

Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies

Cartographies of  
New York and  
Other Postwar  
American Cities

Art, Literature  
and Urban Spaces

By Monica Manolescu



# Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies

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Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies is a new book series focusing on the dynamic relations among space, place, and literature. The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship in recent years, and geocriticism, broadly conceived, has been among the more promising developments in spatially oriented literary studies. Whether focused on literary geography, cartography, geopoetics, or the spatial humanities more generally, geocritical approaches enable readers to reflect upon the representation of space and place, both in imaginary universes and in those zones where fiction meets reality. Titles in the series include both monographs and collections of essays devoted to literary criticism, theory, and history, often in association with other arts and sciences. Drawing on diverse critical and theoretical traditions, books in the Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies series disclose, analyze, and explore the significance of space, place, and mapping in literature and in the world.

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Cartographies  
of New York and  
Other Postwar  
American Cities

Art, Literature and Urban Spaces

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship. Spatially oriented literary studies, whether operating under the banner of literary geography, literary cartography, geophilosophy, geopoetics, geocriticism, or the spatial humanities more generally, have helped to reframe or to transform contemporary criticism by focusing attention, in various ways, on the dynamic relations among space, place and literature. Reflecting upon the representation of space and place, whether in the real world, in imaginary universes, or in those hybrid zones where fiction meets reality, scholars and critics working in spatial literary studies are helping to reorient literary criticism, history and theory. *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* is a book series presenting new research in this burgeoning field of inquiry.

In exploring such matters as the representation of place in literary works, the relations between literature and geography, the historical transformation of literary and cartographic practices and the role of space in critical theory, among many others, geocriticism and spatial literary studies have also developed interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary methods and practices, frequently making productive connections to architecture, art history, geography, history, philosophy, politics, social theory and urban studies, to name but a few. Spatial criticism is not limited to the spaces of the so-called real world, and it sometimes calls into question any too facile distinction between real and imaginary places, as it frequently investigates what Edward Soja has referred to as the

“real-and-imagined” places we experience in literature as in life. Indeed, although a great deal of important research has been devoted to the literary representation of certain identifiable and well-known places (e.g., Dickens’s London, Baudelaire’s Paris, or Joyce’s Dublin), spatial critics have also explored the otherworldly spaces of literature, such as those to be found in myth, fantasy, science fiction, video games and cyberspace. Similarly, such criticism is interested in the relationship between spatiality and such different media or genres as film or television, music, comics, computer programs and other forms that may supplement, compete with and potentially problematize literary representation. Titles in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series include both monographs and collections of essays devoted to literary criticism, theory and history, often in association with other arts and sciences. Drawing on diverse critical and theoretical traditions, books in the series reveal, analyze and explore the significance of space, place and mapping in literature and in the world.

The concepts, practices or theories implied by the title of this series are to be understood expansively. Although geocriticism and spatial literary studies represent a relatively new area of critical and scholarly investigation, the historical roots of spatial criticism extend well beyond the recent past, informing present and future work. Thanks to a growing critical awareness of spatiality, innovative research into the literary geography of real and imaginary places has helped to shape historical and cultural studies in ancient, medieval, early modern and modernist literature, while a discourse of spatiality undergirds much of what is still understood as the postmodern condition. The suppression of distance by modern technology, transportation and telecommunications has only enhanced the sense of place, and of displacement, in the age of globalization. Spatial criticism examines literary representations not only of places themselves, but of the experience of place and of displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it. In sum, the work being done in geocriticism and spatial literary studies, broadly conceived, is diverse and far-reaching. Each volume in this series takes seriously the mutually impressive effects of space or place and artistic representation, particularly as these effects manifest themselves in works of literature. By bringing the spatial and geographical concerns to bear on their scholarship, books in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*

series seek to make possible different ways of seeing literary and cultural texts, to pose novel questions for criticism and theory and to offer alternative approaches to literary and cultural studies. In short, the series aims to open up new spaces for critical inquiry.

San Marcos, USA

Robert T. Tally Jr.

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# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	1
	<i>References</i>	19
<b>2</b>	<b>Walking with Poe: “The Man of the Crowd” from Text to Street</b>	23
	<i>The Legacies of the Flâneur</i>	25
	<i>Vanishing Point: From Poe to Buckingham</i>	29
	<i>New Forms of Following: Poe, the Metropolis and Virtual Communities</i>	39
	<i>References</i>	52
<b>3</b>	<b>Transitions: Happenings and Beyond</b>	59
	<i>Into the Streets: Genealogies of Urban Mapping</i>	59
	<i>Oldenburg’s The Street and Kaprow’s Words: The City Inside</i>	65
	<i>Dispersed Spatiality: Calling</i>	76
	<i>Fluxus: Drawing Lines and Maps</i>	80
	<i>References</i>	87
<b>4</b>	<b>Following Vito Acconci</b>	91
	<i>Inside/Outside: Boundaries of the Page</i>	94
	<i>Urban Nuisances: Following Piece and Beyond</i>	102
	<i>American Gifts: Home and Architecture</i>	115
	<i>References</i>	125

<b>5</b>	<b>Eternal Cities: Rome/Passaic. On Robert Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic"</b>	129
	<i>An "Exploratory Path": From Passaic to Rome</i>	129
	<i>Cultural and Geographical Frames</i>	135
	<i>Rome: "The Rotting Remains of a Vanished Age"</i>	142
	<i>References</i>	160
<b>6</b>	<b>Gordon Matta-Clark's Urban Slivers and "Word Works"</b>	163
	<i>In the Ruins of New York</i>	168
	<i>Cartographic Gaps</i>	180
	<i>"Word Works"</i>	186
	<i>References</i>	201
<b>7</b>	<b>Cartographies and the Texture of Cities: Rebecca Solnit's <i>Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas</i></b>	207
	<i>The Death and Renewal of Maps</i>	207
	<i>Point of View and Renewal</i>	216
	<i>Identity and Performative Cartography</i>	219
	<i>"The Phantom of Place"</i>	222
	<i>The Atlas as Method</i>	224
	<i>References</i>	230
<b>8</b>	<b>Conclusion: "Write a Book to Get Lost"</b>	235
	<i>References</i>	243
	<b>Index</b>	245

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig. 2.1 Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd*, installation view, Murray Guy, New York © Matthew Buckingham courtesy Janice Guy, New York 33
- Fig. 2.2 Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd* Location Photograph: Freyung Passage, 3:55 PM, 2003, gelatin silver print © Matthew Buckingham courtesy Janice Guy, New York 36
- Fig. 3.1 Claes Oldenburg and Pat Muschinski in *Snapshots from the City*, of the performance series *Ray Gun Spex*, within the exhibition *The Street*, Judson House Gallery, February 29, March 1 and 2, 1960. Courtesy Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio, New York. *Photograph credit* Martha Holmes, The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images 68
- Fig. 3.2 Claes Oldenburg and Anita Rubin in *The Street*, Reuben Gallery, New York. May 6–19, 1960. Courtesy Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio, New York. *Photo credit* I. C. Rapoport 71
- Fig. 3.3 Allan Kaprow and Robert M. McElroy, *Words*, installation view, 1962, gelatin silver, 10 × 8 inches, Allan Kaprow Papers, ca. 1940–1997. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (980063) © J. Paul Getty Trust. Rights holder: J. Paul Getty Trust 72

- Fig. 3.4 Peter Moore, Photograph of Allan Kaprow's *Calling*, Grand Central Station, New York City, August 21, 1965. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (980063) © Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York 78
- Fig. 5.1 Robert Smithson, *Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments Along the Passaic River*, 1967, photostat map, 8 1/8 × 8 inches. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway. Courtesy James Cohan, New York. Art © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY 130
- Fig. 5.2 Robert Smithson, Sketch for *Mirrored Ziggurat*, circa 1966. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt papers, 1905–1987, bulk 1952–1987, "Writings," box 3, file 46. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Art © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY 140
- Fig. 5.3 Robert Smithson, photograph taken in Passaic for the "The Monuments of Passaic," not included in the final version. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt papers 1905–1987, bulk 1952–1987, "Project files," box 4, file 41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photo © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY 150
- Fig. 6.1 Gordon Matta-Clark, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates, "Jamaica Curb," Block 10142, Lot 15*, 1974. Collaged gelatin silver prints, deed, and three maps. Map (top left): 13 7/8 × 11 inches; Map (top right): 13 7/8 × 11 inches; Map (bottom right): 14 × 8 1/2 inches; Map (bottom left): 13 7/8 × 11 inches; Documentary photograph: 5 × 3 7/8 inches © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York. Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong 176
- Fig. 6.2 Gordon Matta-Clark, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates, "Maspeh Onion," Block 2406, Lot 148*, 1973. Collaged gelatin silver prints and documents. Deed: 13 7/8 × 8 3/8 inches; Documentary print: 9 3/4 × 6 1/2 inches; Map: 8 × 9 7/8 inches; Collaged prints: 9 3/4 × 18 1/8 inches © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York. Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong 177

- Fig. 6.3 Gordon Matta-Clark, *Window Blow-Out*, 1976/2006. Gelatin silver print 11 × 14 inches © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York. Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong 184
- Fig. 7.1 Rebecca Solnit and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Who Am I Where?/¿Quién soy dónde? A Map of Contingent Identities and Circumstantial Memories*, cartography by Ben Pease, from Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas*, University of California Press, 2010 © 2010 by the Regents of the University of California Press, Published by the University of California Press 219

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

This book considers phenomena of urban mapping in the discourses and strategies of a variety of postwar artists and practitioners of space up to today. It focuses on a constellation of postwar artists whose work shows a fascination with maps and urban mapping in artistic forms that privilege walking, surveying and close exploration. I am interested in how these forms of urban mapping ramify and expand to include texts and visual representations as part of a larger system of apprehending, experiencing and imagining the city. In a classic book, *The Intellectual versus the City. From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (1962), Morton and Lucia White discuss the unwavering distrust of the city voiced by American intellectuals over time and the unfavorable comparison it has generated with the pastoral countryside. *Cartographies of New York and Other Postwar American Cities* tells a different story, one in which the city still coheres negatively, but is embraced as an artistic possibility, as a space of creation and experiment, with experiment defined as a testing of artistic limits and a redrawing of artistic boundaries.

The originality of the book is twofold. First of all, the book posits maps and mapping as a critical nexus around which some the major actors of the artistic engagements with urban space in postwar America can be reconfigured and analyzed. Few overarching studies of the artistic interest in the postwar American city exist, and even fewer studies of the creative engagements with the postwar American city that combine a larger literary, artistic and architectural corpus.<sup>1</sup> This book

is by no means comprehensive or panoramic, but it sets out to lay the foundations of what might subsequently become an ampler perspective on literary and artistic urban figurations in the USA in the postwar period.

Secondly, the distinctive approach of the book is meant to highlight the interplay between discourses and site-oriented practices. My analysis lies at the intersection of the literary and the art historical study of the metropolis, and it results from a literary scholar's perspective on art history and cartography. My take on the subject combines two strands: one that brings to the fore the textual and intertextual dimension in the work of a number of postwar artists, and another that examines their engagement with site as artistic practice. The dialogue between discourses and other artistic forms provides the foundational bifocal perspective of the book. The "literature" in the subtitle *Art, Literature and Urban Spaces* refers to the interdisciplinary dialogue and circulation that results from bringing art historical examples into the field of literature. It also refers to the focus on literary texts like Poe's "Man of the Crowd" and to the rhetorical mediation employed in art and architecture in the postwar era, commonly designated as being decisive in the "linguistic turn." Studies of site-specific art have paid scant attention to the implications of its linguistic and discursive component.<sup>2</sup> Several of the artists I discuss are also writers whose texts are inextricably linked to the rest of their artistic expressions: Acconci started out as a poet, Matta-Clark wrote "art cards," Smithson was also a poet in his early career and a prolific writer of essays, Kaprow is the author of an extensive corpus of essays and scripted performances.

From the first chapter that reads E. A. Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" alongside contemporary artistic experiments that revisit it to the last chapter that examines Rebecca Solnit's recent atlas of San Francisco (*Infinite City*, 2010) as a crossbreed of cartography, literature and visual art, the book bridges the gap that separates different disciplinary traditions and tries to do justice to the highly composite nature of a number of postwar artistic practices grounded in New York and other postwar American cities. I explore spatial investigations that rely on cartographic procedures and the language of mapping in order to engage with the urban and suburban and elaborate a literary and artistic reflection on what it means to inhabit them creatively and often subversively. A significant gesture that inaugurates these spatial investigations consists in the transgression of spatial margins that lead literary characters like

Poe's protagonist and artists like Vito Acconci (also a character in a performance) to move away from confined spaces out in the open where they embrace a posture of interpretation and interrogation that is fundamentally mobile and involves a combination of trajectories and texts, itineraries and discourses.

The selection and organization of the corpus does not follow the logic of artistic schools or currents, but rather privileges the dialogue of texts and experiments that cut across areas of study, media and conceptions of art, literature and cartography. It is the city itself as space of artistic exploration that provides the patterns of coherence that articulate the unity of the book. While the term "city" encompasses the characteristic qualities of urbanism (density, population size, heterogeneity), its widespread and non-reflexive use calls for an analytically driven investigation into what these artists and writers mean by "city" or "metropolis" (another inflationary term).<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the "city" is derived from the complexity of the individual writings and practices that will be examined. Thus, Passaic, for instance, occupies an ambiguous place as a lethargic New York suburb in Smithson's essay, but at the same time is presented by Smithson in ironic comparison with Rome, which destabilizes both Passaic and Rome. In a meditation on historical and industrial ruins, on the continuity of the built environment, and a reworking of the international theme, Passaic as suburban center is ambiguously posited between the ruinous Other of New York and the pale transatlantic mirroring of Rome.

The corpus includes a major nineteenth-century text of fiction and two contemporary artistic rereadings it has generated (one of which involves social media communication and geolocation), experimental poetry, urban performances, Happenings, conceptual works and a hybrid contemporary atlas. The unifying element is provided by a reflection on mapping and cities (New York, Passaic, San Francisco). I examine the interaction between the map as representation and forms of dynamic mapping that involve itineraries, trajectories, tours, acts of surveying that result in hybrid artefacts with visual, performative and discursive components. I bring together visual forms of mapping that revisit or reinvent the conventions of cartography and literary forms of mapping (poems, narratives, essays, "word works" as Matta-Clark called them, verbal "installations" in the case of Acconci) that are rarely discussed together. The book builds on the older observation about the geographical map being a central matrix for reflection and experiment in the visual arts

starting with the historical avant-gardes but considers the textual dimension in mapping practices alongside site orientation.

One of the main aims of the book is to examine the ways in which literary and mapping tactics work together to invest New York, its suburbs and other American cities as material environments to be investigated, as cultural and historical constructs and as spaces of social interaction. James Donald's understanding of cities as "imagined environments" is particularly illuminating (Donald 1992, 422). But the various strands of the process of "imagining" the city (the textual and the site-oriented) have often been treated separately. The interdisciplinary scope of the book is actually even broader: Given the hybrid nature of the artistic production of the artists I examine, who combined text, photography, maps, actual movement, fragments of the built environment, the book stands at the intersection of art history, urban studies, architectural discourse, cartography and literary analysis. The city itself as an "imagined environment" and mediated space invites a far-reaching disciplinary and cultural view due to its privileged position, since Baudelaire, as the benchmark space of modernity, which provides insight into the broader mechanisms of culture and ideology.

The book reflects on the deep concern with the urban condition shared by a variety of twentieth-century American artists across the artistic spectrum, including artists belonging to currents not usually associated with the city, like Land Art. The collusion of art and the city is embedded in the larger reconfiguration of the institutionalized spaces of art and art-making starting in the late 1950s that led to the emergence of new artistic venues and new idioms, anchored in the materiality of site and in previous literary and artistic discourses on the modern city (although parodic and ironic distance is often present). These new artistic idioms use the language and gestures of mapping and surveying to encode a meditation on urban growth and decline, ruins, the monumental and the anti-monumental, property and ownership, the limits between private and public, social protest and the possibility of change, surveillance, Cold War tensions, as well as individual and communal modes of living. The artist in the city displays varying degrees of involvement and opposition, from the exploratory and observational stance to acts of manifest contestation and intervention. The spatial focus of this study is New York in specific works by Kaprow, Oldenburg, Acconci, Smithson, Matta-Clark and the neo-Situationist group Glowlab, but the choice of including "other postwar American cities" in the title

suggests at least two things: the instability of New York as a construct always pointing elsewhere through allusion and cultural dialogue, and the transferability of certain mapping procedures, for instance in the case of Solnit's *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas* (2010), which is part of a trilogy of atlases based on similar methodologies that also includes *Unfathomable City. A New Orleans Atlas* (2013) and *Nonstop Metropolis. A New York City Atlas* (2016).

The theoretical and critical lens adopted throughout the book is provided by “cartographies” in the plural, a term voluntarily chosen both for its rigorous scientific and disciplinary anchorage and for its metaphorical potential. The way I use it, the term refers to the map as a dynamic critical tool that constructs reality without reproducing it, to cartography as a discipline that has undergone tremendous changes in the past decades thanks to the rise of critical cartography and to the creative embrace of mapping processes that testify to a preference given not to maps as conventional representations but rather to itineraries, trajectories, displacements, mobility and dynamic tension. The term “cartographies” captures the move away from an understanding of the map as a supposedly mimetic object to an understanding of the map as a constantly reinvented “proposition about the world” (Wood 1992) and negotiation between the artist, the terrain, its already-existing representations in mutual interaction with their social, historical and ideological frameworks. As early as 1933, in *Science and Sanity*, Alfred Korzybski made the claim that “the map is not the territory” just like “a word is not the object it represents” (58). Reflecting on the problematic nature of mapmaking processes in *Problems and Projects*, Nelson Goodman insisted on “inadequacy” as “intrinsic to cartography” (15). A separate but related distinction is made by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they pit the map (open, performative, “connectable,” susceptible to constant modification) against the tracing (the result of an attempt at reproduction) (12). These pronouncements highlight the gap between representation and the territory and foreground the constructed nature of the map and its potential of “open” artefact, capable to adapt and evolve depending on shifts in points of view, authority, purpose and frames of reference. Starting from the notion of inadequacy, French art historian Gilles A. Tiberghien (2007) emphasizes a different potential of the map: its dependence on and ability to mobilize the “cartographic imagination,” which is a recourse to creativity in dealing with the problems of representation posed by the map (with the uses of the

map as well) and addressed both by cartographers and artists. The cartographic imagination represents a common terrain on which mapmakers and artists (and, I would add, writers) meet. Thus, the map addresses the question of representation, which is dependent on conventions carrying historical and ideological significance and on creative procedures that allow for a constant renewal of the map and recontextualization of conventional forms of mapping in new cartographic expressions. French cartographer Christian Jacob talks about the “intellectual efficiency” of the map in critical and artistic discourse (quoted in Tiberghien 2007, 198). This “intellectual efficiency” stems from the versatility of the map as model of representation and its ability to conjure issues having to do with the relationship between mimesis and ideology, mimesis and creativity, artistic representation and ideals of scientific accuracy.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of “cartographies” covers a whole range of phenomena, from the use of actual geographical maps by artists to walking and other forms of urban mapping that often have an ironic and subversive component. Appropriating and subverting normative mapmaking ways is not a recent enterprise. Artists were playing with maps and mapping as early as 1929, when the Surrealist “Map of the World” (“Le Monde au temps des Surréalistes”) boldly redrew national boundaries and disregarded existing data by blotting out the USA and by giving a gigantic Soviet Union pride of place. In an urban context, the Surrealist nightwalking and the Situationist *dérive* are two of the most radical reinventions of urban experience, which privilege disorientation and the abandonment of any map, mental or material in the confrontation with the city. The geographical map has become a major source of inspiration, especially in the postwar period, when it was adopted and adapted by artists of different sensibilities, who in doing so implicitly interrogate the limits and tenets of cartography. Since the 1990s, a profusion of exhibitions has been organized on “art and mapping,” demonstrating the prominence of the subject and its very rich potential from the perspective of art historical analysis, with a strong component of critical cartography and an emphasis on issues of ideology and policy-making in certain exhibitions. To name just a few of the “art and mapping” exhibits: Robert Storr on *Mapping* at the MoMA (1994); Marie-Ange Brayer’s *Orbis Terrarum. Ways of World Making: cartography and contemporary art* at the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp (2000); *Global Navigation System* at the Palais de Tokyo (2003); *Atlas Critique* at the Parc Saint Léger (2012, see Quiros and Imhoff 2014).<sup>5</sup> In terms of how art and critical

cartography have engaged in dialogue over the past decades, Dryansky points out that artists revisiting mapping representations in the 1960s and 1970s were an important source for critical cartography, which developed in the 1980s and 1990s (Dryansky 2017, 17).

