

5- Locating Distance: A Methodology for Mobile Urban Subjects

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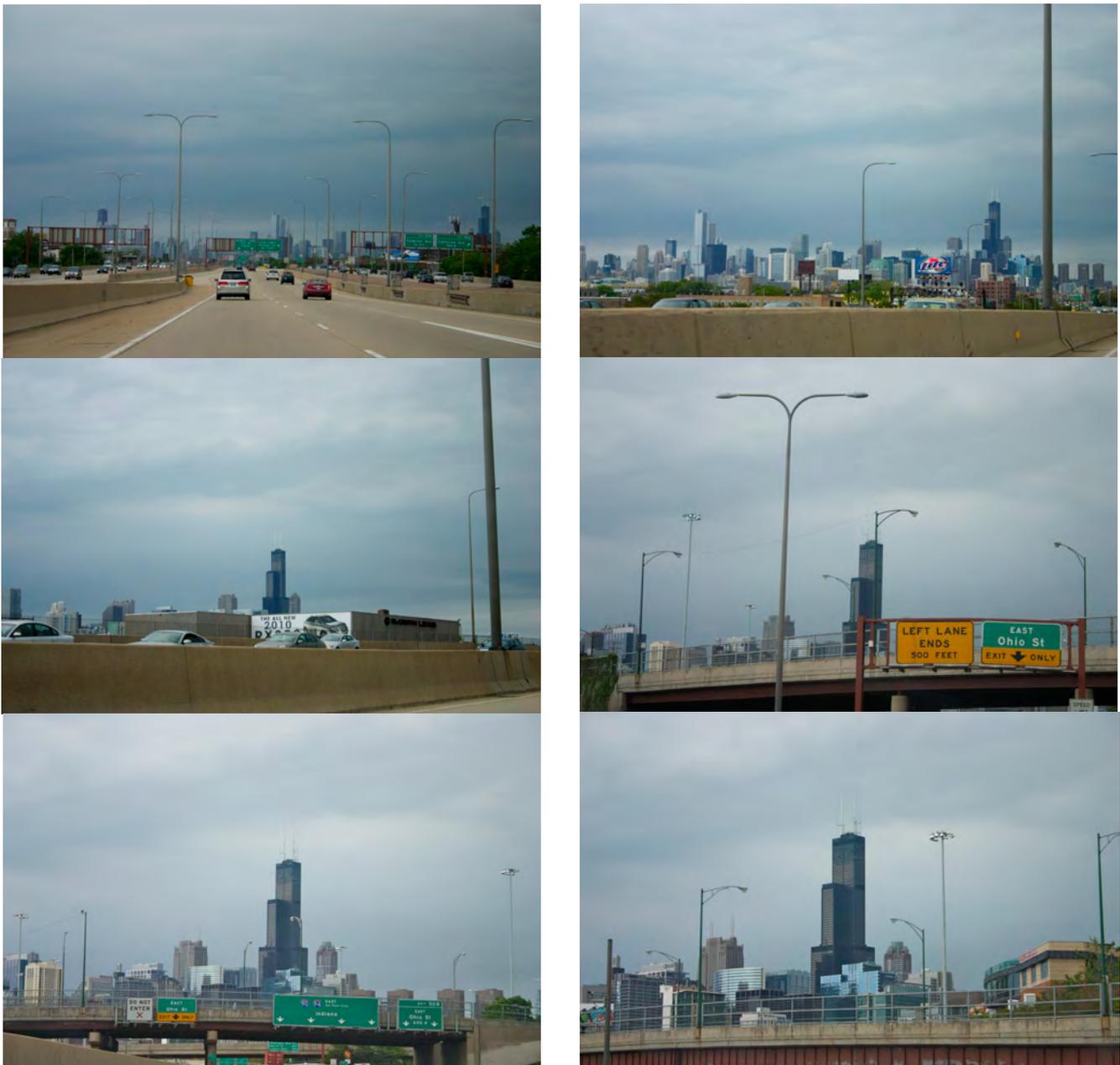


Figure 1. Motorway images (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

The city means different things if seen from different perspectives.¹ I therefore have to ask myself: what is my perspective, what is yours? What is our perspective, and what is that of others? Whatever our epistemological outlook may be, what all such perspectives have in common is that they all maintain a relationship with the city that I will here describe in terms of distance. I am not referring to a geographical distance, but to distance as a concept that marks a relationship as inherently relational, as reliant on constantly changing coordinates, as never absolute. With this as a tool, we can avoid focusing on codified disciplinary approaches to urban research. Instead, we can focus on different degrees of metaphorical distance, on different types of relationships.

