz meanwhile references David Lynch when she describes to me the industrial space which I argue provides the matrix for this walk (Lefkowitz & Perrin 2014).

to one of possible image-production (via the gaze or other means). The following extracts from the book illustrate the ambivalent reference to film:

*When it appeared, she was not watching a film. The images formed a series of suspended objects, of visions, of hallucinations. Yet, the film was unwinding itself in her mind's eye, The time she spent without an image shot through her in a fraction of a second. (Lefkowitz 2015b, p.105)*

*He opens his eyes to a very specific quantity of images that he puts together again. However, the assembly process shifts into a situation where the images became much scarcer. He begins to link the fragments of reality which were not joined together at first. (ibid., p.93)*

*The moments when he opens his eyes are cuts in this multi sensorial and 'multi mental' activity. [These] images do not work like cymbals in the middle of a movement of violins, but rather as holes in the very complex fabric being woven. They are holes. It is as if he is watching a film and all of a sudden the house lights were to go up and an elephant were to run through the movie theatre at top speed, then everything would go dark and the film would continue. (ibid., p.89-90)*

It is clear here that "cinema" sometimes means the cinema auditorium (a dark space in which something is projected), sometimes the film itself as a succession of images. Some participants conceive the film as made up of quasi-photographic glimpses that they recompose, whereas others imagine a film composed of the flux of mental images produced when eyes are closed. In the latter case, the guided spectator can also imagine himself as a character in the film and link his imaginative projection to specific film references: "He is not merely thinking of Fritz Lang's *M*. He is in it. He is *M*" (ibid., p.44).

The confrontation between these spontaneous mental images and sensory impressions again raises the issue of the subject's position in relation to the experience and in relation to the real. "What she saw was like an image where she no longer was" (ibid., p.105). In contrast to this distancing between oneself and the object of the gaze, in the interval between two visual glimpses, "he feels himself to be slipping into an interlude where elements recompose themselves in an improbable order before his eyes with the whole of his body in the middle of the image (ibid., p.93). These stories convey the project's very immersive character. The guided spectator might say, with Merleau-Ponty:

*My body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees [or senses], it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p.163)*

But these photographic snapshots also bring participants face-to-face with strangers. Meeting their gaze produces very intense encounters, an effect generated by the confrontation with other, but also by a sudden change of position in relation to oneself: this world made of the very stuff of the body suddenly also involves a social relation to another subject. What gaze can that other train on this artistic experience at one remove from the real? The effects of surprise, strangeness and intensity generated by these encounters also reveals the existence (or sudden consciousness) of an immersive kind of wandering, allowing one a vague glimpse of how it can reconfigure social engagement.

This encounter (often via close-up framing) depends upon a personal, not to say intimate, distance in relation to the other person. The tacit proxemic rules of social exchange are transcended. Similarly, we can find ourselves witnessing conversations not addressed to us, or even entering into private spaces. Our

immersive wandering thus creates the strange impression of having transformed us into a spectral duo able to glide discreetly through the different strata of social life. Everything here is improvised. Myriam Lefkowitz does not plant accomplices in the city. The impression of unfolding, of flow is not merely a feature of the sensory flux we experience: it is also a quality of the duo's movement. Participants speak of a corporeality caught in a "kind of gravitational suspension" in which they "feel they are gliding and floating" (Lefkowitz and Lavergne, 2014, p.8). This ghostly and uncanny gliding functions like a rupture in ordinary social relations that authorises spatial intrusions. "We play with the conventional distribution of spaces as closed, open, public and private [...] but never with the subversive intent of transgressing what is forbidden" (*ibid.*). It seems that this very particular kind of mobility, born of the walk's unfolding sensory and fictional activity, sometimes allows the duo to circulate wherever it wants (because its character is difficult to pin down, others can choose to ignore it), and sometimes provokes encounters. These are never aggressive, because there is something vulnerable about the duo. Rather, people are more likely to offer help, or to try to share the experience:

*He tears out of his office heading for the toilets when he finds himself face to face with them, still and silent. At first, he wants to make sure everything is all right. Then he looks at them for a long moment and asks them if he could come with them. He says he loves their calm. He says he wants to come sleep with them, dream with them. (Lefkowitz 2015b, p.60)*

The reverie seems visible from the outside, on the basis of their embodied presence. The walk takes a "dive into a dreamlike activity, which configures a world from fragments of reality" (Lefkowitz and Villeneuve 2015, 10) and this gives the walkers their very particular energy. "I often feel like I am walking with someone who is sleeping," says the artist (Lefkowitz 2015a). "Do we dream in the same way in New York, Aubervilliers or Venice?" (Lefkowitz and Perrin 2014).