The explosion of interest in cartography in the fields of literature, art and critical theory is inscribed in the “spatial turn” that Foucault considered to be definitory for what he called “the contemporary epoch” in a talk he gave in 1967 on “other spaces” (“Des espaces autres”), which was published in 1994. The “spatial turn” is a vast concept that covers a variety of tendencies, disciplines and procedures.<sup>6</sup> Strategies of mapping appear to be central to the spatial turn, but they ramify across domains, paradigms and practices, as Denis Cosgrove demonstrates in an edited collection on *Mappings* (1999). Thus, it is challenging to address the question of mapping not only in various media (literature, art historical material, cartographic material), but also across several paradigms (nineteenth-century walking in the metropolis, the paradigm of site in the 1960s and 1970s, examples of counter-mapping that are entangled with the construction of identity, as is the case with Solnit). And yet, it is only by accepting to confront this multiplicity of approaches and by reading them individually, in their specificity, and also together and against one another in their circulation and resonance that we can hope to have a better perspective, both conceptual and historical, on the evolving significance and the diversity of paradigms in urban mapping practices adopted by artists, writers and cultural practitioners.

For this reason, the book is conceived as a constellation of interlinked case studies. Individual chapters are devoted to locative artworks that find inspiration in American literature, the Happenings and Fluxus, Vito Acconci, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, contemporary Situationist projects and recent collaborative atlases of critical cartography. The chapters on Smithson and Matta-Clark are based on archival research at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. and the Gordon Matta-Clark Archive at the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal. The various case studies in the book explore artistic practices that have problematized accepted modes of being in the city and have renewed the repertoire of urban expression, producing new visions of what and how the city might signify. The artists and writers examined here negotiate distinct cultural legacies, which often do not overlap, and their practices originate in different intellectual backgrounds. However, they share an interest in maps

and mapping as forms of representation and interaction with the city, and the term “cartographies” suggests a plurality of approaches while also capturing their common interest in mapping.

The reflection on some prominent artistic explorations of American cities (New York, San Francisco, the suburbia) is contextualized both historically and discursively. Contexts and texts are seen to be critically or constructively adapted by individual artistic practices. The various case studies shed light on the specificity of individual projects, but also seek to form coherent paradigms, to project genealogies and to find a common terrain around certain topics or groups of artists addressing the same phenomena. I discuss the relevance of scenarios of following developed in nineteenth-century contexts of detective and urban fiction, notably in Poe, and also their evolution and transformation in Acconci’s practice, the parody of tourist discourses and the Grand Tour in Smithson around the concept of anti-monumentality, the bathetic inversion of the figure of the surveyor, who looms large in the American imagination, in Matta-Clark’s reinterpretation, which also foregrounds a version of anti-monumentality. Literary texts are central to this cartographic enterprise, either as forms of mapping in themselves (mapping the surface of the page in Acconci), as models or anti-models of mapping experiences (in Poe and Smithson), as a basis for artistic adaptation (Poe adapted by Buckingham, Glowlab and Acconci), as constitutive elements of hybrid textual–cartographic works of art (in Matta-Clark), as verbal counterparts to urban maps constitutive of an atlas (Solnit).

The book has found inspiration in a number of studies of the city in American literature: Sharpe’s interpretations of the modern “unreal city,” Cochoy’s close readings of American fiction through the prism of the “passante” motif, McNamara’s interdisciplinary study of “urban verbs,” Manzanas and Benito’s reflections on occupying space, nomadic space and urban borders.<sup>7</sup> It has also relied on the many studies of individual artists whose work is at least in part grounded in New York (and across the Hudson in the case of Smithson), in particular studies that pay attention to the interplay of text and site: Dworkin’s analyses of Acconci’s poetry and performances (2001), Shaw’s excavations of Smithson’s discursive strata and Richard’s investigations of Matta-Clark’s “physical poetics” (2005).

In terms of periodization and how it is reflected in the structure of the book, the main focus is on New York in the 1960s and 1970s in Chapters 3–6, which are historically and conceptually framed by a

chapter on genealogies (on Poe and his contemporary artistic rereadings) and a chapter on prospects (on Rebecca Solnit). While the temporal framework is that of the postwar period with emphasis on the 1960s, 1970s and the turn of the twenty-first century, the issues of legacy and transmission of earlier cultural subtexts are central to the analysis of specific examples. In this respect, one of my purposes is to trace the circulation and transformation of certain seminal concepts and figures (Baudelaire's and Poe's flâneur theorized by Benjamin, the crowds, the Situationist drift, the tactics of disorientation dear to the Surrealists and Situationists, the *terrain vague*) in the work of artists of the 1960s and 1970s that engage with the urban site and in a more recent example of counter-mapping.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of great turmoil in American history and in the history of New York City, with the Civil Rights movement and protests against the Vietnam War investing public space. Public space became an arena of contestation and opposition, where authority came under pressure and so did boundaries and norms of all kinds. In terms of urban planning and urban history, the 1960s are best remembered for what has become the emblematic binary opposition between preservation and redevelopment represented by the opposition between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses. Alison Isenberg judiciously calls this sharp oppositional focus the “narrowing” of the 1960s (Isenberg 2017, 10). The specific works by artists of the 1960s and 1970s that I examine do not reflect this “narrowing.” They perform a number of cartographic gestures that go beyond the preservation vs redevelopment debate, although this is where some of them tap part of their critical energy: following strangers in the street in order to highlight the private/public distinction (Acconci), buying and surveying tiny plots of land in New York City in order to parody and deflate the notions of property and real estate (Matta-Clark), visiting the drab monuments of Passaic in a replay of the Grand Tour and reflecting on the blight of the suburbia (Smithson). It would be difficult to propose a single kind of narrative of what New York signifies in terms of urban or spatial identity as a result of these critical readings. In itself, the fact that an overarching narrative of spatial and urban identity is not immediately apparent is a proof that artists working in New York in the 1960s and 1970s did not flock around a single issue or angle (like the previously mentioned “redevelopment vs. preservation”). Perhaps an overarching narrative might stem from the dynamic of contestation of norms, boundaries and

conventions, both spatial and aesthetic, which is performed through mapping. New York appears thus as a city that is constantly challenged, displaced and questioned in its structures (the grid) and built environment, monuments (since it is rather the anti-monumental that is foregrounded) and planned development (by SoHo and the loft culture). New York is explored from the perspective of a critical testing of what it stands for conventionally (monuments, the order of Manhattan, corporate culture), reimagined as a negation of these topoi, over and over again, and also as a city that signifies in relation to others, to American culture at large, and within larger transatlantic cultural formations, not simply as an autonomous entity. This critical testing certainly finds some of its sources in the politics of protest of the age and also in the effervescent redefinition and expansion of the arts at the time, marked by increasing hybridization and a continual breaking of frames in minimalism, earthworks, conceptualism and performance art.

By focusing on itineraries, trajectories and mapping strategies that involve walking and surveying, the book projects New York and Passaic (in particular) as invested by pedestrian artists and marked by an ambulatory dynamic, although the car and the bus do feature in certain examples. I consider Oldenburg picking detritus from the streets of Manhattan for *The Street* (1960), Benjamin Patterson crossing and re-crossing the street in Times Square in *Traffic Light* (1962), Smithson walking in Passaic in 1967 (but getting there by bus from Manhattan), Acconci walking in Manhattan in 1969, Matta-Clark surveying his odd lots in Queens and Staten Island in 1973–1974 (but also driving around), the two Glowlab flâneuses following strangers in Manhattan and being followed on social media (2003).<sup>8</sup> This focus on walking in American urban contexts might strike some as obsolete, for at least two reasons: on the one hand, walking is not traditionally associated with an American approach to urban space and to American space in general (conventionally seen as car oriented) and on the other hand, the pedestrian city (especially New York) is far removed from recent forms of the metropolis described as “a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication (airports and airways, stations and railways, parking lots and motorways, teleports and information highways),” so much so that has become difficult to say nowadays “what is not the urban?” (Amin and Thrift 2002, 1). The emphasis on walking applies to an older version of the modern city, a city that can be traversed and experienced at pedestrian level.

It is precisely from this street perspective that a potential for artistic and political questioning is activated. However, there is no nostalgia implicit in my analysis, of the kind that Amin and Thrift identify in certain “writings on the good city” (4): a nostalgia for “a lost past of tightly knit and spatially compact” cities (4). There are no hierarchy and axiology implicit in my readings, which, on the contrary, expose the tensions and contradictions at play in the representations and enactments of the city that I examine. Moreover, it would be wrong to understand walking in opposition to other peripatetic forms of the 1960s and 1970s centered on the automobile, for instance: Smithsonian driving to the Yucatan, Matta-Clark’s *Fresh Kill* (1972) presenting Matta-Clark’s van destroyed by a bulldozer in a dump, to say nothing of the earlier, seminal literary representations of road trips like Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). The “post-studio” era allows for the two paradigms of pedestrian and automobile exploration to converge and enact a rupture with the artist’s studio. In addition to this, one of the recent performances I consider (Glowlab’s *Following “the Man of the Crowd,”* 2004) combines two modes of navigating New York, actual and virtual. New technologies do not sound the death knell of pedestrianism and of walking as an artistic strategy; rather, they can coexist and produce an expanded version of the city experienced at several levels.

The American dimension of the book grounds it in the field of American studies and in American historical and geographical contexts, but the book suggests that a centrifugal dynamic is at work in many of the assumptions and tactics employed by the various artists discussed. Poe, who constitutes the original landmark of the book, is a case in point. His short story “The Man of the Crowd” (discussed at large in Chapter 2) is set in London but encodes a more general reflection on the modern city and is an implicit cautionary tale about the expanding American metropolis. The artists and writers I consider explore New York and its suburbs, and other major cities like San Francisco, in specific historical, social and ideological contexts, but there are often a certain elusiveness and an effect of transferability at work, a projected elsewhere that is fantasized or actualized through cultural references to other cities or artists. This centrifugal effect becomes even more pronounced in the context of globalization, with cities signifying within larger networks, in relation, through circulation and interaction with the faraway, easily brought nearby.

Chapter 2, “Walking with Poe: “The Man of the Crowd” from text to street,” projects a temporal and genealogic arc that grounds the book in nineteenth-century traditions of thinking about the modern metropolis and the meanings of modernity itself. It considers the contemporary artistic legacy of one of the most prominent figures of urban modernity: the nineteenth-century flâneur, who has enjoyed an impressive posterity in cultural theory thanks to Baudelaire and Benjamin. This chapter makes the claim that the flâneur and his specific strategies of observing and mapping the city have also enjoyed an artistic posterity in the twentieth and twenty-first century in the locative arts and the arts of walking. Starting from Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd,” one of the most influential nineteenth-century American texts about the modern city that features in Baudelaire’s discussion of the flâneur in “The Painter of Modern Life,” I examine two contemporary American artistic projects that revisit Poe’s walking scenario: Matthew Buckingham’s 2003 installation *A Man of the Crowd* and the 2004 Situationist experiment of collaborative performance conducted in Manhattan by two flâneuses, Christina Ray and Lee Walton, from the Glowlab group. Set in an indeterminate London, Poe’s story is transposed to distinct contemporary urban environments in ways that foreground the performative, embodied and immersive suggestions in the text, thus uncovering its retrospective relevance for paradigms of site-specificity in twentieth-century art. The historical and spatial transpositions at work in the projects examined here (Poe’s London—Buckingham’s Vienna—Glowlab’s New York) allow for a trans-metropolitan perspective to emerge, underwritten by phenomena of circulation and transformation. The gendered history of streetwalking is both highlighted and undermined by the two flâneuses walking in Manhattan by day and by night, who take over the traditional function of the male flâneur and adopt a posture of agency, inviting online participants to become their “followees.” Finally, the chapter traces the mutations of the flâneur and of the urban situations he originally navigated, which often involved nocturnal landscapes, potentially criminal attitudes and the menacing presence of crowds. There is a significant contemporary elision of this dark underside, manifest especially in the metamorphosis of the crowds, reinterpreted along participatory and communal lines. The chapter offers not only a new reading of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” but also a new perspective on the evolution of the flâneur that spans fiction, art and the work of major cultural theorists of urban modernity, Benjamin and Baudelaire in particular, with references to Simmel.

Just as important conceptually as the shift from text to street discussed in the previous chapter, the shift from museum or gallery space to the streets of the city deserves a separate exploration in Chapter 3, entitled “Transitions: Happenings and beyond.” The move from text to street and from museum to the streets partakes of the same logic of crossing institutional boundaries and expanding the conventional frameworks of artistic media. This is where the city as site comes in as a major source of inspiration, and literal and symbolic ground for innovation. This chapter reflects on how artists embraced spatial liminality in the ebullient atmosphere of the early 1960s in Manhattan, when many artist-run galleries were at the forefront of experimentation. Their varied practices mapped an extremely vast field of approaches, which included visual figuration, sculpture, installations (as we would call them today), performances, environments and Happenings inside and outside gallery space. The city constitutes a privileged topic and catalyst in the work of many of these artists. My analysis will focus on the transitional character of a number of well-known and lesser-known projects which stand in between institutional spaces and the urban site, with ever more unmoored types of artistic mobility being enacted. Claes Oldenburg’s *The Street* (1960) and *The Store* (1964) are among the most striking recreations of urban environments within the gallery, whose occasional performative character (as in *Snapshots from the City*, performed inside *The Street* at the Judson Gallery) paved the way for the proliferation of action-oriented works.

Allan Kaprow occupies an important place in this transitional phase toward the street, first in his Environments, like *Words* (1962, Smolin Gallery), meant to recreate the verbal fabric of the city (graffiti, street signs, shop signs) through a combination of handwritten, printed and audio material. Later the Happenings crossed the line toward urban space even more resolutely, like *Calling* (1965), whose scripted action was divided between New York City and New Jersey. The last part of the chapter will be devoted to a discussion of a few examples of Fluxus and conceptual walking projects: *A Very Lawful Dance—For Ennis* (1962), performed by Dick Higgins and Benjamin Patterson in Times Square and Yoko Ono’s *Map Pieces* (1964). La Monte Young’s *Composition 1960 #10* (“Draw a straight line and follow it”) is also presented as a prototypical and far-reaching experiment not only in music, but also in spatial investigation.

Chapter 4, “Following Vito Acconci,” dwells on the artist’s urban performances and architectural installations in relation to his early literary production, over a period that extends from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Vito Acconci, a prolific artist and a key figure of minimalism and postminimalism, occupies a strategic position in the conceptual and material shift to the actual engagement with urban space in the late 1960s. His work stands at the historical juncture where literary and artistic approaches to the spatiality of the medium, both the printed page and the urban site, confront and complement each other. This chapter has a distinctive approach due to its embrace of the three phases of Acconci’s career (poetry, urban performances and city-related projects, architectural installations) and to the argument it makes for the centrality of his urban performances and the need to interpret them against the backdrop of Acconci’s combined literary, artistic and architectural vision. I follow Acconci in his move away from a modernist-driven desire for autotelic creation dependent on minimalist procedures to an ever-greater explicitness and inclusion of cultural discourses and references (also originating in modernism), many of which revisit American mythologies about building and inhabiting. His mappings of textual and urban spaces, as well as his mappings of American culture, are reflected in the choice of artistic forms that are ever more explicit in their critique, exposing phenomena of compliance with the larger systems of culture and ideology. This chapter offers close readings of some of Acconci’s writings, especially his cartography-inspired poetry that involves transferences from maps and atlases, then turns to *Following Piece* as a seminal work, the centerpiece of the chapter, and ends with discussions of three architectural installations. As far as *Following Piece* is concerned, I analyze its various sociological interpretations, mainly inspired by Erving Goffman’s work, and cultural subtexts that shaped the specific outlook of *Following Piece*, which follows in the steps of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” thus engaging in an echoic relationship with the first chapter on the flâneur.

Chapter 5 focuses on Robert Smithson, an artist who makes extensive use of cartography in his art (which also encompasses his writings).<sup>9</sup> Entitled “Eternal Cities: Rome/Passaic. On Robert Smithson’s ‘Monuments of Passaic,’” it engages with an argument formulated by the exhibition *New Jersey as Non-Site* organized by Kelly Baum at the Princeton University Art Museum (2013), according to which New Jersey emerged as a laboratory of cutting-edge artistic experiment for many artists of the 1960s and 1970s, who were responding to the

centripetal dynamic of New York City by privileging “negative sightseeing” and “negative sites” (including the suburbia) not only as themes, but also as conditions of art. Through a close reading of Robert Smithson’s photographic essay on the suburbia, “The Monuments of Passaic” (1967), I argue that instead of thinking about Passaic in terms of opposition to New York, it is possible to place Smithson’s vision of urban and suburban sites in a much larger transatlantic framework which also includes Rome, to which Smithson compares Passaic with a great deal of irony, thus activating a whole tradition, mostly literary, of transatlantic comparison and circulation between America and Europe. I unravel the significance of Smithson’s mirroring of polar opposites (Rome/Passaic), which is culturally and artistically meaningful within what Malcolm Bradbury calls the “dangerous pilgrimage” context of transatlantic journeys and exchanges. The “urban other” of Passaic is certainly New York, but also Rome itself as the Eternal City and honored historical and cultural myth. This chapter uses archival material from the Robert Smithson archives at the Smithsonian in order to bring Smithson’s two trips to Rome in 1961 and 1969 to bear on the reading of the Passaic essay. So far, Smithson’s essay has been read against the literary backdrop of William Carlos Williams’s poem *Paterson* (Shaw 2013), but I propose a different geographical and cultural frame of reading, which opens up to nineteenth-century debates on the relationship between Europe and America, on the role of the American artist and the making of an American tradition. The chapter also addresses the broader question of Smithson’s stance on the urban condition and the urban site, as it emerges in other essays, especially “Ultramoderne,” “The Crystal Land” and “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape.”