In this paper, I will be tracing my photographic journey to and through Chicago, scrutinising my own distance from the city, and how it relates to that of other urban explorers, namely Baudelaire's flâneur, the Situationists' drifter(s), and Michel de Certeau's figure of the pedestrian. The exploration of the city and that of the method are here linked, with the aim of bringing city and method closer to each other. In fact, I argue that the two need not be seen as entirely separate at all. Just like cities can emerge from methods – from urban grids and building codes – so methods can emerge from cities. For the mobile urban subject – the protagonist in this narrative and the 'we' in this text – the method for researching the city can be developed in relationship with the city, through a careful observation of the changing degrees of distance from it.

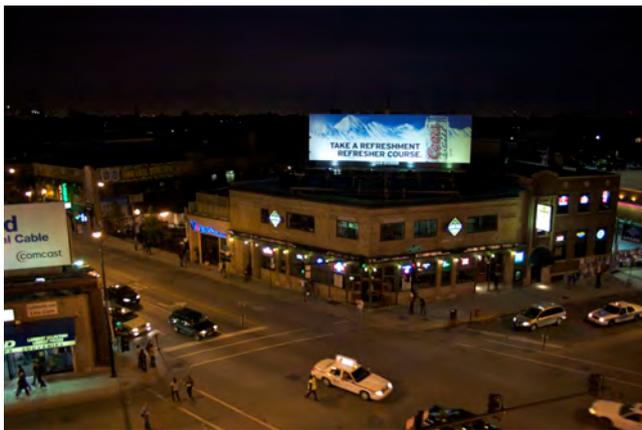


Figure 2. Crossroad (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

For example, the physical distance from the city can be differently mediated, depending on one's means of transport. A pedestrian's and driver's experience of waiting for the lights at the crossroads is dramatically different, although both are ostensibly waiting for the same thing. They could find themselves in an almost identical location, and yet their relationship with the city would be very different.

Going back to the question of methodology, there can thus be said to be a difference between the *method* – what we do while exploring the city – and the *methodology* – what we do to explain our exploration after the fact. This, in turn, means that at the time of the initial exploration, our activities can indeed be *methodical* without already having to be *methodological*, that is, they are not necessarily aimless just because they do not have a pre-formulated goal. There is an opening here for building a methodology from an urban experience and retroactively locating it with the help of other methods, rather than having a methodologically developed experience to begin with. Further, the contemporary city can no longer be seen as a coherent and monolithic object, and as such we cannot expect that a preformulated methodology would be able to accommodate that which has lost its physical boundaries.² I argue that in this way we have a much better chance of accessing the inherently diverse nature of the contemporary city, and what there is to learn from it for our own method.



Figure 3. 'United we stand' (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

This multifariousness is embraced by our methodology for mobile urban subjects, for travellers who seek answers not in the completion of an itinerary, but in understanding how the itinerary unfolds. We will be moving, looking, reading, and each of these activities puts us in a different relationship with the city, or, to be more precise, puts us at a different *distance* from the city and from others who explore it. Our goal will be to frame those distances, to consider our shifting frames of reference, more so than understanding the city as an object. Despite the focus on difference and distance, there is this common goal; we do indeed stand united.

Locating Distance



Figure 4. Distortion (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

A few words are necessary on the notion of 'locating distance'. I borrow the term 'location' from James Clifford; it is here not just a matter of coordinates in space, but of an ontological positioning of the subject. Clifford sees it as a key term pertaining to the question of subjectivity in ethnographic encounters: 'I do not accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her "identity"; but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history' (Clifford 1997: 12). Such limits of our own perspective are the boundaries that are still in place between us and the city, and that allow the building of relationships. Locating as an activity thus means not just to become aware of those borders and boundaries, but also to be attentive to the differences and distances between the corresponding ontological and ideological positioning. The act of 'locating distance', however, seems a paradoxical suggestion, for a distance is in-between locations, and thus can only be described by means of specifying those same locations. The distance itself escapes localisation and is inherently referential. Thus, it is the mutability of the distances between us and the city and between our approaches and those of others that are of interest here, and that can be understood through an apprehension of different locations. Just like in the above image, there are always shaping powers at work. There is no naïve eye, just like there is no absolute relationship or distance. We never only look at something, but always also from somewhere and through something.