## *Animating public space?*

This state of altered awareness to which the walker consents warrants further reflection. There is a certain significance to the fact that today's artists choose to lead others blind around the city and today's audiences agree to experience a state of reverie in public space, accompanied by a stranger. This singular experience enables our knowledge of the city to be renewed, something which itself opens up countless possibilities. But the force of this artistic project also resides in its capacity to open a fissure in the attention economy characteristic of the contemporary world. Privileging darkness, wandering, non-intentionality, floating and suspension of time, whilst sharing knowledge that belongs to perceptual and kinetic culture of the dancer, Myriam Lefkowitz swims against the current of a society that demands a state of heightened awareness and (particularly) vigilance at all times – a hyperactivity that blocks all imaginative capacities of the human mind. Interrupting the ceaseless flow of demands, suspending visual attention and deviating from the usual channels of sensory experience are salutary responses to a world in which sleep might be the last bastion of resistance to capitalism (Crary 2014). *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* reveals how the city also participates in this capitalist attention economy and points up the need to invent new ways of engaging with and living urban environment. To close one's eyes is both an act of resistance against visual overload and an engagement in sensory experiment bound up with affects, as well as a way of opening those unproductive spaces where another world might be invented.

In this respect, Myriam Lefkowitz is not trying to "animate public space" in the sense of making it come

alive through entertainment. The phrase used in the title of this special issue of the journal *Ambiances* ill suits this project. On the one hand, contemporary art is suspicious of this idea of animation and is characteristically critical rather than entertaining. On the other hand, *Walk, Hands Eyes (a city)* intervenes in public space in a way that is fundamentally discreet, parsimonious (the number of spectators remains very small) and almost imperceptible (because of its spectral quality, the duo can pass almost unnoticed). Nor does Myriam Lefkowitz claim to impact the aesthetics of public space. She prefers talk of *care*, the attention or concern that one has for another person. Far from courting the excitement of the event, she is primarily interested in the effects of what is both an art work<sup>13</sup> and a practice. This practice involves exercising the senses and the imagination, opening the possibility of a transformation or fluctuation in everyday life and in the way the city is represented. Instead of animating the city, this project seeks to test how the continuous city and the possible constitution of a sensory environment can coexist. This environment is all the more likely to persist or be reactivated if the experience proposed is memorable. We could say therefore that *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* activates the memory enacted in the present described by sociologist Jean-François Augoyard: a “protentional” memory which organizes perceptions according to what will be memorable (Augoyard 2007, 20). This walk’s memory enacted in the present emerges from intensity of feeling and is reinforced by the stories participants tell when it is over, stories that give form to the continuous city: a city that is felt, dreamed and imagined blind.

## *Imagining, feeling, articulating*

This discussion of *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* takes an essentially aesthetic perspective, whilst also beginning to explore the social and political significance of art. However, there is one further aspect that can be emphasised in conclusion, which concerns the intersection between sensory knowledge and theory of sensation. Essentially, this means interrogating how art research intersects with research into “ambient gesture” (Thibaud 2013, 17) or situated action (whether artistic or not), whilst also opening a theoretical horizon for the walk that Myriam Lefkowitz has conceived. This horizon involves the connection between imagination, sensation and the act of utterance.

Walking is an object of investigation shared by several humanities and social science disciplines, and it is acknowledged that analysis of pathways can help renew our understanding of the city (Augoyard 1979, 2010; Thomas 2010). Hodological choreographic practices also help us to rethink the quality of everyday movement and our understanding of the urban environment, as well as pointing up what the everyday tends sometimes to conceal. Although the research methods and tools of analysis change according to discipline, their preoccupations nonetheless clearly connect. In art research, just as in the social sciences, many studies centre on observing everyday behaviour or the sensory dimension of our interactions with the environment. Continuing the sociological work Jean-François Augoyard, Rachel Thomas envisages walking as a “mode of incorporation, expression and modelling of architectural and urban atmospheres” (Thomas 2010, p.12). She calls for the corporeal dimension of walking to be examined: walking is defined by a “constant embodied confrontation with the city’s materiality, with the other, with the whole set of those

<sup>13</sup> The term “project” might be preferable here, given the extent to which the notion of the work (like the activity of the spectator) has been disrupted by artists’ emphasis on process, site-specificity, relationality, even the sociality of art since the 1960s.

sensory modalities that confer on the shared spaces of everyday movements their identity, their attractiveness and their coldness" (*ibid.*). The case of *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* perhaps enables a more refined focus on the nature of this embodied interaction, by reflecting on the different possible ways of being together with a partner. More generally, it enables a reflection on intercorporeality as it has been investigated by dance studies: that is, intercorporeality understood as relation with the other and with the surrounding world, which opens up a whole range of possible ways of being together. Indeed, the philosopher Michel Bernard has developed a philosophy of corporeality which foregrounds intercorporeality in relation to the operations of sensation:

*The ostensible biological, anatomical or physiological body of the individual [is] is merely an epiphenomenon and to some extent the artefact of an immense and nebulous intercorporeality, expressed in resonance between not just my own sense impressions, and their double active and passive aspect, but also between these sensations and the hybrid configuration of the sensations of those around me and, more broadly, the diverse sensory qualia that emanate from the wider environment. (Bernard 2019 [2001])*

We see here the debt Michel Bernard's thought owes to Merleau-Ponty's chiasmatic theory, which he develops by elucidating four chiasms: the intrasensory chiasm (residing in the simultaneously active and passive aspects of each sense); the intersensory chiasm (based on the interconnection and mutual interference between senses); the parasensory chiasm (the interweaving of act of sensing with acts of utterance); and, finally, the chiasm of intercorporeality.