Chapter 6, “Gordon Matta-Clark’s urban slivers and ‘word works,’” focuses on one of Matta-Clark’s most conceptual projects, left unfinished at the time of his death, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1974), which has survived as a mixed-media work consisting of maps, photographs and administrative documents illustrating the ownership by the artist of fifteen tiny plots of land in New York. The documents in *Reality Properties* were posthumously reconfigured by Matta-Clark’s widow in fourteen collages, thus complicating the status of the work in terms of authorship. Matta-Clark’s reflection on the urban grid is a humorous attempt to denounce the supposed infallibility of the grid as a form of organization and representation, which is ridden with anomalies and irregularities. Matta-Clark takes issue not only with the grid of urban planning, but

also with the modernist grid, which is according to Krauss the emblematic form of pictorial modernism (1986). Matta-Clark transfers the grid to a distinct conceptual territory where it becomes entangled with bureaucratic practices and the idea of land ownership, emerging as a figure of inconsistency and uselessness.

I argue that while most of Matta-Clark's work is grounded in the derelict Lower Manhattan of the 1970s whose ruins and vacancy become fertile contexts for art-making, some of its aspects are best understood in international and transatlantic artistic contexts. I suggest that Surrealism might provide interesting points of convergence and comparison with Matta-Clark's playful interest in interstitial and useless urban spaces.

My discussion of *Reality Properties* shifts the traditional emphasis in scholarship away from Matta-Clark's grand and arduous "splittings" and proves that the artist was very much interested in the minute and the infinitesimal, and in their implications of anti-functionality. While the building cuts had unmade architectonic structures, *Reality Properties* confronts a situation prior to construction, although the project turns the very idea of construction on its head given the minute size of the plots. Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties* grants new insight into his work based not on his monumental urban or suburban work but rather on a small-scale project, whose meaning derives to a great extent from targeting the interstitial in the urban fabric and by granting it a special potential for creative rather than practical use. *Reality Properties* is both a form of institutional critique and a way to revisit American myths related to land use: property, home, land surveying, ownership inscribed in the American Dream. My interpretation takes into account the artist's "art cards" (aphorisms and pithy sentences written on index cards) as part and parcel of his artistic practice.

The last chapter, "Cartographies and the texture of cities: Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas*" (2010), is a reflection on a relatively recent experiment in cartographic representation in relation to urban mapping, whose ambition is to foster a sense of locational identity and a feeling of belonging to the city. Here, the map changes status. In the work of the artists I have examined, the map is articulated as a dynamic trajectory through an urban site, as a walking or following scenario, as a mere fragment, or as an anomalous, negative, residual trace. Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas* offers a striking example of an atlas reinvented through creative practices and shaped by literary and artistic influences, thus constructing a city which becomes a

“place,” an ambiguous and unstable but necessary concept carrying connotations of affect and subjectivity (Buell 2005, 63). *Infinite City* is the result of the collaborative efforts of thirty writers, artists, cartographers, sociologists, an atlas made up of twenty-two maps of San Francisco or the Bay Area, nineteen of which are accompanied by an essay and occasional photographs. *Infinite City* is a rewriting of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and of Debord’s notions of defamiliarizing the city, with a strong feminist and environmentalist perspective also inspired by Lefebvre’s “production of space.” This example of counter-mapping allows me to engage with the debates about the evolution of cartography as a discipline and with the recent emphasis on the democratization of cartography. The ambition of this analysis is to go beyond the case study in order to shed light on a few general tendencies in recent cartographic practices in relation to the city. First, it can be argued that a growing affection for “home,” “belonging” and “the spirit of place” is noticeable in contemporary projects of collaborative cartography focusing on a given place. Such attempts to retrieve the uniqueness of place and to state the individual’s attachment to it which sound retrograde and conservative stand in contrast to models of identity that insist on nomadism and dispersion in a globalized world in constant flux (a model put forth by Deleuze and Guattari). It is worth asking what role cities occupy in this return to the local and whether a compromise between these two apparently irreconcilable approaches to site and identity—the local and the nomadic—is possible. Secondly, I make the claim that the atlas itself can have much larger implications and uses outside of geography and can be considered a fruitful method of cultural investigation, in the spirit of Aby Warburg’s *Atlas of Mnemosyne* (1924–1929).

In the conclusion, I chart some possible perspectives opened by these discussions and reflect on the need for a debate about the articulation between art and urbanism, between literature and urbanism. This book celebrates the art of getting lost, which brings to the fore the pleasures and perils of disorientation inherent in most of the examples discussed, which redeploy the map to serve a creative loss of bearings and to question accepted patterns of navigating and understanding the city. The emphasis is on multiplicity and alternative models: New York as it is represented and experienced here always points to the existence of urban others (terms of comparison and historical/discursive models in the USA and elsewhere), to the dispersion of narrative and visual possibilities that are constitutive of its fluid nature, resulting from unsettling perspectives

on monumentality, real estate value, social regulations, epistemological certainties and political authority. The map as representation and mapping as process complement each other, revealing the constant dialogue between “here” and “there” and suggesting that mapping urban spaces means traversing, representing and reimagining them at the same time.

## NOTES

1. The project of writing a history of the painting of urban life in the USA from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century is underway: David Peters Corbett is currently completing it. For a cogent panoramic analysis, see Corbett (2015, 562–580). As far as postwar art is concerned, the relationship between artists and the city is at the forefront of curatorial initiatives. Several recent exhibits concentrate on specific periods, cities and artists: Cooke and Crimp (eds.), *Mixed Use, Manhattan. 1970s to the Present* (Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, 2010); Bussard (ed.), *The City Lost and Found. Capturing New York, Chicago and Los Angeles 1960–1980* (Art Institute of Chicago and the Princeton University Art Museum, 2014–2015); Phillips (ed.), *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (Queens Museum 2017); and Rachleff, *Inventing Downtown. Artist-Run Galleries in New York City 1952–1965* (Grey Art Gallery, New York City, 2017).
2. McNamara’s *Urban Verbs* (1996) is an excellent example of an interdisciplinary reading of American cities. Shaw’s *Fieldworks* (2013) is another brilliant example of interdisciplinary approach to place and site in postwar poetry and art.
3. For a series of reflections on the evolutions and contexts of the term “metropolis,” see Brantz et al., *Thick Space. Approaches to Metropolitanism* (2012).
4. For an overview of cartography in relation to art and literature, see Olivier Brossard and Monica Manolescu, “Introduction” to *Cartographies de l’Amérique, Transatlantica 2/2012*: <https://transatlantica.revues.org/6232>.
5. Storr, *Mapping* (1994); Brayer, *Orbis Terrarum. Ways of Worldmaking* (2000); Bourriaud, *GNS* (2003), Quiros and Imhoff (eds.), *Géo-Esthétique* (2014). See also Harmon, *The Map as Art. Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography* (2010) and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Mapping It Out. An Alternative Atlas of Contemporary Cartographies* (2014). In 1980, the Centre Pompidou organized an exhibit on maps which included a reflection on their artistic appropriation: *Cartes et figures de la Terre* (1980). For an analysis of some of the most important tendencies in artists’ work with maps, see Brayer, “Mesures d’une fiction picturale. La carte de géographie” (1995).

6. See Warf and Arias (eds.), *The Spatial Turn. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 2008.
7. See Sharpe (1990), McNamara (1996), Cochoy (2009), and Manzanas and Benito (2011, 2014).
8. A different set of prospects is suggested in the chapter on Poe's "Man of the Crowd," which examines, among other things, the virtual worlds of online communication and the involvement of the digital in urban exploration. But virtual urban navigation and digital mapping are not central to this book. They deserve a separate study. For an in-depth series of analyses of virtual processes of navigating the urban, see Darroch and Marchessault (2015).
9. As evidenced by the exhibit Robert Smithson, *Mapping Dislocations* at the James Cohan Gallery, New York, 2001.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# Walking with Poe: “The Man of the Crowd” from Text to Street

This study of urban cartographies begins with an investigation of the legacies of the flâneur, the mythical character who looms large in the theoretical crystallizations of modernity and its privileged spaces. The flâneur in America originates in a ghostly way in Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” (1840), a story set in London, but which points geographically to American urban centers and to their implicit, troubled futurity. Quite tellingly, the “cartographies of New York” explored in this book begin elsewhere, in Poe’s London read as a projection of America’s cities to come, New York in particular.

Together with Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” (1837) and Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853), Poe’s story stands out in nineteenth-century American fiction through a particularly poignant representation of the individual in the middle of the city. These three texts capture unsettling aspects of modernity in an urban context, presenting conflicted characters, disoriented or displaced in the modern city, be it London (in “Wakefield” and “A Man of the Crowd”) or New York (in “Bartleby”). Hawthorne, Poe and Melville investigate various modes of marginal or exilic behavior: Wakefield, “the Outcast of the Universe” (298), contemplating his previous life from a distance, anonymously ensconced in the midst of London crowds; Bartleby contending blandly that he “would prefer not to” (10) and staring at the wall visible from his office window; the man of the crowd moving haggardly across the city in order to sustain himself on the crowds, with the narrator at his

heels for a night and a day. Poe's story is the most dynamic of the three due to its focus on walking and following resulting from an attempt to decipher the mystery of "the man of the crowd." The patterns and figures of urban circulation the story foregrounds have become key elements in critical readings of the flâneur and the modern metropolis by Baudelaire and Benjamin. Apart from its overwhelming posterity in cultural theory, Poe's story has also enjoyed an artistic posterity thanks to its urban itineraries that have invited transpositions to media and forms apt to convey movement: video, film and performance. One cannot help identifying literary echoes of Poe's short story in contemporary American fiction, for instance in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, which narrates repeated episodes of following in Manhattan within a detective framework (Auster 1987, 58–72).

Starting from two contemporary artistic adaptations of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," I would like to explore the artistic legacy of the short story and to make a few general claims about the mutations of the walking figure as it has crossed over from the medium of literature to the medium of art, from Poe's nineteenth-century text to contemporary artistic rereadings. The two artistic projects I will discuss—American artist Matthew Buckingham's film installation *A Man of the Crowd* (2003b) and the project of the neo-Situationist group Glowlab, *Following "the Man of the Crowd"* (2004)—stand on their own while also engaging closely with Poe's text and with the body of scholarship it has generated. These artistic renderings articulate artistic discourses that translate the urban walk into perceptible experiences. My primary focus is not on Poe and adaptation, which has already led to numerous investigations in film, music and popular culture, although I will also be addressing the slippages that inevitably intervene in phenomena of aesthetic appropriation.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I will highlight the artistic significance of the passage from the window to the street as a change of paradigm and a crossing of boundaries that are central to the artistic transformations of the twentieth century. I will also demonstrate that Poe's crowds, with their nineteenth-century overtones of dread and menace, but also vitality, have undergone a spectacular overturn, metamorphosing into twentieth-century and contemporary formations of sociability, interaction and participation. By examining artists' responses to "The Man of the Crowd," I will put into perspective a series of passages in literary–artistic–spatial practices that allow us to grasp the points of contact between Poe's short story and performance art, installation and locative media. A major line of interpretation of the story so

far has focused on the omnipresence of visual stimuli and the primacy of reading and seeing in the text. It can be argued that, while vision certainly occupies an important place, Poe's story dramatizes a move from a visual to an immersive regime in the city.

My reading of Poe is not based on the assumption that "The Man of the Crowd" is a prototype or a source that has grown teleologically into an art historical lineage. Rather, Poe appears to be a particularly cogent condensation of a number of major issues in reading, representing and experiencing the modern city that resonate particularly well with later reflections, although their historical contexts and aesthetic approaches are widely distinct. "The Man of the Crowd" seems to capture the spirit of that seminal moment in the history of vision which is difficult to pin down with precision when framed observation gave way to an exploratory ethos, when the mapping of contexts and situations took precedence over more sheltered and regulated approaches to the city and its figuration.<sup>2</sup>

### THE LEGACIES OF THE FLÂNEUR

The proliferation of walking strategies in the arts starting with the second half of the twentieth century is generally considered to belong to the cultural genealogy of the flâneur and to resurface in the experiences of Surrealist nightwalking and Situationist *dérive*. The walking artist has become one of the most potent figures of the artist engaging with the conditions of the present and the spaces of modernity, and walking tactics have gradually come to possess a complex aesthetic, social and ideological layering.<sup>3</sup> The flâneur is omnipresent in critical theory, although the elusiveness of the term has allowed for the dispersal of diverse and even conflicting versions. As Gluck puts it, "contemporary critical discussions have produced as many images of the flâneur as there are conceptions of the modern" (Gluck 2003, 53). These images and legacies of the flâneur are not dependent only on underlying conceptions of the modern, but also on specific media that flesh out the figure, in texts, visual arts, performance and other hybrid forms.<sup>4</sup> The intermedial circulation of the flâneur and his subsequent avatars is a key element in the genealogy that connects the nineteenth-century flâneur and twentieth-century peripatetic artists. At a given point, a historical figure best known as a literary persona stepped down from the page into the street and became an artist exploring a physical space constructed at the intersection of various discourses.

Walking turned into an aesthetic act. As I will try to show, the passage from text to street is central to the evolution of the figure. Michael Davidson's reading of poetic texts as cultural borrowings from the predecessors that collude with inscriptions in history seems to characterize well the phenomenon of the flâneur, which appears to be a set of stratified fictions and historic moments "like multiple scripts in a palimpsest" (Davidson 1997, 5).

It might seem legitimate to question the relevance of the widespread use of the term "flâneur" irrespective of specific contexts every time a text or an artwork represents or stages processes of walking, and yet it seems to me that the flexibility and adaptability of the term is its greatest conceptual strength. Rather than dismissing the term completely in contemporary cultural, literary or art historical contexts, as some have suggested, a more judicious approach is one of careful contextualization and close scrutiny of the specificities of individual examples.<sup>5</sup>

Although the nineteenth-century flâneur is often considered to have a special significance for the contemporary arts of walking, the connection is usually taken for granted and remains insufficiently substantiated. The passage from the literary and visual approach to the city associated with the early flâneur to the urban experience of a variety of twentieth-century and contemporary artists who conceive of the city as the site itself of art was made possible by a shift from a representational, object-based aesthetic practice to a process-based one.<sup>6</sup> The early flâneur and the postwar/contemporary walking artist are worlds apart, separated by distinct visions of art, art-making and the role of the artist, but also by the intervening transformations of the metropolis. The two stand at different junctures in the course of modernity and its late developments, in different urban contexts, and illustrate different aesthetic stances, dependent not only on specific individual projects, but also on distinct artistic paradigms.

Typically, Baudelaire's flâneur embraces the crowds and opens up to the multiplicity and ephemerality of modern life:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. 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. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family (...). Thus the lover of universal life enters a crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. (Baudelaire 1964, 9)

Baudelaire's flâneur is a potential artist capable of producing new forms of artistic expression reflecting the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (Baudelaire 1964, 13). Walking and observing the metropolis afford aesthetic glimpses, but do not constitute intrinsically aesthetic acts. The acknowledgement of walking as an inherently artistic gesture will only occur later, with the advent of the historical avant-gardes. In Baudelaire's texts, the artistic process resulting from the experience of the city consists of the transposition of the urban material into art composed later, far from the crowds.

With Benjamin, the nineteenth-century flâneur is presented as a social fantasy offering an illusion of the city as legible and of the crowds as socially amenable, obliterating their threatening potential. Although complicit in the consumerist culture around him, he is both intoxicated by the spectacle around him and lucid in his attempts to scrutinize its mechanisms. His superior visual skills allow him to grasp relevant details of the urban landscape and to intuit their deeper significance, but he remains a character manipulated by higher forces. In "Paris, the Capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" (the 1935 version), the flâneur is a fundamentally alienated, divided figure:

For the first time, with Baudelaire, Paris becomes the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The flâneur still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd. Early contributions to a physiognomics of the crowd are

found in Engels and Poe. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria – now a landscape, now a room. Both become elements of the department store, which makes use of flânerie itself to sell goods. The department store is the last promenade for the flâneur. (Benjamin 1999, 10)

In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman interprets Benjamin's writings about Paris themselves as ambiguously divided (just like the flâneur they describe), as "a remarkable dramatic performance, surprisingly similar to Greta Garbo's in *Nimotchka*. His heart and sensibility draw him irresistibly toward the city's bright lights, beautiful women, fashion, luxury, its play of dazzling surfaces and radiant scenes; meanwhile his Marxist conscience wrenches him insistently away from these temptations" (146).

Both Baudelaire and Benjamin mention Poe's "Man of the Crowd" as one of the most significant early explorations of crowds and urban walking. The conventional image of the flâneur as an exclusively European phenomenon has been contradicted and nuanced by Dana Brand, who has shown that while there did exist a strong American tradition of anti-urbanism, the flâneur "was in fact a significant presence in the culture of the United States in the three decades before the Civil War" (Brand 1991, 9). Two complementary visions of the historicity of the flâneur underlie the attempt to uncover the continuities and ruptures between the nineteenth-century flâneur and later artists investing the city. One posits the flâneur as a historical figure rooted in a given space and time, while the other considers him an ahistorical type having acquired a general relevance as an emblem of intellectual inquiry, the superior observer not only of urban phenomena, but also of the cultural and ideological fabric of any given context. This dual understanding of the historicity of the flâneur has major consequences, as Tester points out: "it could lead to flânerie being made so specifically about Paris at a given moment in its history that flânerie becomes of no relevance at all. Either that or flânerie becomes so general as to be almost meaningless and most certainly historically rootless if not seemingly somewhat ahistorical" (Tester 1994, 17).<sup>7</sup>

Rather than thinking of the flâneur in mutually exclusive terms as either a historical figure belonging to nineteenth-century Paris or a typological figure of little historical significance, it is possible to conceive of him as a series of context-dependent avatars subject to evolution and

change. As a result, the *flâneur* appears eminently adaptable and transferable, capable of reflecting (on) the fugitive and chaotic nature of the early modern metropolis and the globalized and dispersed nature of the contemporary city alike.

A cross-disciplinary investigation of contemporary artists revisiting Poe's "Man of the Crowd" promises to shed light on the metamorphoses of the *flâneur* and on the artistic and urban frameworks within which this figure has evolved and which it has reshaped. My examination of two contemporary artistic transpositions of Poe's "Man of the Crowd" goes beyond the mere exercise in intertextual and intermedia comparison. The attempt to "follow" a text as it crosses over into other cultural fields expands the domain of the "contemporary" into earlier history, "reclaiming the 'contemporary' as a condition of being alive to and alongside other moments, artists, and objects" (Meyer 2013, 16). An echoic relationship can be established between "The Man of the Crowd" and the growing interest in experience and perception that manifested itself with the historical avant-gardes, gained in relevance all along the twentieth century and remains with us today.

#### VANISHING POINT: FROM POE TO BUCKINGHAM

"The Man of the Crowd" is one of Poe's most analyzed texts, with a rich critical posterity nourished by Walter Benjamin's interest in Baudelaire's Paris as a subject of lyrical poetry and the constant attention Benjamin pays the short story in his discussions of the *flâneur*.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of Poe's tale, the first-person narrator finds himself in a London coffee-house, sitting by a bow window, reading the newspapers and scrutinizing the pedestrians walking in the street. He indulges in an exercise of urban reading reminiscent of the "physiologies" of earlier decades, an exercise that will become typical of C. Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, and which consists of correlating an individual's clothes and expression with his social and professional status. An old man in the crowd suddenly arrests his eye "on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy" of his countenance, and unable to decipher his face at first glance, he leaves the coffeehouse and pursues the stranger in the streets of London for twenty-four hours (Poe 1984, 392). As the narrator follows him from one site to another, he realizes that the old man is pathologically attracted to crowds. At the end of the story, the two characters face each other, but no revelation occurs. Rather, the old man remains a mystery for the

narrator, who does not conclude that his method of reading has failed, but rather declares that the man of the crowd's impenetrability must be due to the fact that the latter is "the type and genius of deep crime" and his heart is "a book that does not permit itself to be read" according to a quote from a German book (Poe 1984, 396).