The main premise for the present argument is that there is no one methodology for understanding the city, because there is no coherent and monolithic object to apply it to. Because the idea of the city as a material thing or object in space is dissolving, we need new ways to gain access to 'it', an 'it' that is much more fleeting than the linguistic signifier would have us believe. Especially with the development of increasingly sophisticated technological



Figure 5. Blurry distant lake (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

infrastructures and high-speed data streams, the meaning of the city has long surpassed its own physicality, and it already inhabits a profoundly theoretical dimension of existence. It is now more a network of different understandings of what a city is than any one thing to be understood. Thus, physical and representational urban layers can no longer be separated, and every encounter, be it in person or 'in image', with the city has to be seen as expressive of both physical reality and representational capacity. It is this 'melting together' that the above photograph exhibits, where the city appears to melt into both the sky and the water, where we can no longer make out and hold on to distinct boundaries.

However, in thinking about methodology and the fluidity of the city, we must not ignore that we can still explore it, and that others have explored it before us. Let us start, then, with modernity's archetype of the urban explorer – Baudelaire's *flâneur* – and ask what we share with 'him'.

Flânerie or not? - Baudelaire's *flâneur*

This journey relies on images of the city,³ and is thus not dissimilar to what Baudelaire describes as the method of the *flâneur* in the early 1860s: 'He is an "I" with an insatiable appetite for the "non-I", at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive' (Baudelaire 1964: 9). While, on the one hand, the static image must seem too inflexible to express or represent our constantly shifting position, it is, on the other hand, through these images that our thoughts about this movement can be mobilised. The power of the image lies in the fact that it is recognisably an image and is thus allowed to point to something much larger than itself. But whereas Baudelaire's *flâneur* works with sketches, our medium here is photography; this difference is consequential,



Figure 6. Motorway (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

and it would be for Baudelaire himself, but it is not of primary interest for our purposes.

We are also quite different from the flâneur in other respects, and especially in our relationship to the world. Baudelaire writes: 'To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define' (Ibid.). One of the goals of locating distance is precisely to step out of the centre of the world, and to acknowledge both our own alienness in an unfamiliar place and our visibility in it.

Our entry into the city cannot be understood without a movement towards it, that is, without an approach. The blurred appearance of the car in the photograph above hints at a velocity the image is not privileged to express. What constitutes the city here, what constitutes Chicago? Is it the skyline – that array of building outlines seen from, aptly, a distance; that image of the built environment that is slowly changing vis-à-vis us as passive spectators? Or is it our proximity to the expressway that invites us to physically approach the city by car? It is hard to even speak of an approach in this image, because we have already entered the city, and now signs guide us to its many different parts and localities. The closer we get to the skyline, the less of its formidable appearance will it retain – once it can no longer be apprehended with a single glance. Seen up close, the individual skyscrapers instil a different, neck-bending kind of awe.

Within the semiology of the expressway signage, we are never really anywhere. The names on the signs never specify our geographical location, but only inform us about our relative distance to locations beyond our immediate field of vision. They