What is relevant here is a particular point of connection. During the 1970s, the functioning of the sensorium was explored by both Michel Bernard (who would come to play a key role in the development of dance studies in France) and Jean-François Augoyard (whose approach to architecture and the built environment would form the basis of the sensory methodologies central to the work of the CRESSON research centre<sup>14</sup>). They came to ask similar questions through examining corporeal expressivity on the one hand, and the contemporary city dweller's experience of walking on the other, both highlighting a clear connection between sensing and acting. Drawing on often shared reference points (phenomenology, perceptual ecology and anthropology of the senses, for example), sociologists investigated the role of perception in the social construction of reality (Thibaud 2001) or suggested a "re-reading of social issues in light of aesthetic questions" (Thibaud 2013, p.9). Meanwhile dance researchers Hubert Godard and Michel Bernard recalled the direct link between perception and action: how activity orients perception and, reciprocally, how perception guides action. "Everyone perceives in order to move and moves in order to perceive" (Thelen, cited in Ginot et al., 2006, p.6).

If the plane of sensation is a shared foundation, analysis of the forms of sensory experience also enables reflection on two sorts of articulation. The first is the articulation between perception and discourse (the parasensory chiasm): Jean-Paul Thibaud speaks of "an interlacing of discourse and perception" (Thibaud 2001, p.82), and Michel Bernard of "a hidden, secret and subtle intertwining or imbrication of sensation, expression and enunciation" (Bernard 2007, p.119), developing the idea that the articulation between sensation and discourse rests on "the shared mechanism of *utterance* as a process of projecting an apparently real sensory or intelligible world" (Bernard 2019 [2001]). From this perspective, the project *Walk, Hands,*

<sup>14</sup> The Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbaine, or Centre for Research on Sound Space and Urban Environment.

*Eyes (a city)* seems to me to seek to deploy this connection between perception and discourse in an original way: it first invites the participant to walk in silence, thereby delaying speech, so that the experience renders the relation to sensation more intense; and this in turn favours a mode of utterance at the end of the walk which depends primarily on sensation rather than cognition. Once the walk is finished, the partners always discuss the experience and these discussions are an integral element of the project. The book published by Myriam Lefkowitz weaves together snippets of these exchanges, insisting on the sensory, imaginary and affective dimension of the experience rather than on topographical details. The text is structured by type of sensation or mini-story in a way that draws on literary resources rather than urban studies. The mode of narration selected allows the author to follow closely a logic of association of ideas or sensations, playing also with the contrasts of experience, to reveal unexpected sounds, smells and image. In other words, these narratives re-enact the score of the work (its wandering, simultaneously immersive and fragmented character), based on the reported experience of multiple subjects. Just like the walk itself, this literary project seems to “move beyond description of reality as it is, instead charging the real with virtuality or possibility. We return to the world equipped with these possibilities, having glimpsed a different form. In a way, the aim is to open up new worlds, to imagine a non-resemblance or non-identification with what is” (Gonon and Lefkowitz, 2012).

The second articulation is between sensation and imagination. Conceiving imagination as a dynamic process which grounds the functioning of sensation leads Michel Bernard to argue for a “‘fictive’ theory of sensation”. The passage I began to quote above continues as follows: “there is [...] a hidden, secret and subtle intertwining or imbrication of sensation, expression and enunciation, insofar as all three are inhabited, animated and interwoven with the same singular, ever-present force ceaselessly productive of fictions” (Bernard 2001, p.119). These fictions, Bernard continues, are produced within each sensory organ and resonate in the other senses (via radical intersensory engagement). In other words, “imagination is *in* sensation” (*ibid.*, p.61). Bernard detaches this “fictive” theory of sensation from linguistic logic in order to emphasise the expressive and creative dynamic of sentient corporeality’s fictions. Similarly, Jean-François Augoyard develops a theory of expression in which “walking rhetoric clearly differs from a linguistic process” (Augoyard 2007 [1979], p.159). He introduces “the instantiated principle of the imaginary” into understanding the expression of city inhabitants (*ibid.*, p.137): “In understanding everyday activity on the basis of its *imaginary ground*, the world begins in another way”<sup>15</sup> (*ibid.*, p.177). In this regard, remaining silent during *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* is just as important as closing one’s eyes, because it allows the proliferation of fictions or expressions bound up with the sensory. And from this imaginary ground, it becomes possible perhaps to reinvent one’s city.

Translated from french by Anna Pakes.

<sup>15</sup> Yves Winkin highlights and discusses this phrase, in both his preface to the new French edition of Augoyard’s book *Pas à Pas* (2010, Grenoble: A la Croisée) and his essay “Relire *Pas à pas* aujourd’hui” [“Re-reading *Step by Step* today”] (in Thomas 2010, pp.21-27).

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