Although the short story is set in London, a city Poe had visited as a child, its American relevance becomes manifest if we consider this choice to be due most likely to "America's cosmopolitan insufficiency" in the mid-nineteenth century (Brand 1991, 70). In the nineteenth century, London was the world's largest city and the capital of the British Empire, with a population of 750,000 people. It is tempting to speculate, with Sharpe, that Poe's American readers most likely discerned the future of their own growing cities, especially New York, in the crowded descriptions of London (Sharpe 2008, 70).

Critics agree that "The Man of the Crowd" foreshadows Poe's detective stories and its narrator functions as a failed detective, to be replaced by C. Auguste Dupin.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of Benjamin's analysis of the short story's relevance to modern commodity culture, critics have focused on the emergence of the crowd as an ambivalent spectacle in the early metropolis, inspiring both repulsion and attraction, and on the story's insistence on visual processes and the visual culture of the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>10</sup> A distinct line of interpretation highlights the textual mechanisms of the story, in particular its absorption of other texts. Despite its insistence on the failure of reading, "The Man of the Crowd" is based precisely on a process of reading previous texts, notably Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and the Addisonian tradition of flâneur writing. Poe's rather vague London can be seen as a city mediated by literature, both "a social reality" and "a textual construction" (Rachman 1997, 658).<sup>11</sup>

These lines of interpretation intersect in this chapter, which is primarily concerned with Poe's relevance for certain aesthetic paradigms of twentieth-century and contemporary art as reflected in two case studies. The first example is provided by contemporary American artist Matthew Buckingham (born in 1963), who has often been described as an artist-historian deploying an archival form of research.<sup>12</sup> Buckingham's vision of art, culture and history is Benjaminian in outlook:

There's a notion that can be found in Walter Benjamin's writing that is quite central to what I try to work with. It's a very simple but challenging concept. Benjamin describes the vanishing point of history as always

being the present moment. This formulation of history – thinking about the present moment as the point where history actually vanishes – is an interesting way of reversing the more received notion of history as something which seems to be vanishing somewhere behind us, vanishing into a time that no longer exists. I think that by switching [this notion] around and placing [the vanishing point] in the present moment, we activate our sense of history and our sense of the past. (Buckingham quoted in Godfrey 2007, 145)

Benjamin's philosophy of history and his conception of the dialectical image (the momentary mutual recognition and illumination of past and present) permeate to a certain extent (cultural, but not political) Buckingham's own understanding of history as vanishing in the present.<sup>13</sup> Benjamin sees the process of mutual recognition of past and present in terms of a constellation, which represents the cornerstone of the historiographical methodology of *The Arcades Project*:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. (Benjamin 1999, 462)

Knowledge is built through "lightning flashes" (Benjamin 1999, 456) and can only be written down and transmitted in the disjointed, aphoristic style typical of *The Arcades Project*, or in the form of modernist collage adopted by Benjamin's autobiographical writings. Although the exact meaning of the dialectical image as constellation remains inadequately theorized in Benjamin's writings, a few features stand out. The dialectical image is meant to carry a politically effective charge and lead to an awakening from the collective dream that capitalism induced over nineteenth-century Europe. Historical fragments are removed from their original context and embedded into new collages, with new principles of juxtaposition, which mediate a new interpretation of the material culture from where they were wrested and of its relevance for the present moment.<sup>14</sup>

Buckingham's standpoint leaves aside the political charge, the shock of ideological awakening, to suggest that cultural artifacts invite correlations with contemporary cultural paradigms. A historiographical methodology seen as a means of political action turns into a cultural methodology of correlative reading across time. Buckingham's perspective allows him to contemplate a text like "The Man of the Crowd" as meaningful not only for nineteenth-century phenomena specific to the modern metropolis but also, and above all, for contemporary cultural configurations in art and literature. Poe becomes, for Buckingham, a lens through which he reconsiders certain representations of modern urban experience in twentieth-century art: "When I first read Poe's story (...) some years ago, it struck me as a fascinating early expression and exploration of uncanny urban anonymity, and as an interesting point from which to reexamine various films and works of the twentieth century where these qualities appear" (Buckingham 2008). Buckingham's "vanishing point" operates a selection of genealogical models, rendering the philosophical legacy of "The Man of the Crowd" manifest in the twentieth century.

In 2003, Buckingham reworked Poe's tale in the form of an installation featuring a 16-mm black-and-white film with intra-diegetic sound projected through a semi-reflective glass, both a screen and a specular surface that reflects the viewers (Fig. 2.1).

Buckingham's installation was commissioned by the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna and has been shown in galleries and museums across Europe and the USA. Within museum space, the twenty-minute film is projected in a loop that blurs the beginning and ending, suggesting a cycle of pursuit, a continuously renewed story. This smooth dovetailing is achieved through the absence of opening or closing credits. No title, name of director or actors and no indication of source are given, but these explanatory paratexts are on display on a separate label in the museum.

The film is both an adaptation of Poe's text and a visual encoding of the interpretations that have made "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Purloined Letter" famous, in particular Walter Benjamin and psychoanalysis. Buckingham's installation orchestrates a series of spatial and temporal shifts: Poe's nineteenth-century London becomes twentieth-century Vienna, a city with a nineteenth-century look however, and with a nostalgic conservation project underwriting it.<sup>15</sup> Representations of topography differ radically in Poe's text and Buckingham's installation. In Poe, the illegibility that affects the German book and the supposed



Fig. 2.1 Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd*, installation view, Murray Guy, New York © Matthew Buckingham courtesy Janice Guy, New York

mystery buried in the old man's heart contaminate the city itself, which sinks into nocturnal confusion. In Buckingham's rendering, a hand-held camera follows the two characters in the streets of Vienna, whose architectural landmarks are most of the time visible. The artist's carefully prepared location notes and maps of itineraries suggest the intentional foregrounding of a recognizable city in which the monumental and the historical coexist with the humble and the anonymous. *The man of the crowd* becomes *a man of the crowd*, with the passage from the definite to the indefinite article suggesting that the type consecrated by Poe is here presented in one of its possible embodiments as a contemporary avatar. The centrality of Poe's short story for the installation is signaled by an intra-filmic device: a phone call made by the narrator, who is heard leaving a message which is actually the German quote from the beginning of the short story: "It was well said of a certain German book that '*er lasst sich nicht lesen*'" (Poe 1984, 388). Poe's original quote

in German intersects both the Austrian context of the installation's museum space and the choice of the Viennese cityscape as a substitute for London. The filming mode is a combination of neutral documentary style and film noir. The camera becomes a central character, on a par with the two characters inherited from Poe.

Prior to the film installation, Buckingham had published a series of "annotated associations" with "The Man of the Crowd" presented, visually, in a layered textual configuration: Poe's text occupies the middle of the page, while Buckingham's comments, both verbal and visual (book covers, film stills, photographs, etc.), occupy the top and bottom layers, framing the former (Buckingham 2003b). These annotated associations show a contemporary artist appropriating a canonical nineteenth-century literary text and laying the foundations for his own *Man of the Crowd*.<sup>16</sup> The annotations in the margin of Poe's text and inseparable from the 2003 installation consist of commented references to literary, artistic, sociological works that treat of major themes such as the double, the crowd or walking.

In Buckingham's "annotated associations," the description of the physiognomies of the crowd for instance is accompanied by a visual and critical apparatus that comprises eclectic references to Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, King Vidor's 1928 film *The Crowd*, Carol Reed's 1949 film *The Third Man* and aerial photographs of two marches on Washington D.C. The act of following triggers associations with cinema (Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.*, 1924, Samuel Beckett's script for the short *Film* directed by Alan Schneider and starring Buster Keaton, 1964) and with conceptual and performance art as well. Buckingham brings into play references to performance art that share an urban peripatetic dimension, an interest in photographic documentation and an emphasis on the artist's body: Günter Brus's *Vienna Walk* (1965), Yoko Ono's *Rape* (1968–1969), Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being* (1975) and Sophie Calle's *The Shadow* (1981) and *Suite vénitienne* (whose photographs and text were published together with an essay by Baudrillard, 1988).

Buckingham's annotations were also published separately in book form to accompany his "Man of the Crowd" installation in Vienna (Buckingham 2003a). Buckingham's purpose is not to provide a scholarly investigation into Poe's sources or scholarship, but to embed Poe's story within a network of cultural associations (a Benjaminian constellation) recalled by the text in an individual reader and artist. Poe's

vanishing point is thus firmly set in the present. In his critique of the theory and practice of intertextuality as consecrated by structuralism, William Irwin dismisses intertextual studies based on vague recollection, intuition or association, deemed shallow and difficult to substantiate (Irwin 2004). But Buckingham produces something quite different from a loose erudite discourse. In annotating Poe, he is laying bare the patterns of cultural subtexts that might be generated by *A Man of the Crowd* in the mind of a contemporary reader. His artistic references are particularly interesting since his own artistic practice relies both on Poe's text and on the artists and artworks whose "walkscapes" remind him of Poe. The intertextual series that starts with Poe borrowing from Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* and from La Bruyère (who provides the motto for Poe's tale) is continued by Buckingham's reading of Poe, but also by his reading of Benjamin reading Baudelaire reading Poe, as well as by the filmic and artistic works he associates with the motif of the double and the act of following.

Buckingham's *A Man of the Crowd* addresses issues of cultural memory and textual-artistic interconnectedness through an embodied, situated approach to rereading:

In looking at the history of the story itself, I found that through Baudelaire's translating it into French, it became a model of the flâneur for him, which in turn influenced Walter Benjamin, and so on. Suddenly I saw the story as an intersection of a number of concerns. This raised the question of what happens to a preexisting text when it's adapted. (...) In my case I brought it into real, physical space. (Buckingham 2009)

Buckingham's annotations open with a quote from Edward Casey's study of the intellectual history of place: "To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place... Nothing we do is unplaced" (Casey 1998, ix). The artist's choice of (dis)placing Poe's text into "real, physical space" gives rise to a spatial discourse that mobilizes the various architectural, filmic and cultural mythologies of Vienna, in addition to previous critical readings of Poe, giving a hybrid quality to the adaptation, embodied and fictional at the same time, situated both in urban space and in the cultural space of intersecting representations. Buckingham's choice of Vienna points at his status of "itinerant artist" common in today's cosmopolitan art world, where artists are invited by art institutions to engage with the histories

and narratives specific to a given site (Kwon 2002, 46).<sup>17</sup> Such nomadic practices tend to valorize institutional and urban marketable identities, highlighting singularity and authenticity. *A Man of the Crowd* clearly constructs a marketable identity for Vienna dictated by official strictures, but the urban cultural script it produces is complicated by effects of superposition and interweaving of additional cities and urban mythologies (London, Vienna, Paris), which dilute any claim to univocal and unabashed singularity and authenticity.

Two notable examples of the meaningfulness of space as accumulation of cultural emblems in Buckingham's *A Man of the Crowd* refer to one of the major sites in the film, the Freyung Passage in Vienna, built in 1860, whose arcades shelter the man of the crowd and his stalker for a while (Fig. 2.2).<sup>18</sup>

The frantic movement of the walk subsides and, in the shadow space of the arcades, the two characters perform a mute choreography of eluded gazes, approaching, but never facing each other, coming close



Fig. 2.2 Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd* Location Photograph: Freyung Passage, 3:55 PM, 2003, gelatin silver print © Matthew Buckingham courtesy Janice Guy, New York

to the slow tempo of the flâneur that Benjamin describes by quoting Schiller's "hesitant wing of the butterfly" (Benjamin 1999, 425), in line with his remark that in 1839 it was fashionable to take a tortoise out for a walk (422). The marbled arcades with high pilasters and vaulted ceilings, lined with luxury stores, represent a visual memento of Benjamin's arcades as a major site of modernity's display of commodities. A venerable tradition of Poesque interpretation thus irrupts within the space of the filmic narrative, together with Benjamin's comments about modern space as an experience of both an open landscape and a closed interior. The shift from Baudelaire's Paris and its vaulted arcades to Vienna's arcades adapts Benjamin's archeology of modernity to a larger European context.

Beneath this iconic architectural image also lies an invitation to engage in the mapping of an enclosed space of dimness that materializes the darkness within. The spectral psychic quality of the arcades is an architectural counterpart to Poe's gothic sensibility, which brings us to a reading of Vienna as the birthplace of psychoanalysis. From Baudelaire's Paris to Freud's Vienna via Poe's London, Buckingham takes us on an urban tour in the cultural labyrinth of the double. The artist's annotations recall a biographical episode taken from *The Uncanny*, in which Freud mentions having once travelled by train at night and having been intrigued by a mirror image of himself that he mistook for a real person (Freud 1959, 219–252). The dark psychological lining of Poe's story and notably the compulsive nature of the stalking process surface in Buckingham's film installation, which is haunted by Benjamin's discussion of the animal drive in Poe's man of the crowd, whom he calls a "werewolf restlessly roaming a social wilderness" (Benjamin 1999, 418).

Finally, the move from the bow window to the street is a shift from perspectival vision to actual movement, from the window as a framing device that mimics the picture frame to the street as the locus of immersive experience, from the detached examination of a distant spectacle to the confrontation with a kaleidoscopic city sinking into darkness and ever-greater promiscuity.<sup>19</sup> Buckingham overlaps the two modes of vision and experience by preserving the window/screen and allowing the audience to follow the following itself as a series of moving images. The film and the installation rely on a combination of mirrors and windows, of doubles and shadows. The semi-reflective glass is reminiscent of Dan Graham's 1976 installation at the Venice Biennale entitled *Public Space/Two Audiences*, which the artist intended as a polemical response to the

phenomenology of aesthetic reception usually associated with minimalism, choosing rather to lay emphasis on the social dimension of aesthetic reception (Graham 1999, 55–59).<sup>20</sup> The aesthetic concern with the audience—its vital role in the making of art, its involvement, its status of witness, its ability to endure—is a prominent one in the 1970s, when, according to Anne Wagner, “it (the audience) is what is being seen” (Wagner 1999, 67). Performance art as a whole deploys optical technologies (mirrors, photography and movie cameras, video monitor) meant to make the audience visible.

In Buckingham’s *Man of the Crowd*, the semi-reflective glass that occupies the center of the gallery space is a composite device, both a mirror and a window, a reflexive and transparent surface that allows one to see the film while also being duplicated and superimposed upon it. Such specular and optical effects represent an artistic counterpart to Poe’s literary rendering of both observation and introspection, of outer and inner vision. Film installations confront the viewer with the three-dimensionality of experiencing an image in space, to which Buckingham adds a social dimension of human traffic in the museum, which echo Dan Graham’s own comments on *Public Space/Two Audiences*:

*A Man of the Crowd* can be installed in spaces that range in size from around twenty to one hundred feet in length or so. The size of the room changes the size of the image and the glass, and creates different traffic patterns for the spectator. The most important aspect for me is the social space that can be created where the viewer is aware of themselves in relation to the film narrative and to other visitors. I think it can be very interesting when there is a play of scale between spectators, their reflections, shadows and the characters projected in the film. (Buckingham 2008)

Buckingham conflates the nineteenth-century “man of the crowd” and the contemporary museumgoer. In the spirit of collective participation that dominates artistic practices since the 1990s, aesthetic experience is understood as a joint spatial and social experience uniting the spectators in an environment of embodied presence and reflection. The fearsome crowds of the nineteenth-century metropolis are transmuted into the social group of spectators brought together in an ephemeral configuration around *A Man of the Crowd*. This positive perception of what had formerly been imagined as an impersonal or threatening mass of impenetrable and anonymous individuals is the effect of a recent valorization of

social groups and participation in artistic contexts. Simmel's "Metropolis and Mental Life" interpreted the city as "a structure of the highest impersonality" and saw "reserve" as the dominant attitude of metropolitans toward one another (Simmel 1950, 413, 415). Berman's Marxist analysis of Baudelaire's boulevards in "The Eyes of the Poor" unmasks the contradictions of public spaces and stresses their staging of social exclusion by forcing passersby to confront poverty: "there is no way to look away" (Berman 1982, 153). But phenomena of exclusion, structures of negative feeling (impersonality, fear) and abrasive encounters appear to be toned down or absent from contemporary artistic adaptations that stress communication and community, and result in consensus. The impersonal crowds have given way to communities, be they inoperative or transitory, and the flâneur has entered a phase where his social potential is highlighted in a constructive way.<sup>21</sup> Whether these new crowds/communities transcend the atomized individual is open to question. As Kaprow reminds us, "the crowd is lonely in its own way" (Kaprow 1993, 125).

#### NEW FORMS OF FOLLOWING: POE, THE METROPOLIS AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

For Buckingham, Poe's short story is a starting point for a contemporary archeology of urban mythologies and an exploration of aesthetic reception as social phenomenon. Poe's interest in otherness and readability as well as his interest in crowds and the psychology of city life seems to resonate with contemporary forms of expression and interaction that celebrate sociability, participation and community. But other radical reversals are yet to come. Poe's crowds and Buckingham's spectators are anchored in an urban space, although the indeterminacy and the intertextual quality of Poe's metropolis allow for a generic rather than a specific site to come to the fore. The next project I will examine gives yet another spin to the city and crowds in Poe's text, moving from a literal following to a virtual one.

Glowlab, at the origin of the *Following "The Man of the Crowd"* project, was an "experimental arts lab" founded by artist Christina Ray in 2002, best known as the co-initiator of the annual Conflux festival of psychogeographical practices in New York, devoted to enchanting and reclaiming the city through alternative artistic explorations.<sup>22</sup> Glowlab's *Following "The Man of the Crowd"* takes the text out into the street in

a manner that allows for contextualization. Claiming a Situationist origin, the project strips Poe's text of its details and retains the plot in its purely schematic form (what Genette calls the "diegesis"). The following becomes a script open to repetition and reenactment, both individual and collective, in the urban environment and in cyberspace, meant to tap into the mysterious potential of the city at night through a Situationist reading of Poe. In "Exercise in Psychogeography," Debord mentions Poe in a list of ur-psychogeographers:

Piranesi is psychogeographical in the stairway. Claude Lorrain is psychogeographical in the juxtaposition of a palace neighborhood and the sea. (...) Arthur Cravan is psychogeographical in hurried drifting. Jacques Vaché is psychogeographical in dress. (...) André Breton is naively psychogeographical in encounters. (...) Along with (...) Edgar Allan Poe in landscape (...). (Debord 1954)

There is a tendency in contemporary locative media art to invoke the legacy of the Situationist International (McGarrigle 2010, 56). This is ironic given the Situationist International's attempt to transcend art and its diffidence of fixed cultural authorities and models. The invoked legacy consists in the Situationist redefinition of urban experience elaborated from 1954 to 1957 in *Potlatch*, the information bulletin of the Lettrist International and, later, the Situationist International. Concepts and tactics of drift, *détournement*, unitary urbanism, psychogeography form the core of this redefinition. The fame of these concepts has led to their "banalization," and in many subsequent appropriations they appear to have lost their initial revolutionary overlay and their transgressive character (Kauffmann 2002, 285). But they live on in more subdued forms, in particular the concept of psychogeography, described by Debord as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord 2008, 23). This psychological framework of the Situationists' utopian approach to the city is closely associated with the playful or forceful "operations" meant to render the urban landscape less predictable and monotonous, and the urban dweller a more active creator of ambiances.