Figure 7. Skyscraper (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

point to a narrative of boundaries and limits – limits to vision, to local access and interaction, even limits to slowness in the shape of minimum speed limits. It is also a narrative of the handling and shifting of distances. As the distance to downtown is decreasing, its visibility as a skyline gradually disappears, making it even harder to see Chicago as an object, an image, an emblem (in the photograph, it is hard to tell the city from its image). Different distances are here in motion, but they shift in opposite directions. With the physical distance decreasing, the visual access to the city as an imagined physical whole is itself moved into the distance. Also important is the notion of disorientation, of not knowing where exactly we are. Our own positioning in relation to the city depends on a number of predetermined relations, vectors, and traditions. For example, let us assume that our goal is to go to Chicago. We are already in Chicago, but whether we *are there yet* depends on a different set of parameters, because the Chicago we are going to is not that of a skyline in the distance, of a gradually approaching and growing image, or of a name on a map or road sign. Japanese architect Maki Fumihiko says that 'the city exists as the sum total of the actions people take daily to create their own individual realities out of a hypothetical (or virtual) reality' (Maki 2008: 119). The city is a sea of such possibilities and potentials, among which we move, sometimes active (as a driver), sometimes passive (as a passenger). Our photographs are not like the flâneur's sketches, they are not more living than life itself, but they provide an entry into thinking about this liveliness, about the constant shifting of perspectives, spatial and mental. We are never firmly located at the centre of the world, which only exists as an epistemological fiction, nor are we hidden from the world, for we are visibly moving in it. However – and this is something we have in common with the flâneur – wherever we are, we realise that our coordinates are more a question of visibility than geography; it is, ultimately, our perspective that locates us.

Drifting along - Debord's *Dérive*

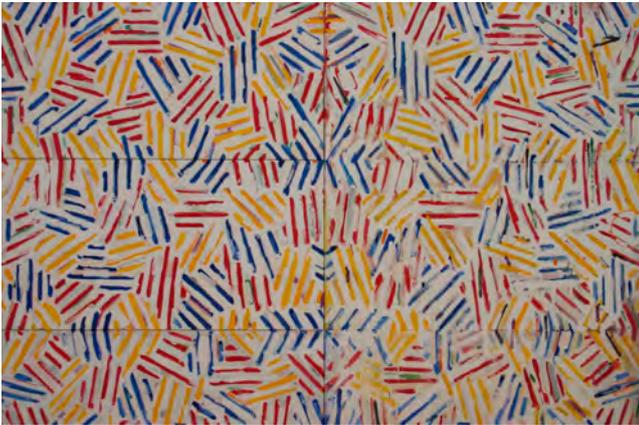


Figure 8. Jasper Johns *Corpse and Mirror II*, detail (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

As we are still in the passenger seat, drifting towards denser and denser parts of the city, I cannot help but think of Guy Debord and his technique of *dérive*. In 1956, one year before the Situationist International was founded, he wrote that '[o]ne of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive* (literally: 'drifting'), a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll' (Debord 1956). While Debord would have disapproved of car travel (which is iterated in the above detail of Jasper Johns' *Corpse and Mirror II*)⁵, or the use of any kind of vehicle for the successful execution of a *dérive*, there are overlaps between his methodology and our own. We, too, want our experience to be neither planned out beforehand, nor completely random. Debord sees *dérives* as being 'wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete *insubordination* to habitual influences (influences generally categorized as tourism, that popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit)' (Debord 1955). What is crucial for us, and unaddressed by Debord, is that, in order to identify our experience as non-habitual, we need to become aware of what defines an experience as habitual. Our habits are of course subjective, and rarely shared, certainly not in their entirety. The *dérive*, being non-habitual, hence has to be non-subjective: 'In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there'⁶ (Debord 1956). *Dérive* thus means giving up our subjectivity and, ideally, inserting ourselves into one of multiple small groups, with the goal of reaching 'the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions' (Ibid.). However, we

have to be doubtful whether there can ever be such a thing as 'the same level of awareness' between different people. We are not interested in sacrificing subjectivity to the greater good of objectivity in the perception of unities of ambiance. Yet there is a great appeal in some aspects of the *dérive*. By means of surveying the 'psychogeographical articulations of a modern city', '[o]ne arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence of psychogeographical pivotal points. One measures the distances that actually separate two regions of a city, distances that may have little relation with the physical distance between them' (Ibid.). This multifaceted understanding of distance resonates well with our understanding of the city as both physical reality and representation. But still, the situationist notion of objectivity remains problematic for our approach. For while Debord derides tourism as a habitual influence to be avoided at all cost, the drifting in groups and shared level of awareness is, ironically, strongly reminiscent of some standard tourist activities, highly structured and communal, such as boat tours in Chicago (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Boat tour (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

Participation in such a tour is certainly non-habitual, and we literally allow ourselves to be drawn to the attractions around us, despite the fact that the commercial nature of the tour and our passive seated position are at odds with the situationist project. But even within this group experience, we cannot forfeit our subjectivity, for how could we be drawn to anything, if not by virtue of how we (individually or not) respond to attractions and encounters?