The playful component and the construction of situations are visible in *Following "The Man of the Crowd,"* a collaborative walk/performance conducted in lower Manhattan in 2004 by artists Christina Ray

and Lee Walton, who describe it as a 24-hour walk for two participants "who drift separately but simultaneously through the city in an alternating pattern according to the movements of strangers" over a 24-hour period while remaining connected through text messaging. The walk is defined as based loosely on Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" and inspired by Vito Acconci's 1969 *Following Piece* (Ray and Walton 2004).

Several salient features stand out from the outset, one of which is the replacement of the male flâneur with two women artists who embark upon a "loose" rereading of Poe's text and Acconci's performance piece. The gendered dimension of streetwalking and the gendered experiences of the public sphere play an important role in Glowlab's rereading, which functions as a contemporary feminine reappraisal of a traditionally male stance of observing and experiencing the city. In terms of the intertextual aspects of the Glowlab project, its sources are Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*, discussed in Chapter 4, which carries a certain resemblance with Poe's short story. Indeed, the two are often mentioned together in discussions of artistic experiments investing urban space and generating patterns of walking and following. In *Following Piece* (1969), Acconci picked people randomly in the streets of New York and followed them until they entered a private space. Glowlab revisits Acconci's performance with the difference that two performers instead of one navigate the streets in pursuit of strangers:

By entering a private space or somewhere other than the sidewalk, the strangers unknowingly triggered the switch between us and became disengaged from our process. While following, or 'on,' we maintained an intense awareness of a single stranger and his or her unknown destination. While 'off,' we rested, blending into the peculiarities of our surroundings and experiencing a sense of quiet engagement with the city. (...) 24 hours later we met back at the same spot, having documented our experience with still photographs, camera-phone photos and videos of over 60 strangers followed. (...) The duration of the *Following "The Man of the Crowd"* project is not only a reflection of Poe's story of obsession and endurance, but is also an expression of Ray and Walton's desire to experience the city and its residents at all hours. Their hope is that strangers will lead them down paths never before taken as they weave a complex double route of randomness facilitated by the silent signals of mobile messages. (Ray and Walton 2004)

On their journey, the two Glowlab artists packed digital cameras, video cameras, mobile phones, chargers and notebooks: “As Lee located the first stranger and began following, Christina waited. When Lee’s stranger became ‘un-followable’ by entering a taxi, she sent Christina a text message to activate her following process and pause his own” (Ray and Walton 2004). The two performers invite online followers to follow them in actual space, thus transforming Poe’s crowd into a virtual audience who is welcome to join in the game on the terrain:

Sign up to receive hourly text messages broadcasting our locations from the street. Messages will look something like this:

“current location: agent 1 @ 6th ave/w.4th. agent 2 @ houston/broadway. come find us now and get followed.”

If you don’t know Christina or Lee and would like to be a potential follow-ee, when you get a message go to either of those locations, hang out, walk around. We might end up following you if we’re nearby [you’ll know later when we post documentation of the project]. If you **do** know us, come say hi, join us for a while, have a cup of coffee with us [we’ll need it!]. Point being: we won’t follow people we already know. We also won’t be able to text message you directly [sorry], so you’ll only know our approximate locations. (Ray and Walton 2004)

Glowlab relies on the use of communication via social media, which ensures its collaborative dimension. The following act ramifies in the actual and virtual world, which gives a new interpretation to Poe’s mirrors and reflections. “Following” has changed meaning, having become a common phrase in the language of Internet culture and social media, particularly in the case of “following” somebody on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. The Glowlab project overlaps the conventional, pre-Internet meaning of “following” and the new meaning of the term. It also maps the delocalized spaces of the Internet onto the localized grid of Manhattan, since the cyberspace both mirrors and (possibly) influences a process that takes place in the city. The “electronic flâneur” is invited to leave the “electronic agora” (Mitchell 1996, 7–8) where he or she can share traces of the events just as they occur (photographs, text messages, bloggers’ reactions) and become a participant in an urban walk inspired by a nineteenth-century text. In *Following* “*The Man of the Crowd*,” Poe’s crowds and the Situationist collective model give way to a virtual community, an online audience who can choose to leave the security of their screen in order to follow the artists following strangers in the street (D’Ignazio 2006, 29).

The circular pattern of Poe's urban journey gives way to a bifurcating model that combines the itinerary through the actual city at night and the same itinerary documented in virtual space. The modes of transmission of events shift from a first-person narrative to a dual and plural kind of multimedia participation marked by distant communication, with no face-to-face confrontation, not even during the urban walk. The double is recast as a collaborator, whose messages are perfectly readable, unlike Poe's German book that does not allow itself to be read. The work is a temporary process made of collective gestures and remains open to change over the twenty-four-hour span (but not in Eco's sense or in the usual poststructuralist sense of open interpretation). Poe's gothic mystery is channeled toward a distinct aim. The target is not the person followed, but the city itself. The objective is not the reading of faces, but a diffuse sociability and the encounter with the city at night resulting not in the gradual descent down the spiral of social strata and sites, but in the juxtaposition of equivalent nocturnal scenes. Poe's translation into the language of Situationism suppresses the former's fascination with interiority, since in Situationism "everything happens outside, there is no longer room for either interior or interiority: henceforth subjectivity is lived or expresses itself externally, it is collective or it is nothing" (Kauffmann 2002, 297). The Surrealists had already contested the collusion between urban space and the plurality of separate and alienated intimacies it entailed, looking for more communal forms of experiencing the city and projecting an image of the metropolis which is positive in the immense potentials and promises it holds, contrary to the predominantly negative image of the city in traditional nineteenth-century novelists like Balzac (Kauffmann 1997, 164–166). The rejection of the deeply ingrained corruption of the urban imaginary in such novelists results in the dismissal of the fundamentally solitary activity of reading novels, so much so that "the urban imaginary of the avant-gardes is globally opposed to the urban imaginary of novelists" (Kauffmann 1997, 167). The emblematic Surrealist encounter takes place in the street, if at all, and the Surrealists stay away from the intimate bedchambers where novels are read, preferring rather to imagine the city as a place of communication, circulation and interaction (Kauffmann 1997, 171). It seems that Poe's "Man of the Crowd," although not a novel (but still a piece of short fiction), is ideally posited on the threshold that separates the bedchamber of isolated fiction-reading (the equivalent of the coffeeshop of isolated observation) and the street as venue of new artistic idioms that forge a different understanding of a more connective and open-ended metropolis.

If we examine the Situationist component of Glowlab's project more closely, it appears that it takes its cue from Poe's story to initiate a drift, a practice which, according to the Situationists, had nothing in common with strolling and flânerie: "The concept of *dérive* is indissolubly linked to the recognition of effects that are psychogeographical in nature, and to the affirmation of a ludic-constructive behavior, something which opposes it in all respects to the classical notions of travel and promenade" (Debord quoted in McDonough 2002b, 300). The Surrealists had readily embraced walking in the city, but they had experienced city walks as ways of interlocking the self and the city in resolutely personal confrontations.<sup>23</sup> Psychogeography aspires to an impersonal stance from which autobiography is dismissed. A corollary of this aspiration is the collective nature of the Situationist drifts, in keeping with the attempt to reach the "enunciatory and ambulatory disappearance of the walker" as an individual (Kauffmann 2002, 301). The drifts tended to become communicative games among the participants, who sometimes used communication technology, like walkie-talkies (Kauffmann 2002, 303–304). The use of technology distinguished the Situationists from the Surrealists, and so did the type of representation they favored during the walking process and in its aftermath. While Breton's *Nadja* is illustrated with photographs by Boiffard and Man Ray, the Situationists tend to use impersonal forms of spatial representation, maps in particular, more in line with their distrust of spectacular representations. Cartographic representations feature repeatedly in Situationist texts and spatial investigations. Debord was amused by the experience of a friend who had wandered through the Harz region of Germany while following a map of London (Sadler 1998, 78). The map is severed from its utilitarian purposes to serve a playful, even absurd, behavior on the terrain and to recode the concept of orientation itself. Debord's psychogeographical diagram of Paris entitled *The Naked City: illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographique* (sic) (1957) is marked by clusters of arrows meant to illustrate the turning points in the network of paths that cross the city.<sup>24</sup> Actual or implied maps of itineraries abound in Situationism and in its wake, with the effect that the site itself is conceptualized as a trajectory, as the trace of an experience, but drifting scenarios function as transferable models and rituals. It is quite telling that Debord's *Naked City* refers to Paris but borrows its title from Jules Dassin's film noir and Weegee's book of photographs about New York.

Read through a Situationist lens, Poe's "Man of the Crowd" presents London as a city of shadows and indeterminacy, not as a city of monuments and landmarks, in keeping with the Situationist obliteration of the grandiose and the recognizable.

Drifting experiences induce a change in the perception of the nature of site. The site is a route and a document recording the route, an actual and a virtual itinerary. The older version of the city as arena of social interaction is now prolonged in the virtual agoras of the Internet. Kwon's descriptions of the "discursive site" (which is according to her the third paradigmatic type of site after the phenomenological/experiential and the social/institutional) seem to correspond quite well to the kind of mediated and intertextual site that Glowlab conjures here, although Kwon has in mind very different examples (Mark Dion for instance):

The site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist. Corresponding to the pattern of movement in electronic spaces of the Internet and cyberspace, which are likewise structured to be experienced transitively, one thing after another, and not as synchronic simultaneity, this transformation of the site textualizes spaces and spatializes discourses. (Kwon 2002, 29)

James Meyer's distinction between "literal site" and "functional site" likewise captures the shift in emphasis from the actual site to a set of fundamentally heterogeneous conditions of existence of the site (textual, visual, migratory) in contemporary approaches. While the literal site is an actual location and a singular place, the functional site

may or may not incorporate a physical place. It certainly does not privilege this place. Instead, it is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual affiliations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all). It is an informational site, a palimpsest of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places and things (...). It is a temporary thing, a movement, a chain of meanings and imbricated histories (...).<sup>25</sup> (Meyer 2000, 25)

The Surrealists and the Situationists actively sought the experience of getting lost as an escape from routine leading to the rediscovery of

overlooked aspects of cities. Getting lost was one of the most thrilling forms of the quest for “the experience of experience itself” that Blanchot said Breton was pursuing (Sheringham 2006, 73). Starting with minimalism, artists are less and less prone to phenomena of spatial disorientation. The walksapes of postminimalism (Acconci’s *Following Piece*) and those involving locative media display a constant awareness of precise coordinates. Such projects cultivate ambiguity resulting from knowing where one is but not choosing one’s direction and delegating choices to another agent. The disruptive potential of disorientation is harder to activate. At the beginning of *The Image of the City* (first published in 1960), Kevin Lynch, whose main interest is the legibility of cityscapes, muses on the anxiety of getting lost in the modern city. His reflections sound outmoded in the age of Global Positioning Systems:

To become completely lost is perhaps a rather rare experience for most people in the modern city... But let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being. The very word “lost” in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster. (Lynch 1990, 4)

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin equates the experience of getting lost in the city with an “art of straying” that is both desirable and fearful:

Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, sign-boards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying... (Benjamin 1999, 8–9)

This atavistic immersion in the wild forest of the city corresponds to the frightening and menacing potential of the urban scene at the heart of Poe’s tale. We can find nothing of the kind in the contemporary rereadings of Poe by Buckingham and Glowlab. The grid of New York

in the case of Glowlab certainly prevents disorientation. Long before the advent of GPS and GIS, Mayakovsky, visiting New York in 1925, observed on the impossibility of getting lost in the city: "To lose one's way in New York is more difficult than in Tula. Avenues run from south to north; streets from east to west. That is all" (Mayakovsky 1997, 117). This absence of disorientation is in keeping with a general impression of straightforward and uncomplicated abandonment to the chosen protocol of following without considering the ethical and legal implications of performing transgressive acts in the city (following as stalking). This questioning was already present in Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*, which reflected on the conventional limits between private versus public spheres and foregrounded the scandalous and criminal potential of following in an artistic and social context of political contestation.

Urban practices like the one conducted by Glowlab are elaborated in the gray zone where art and life blend in a manner initiated by the historical avant-gardes and perpetuated by the Situationists. The group-oriented endeavor at the heart of the Glowlab project is remotely reminiscent of the "social turn" in art theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud, characterized by an interest in human relations as theme and process and a modest political agenda (Bourriaud 2002).<sup>26</sup> The "relational art" described by Bourriaud favors face-to-face human relations, contrary to the virtual connectivity we find in Glowlab's experiment. The Situationists' dubitative conclusions about the efficiency of art and artists in their general remodeling of politics and urbanism invite one to favor a reading of such experiments that insists primarily on their social dimension. It is precisely because of its ambiguous place between aesthetic and social practice that "relational art" has come under criticism. Claire Bishop contends that by orchestrating a kind of conviviality, collaborative works are often too consensual and "congratulatory," intent on experiencing the pleasure of collaboration (Bishop 2004, 79).<sup>27</sup> Glowlab's *Following "The Man of the Crowd"* is an unruffled version of Debord's oppositional Situationism, in which an existing model is used to renew one's perception of the city rather than to contest a political, urban or architectural situation. It is a watered-down version of Situationism, the drift without the element of institutional critique.

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Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" stages an urban observer who leaves his point of observation to take to the streets, thus adumbrating a move that was emblematic for the redefinition of artistic practices in the twentieth century. That is why it is possible for Buckingham to imagine a network of twentieth-century and contemporary artistic examples starting from Poe's short story, and for Glowlab to grasp and exploit the confluence between Poe's following plot and certain tactics central to Situationism.

A certain number of historical phenomena that are associated with prototypical situations of the flâneur walking in the streets by day and by night are reinterpreted and given specific aesthetic significances. The menacing crowds turn into communities or groups of spectators in museum or virtual space, the window is revisited in its minimalist versions or adapted to the computer screen and the street is seen less as a space of social differentiation than as a space of artistic exploration.

In these experiments (including Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*), the urban setting is much more clearly brought into focus in the way it is structured by street coordinates. Spatial disorientation is never at stake, although the act of mapping is foregrounded as a process of walking. The story's insistence on the failure of reading is readily embraced by contemporary artists. The clarity of univocal readings is no longer desired and the narrator's failure turns into a creative possibility. The walking artist moves freely from Poe's London to Vienna or New York, adapting to international contexts and projecting the mythology of the flâneur to other urban and cultural situations.

These encounters between literature and art, between a nineteenth-century American text and contemporary artistic practices allow one to apprehend the processes of selection, recognition and transformation that connect Poe's dark romantic ethos with contemporary aesthetic paradigms of urban experience. The text cannot stand alone, or, rather, the text cannot walk alone. Deciphered and dispersed in critical discourse, it becomes embodied again in performance and installation art, where it urges us to reflect on the endless spatial and social possibilities of following, and on the many legacies of the flâneur.

## NOTES

1. For a recent analysis of film adaptations of "The Man of the Crowd," see Johnkin (2012, 119–132). My focus is not on the illustrators of Poe's texts. On that topic, see Pollin (1989) and Hayes (2002). I will not refer either to Poe's interest in the visual arts recently documented by Cantalupo in *Poe and the Visual Arts*, 2014.
2. Jonathan Crary suggests that a history of vision should take into account not only shifts in representational practices, but also the phenomenon of the observer and his evolving status (see his introduction to *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 1–24). I start from a similar premise by examining a shift in the position and behavior of the observer, in connection with modes of seeing/reading the urban. There is no consensus, however, about the periodization of the new kind of observer in the nineteenth century. Crary suggests that inventions like the stereoscope created the conditions of a more embodied kind of perception in the 1820s–1840s, but other accounts of vision place this shift later, in the 1880s.
3. On walking as an artistic practice, see *Un siècle d'arpenteurs. Les figures de la marche* (2000), Careri (2002), Davila (2002), Cocker (2007), Waxman (2010), Buffet (2012), Evans (2013), and O'Rourke (2013). For walking across disciplines, see Pink et al. (2010).
4. For a discussion of the elusiveness of the figure of the flâneur with emphasis on gender, see Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis. Women, the City and Modernity* (2003, 2–8). The early flâneur has been discussed in terms of literary representations and personae, but also in the context of nineteenth-century painting and visual arts. See Reff's analysis of the connections between Baudelaire's vision of the "painter of modern life" and Manet (Sharpe and Wallock 1983, 131–163) and also Hannoosh's chapter on Baudelaire and the Impressionists (Sharpe and Wallock 1983, 164–184).
5. McGarrigle urges us to "forget the flâneur" when discussing contemporary locative media because this reference supposedly diverts us from paying attention to the latter's originality (McGarrigle 2013).
6. The link between post-1960 artists that deploy walking strategies and the nineteenth-century flâneur is mentioned in Davila (2002, 29–30), Hollevoet (1992, 2001), O'Rourke (2013, 8), and Waxman (2010, 18), among others. For two distinct approaches to this shift from the earlier walking figure of traditional media (either artistic or literary) to the artist using the city as a medium in itself, see two essays included in the catalogue of the exhibition *The Power of the City/The City of Power* organized at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1992 (Hollevoet et al. 1992). Nye (1992) keeps within the limits of art history and focuses

- on the move from mimetic to conceptual appropriations of space. Hollevoet opts for a literary genealogy originating in the flâneur (1992), an approach also developed in her Ph.D. dissertation, *The Flâneur: Genealogy of a Modernist Icon*, 2001.
7. A similar dilemma plagues the interpretations that reclaim the legacy of Situationism as highly relevant for “postmodernism,” thus tending to de-historicize the Situationist project (McDonough 1997). A reassessment of the flâneur as an international figure, outside of the conventional context of nineteenth-century Paris, can be found in Wrigley (2014) and Nesci (2014, 82).
  8. See especially Benjamin’s essay “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” in its two versions of 1935 and 1939, both included in *The Arcades Project*, 3–13 and 14–26. See also Benjamin’s “Baudelaire,” “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in Benjamin (2006). On the theoretical and historical background of Benjamin’s research on Baudelaire, see Gilloch (1996, 132–167).
  9. Merivale (1999) argues that this is Poe’s first detective story. Along the same lines, see Brand (1991, 79–105). In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin had already interpreted the detective as a social camouflage of the flâneur (442).
  10. See Sweeney (2003, 14–15) and Byer (1986).
  11. On “The Man of the Crowd” as intertextual construction, see also Rachman (1995).
  12. Both Mark Godfrey (2007) and Tacita Dean (2004) have referred to Buckingham as “artist historian.” Hal Foster mentions the “archival impulse” in certain contemporary artists (quoted by Godfrey 2007, 141). Notable projects by Matthew Buckingham include investigations and adaptations of various historical narratives: the history of slavery (*Amos Fortune Road*, 1996), the commercial and ecological exploitation of Native American people and land (*Mubheahkantuck: Everything Has a Name*, 2004), racial segregation in urban planning (*Traffic Report*, 2005), the history of physiognomy (*Subcutaneous*, 2001), the emerging hegemony of the English language after the publication of Johnson’s *Dictionary (Definition)*, 2000). Buckingham has also produced two works inspired by nineteenth-century American fiction: *A Man of the Crowd* (based on E. A. Poe’s short story) and *Obscure Moorings* (a rereading of Herman Melville’s “Daniel Orme”).
  13. One should be careful not to equate the “vanishing point” of the past into the present with a triumphant progress of history into the present. To quote Gilloch, “Benjamin regards history as permanent catastrophe and ceaseless ruination” and modernity “does not constitute the

- height of civilization but rather only a refinement or fine tuning of barbarism" (13).
14. A discussion of the dialectical image can be found in Pensky (2004). Pensky approaches the dialectical image as a radically new method for the conduct of a new mode of materialist historiography and as the description of an alternative view of time and historical experience (179).
  15. Matthew Buckingham's "Location notes" highlight the importance of Vienna's preservationist project for *A Man of the Crowd* (Buckingham 2003c).
  16. Buckingham is not the only artist who has acknowledged the relevance of Benjamin for his artistic practice. A recent exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York City has offered a reading of contemporary art seen through the lens of Benjamin's work: *The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin* (Hoffmann 2017).
  17. Kwon points to the constraints of site-specific works commissioned by host institutions, which are temporary and difficult to transfer elsewhere (Kwon 2002, 46). Similar concerns about the work being less visible than the institution that commissions it are expressed by Foster (1996, 198).
  18. In his "Location notes," Matthew Buckingham comments on the similarity between the Freyung Passage and Benjamin's arcades (Buckingham 2003c). For an analysis of the arcades' centrality in Benjamin's mythology of Paris, see Gilloch (1996, 123–131).
  19. On the window as framing device in painting, see Stoichita (1993). On the window in literature, see Del Lungo (2014).
  20. Godfrey remarks the parallel between Buckingham's and Graham's installations in Plath and Waspe (2005, 99–101). An analysis of the uses of transparency and reflection in modern and contemporary art starting from Gerhard Richter's *Eight Gray* can be found in Buchloh (2003), who also discusses Graham's *Public Space/Two Audiences* as an articulation of "the conditions of a highly isolated, almost cellular perception," "a guaranteed experience of narcissistic mirroring" (27). This interpretation differs from Graham's own and from mine.
  21. In his reading of the flâneur from Benjamin to Acconci, McDonough stresses the criminal undertones of following (McDonough 2002a). In more recent examples, due to the emphasis on participation and sociability in art contexts, the criminal dimension has receded, replaced by models of interaction and community.
  22. Glowlab developed projects from 2002 to 2010. In 2010, Christina Ray re-launched Glowlab under her own name.
  23. On the centrality of urban spaces and walking practices in Surrealism, see Foster (1995, 157–192) and Walker (2002, 30–47 and 114–143). On Surrealist photography and nightwalkers, see Krauss (1981).

24. The title of the map echoes the title of a 1948 American film noir with a documentary style by Jules Dassin showcasing detectives at work in New York City. Dassin appropriated the title from photographer Weegee's photograph album *Naked City* (1945). Debord borrows the rigor of a documentary approach to the city, but also the film's projection of an abandoned city, with few pedestrians, plagued by the automobile (Sadler 1998, 61). For an analysis of Dassin's *The Naked City*, see McNamara (1996, 174–208).
25. Shaw rightly takes issue with both Kwon's and Meyer's insufficient emphasis on the discursive dimensions of the site even in the phenomenological and institutional paradigms. He also takes issue with Kwon's inadequate theorization of how the discursive sites of contemporary art recode both the intertexts and the art historical practices they use. Shaw calls this recoding "the reciprocal pressure" between the categories of art and other discourses (of anthropology, literature, etc.). See Shaw (2013, 242).
26. The artists discussed in Bourriaud's book are Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Phillippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Christine Hill, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan and Jorge Pardo. See also, on the collective dimension of contemporary art, Möntmann (2009). Several recent studies of the relationship between community, art and politics start from the conceptual basis of Jacques Rancière's work and Jean-Luc Nancy's *Inoperative Community* (1991). See Hinderliter et al. (eds.) (2009).
27. For a critique of relational art, see also Bishop's "The Social Turn. Collaboration and Its Discontents" (2006) and Hal Foster's "Chat Rooms" (2004), included in Bishop's *Participation* (2006, 190–195).

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## CHAPTER 3

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# Transitions: Happenings and Beyond

### INTO THE STREETS: GENEALOGIES OF URBAN MAPPING

The flâneur is one of the major transitional figures that bridges the gap between literary texts and street performances. As we saw in the previous chapter, Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” condenses some of the seminal elements and gestures that will live on in detective novels, cultural theory and the arts of walking: the crowds, following, the flâneur, the stalker, which illustrate the collusion between modernity and the city. But the flâneur underlies only one possible lineage of the transition from contained spaces of representation (the material book and the canvas) to sites out in the open, from the medium of literature and painting to dynamic processes of navigating the city. In what follows, I will examine a different kind of genealogical model that reclaims distinct theoretical and artistic sources from the ones I investigated in the previous chapter: the fluid model of the Happenings, with examples provided by Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg and some Fluxus practitioners. Chapters 2 and 3 should be considered together as exploratory attempts to trace urban mapping back to divergent sources and contexts. Artistic practices that look similar in some respects and that share an interest in urban environments actually stem from very different conceptualizations (literary, artistic, sociological, architectural or a combination). A careful reading of motivations and sources is necessary in order to bring nuance and differentiation in the extremely rich field of urban mapping.

Allan Kaprow does not begin with literature in his project of blurring the boundaries between art and life. Rather, he starts from Jackson Pollock's technique in order to make a plea for an art that goes beyond conventional framing into the spaces of everyday life, which offer endless possibilities. The urge to invest the streets as sites of artistic creation and to leave behind traditional forms of representation, pictorial in particular, was formulated by Allan Kaprow in 1958, two years after the death of Jackson Pollock (although the essay was written in 1956). Kaprow had completed his master's degree in art history at Columbia in 1952 and was appointed at Rutgers University in 1953, where he taught art history. In "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," his manifesto published in *ARTnews*, Kaprow emphasized Pollock's transitional character between painting and an everyday-based art:

Pollock, as I see him, left us at a point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano: three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sight, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat – all will become materials for this new concrete art. (Kaprow 1993, 7–9)

Kaprow insists on spaces, objects and their apprehension by the five senses in this visionary essay whose subject is an all-encompassing and collective "we." "We" stands for "the present generation of artists" who are also called "these bold creators." In 1952, Kaprow and other students of Hans Hoffmann (Jan Muller, Jane Wilson, George Segal, and Robert Whitman) founded Hansa Gallery, a cooperative gallery on East Twelfth Street "to provide a forum to explore the legacies of gestural abstraction, assemblage, and other forms" (Schimmel 2008, 9).

Kaprow's optimism and faith in change is boundless, actually the whole rhetoric of the piece is one of outright rejection of boundaries. His upbeat discourse is permeated with a sense of infinite possibility and a feeling of wonder. He shifts the emphasis from "preoccupied with" the space and objects of our everyday life to "even dazzled by," which suggests a rediscovery of the existing infrastructure and texture of the everyday. The already familiar "bodies, clothes, rooms" and "Forty-second Street" become the subject matter of a new artistic vision that exalts their banality and their availability, also priding on their residual and elusive nature. The "garbage cans" are open for inspection as reservoirs of discarded objects and material remains. The "odor of crushed strawberries" is their positive and ineffable counterpart. The material of the world is unlimited, hence the preference for long enumerations that juxtapose elements without any closure in view. Kaprow's blurring of art and life is manifest in his language of rediscovery of the world. The art (or un-art) he describes is predicated on a new understanding of "our" surroundings, on a philosophical reassessment of what and how the everyday signifies. When Kaprow mentions "the world we have always had about us but ignored," his pronouncement is revelatory of deeper foundational endeavors that aim at tapping the overlooked potential of the everyday. Kaprow's understanding of aesthetic experience is pervaded by his readings from American philosopher John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934), which shifted the emphasis of aesthetic investigation from understanding the material work of art to understanding aesthetic reception in terms of experience, although Kaprow radicalized Dewey's arguments (Delpoux and Tiberghien 2007).

The essay on Pollock functions like a manifesto, the rhetorical expression of a new, original program. Kaprow's point of reference is Pollock's painting, which is a transition to "environments" (6). Pollock's painting marks a turning point and goes against the very concept of painting: "He created some magnificent paintings. But he also destroyed painting" (2). Pollock's painting as a destruction of the art of painting represents Kaprow's material and conceptual basis for a redefinition of art based on a blurring between the canvas and what lies beyond. Kaprow's whole essay is a dismissal of containment informed by an opposition between European and American models of art-making. In a very schematic way, Kaprow pits the "self-contained works of the Europeans" and the "seemingly chaotic, sprawling works of the American" (4). Along the same lines, Kaprow emphasizes the supposed "crudeness" of

Pollock in opposition to the sophistication of “the European artists he liked”: “The crudeness of Jackson Pollock is not, therefore, uncouth; it is manifestly frank and uncultivated, unsullied by training, trade secrets, finesse – a directness that the European artists he liked hoped for and partially succeeded in but that he never had to strive after because he had it by nature” (7). Kaprow transposes the oppositions of the international theme to the field of art and constructs a Manichean antinomy between the American artist who is supposedly “uncultivated” and the sophisticated European artists who long for Pollock’s directness without being able to achieve it.<sup>1</sup> Kaprow is careful to downplay the influence of Surrealist automatism on Pollock claiming that automatism had not really been used by Surrealist painters, although he concedes that some Surrealist writers adopted it successfully in a limited number of examples: “The European Surrealists may have used automatism as an ingredient, but we can hardly say they really practiced it wholeheartedly. In fact, only the writers among them – and only in a few instances – enjoyed any success in this way” (4). Thus, Kaprow wishes to make a case for the American uniqueness of Pollock and for his departure from European models. Related to this transatlantic rhetoric is a dismissal of knowledge consigned to paper, of books as inconsequential repositories of dead meaning that have attained an inert respectability. In “Manifesto” (1966), he declares quite dismissively that “the history of art and aesthetics is all on bookshelves” (81) and in “Happenings in the New York Scene” (1961) he is careful to point out that the Happenings are quite different from modern plays, which are “first written,” whereas a Happening “is generated in action by a headful of ideas” (19).<sup>2</sup> What Kaprow prefers in the wake of Pollock is a spontaneous expression that is indiscriminate, disorderly and supposedly unmediated, described in “The Shape of the Art Environment” (1968) as “following shortly on the sprawling, limitless impulses of Abstract Expressionism” (Kaprow 1993, 93). Kaprow’s manifesto distances itself explicitly from painting, printed books and European influences to embrace less codified forms and to plunge into the reservoir of the readily available (hence American) everyday. The city as relevant space and material erupts in Kaprow’s practice as part of the continuum of what he calls “the world we have always had” and “everyday life.” Urban environments and materials are not superior to others or disconnected from other kinds of materials or locales. Kaprow’s principle of devising Happenings that associate several spaces operates within an equalizing perspective.

John Cage provided the other major influence on Kaprow's art practice. Kaprow was Cage's student at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1957 to 1958, in the experimental music composition class. Among Cage's students were George Brecht, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, and La Monte Young.<sup>3</sup> Cage was instrumental in showing Kaprow a way in which he could negotiate the legacy of Pollock "by incorporating time-based practices, employing new modes of nonnarrative composition, and requiring the participation of the audience for the realization of a work" (Schimmel 2008, 9).

Two distinct art historical legacies, of Pollock and Cage, mark Kaprow's farewell to painting and his foray into new art spaces, including the streets, away from the tenets of high modernism, away from its purity, specificity and cherished boundaries between the arts. The twentieth-century artists-flâneurs function within a quite different framework, as we saw in the previous chapter. They reclaim a discursive anchorage in Poe, Baudelaire and Benjamin even if they reinterpret loosely and freely these writers' foundational texts. Quite significantly, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is a collage of convolutes that mimics the fragmentary, kaleidoscopic nature of the modern city. Kenneth Goldsmith's recent rewriting of Benjamin, *Capital. New York, Capital of the 20th Century* (2015), is a mosaic of quotations about New York culled from literary, artistic and theoretical texts about the city. This discursive nature of the reflection on the city (and ultimately, of the city itself) is extremely prominent within the flâneur paradigm. The awareness of the literary heritage is central to the strategies of artists-flâneurs, whose explorations grow out of an acknowledgement of the centrality of the city in the experience of modernity. Kaprow is not primarily concerned with understanding the nature of modernity, although an appraisal of modernity is implicit in his theory and practice of art. Rather, his major concern is with leaving behind the artistic expressions of modernity, especially the traditional forms of pictorial modernism. Kaprow situates his Happenings away from high modernism and looks toward a future trailblazing endeavor, while the twentieth-century avatars of the flâneur look back to their nineteenth-century sources and seek to gauge the depth of the intervening mutations. Like Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the twentieth-century flâneur advances with his face turned toward the past. In a revealing declaration, Kaprow lays emphasis on "adventure" in art (a future-oriented endeavor) and comments on the interaction of past, present and future temporalities in art history and how they influence his understanding of art and the artist:

I have always dreamed of a new art, a really new art. (...) And the past? The only general use the past has for me is to point out what no longer has to be done. The past cannot and does not want to be embalmed. The spirit of aesthetic anarchy is our only accurate expression of this great tradition. "Anarchy" now can be reevaluated. If we owe allegiance to no one and no institution of Beauty, however sanctified, we are only turning away from what should be left behind: the idea of achievement. The long shadow of Dante or Michelangelo is only a shadow after all, and not the intensity, the electricity that infused their art... We are adventurers... We are busy dreaming. We are hard and tender, without nostalgia, fearless ecstatic. We are giving to the past and to the future the present. (Kaprow in Glimcher 2012, 301)

This is not to say that in his anti-nostalgic stance Kaprow pays no attention to the affinities between Happenings and other cultural practices, but he insists on the marginality of these practices within the fine arts in the essay "The Happenings are Dead, Long Live the Happenings!" (1966):

The importance given to purposive action (...) suggests the Happenings' affinities with practices marginal to the fine arts, such as parades, carnivals, games, expeditions, guided tours, orgies, religious ceremonies, and such secular rituals as the elaborate operations of the Mafia; civil rights demonstrations; national election campaigns; Thursday nights at the shopping centers of America; the hot-rod, dragster, and motor-cycle scene; and, last but not least, the whole fantastic explosion of the advertising and communications industry. (Kaprow, 1993, 64)

This eclectic enumeration demonstrates that the city becomes an integral part of artistic practice and does not carry a superior meaning, as it does in the case of the flâneur. Rather, it is a possible alternative to the museum and the gallery on a par with other possible spaces, as he claims in "The Shape of the Art Environment": "Artists really pursuing the palpable experience of the measureless, the indeterminate, the use of nonrigid materials, process, the deemphasis of formal aesthetics, would find it very difficult to do so in gallery and museum boxes or their equivalents" (Kaprow 1993, 93). The ephemeral nature of the Happenings poses a challenge for whoever wishes to study or understand them, since they live on in photographs and retrospective accounts. Kaprow was well aware of the legendary potential of these performances attended by a relatively small audience when he

formulates the following rhetorical question in “Happenings in the New York Scene” (1961): “Who will have been there at that event? It may become like the sea monsters of the past or the flying saucers of yesterday” (Kaprow 1993, 26).

### OLDENBURG’S *THE STREET* AND KAPROW’S *WORDS*: THE CITY INSIDE

Several works of the early 1960s, notably Claes Oldenburg’s *The Street* (1960) and Allan Kaprow’s *Words* (1962), mark the transition to art processes taking place in the streets and express, in different ways, the interest in recreating large-scale urban environments. When Oldenburg read Kaprow’s “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in 1958, he wanted to meet the author and follow Kaprow’s lead. Oldenburg’s *The Street* (1960) breaks the boundaries between painting and sculpture in what we would call today an installation (a term that did not exist at the time) at the Judson Gallery, in the basement of the Judson Church House of the Judson Memorial Church (Washington Square South, in Greenwich Village) and a few months later, in a different form, at the Reuben Gallery in New York City, a few blocks away from the Judson Gallery. With *The Street*, Oldenburg sought to position his experimental practice within the variegated New York art scene and continue developing his Ray Gun persona.<sup>4</sup> Like many other artists at the time, Oldenburg was interested in objects, especially urban objects. This tendency received various names: “factualism” (Billy Klüver), “new realism” (Sidney Janis using a phrase previously used by Pierre Restany), “New York junk culture” (Martha Jackson), “neo-Dada” (various journals from *Art International* to *Newsweek*) (Shannon 2009, 3). For Oldenburg and other artists, the main source of objects was in the streets of New York and in the buildings of the galleries they occupied.<sup>5</sup> In Oldenburg’s diary, we find notes dating back to the end of the 1950s that testify to his sense of wonder at the sight of common things, a feeling that Kaprow had celebrated in his essay on Pollock: “I observe with delight the strangeness of common things” (Oldenburg 2013, 26). Objects are then used in the gallery, and after the performance become once again residual objects on the stage analogous to the street, as Oldenburg explains in a short text entitled “Residual Objects” (1962):

Residual objects are created in the course of making the performance and during the repeated performances. The performance is the main thing but when it is over there are a number of subordinate pieces which may be isolated, souvenirs, residual objects. To pick up after a performance, to be careful about what is to be discarded and what still survives by itself. Slow study and respect for small things. One's own created "found objects." The floor of the stage like the street. Picking up after is creative. Also their particular life must be respected. Where they had their place, each area of activity combed separately and with respect for where it begins and ends. (Oldenburg 1995, 143)

The sense of wonder that generated the selection of objects was probably not experienced by the visitor of Oldenburg's *Street*, which suggested a spectacle of abjection and oppression. In his poetry, Oldenburg makes a collage called "Observed Fragments" (1957), which is a series of notations on bits of paper pasted together to form a list. All of these observed fragments have their source in the city and recreate it in the manner of a mosaic:

Drops in gray water  
 Tinfoil trampled flat on a wet concrete sidewalk  
 An ice machine grinds ice  
 Metal gull on a metal sky  
 Ketchup on a wet sidewalk  
 Bright nuts  
 Constructions of chocolate  
 Red fur  
 Wet wood inside a barrel  
 A smoking cloth  
 A man polishes chrome. Chrome is polished. Nearby from a chrome  
 arm hangs a chicken with its throat open  
 (...) (Oldenburg 2013, 45)

These fragments function quite differently from Eliot's fragments of the "unreal city" in *The Waste Land* (1922). If Eliot's Tiresias is doomed to "scavenge earlier texts and recycle the words of others" (Sharpe 1990, 102–103), Oldenburg considers scavenging a worthy occupation. Apart from the discarded objects and materials he picked from the streets, he also took photographs of the Judson Gallery neighborhood in the preparatory phase of *The Street*. It is tempting to make a connection with Benjamin's "ragpicker," whom he mentions in "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (and elsewhere) when he comments on Baudelaire's poem "Le Vin des chiffonniers," but which has larger

cultural and historical significance as an alter ego for Baudelaire and for Benjamin himself (Benjamin 2006, 52–55).

*The Street* is a selection of the most abject fragments of the city in installation form, attempting a recreation of the New York City streetscape using cardboard, wrapping paper, newspaper, wood, black paint and found objects such as bottles and shoes. Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961) was similar to *The Street* in its attempt to condense an environment in an interior setting, but its sculptural approach was very different, coming close to the imagery and sources of Pop art. *The Store* recreated a store environment in an actual store opened by the artist on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, selling bright and clumsy sculptures of commercial products and food items. Both *The Street* and *The Store* had the ambition to remodel urban and consumerist environments in closed spaces, either galleries or more ambiguous spaces with overlapping functions, like *The Store*, which made explicit the entanglement between commercial and artistic purposes. The spatial dynamic of experimental art at the beginning of the 1960s seems to suggest a reversal of inside and outside (the city in the gallery, Happenings that will soon take the streets). This phenomenon is adumbrated by Benjamin, who, in *The Arcades Project* ("The Interior/The Trace"), comments on the transformation of interior spaces into exterior ones and vice versa. He quotes Baudelaire's introduction to his French translation of Poe's "Philosophy of Furniture": "Who among us, in his idle hours, has not taken a delicious pleasure in constructing for himself a model apartment, a dream house, a house of dreams?" (Benjamin 1999, 227). Oldenburg sets out to achieve the construction of an anti-model city, which is not a dream city, but rather a nightmare city. The circulation of elements between inside and outside and the ultimate reversal between them are central to the urban cartographies of the 1960s.