If we want to be attentive to everything around us, we cannot give up our selves in the course of it. Also, we are not after objective conclusions about how the environment affects our emotions and behaviour, which is the declared goal of psychogeography (Debord 1955). It is not surprising that the Situationists were preoccupied with the actualisation of maps, aiming at exposing the boundaries of different perceptions, performatively expanding the possibilities of spatial exploration. Any given map, with its predetermined view on the world, could potentially be subjected to these kinds of alterations, with new, and not only strictly geographical, distances being inscribed as the result.



Figure 10. Millennium Park map (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

Maps are designed for very specific purposes, emphasising information of relevance and filtering out unnecessary details. The above map of Millennium Park is designed for pedestrians, the roads fading into the background. Important parts of the infrastructure, such as public bathrooms, are marked in a landscape in which we are the centre of attention – a bright orange circle that cannot be overlooked. Maps also tell us where we are ('You Are Here'), maybe even where we stand. As such, they work in ways very similar to those of academic disciplines, of which methodologies are representatives. Katherine Hayles applies the notion of lenses to disciplines: 'when we are trained in a discipline, we put on a set of conceptual lenses which limit even as they focus. [...] By the time we reach fully professional status, our disciplinary lenses have become transparent to us, yielding

no more resistance than the air we breathe' (Hayles 1994: 25). It is therefore questionable whether Debord's 'objective *dérive*' would be able to escape this sedimentation into a fixed discipline-like method, in which your impressionistic openness to attractions and encounters will ultimately exclude those not compatible with the Situationists' anti-capitalist ideology. This resonates with James Clifford's highlighting of the artificial nature of disciplines: 'All knowledge is interdisciplinary. Thus, disciplines define and redefine themselves interactively and competitively. They do this by inventing traditions and canons, by consecrating methodological norms and research practices, by appropriating, translating, silencing, and holding at bay adjacent perspectives' (Clifford 1997: 59). Just like every cartographical representation changes along with the demands made of it, the workings of disciplines change over time. However, they only accept changes motivated by practices that still adhere at least to their more general framework.⁷ This is based on the fact that for disciplines, inside and outside are distinctly demarcated places, that is, boundaries are of great importance and the keeping of specific distances becomes crucial for building and maintaining an identity. At the same time, while in many instances it might indeed be easy to distinguish between inside and outside, we also have to be careful not to follow the fallacious thought that disciplines are homogeneous entities.⁸ Hayles points out that this is what makes thinking of *one* set of lenses for each discipline a difficult matter. Rather, 'a discipline appears as a heterogeneous discursive field through which multiple fissures run, with boundaries of fractal complexity' (Hayles 1994: 31). This is where the cartographical parallel to Debord's psychogeography becomes apparent, because, for Hayles, an inquiry conducted in this type of disciplinary field would 'seek to understand the complex interplay of differential gradations in assumptions across regional divides. [...] Any such inquiry also embodies presuppositions of its own, so that the work must proceed reflexively as well as reflectively, aware (as Steve Fuller has put it) that disciplinary "knowledge is *in* the same world that it is *about*"' (Ibid.: 31 – 32). In other words: the focus is on the relative proximities and distances between different modes of thinking, rather than their assumed ontologies.

This resonates strikingly with the readjustments of distance between areas in the psychogeographical project, with the 'exposure of the boundaries of different perceptions'. While we, the mobile urban subjects, may share Debord's concerns about the exclusivist practices of mapping, we are probably at odds with his own exclusivist approach to our subjectivity, and with his project's investment in pushing forward a political agenda for what an experience of our cities should be like.