*The Street* offered the experience of a cluttered and rubbish-filled environment peopled by cardboard figures of uneven scale, on the brink of the illegible, which suggested a character holding a gun, another character with hair made of unreadable scribbled words, a man in a top hat. Other cardboard pieces stood for cars, a traffic barricade and a shoeshine stand. The floor was covered in pieces of wood, wire, worn-out shoes and crumpled newspaper. The black paint used for contours and lettering enhanced the sordid and messy effect. Oldenburg's diary mentions coarseness as an effect that is actively sought, especially in relation to American culture: "What I am deeply interested in is counteracting the tendency to draw a film over American life – pretty coarse but more honest than to hide

it, so press this coarseness” (Oldenburg 2013, 27). In conjunction with *The Street*, the Judson Gallery presented Jim Dine’s *House*, which was also made from discarded materials: rags, newspapers, children’s paintings, a broken umbrella, written all over with nonsensical signs.

Oldenburg staged the Happening *Snapshots from the City* three times within the environment of *The Street* as part of the performances known as Ray Gun Spex (“spex” refers to a burlesque performance in Swedish) (Fig. 3.1).



**Fig. 3.1** Claes Oldenburg and Pat Muschinski in *Snapshots from the City*, of the performance series *Ray Gun Spex*, within the exhibition *The Street*, Judson House Gallery, February 29, March 1 and 2, 1960. Courtesy Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio, New York. *Photograph credit* Martha Holmes, The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images

A key element of the staging was to keep the audiences in the dark and have the light turned on only intermittently by artist Lucas Samaras, making it impossible to conceive of the *Snapshots* otherwise than as a fragmentary piece, literally a series of snapshots. Oldenburg dressed in rags, with stripes of cloth hanging, holding a bottle of spirits, and Pat Muschinski, wearing a newspaper mask, played in *Snapshots from the City*, dancing, making exaggerated, distorted movements and grunting inarticulately against a background of recorded city sounds (sirens, car traffic). At the end of the performance, Oldenburg's character killed himself with a cardboard gun (an allusion to the artist's pseudonym) and was crushed by a cardboard automobile.<sup>6</sup>

From the point of view of the figuration of the urban, Oldenburg's recreation of a New York street as wasteland within gallery space seems quite static, far removed from a dynamic expression of urban cartographies. And yet, the effect of disorientation intended and most likely achieved by the installation in the spectators is akin to an immersion in an unfamiliar, gritty and barely recognizable streetscape. The installation was placed within a space that visitors were allowed to enter, but which resisted such attempts because of the amount of detritus on the floor (Hochdörfer 2012, 34). Exploring the installation meant stumbling across heaps of junk and coming face-to-face with elusive and menacing cardboard figures. *The Street* lies on the threshold between the recognition of the real and the familiar (the streets outside the gallery) and the refusal of immediate and easy legibility, between figuration and its questioning. This disorienting navigation between the street outside and *The Street* inside is central to the semantic opacity and interpretive dynamic of the urban cartographies enacted by Oldenburg.

Intriguingly, Shannon even goes so far as to compare the chaotic city in *The Street* with the city as emblem of blockage in the Situationist International, even if Oldenburg was not openly Marxist and no social or political activist (Shannon 2009, 47). Although Oldenburg does not make use of maps and there is no ideological basis in the comparison, it does capture a fundamental feature of *The Street*, namely its attempt to give material form within a closed space to disorientation as a conjoined urban and aesthetic phenomenon. Oldenburg's grimy, gritty and deteriorating "street" can be read as the form and substance of spatial and mental confusion par excellence, an environment whose residual materiality is manifest not only in its actual rubbishness, but also in its perishability. Its only possible evolution is toward further decay, as newspapers are trampled

on and pieces of cardboard fall apart. It is difficult to decide on how to define or categorize *The Street* and *Snapshots from the City*: as responses to the historical conditions of urban renewal in New York City at the time and as a historically determined reflection on poverty and homelessness (Shannon 2009; Rodenbeck 2011, 51), as an absurdist Neo-Dada staging of existential chaos, despair and madness with Beckettian overtones (in *Endgame*, first performed in 1957, Nagg and Nell live in dustbins), as a critique of American mainstream culture, as a crystallization of influences from Artaud, Céline (whom Oldenburg was reading at the time) and film noir. Its critique of the capitalism is manifest in the fact that Oldenburg drew paper money for the event and members of the audience were each given a million of this special currency, which they could use during intermission to buy junk picked from the streets and sold out of carts (Shannon 2009, 27). *The Street* seems to result from a combined response to current issues in urbanism and to the search for new forms of experimental art after the break with Abstract Expressionism.

Oldenburg's *The Street* was recreated at the Reuben Gallery in New York a few months later (May 6–19, 1960). This installation offered a very different clean and polished version of the previous one, in a commercial gallery for which Oldenburg favored a museum display. The two installations are complementary. Since most of the fragile objects in *The Street* installation at the Judson Gallery had been destroyed, new artworks were made especially for the Reuben, consisting of the same kind of objects hesitating between sculpture and painting, fabricated out of cardboard, newspaper and burlap, hanging from the ceiling and on the walls, or placed on the floor (Fig. 3.2).

It is significant that the five remaining artworks from *The Street*, in various museum collections, originate from the Reuben installation and not from the Judson show, whose materiality was entirely ephemeral. In the new environment of the Reuben, the cardboard figures have the aura of more conventional museum objects, divorced as they are from the mass of junk in which they had been anchored at the Judson Gallery and arranged as isolated elements in a configuration whose logic and narrative are not apparent (if any). Quite tellingly, Hochdörfer compares the Reuben *Street* installation with a ghost town (34), a comparison that captures the lifeless and inert ethos of the exhibit.

Another, more abstract and less cluttered environment inspired by street scenes is Allan Kaprow's *Words* at the Smolin Gallery in New York (1962) (Fig. 3.3), described by Kaprow as a "rearrangeable Environment



**Fig. 3.2** Claes Oldenburg and Anita Rubin in *The Street*, Reuben Gallery, New York. May 6–19, 1960. Courtesy Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio, New York. *Photo credit* I. C. Rapoport

with light and sound” (Kaprow 1966, 54). The language of the city, spoken and written, is its theme and material:

I am involved with the city atmosphere of billboards, newspapers, scrawled pavements and alley walls, in the drone of a lecture, whispered secrets, pitchmen in Times Square, fun-parlors, bits of stories in conversations overheard at the Automat. All this has been compressed and shaped into a situation which, in order to “live” in the fullest sense, must actively engage the viewer. (Kaprow quoted in Kelley 2004, 71)

Kaprow’s interest in the language of the city is shared by Oldenburg, who mentions in his diary “groans, moans, street cries, everyday conversation, everyday ‘literature’” (Oldenburg 2013, 57). This “everyday literature” is often meaningless, non-narrative, disjointed, cacophonous. *Words* is underscored by a cogitation on the nature of meaning and language in everyday contexts of communication, street signage and advertising. Kaprow is concerned with the omnipresence of language and also

**Fig. 3.3** Allan Kaprow and Robert M. McElroy, *Words*, installation view, 1962, gelatin silver, 10 × 8 inches, Allan Kaprow Papers, ca. 1940–1997. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (980063) © J. Paul Getty Trust. Rights holder: J. Paul Getty Trust



with its high degree of imprecision in normal exchanges. The Happenings tend to render the floating quality of linguistic exchanges and to privilege intransitive sounds with no immediate meaning, but which are nevertheless part and parcel of the texture of the everyday. The Surrealist emphasis on the significance of linguistic, extraliterary material and of literary material subtracted from its original context is relevant here, and so is Cage's argument that silence is integral to music. His silent piece *4'33"* (1952) foregrounds the contingent sounds of the audience and of the whole environment. The relationship between Cage's silence inhabited by sounds and music is similar to the relationship between Kaprow's elusive "words" and traditional theater. Kaprow's belief in the centrality of linguistic imprecision and his foregrounding of our immunity to the constant background of sounds and verbal exchanges to which we do not pay close attention have major consequences on his appraisal of philosophy, as expressed in "Manifesto" (1966):

Philosophy will become steadily more impotent in its search for verbal knowledge so long as it fails to recognize its own findings: that only a small fraction of the words we use are precise in meaning; and only a smaller proportion of these contain meanings in which we are vitally interested.

When words alone are no true index of thought, and when sense and nonsense rapidly become allusive and layered with implication rather than description, the use of words as tools to precisely delimit sense and nonsense may be a worthless endeavor. (...) Contemporary art, which tends to “think” in multimedia, intermedia, overlays, fusions and hybridizations, more closely parallels modern mental life than we have realized. (Kaprow 1993, 82–83)

What is at stake here is more than simply the infiltration of all aspects of everyday life by language and the exclusive reliance of philosophy on verbal knowledge. The very nature of thought and its possibilities of expression come under scrutiny. The equivalence between words and thought and the translation of thoughts into words have a long philosophical and cultural history, the latest and most prominent aspect of which had been elaborated in modernist literature. Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner and Hemingway had all investigated, between the early 1920s and the early 1960s, the articulation of thoughts into discourse. The stream of consciousness came out of this philosophical and linguistic exploration. Kaprow gives a different answer to the question of how to express thought. Where theater and philosophy seemed to him to have failed, contemporary art (including his own) offered a more appropriate response in its embrace of hybridity and intermedia. Happenings make occasional use of words, but they are not central to their effects and strategies, which sets them apart from the theater, as he argues in “Happenings in the New York Scene” (1961):

A play assumes that words are the absolute medium. A Happening frequently has words, but they may or may not make literal sense. If they do, their sense is not part of the fabric of “sense” that other nonverbal elements (noise, visual stuff, action) convey. Hence, they have a brief, emergent, and sometimes detached quality. If they do not make sense, then they are heard as the sound of words instead of the meaning conveyed by them. Words, however, need not be used at all: a Happening might consist of a swarm of locusts being dropped in and around the performance space. The element of chance with respect to the medium itself is not to be expected from the ordinary theater. (Kaprow 1993, 19)

In Kaprow’s “Manifesto” (1966), common sounds (not necessarily the spectacular “swarm of locusts”) and banal verbal exchanges become

the material of vanguard art, just like common objects and buildings, which are reminiscent of existing paintings and works of art: “The side of an old building recalls Clyfford Still’s canvases, the guts of a dish-washing machine double as Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack*, the voices in a train station are Jackson Mac Low’s poems, the sounds of eating in a luncheonette are by John Cage, and all may be part of a Happening” (Kaprow 1993, 81). While the sounds of a train station and of a luncheonette are a familiar experience to each and every one, some Happenings made use of much more elaborate and sophisticated dramatizations of unfamiliar sounds and foreign languages with the likely effect of plunging the audience in an utterly strange environment, whose strangeness was enhanced by the incomprehensible language. We find in Oldenburg’s staging of the Ray Gun Spex series an interesting example of the artist using discourses in Swedish (his mother tongue). During a Ray Gun Spex evening, Oldenburg read from a balustrade a passage from a Swedish translation of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, a 1905 adventure novel written in English by the Hungarian-born Baroness Orczy, very popular with British audiences. Such Babelian effects are only fitting to be staged in the city (either *The Street* or New York City itself), which is the figure of Babel par excellence.

The installation *Words* occupied two rooms at the Smolin Gallery. In the first room, five vertical loops of cloth stenciled with words were hanging side by side, and visitors were invited to roll the loops so that words would align or misalign, like a slot machine. On the other two walls, hundreds of strips of paper, each containing a single word, had been affixed. Visitors were encouraged to remove strips and replace them with others, hanging on a post. The words had been randomly gathered from “poetry books, newspapers, comic magazines, the telephone book, popular love stories” (Kelley 2004, 71). Overhead signs urged visitors to “play,” “make new poems,” “tear off new words from post and staple them up.” Three record players could be made to play recordings of lectures, shouts, nonsense and music simultaneously.

The second room was painted blue and illuminated by one lightbulb. A black plastic sheet covered the ceiling, which gave the room the look of a public space: an alley, a subway, public restrooms or a pedestrian tunnel. Strips of cloth were hanging from the ceiling, and stapled onto them were handwritten bits of paper. Visitors were provided with paper, clips and pencils to add their own notes. They were also provided with

colored chalk to draw or write their own messages on the walls. In this room, a single record player played whispering sounds. This was one of the first artistic events that counted on the participation of the audience, after Kaprow's *The Apple Shrine* (1960, at the Judson Gallery), during which visitors had been invited to eat apples. *Words* translates the urban environment into "words" in a reflection on the ubiquity of signs and on the everyday immersion in language, so pervasive that it is taken for granted and is given little or no attention at all. Jeff Kelley points out the tension that stems from reading Kaprow's *Words* against the background of the latter's academic career, which led him to deliver and publish "words" that made sense in academic contexts. *Words* abandons the seriousness of academic thinking and discourse by highlighting nonsense and inarticulate speech, and above all verbal play (Kelley 2004, 73).

The subtext and the tradition of the flâneur theorize the city as subject matter of lyric poetry, not simply a background, but a material transmuted into poetry, a material whose characteristics inflect jointly content and form, and which gives rise to a reflection on the seminal link between modernity and the city. With Kaprow and the contemporary artists of his era, like Oldenburg, the city is no longer understood as a source of articulate poetic discourse, but rather, in the spirit of the blurring of art and life which is the major principle of the Happenings, as a verbal environment in which we live and whose omnipresence and availability is made apparent by the Happenings. What Oldenburg calls "everyday literature" is made visible and tangible in the immersive environment of *Words*. Its participatory dynamic and its invitation to the audience to "make new poems" lay emphasis on a deinstitutionalized and democratized version of poetry and literature, within everybody's reach, that Kaprow had called a "deemphasis of formal aesthetic" in "The Shape of the Art Environment" (Kaprow 1993, 93). *Words* spells out our daily production of "everyday literature" in banal conversations, but also in the practice of graffiti, in the use of political banners, advertisements, billboards, in the production of sound, music and silence. Phenomena of confusion, interference, overlapping, lack of clarity and partial comprehension are important features of this "everyday literature" which, according to Kaprow, is understood and valued for its lack of clarity only by the new art he promotes together with like-minded artists of his generation. While Joyce sought to convey the mechanisms of thought formation in verbal form, Kaprow sought to explore

those mechanisms using various media and immersive environments that invited participation. The discourses of the city in Kaprow shift to a plural register in which the lack of logic and that of a linear narrative are keywords in a new artistic grasp of the nexus between language and everyday life in the city, which seems to replace the nexus between modernity and the city familiar to us from the flâneur paradigm.

### DISPERSED SPATIALITY: *CALLING*

One of the guiding principles of the Happenings was their dispersed spatiality, as Kaprow makes clear in “The Happenings are Dead, Long Live the Happenings!” (1966): “The Happenings should be dispersed over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing, locales” (Kaprow 1993, 62). The city is juxtaposed to other spaces, and the Happenings play on the differences between them, when the same scenario is shifted from one location to another. Thus, *Calling* was performed on two consecutive days, August 21–22, 1965, in New York City and New Jersey, on George Segal’s chicken farm in New Brunswick. Kaprow published a retrospective account of *Calling* in *The Tulane Drama Review* in 1965, in an issue devoted to Happenings. The prerequisites to *Calling* are stated in Kaprow’s notes. It is deemed preferable for the performance to take place over two days and in two different places, in the city and in the country. At least twenty-one persons are necessary to perform it and six cars.<sup>7</sup> The timing for the various actions should be carefully worked out. Kaprow’s text begins: “In the city, people stand at street corners and wait” (Kaprow 1965, 203). While the sentence seems to suggest a general state and activity, it refers to the performers who are in position for the performance that is about to begin. However, the ambiguous overlap between the generic urban dweller and the performers is quite telling of Kaprow’s principle that the line between art and life should be kept fluid and as indistinct as possible. Although for Kaprow the language and procedures of traditional theater are bound to become outmoded, the city is implicitly presented as a stage in which the performers blend in the everyday environment and do not stand out in any way, at least not at this point in the Happening. The protocol described by Kaprow and followed as closely as possible by the performers is not theorized or justified in any way. The writing is dry and descriptive, although certain sentences are

slightly mysterious: “In the woods, the persons call out names and hear hidden answers” (203). The performers waiting at street corners are waiting for cars to pull up, the drivers call the performer’s name, the person gets in and they drive off:

During the trip, the person is wrapped in aluminum foil. The car is parked at a meter somewhere, is left there, locked; the silver person sitting motionless in the back seat.

Someone unlocks the car, drives off. The foil is removed from the person; he or she is wrapped in cloth or tied into a laundry bag. The car stops, the person is dumped at a public garage and the car goes away.

At the garage, a waiting auto starts up, the person is picked up from the concrete pavement, is hauled into the car, is taken to the information booth at the Grand Central Station. The person is propped up against it and left.

The person calls out names, and hears the others brought there also call. They call out for some time. Then they work loose from their wrappings and leave the train station. They telephone certain numbers. The phone rings and rings. Finally, it is answered, a name is asked for, and immediately the other end clicks off. (Kaprow 1965, 203)

The first part of *Calling* that takes place in New York involves a strange choreography of wrapping the performers in foil and cloth, unwrapping them, stuffing them in laundry bags, letting “the silver persons” wait in locked cars, “dumping” and “picking up” them, “hauling” them, “propping” them up and leaving them behind. This sequence of gestures presupposes a vastly unequal distribution of agency between the drivers and their human packages, resulting in an ethically dubious exertion of power and deprivation of will, although this situation is temporary. On the following day, the performers are to change places and the former dominators become the dominated. This inversion of perpetrators and victims insures a shared experience by all the performers and carries carnivalesque overtones, the carnival being one of the popular rituals that Kaprow singled out as relevant for the Happenings. The wrapping technique is reminiscent of George Segal’s in his wrapped sculptures, suggesting mummification and inertia.<sup>8</sup> Once they leave their waiting spots on city corners, the performers are treated like objects or corpses, but they remain visually central, attracting attention and prompting interrogation. The wrapped bodies, albeit reified, are still

identifiable as human, and thus a troubling suggestion of illegal or transgressive action comes to the fore, especially due to their transportation all over the city.

The urban cartographies of *Calling* carry a potential of transgression that is difficult to suppress or hide. Wrapped-up bodies left behind in a car or propped up against the information booth at Grand Central Station are hardly inconspicuous. In that sense, the Happening is only in theory a performance that blurs art and life. The first photograph included in Kaprow's *Calling* is of a crowd of onlookers staring at the unwrapping performers at Grand Central Station. One of the spectators is even taking pictures. The division between the performers and the audience (a term that Kaprow disavowed) is very clear, and it is difficult to imagine that Kaprow and the performers were not expecting this spectacular outcome (Fig. 3.4).<sup>9</sup>

The "calling" involves human voice and the telephone. Once the performers have unwrapped themselves, they call their drivers from public booths: "Phone is allowed to ring fifty times before it is picked up.