Walking at Last - Michel de Certeau's Pedestrian



Figure 11. Robot (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

We get out of the car, following the situationist predilection for pedestrian travel. While walking in the city, Michel de Certeau's writings on the everyday come to mind, and it occurs to us that his reading of the city is not so different from Debord's. For de Certeau, spaces are constituted in the binary tension between strategic control and tactical adjustments made to those strategic spheres (Dünne 2008: 161). We can see this in the photograph; the pavement is here turned into a canvas, from directing our pedestrian movement it is turned into something that diverts our gaze. The robot itself exclaims 'ROBOTS NEVER DIE!', but it might just as well have said 'TACTICS NEVER DIE!'. And yet the robot depends on the pavement, on its canvas, to make its point, to, so to speak, stand its ground. In our case, it is our 'walking in the city' that constitutes tactics. For de Certeau the extremes that exist in the city are not so much separated by sharp boundaries as they are coincidental in the 'texturology' (de Certeau 1984: 91) of the city seen from above.

He asks: 'Is the immense texturology spread out before one's eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artefact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner and cartographer. The panorama-city is a "theoretical" (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices' (Ibid.: 92 – 93). This means that any map that positions the city as a fixed object and solid entity – and that is the kind of map at the core of Debord's critique – is necessarily 'theoretical', as it represents an environment that cannot be experienced in the same way in reality. Thus, de Certeau's tactical pedestrian – ignoring, circumventing, or undermining the urban strategies of the government, architects, and planners – follows a path not dissimilar to that of Debord's *dérive* – against the simulated whole of the city.



Figure 12. Dense architecture (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

However, while the *dérive* is defined by its departure from habitual practices, de Certeau's walking embraces the everyday, uncovering unconscious acts of navigation that are deeply rooted in the individual and their subjectivity. He compares our walking to linguistic formations, likening our spatial practice to a speech act imbued with all possible types of stylistic expression. We are therefore seen as rewriting the urban fabric without reading it, abdicating the position of the totalising eye from above. As much as we might like the idea of contributing to the rewriting of that fabric, we cannot help but feel alienated from the role of de Certeau's pedestrian. His is a local figure that can lay claim to the city by virtue of everyday exposure and navigation. It appears that we, however, are mere visitors in this context; too distant, aloof like a *flâneur*, and also joining the tourists in their ascent to the top of Willis Tower (formerly known as Sears Tower), taking the obvious photographs (see above). Remember Baudelaire: 'To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to

see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define’ (Baudelaire 1964: 9). Our understanding of home and of the everyday is different, however. Making everywhere our home means that our first home has lost some of its privilege of being an ideal beyond scrutiny – it may even be made part of our walking analysis. As for the everyday, for us it is not marked by the same routine processes, but it is a source of endless variation and change. In this, it seems that our perspective is much closer to the one de Certeau implicitly claims for himself. He could not be merely the grass-roots pedestrian of which he speaks, for he would not know of the ramifications of his own actions. We, similarly, are well aware of the ways in which we bend perception, of our double role as insiders in practices and outsiders to the everyday.

Arrival of the Mobile Urban Subject



Figure 13. 'Cloud Gate' (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

In other words, the distances between the macro- and micro-perspectives on the city are not as great for us as they are for the strategic planner and tactical pedestrian, respectively, in de Certeau's analysis. We cannot very easily pick a side, just like we would have trouble subscribing to the ideology of the situationist project. Our goal is not to find a home base from which to apprehend and investigate other approaches. Rather, we shoulder our own ideological baggage – which we undoubtedly have – and bring it with us, making it part of the investigation, keeping our mobility to get away from the assumptions and presuppositions that would come with being at the flâneur's centre of the world. We constantly and repeatedly assess our relations to the methods around us, our shifting frames of reference, and our distances to the paths others have taken in trying to understand the city. We always look through some type of lens, relying on representations of the city that are already shaped by specific interests and projects, and that can take an endless number of forms – from

sketches, maps, shapes of skylines, to the reflections in Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* (Figure 13) in Chicago. Here we see the city where it is not, while at the same time we have to acknowledge that it exists nowhere else but in such mirror reflections and other images. That is precisely the type of paradoxical suggestion at the core of 'locating distance': a distance is about more than just the physical distance between two points; it is about the space and terrain in-between, about specific details in local (and always changing) contexts. As such, it is tied to individual locations, to moments and nodes of reflection. While our own subjective and ideological locations are not the same as the distances between us and different positions, it is only through the former that the latter can be worked out.

We do not speak from an isolated position like the flâneur, we do not pursue the objectivity of our political peer group like a



Figure 14. Chicago flag (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

situationist drifter, and we do not behave quite like the everyday pedestrian of de Certeau's spatial narrative. Or rather: we may choose to do all or none of the above, but any such choice will form part of *our* approach to the city and of *our* methodology. Our distance to these approaches is never measured from a fixed position we can call our own, but from the changing locations in which we find ourselves on our journey as mobile urban subjects.

We stop for a moment in the middle of the bustling city, enjoying the warming rays of the sun with our eyes closed. Just as we begin to think that we can fade out the city around us, the sound of a flag in the wind captures our attention. We listen carefully, and hear a clear pattern and an imperfect rhythm. It is a collision between the fabric and the wind, a sound that neither of the two could produce by itself, and it is thus both pronouncement and pronunciation of their inseparability. We open our eyes and look up, squinting at the sun. And then we see parts of the two cities of Chicago – the building as symbol of physicality, and the flag as symbol of representation; or is it the other way around? Is the network of human interaction that the flag stands for any less physical than the single building that at best hints at the presence of a city that it is a part of? The flag might even be waving goodbye to this architectural signifier of urbanity, or could be wrapping itself around the building, seeking a rigid support for its own surface. Or is this reading merely forced upon us by the scale in the image that makes the flagpole appear as if it was touching the sky? Whatever the case may be, we realise that these readings come down to being questions of distance – distance from the physical and symbolic city (or from physical and methodological encounters, if we decide to hold on to these categories) and from the meanings and readings that we ourselves, and others around us, see in it.

With these thoughts on our mind we move on, until we can no longer make out the sound of the flag fluttering in the wind. And we keep moving, for there is always more to discover.

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Endnotes

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² To give only one well-known example, think of Paul Virilio's essay 'The Overexposed City' (published in French in 1984), in which he comments on the changing boundary of and access to the city: 'From the palisade to the screen, by way of stone ramparts, the boundary-surface has recorded innumerable perceptible and imperceptible transformations, of which the latest is probably that of the interface. Once again, we have to approach the question of access to the City in a new manner. For example, does the metropolis possess its own facade? At which moment does the city show us its face?' (Virilio 1991: 12).

³ While the most common association with the flâneur might be that of an urban pedestrian, my focus is here on the mode of documentation, rather than that of movement. I am therefore more interested in the different types of image-making (sketching versus photography), rather than in a discussion of the acts of walking and driving, respectively.

⁴ Consider Baudelaire's vitriolic commentary on photography and what he saw as its detrimental influence on the production of art in his 1859 text 'The Modern Public and Photography'. He sees the public as enamored with the new medium and mimics them: "Since Photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then Photography and Art are the same thing" (Baudelaire 1965: 152). He goes on to express his conviction 'that the ill-applied developments of photography, like all other purely material developments of progress, have contributed much to the impoverishment of the French artistic genius, which is already so scarce' (Ibid.: 153).

⁵ Johns painted *Corpse and Mirror II* (oil on linen) in 1974 – 75, inspired by an experience of passing traffic. On the Art Institute of Chicago's website it says that 'John [sic] first glimpsed this pattern on a passing car, recalling: "I only saw it for a second, but knew immediately that I was going to use it. It had all the qualities that interest me – literalness, repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness, and the possibility of a complete lack of meaning"' (The Art Institute of Chicago 2012).

⁶ We might then even be inclined to suspect that Jasper Johns was himself 'drifting along' when he found his inspiration for *Corpse and Mirror II*.

⁷ Hayles's description of the exchange between Derrida and Searl gives wonderful proof of this: 'Many philosophers who take issue with Derrida's style [...] understand only that [it] is deviant and irresponsible, not that it seeks to bring into question the assumptions that enable them to judge it as deviant and irresponsible' (Hayles 1994: 44).

⁸ Hayles points out that this is exactly the presupposition forming the base for Stanley Fish's thinking about the impossibility of interdisciplinarity, the impossibility of taking off that lens. In Hayles's view, disciplines are not nearly as monolithic as Fish makes them out to be, and they do in fact communicate with one another (Hayles 1994: 30).