**Fig. 3.4** Peter Moore, Photograph of Allan Kaprow's *Calling*, Grand Central Station, New York City, August 21, 1965. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (980063) © Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Answerer says only ‘Yes?’ Caller asks if it is X (stating the right name), and X quietly hangs up” (Kaprow 1965, 206). There is a correspondence between the caller and the called that is personalized by the use of names, a relationship that preexists the Happening, a scripted bond resulting in a mutual recognition of signals. The illegal and violent overtones of the human packages being abducted, driven around the city and dumped at Grand Central Station are mitigated by the acknowledgement of names and relations that preexist the event. The transgression is contained within the Happening and within the group of performers and does not seep through into the human fabric of the city. Ironically, Kaprow had alerted the authorities at Grand Central Station about the Happening and had tried to attenuate their impact by announcing it as the rehearsal of a children’s play (Ursprung 2013, 60). However, on a certain level, the staged suggestions of harmfulness and aggressiveness in *Calling* are indeed child’s play, since the violence and transgression, although spectacularly manifest, are restricted to the planned participants and no member of audience is targeted. At the opposite of this strategy of illegal play, Acconci’s *Following Piece* (1969), as we will see in Chapter 4, exploits transgression in infinitely more discreet and more threatening ways by including in the unethical procedures outsiders, anonymous city dwellers. The use of names in Kaprow’s *Calling* is worlds apart from the anonymity of Acconci’s *Following Piece* and from the dark epistemological impenetrability of the double in Poe’s “Man of the Crowd,” who remains unknown and unknowable to the end, “a book that does not permit itself to be read” (Poe 1984, 396).

On the next day, in the woods close to George Segal’s farm, the former perpetrators become the new victims and the former victims wrap their human packages in aluminum foil and carry them to the woods, where they hang them on trees, leave them dangling after they have ripped off their clothes and leave. “The naked figures call to each other in the woods for a long time until they are tired. Silence” (Kaprow 1965, 204). The rural act is less elaborately presented and also more chilling, since there is no audience at all to come to their rescue, contrary to the crowd at Grand Central Station huddling around the performers unwrapping themselves. Although Kaprow’s intention was to go beyond theater, there are echoes from Artaud’s “theater of cruelty”: “we need above all a theater that wakes us up” (Artaud 1958, 84). *Calling* seems to be related to the new theater dreamed by Artaud, based on a testing

of limits: “It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt” (Artaud 1958, 85).<sup>10</sup>

Annette Leddy identifies “archetypal group dynamics” at the core of the Happenings of the early 1960s: “scapegoating, sacrifice, objectification, compartmentalization – the hierarchical behaviors through which the unreflecting self is formed” (Leddy 2008, 44). This ritualistic reading of *Calling* has the advantage of providing a uniform framework within which to understand the two acts (urban and rural) of this particular Happening, but it can be argued that in an urban context the kidnapping scenario and the wrapped-up bodies being carried around the city stuffed in laundry bags look less like a ritual of violence and more like a situation borrowed from detective fiction and film. Whether this echoing effect is intended or not is open to speculation. Cultural subtexts familiar to us from crime and detection narratives can be identified, and the urban setting of the first act is a key element in this identification. In this respect, *Calling* comes close to Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” and also to Acconci’s *Following Piece*, although they share only a surface resemblance.<sup>11</sup> Violence is an important component in Happenings at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s: Claes Oldenburg’s *Snapshots from the City* (1960), as we have seen, Robert Whitman’s *Small Cannon* (1960), which presented an airplane being shot down, and Jim Dine’s *Car Crash* (1960), which showed an accident and victims asking for help.

### FLUXUS: DRAWING LINES AND MAPS

It is in conceptual art and in Fluxus (the latter shares some sources with the Happenings) that urban mapping processes, especially ambulatory practices, start to flourish.<sup>12</sup> Although quite difficult to circumscribe and delimit historically, Fluxus, as its name suggests, celebrates the flow of common experience in a way that is reminiscent of Kaprow’s blurring of art and life, but the events favored by Fluxus do not have much in common with Kaprow’s exotic and outlandish rituals of abduction, with his suggestion of staging the sound of “swarms of locusts being dropped” or with Oldenburg’s theatrical *Snapshots from the City*. Rather, the practice of Fluxus brings the everyday into focus (one of Kaprow’s ideals as well), but in a way that invites concentration on banal games and ceremonies (like sports), and on normal gestures

and sensorial experiences like standing, extending an arm or walking. Cage's lessons are at the origin of this attention to reflexes and bodily gestures that one performs unconsciously and whose over-conceptualization might even hinder their accomplishment. Surrealism is also a significant influence, but in Fluxus we cannot find the valorization of the unconscious and of the mystery of urban spaces irrupting during exploratory actions. Fluxus does not seek to ennoble the banal otherwise than by embracing it full-heartedly. In what follows, I will briefly focus on three examples of Fluxus and conceptual works that have a connection with urban mapping: La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10*, Benjamin Patterson's *A Very Lawful Dance—For Ennis* (1962) and Yoko Ono's *Map Pieces* (included in the collection *Grapefruit*, published in 1964).

La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10* ("Draw a straight line and follow it"), although it developed in a musical context, is particularly relevant for a study of urban mapping. Young included some of the *Compositions 1960* in *An Anthology*, an influential collection of experimental pieces by various composers and artists, compiled by Young and Jackson Mac Low. It featured visual design by George Maciunas, and works by Young, Mac Low, Cage, Ono, Nam June Paik and others (Grimshaw 2011, 77). Young's compositions suggest performance situations, but most of them do not refer to traditional music making. As Grimshaw puts it, "if there is an idea that ties all of the 1960 pieces together, it is their various attempts to transgress particular presuppositions about what comprises the musically normative, from the ritual expectations one brings to a concert to the aural assumptions one makes about musical and nonmusical sounds" (Grimshaw 2011, 78). The *Compositions 1960* included in *The Anthology* are scores (actually instructions) about situations:

- # 2 The performer is instructed to build a fire in front of the audience.
- # 3 The performer does anything he pleases.
- # 5 One or more butterflies is set loose in the performance space.
- # 6 The performers and audience trade roles; the former watch and listen to the latter.
- # 7 A dyad, B-F sharp, is sustained for an indeterminately long period of time.

# 9 Score consists of a straight line on a small card.

# 10 (to Bob Morris) Score consists of the text “Draw a straight line and follow it.” (Grimshaw 2011, 77)

*Compositions 1960 #9* and *#10* are hybrids between the visual and the musical, suggesting an even gesture and an unhindered progress, a growth always equal to itself. *Composition #7* is the musical version of *Compositions #9* and *#10* and shows Young’s interest in long sustained tones. Drawing a straight line can be performed on paper, but also in space, using a pen, chalk or other implements (for instance, it was performed using plumb lines, according to Grimshaw 2011, 81). The composition does not specify a location or a procedure, leaving it open to interpretation. The line is a central concept in cartography, especially in mapping strategies that involve itineraries. The source of the line is in the person drawing it, and performing such a gesture in an urban environment can attract audiences, especially in crowded contexts. In 1963, George Maciunas suggested performing Young’s *Composition 1960 #10* in front of New York museums, on crowded sidewalks, as a publicity stunt for Fluxus. In 1964, Ben Vautier performed it on Canal Street in Manhattan as part of a Fluxus festival. In 1962, George Maciunas wrote *Homage to La Monte Young*: “Erase, scrape or wash away as well as possible the previously drawn line or lines of La Monte Young or any other lines encountered, like street dividing lines, ruled paper or score lines, lines on sports fields, lines on gaming tables, lines drawn by children on sidewalks etc.” (quoted in Waxman 2010, 185). This counter-composition can be read as an echo of Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) and also of Marcel Duchamp giving instructions for a “reciprocal readymade” to be obtained by using a Rembrandt painting as an ironing board (Duchamp 2008, 5). In response to Young’s continuous line, Maciunas imagines the erasure of all possible lines, boundaries, frontiers and limits (which suggest normativity), but also of playful lines, where no normativity is involved. The erasure of street dividing lines suspends the urban from its regulatory framework of traffic and circulation, suggesting an unbound space, with no laws and rules. Thus, Young’s “drawing of a continuous line” can be read not only as a musical experiment, but also as a spatial one, charting movements in space, much in the same way as lines have been used by others, for instance Fernand Deligny in his “wander lines,” that trace the movements of autistic children through space

(Deligny 2013). The drawing of a line becomes synonymous with leaving a trace with no fixed meaning. Movement is translated into the line, and the line becomes a trajectory, a form of variable mapping.

Young's *Composition 1960 #10* about drawing a line is abstract and open-ended. Other Fluxus works that are relevant for urban mapping are more verbose and precise in their instructions. Benjamin Patterson's *Traffic Light—A Very Lawful Dance—For Ennis* (1962) is a case in point. Patterson, an African American artist associated with Fluxus, wrote the following instructions in Germany, and they were carried out in various contexts, one of which was in Times Square:

A traffic light, with or without special pedestrian signals is found or positioned on street corner or at stage center. Performer(s) waits at real or imaginary curb on red signal, alerts self on yellow signal, crosses street or stage on green signal.

Achieving opposite side, performer(s) turns, repeats sequence. A performance may consist of an indefinite, an indeterminate or a predetermined number of repetitions. (*Flux year box 1, 1964*)

Together with Dick Higgins, Benjamin Patterson proceeded to carry out the instructions in Times Square, crossing and re-crossing the street, and their actions were remarked by a few passersby who joined them and they continued the performance together. Such repetitive scenarios will become common in minimalism. We find a repetitive urban protocol in Acconci's *Following Piece*, for instance, where it takes on a transgressive dimension, as we will see in the following chapter. Acconci's scenario consisted in following strangers in the streets of New York until they entered a private space. The title of Patterson's *Lawful Dance* spells out the huge conceptual distance that separates his traffic light choreography from Acconci's potentially subversive and unlawful activity. The traffic light in Patterson functions like a predictable source of signals at regular intervals. Obeying traffic rules means embracing an available urban pattern and not deviating from it. However, the serialization of movement in Patterson's *Lawful Dance* destabilizes the principle of intentionality or lack thereof (in aimless flânerie) inherent in the act of urban walking. The performers conform to the norms of traffic light change and adopt a lawful pedestrian attitude, but which is ultimately meaningless, inscribed in a loop of street

crossing that renders the banal act of crossing irrelevant and projects it into a humorous and absurd register. Just like a musical score, *A Lawful Dance* can be repeated over and over again, drawing attention to the ambiguity of repetition.

Patterson's instructions can be visualized as a simple diagram of lines, coming and going from one side of the street to the other, in a repetitive to and fro movement. Any two points in space (either in the street or on a stage) can fulfill the regulatory role required by the instructions. Other cartographic instructions by artists associated with Fluxus are more abstract and imaginative, predicated less on a real-world situation than on an imaginary projection. Thus, Yoko Ono's *Map Pieces* included in the anthology of instructions *Grapefruit* (1964) start from an imaginary map rather than a given space in order to suggest the necessary distance between the abstract cartographic model and its spatial counterparts:

Draw an imaginary map.  
 Put a goal mark on the map where you want to go.  
 Go walking on an actual street according to your map.  
 If there is no street where it should be according to the map, make one by putting the obstacles aside.  
 When you reach the goal, ask the name of the city and give flowers to the first person you meet.  
 The map must be followed exactly, or the event must be dropped altogether.  
 Ask your friends to write maps.  
 Give your friends maps.(Ono 2000, n.p.)

A certain feigned naivety and a high degree of idealism dismissive of material boundaries permeate the piece. The map dictates the contour of the real and not the other way round. The goal ("where you want to go") is divorced from cartographic data and not set in accordance with realistic contingencies and constraints. The "name of the city" is to be found out once one reaches it, not before. The gesture of offering flowers to the first person is reminiscent of pacifist offerings, of the counterculture movements that Ono (and later, Lennon, whom she met in 1966) embraced. The ideal map overrules the accidents on the terrain, immutable, imperishable and idealistic. The instructions at the end suggest a beneficial result from offering maps and asking friends to "write maps," as if the offering and writing of maps were invitations to dare

and believe, against all odds to the contrary. Ono's second *Map Piece* is shorter and less specific: "Draw a map to get lost" (Ono 2000, n.p.). It is reminiscent of Situationist longings for drifting to the point of losing one's bearings. Disorientation becomes a goal in itself, away from pragmatic and functional readings of the map. The purpose of the map is diverted, in another stab at real-world calls to realistic thinking and compromise.

Although Ono's *Map Pieces* carry no overt political message, their ideology is quite transparent and central to their meaning. Their poetic, haiku-like elliptic nature is an implicit condensation of the ideological ethos of 1960s pacifism and counterculture. Her highly poetic maps are thus fundamentally political, directed at larger forces and events that are left unmentioned, but are quite obvious despite their implicitness. Thus, mapping becomes a political, confrontational and contestatory act. The *Map Pieces* beg to be read against the background of the protest culture of the 1960s, especially the demonstrations and marches in favor of Civil Rights and against the war in Vietnam. Marching becomes a form of urban mapping, a way of occupying public space and signifying opposition to authority in urban space. Ono's *Map Pieces* pave the way for more explicit forms of counter-mapping that have become quite common in recent cartographic practices, as we will see in Chapter 7, devoted to Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (2010).

## NOTES

1. As Crow puts it in *The Rise of the Sixties*, Kaprow's pronouncement was "an expedient repetition of the simplest media myths of the artist" (Crow 1996, 33). Ironically given Kaprow's celebration of Pollock's "crudeness," most of his Happenings were perceived as too cerebral by his contemporaries. His *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) were deemed "supremely controlled and intellectual" (Glimcher 2012, 38).
2. A consequence of this distrust of books is that, according to Kaprow, "art criticism" is doomed, just like "art" itself is doomed in his reworking of it into non-art: "critics will be as irrelevant as the artists" (Kaprow 1993, "Education of the Un-Artist, Part I," 107).
3. Cage commented on the fact that most of the students who took his classes and most of the people who came to his concerts were artists rather than musicians: "I had early seen the musicians were the people who didn't like me. But the painters did. The people who came to the

- concerts which I organized were very rarely musicians - either performing or composing. The audience was made up of people interested in painting and sculpture” (Cage in Sandford 1995, 67).
4. My sources for the background research on *The Street* are Shannon (2009) and Hochdörfer (2012).
  5. In “Happenings in the New York Scene,” Kaprow advocated the impermanence of Happenings not only based on their ephemeral performativity, but also on their perishable materials: “The physical materials used to create the environment of Happenings are of the most perishable kind: newspapers, junk, rags, old wooden crates knocked together, cardboard cartons cut up, real trees, food, borrowed machines etc. They cannot last for long in whatever arrangement they are put. A Happening is thus fresh, while it lasts, for better or worse” (Kaprow 1993, 20). For *The Street*, Oldenburg explored the basement of the Judson Gallery: “Go through basement under auditorium, find much junk which can be used. (...) Build with lumber and stuff found in basement” (Oldenburg 2013, 56–57). This fascination with detritus endured. In 1971, Gordon Matta-Clark made a sculpture of tin cans, rubbish and paper he called *Fire Child*, the making of which was immortalized in the film of the same name. One year later, the film *Fresh Kill* recorded the destruction of Matta-Clark’s truck in a garbage dump.
  6. A five-minute 16-mm film made by Stan Vanderbeek of Oldenburg’s *Snapshots from the City* has survived.
  7. Among the participants were Allan Kaprow, his wife Vaughan Rachel, Michael Kirby, Peter Moore (who took photographs), Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Robert Brown, Christo, Jeanne-Claude and others.
  8. Ursprung makes the connection between the two (Ursprung 2012, 64).
  9. Ursprung’s claim that “*Calling* was the first of Kaprow’s Happenings that all but did without an audience” is true only up to a point (Ursprung 2013, 59).
  10. The link between Kaprow and Artaud remains speculative. Sally Banes writes that Cage was familiar with Artaud’s work to which he had been introduced by Pierre Boulez. “Kaprow may have read Artaud’s manifestos in the class he took with John Cage” (Banes 1993, 28).
  11. Tom McDonough discusses Acconci’s *Following Piece* and Kaprow’s *Calling* together in “The Crimes of the Flâneur” and places them within the cultural tradition of the flâneur (McDonough 2002a). He points out the fact that *Following Piece* and *Calling* have very different artistic conceptions: Acconci’s is an inconspicuous performance with a sociological take on urban interaction, while Kaprow’s is an eye-catching demonstration of how theatricality can be deployed away from conventional

dramatic venues. Moreover, there is little walking in *Calling*, whose emphasis is on circulation and changing locales rather than on mapping the city by foot. Acconci acknowledged the impact of Ervin Goffman's sociological analysis on *Following Piece* and other pieces he was doing at the end of the 1960s. Kaprow was familiar with Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that he mentions in "Participation Performance" (1977). Kaprow highlights Goffman's merit in showing that the "routines of domesticity, work, education, and management of daily affairs (...) possess a distinctly performance-like character" and in making them subjects of sociological investigation (Kaprow 1993, 186).

12. For an excellent introduction to Fluxus, see Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (2002).

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Following Vito Acconci

Vito Acconci's career as a writer, artist and architect is characterized by a steady concern with the spaces of the printed page, the museum and the city, and a fascination with the artificial and porous character of normative boundaries that separate artistic forms and regulate social space. From his early career as a poet in the 1960s to his recent architectural work via his performances and installations, Acconci has obsessively questioned the conditions of occupying and inhabiting space, urban space in particular, with emphasis on mapping New York. In what follows, I will explore the nature and underlying assumptions of Acconci's engagement with urban sites and architecture. The artist typically uses the materials and contexts at hand in order to lay bare existing conventions and unsettle them, thus encoding a reflection on complicity and subversion. Acconci's choice of artistic spaces and the way he has invested the page, the street, the gallery, then again urban space have inscribed them in larger categories, respectively, the textual, the sociological and the ideological, reflected in the choice of artistic forms that are ever more explicit in their critique, exposing phenomena of compliance and participation in the larger systems of culture and nationhood. This evolution toward greater critical explicitness and acerbity is visible in Acconci's fluctuating moves from a modernist-driven writing project dependent on minimalist procedures to the embrace of different media and sites and to the ever-greater inclusion of cultural discourses and references (also originating in modernism), many of which revisit American mythologies

about building and inhabiting. In “Performance After the Fact,” Acconci mentions the artist’s spectrum of possible identities, from the “guerilla fighter” to “the prankster” (Acconci 2001, 357). Acconci’s mappings of textual and urban spaces as well as his more global mappings of American culture show his attempts to exploit the many possibilities of being or committing an aesthetic nuisance, a term with no critical pedigree as such, but which is a variation on the subversive artist.

Vito Hannibal Acconci (1940–2017) studied literature at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA and then graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He embarked upon a literary career as a poet in New York City in the 1960s, but by the end of the decade he left writing behind (or so it seems) and moved into the realm of art, becoming a performance and video artist, experimenting also with permanent sculpture and installations.<sup>1</sup> His early literary production was influenced by the modernism of Stein, Pound, Joyce and Beckett, by the *Nouveau roman* as well, consisting in experiments with typography and the space of the printed page, and a rejection of the transitivity of language: Acconci claimed that he never wanted to write *about* something, but that he wanted to write *something* and that he used “language to cover a page rather than uncover meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Such statements and the practice they inform were instrumental in the linguistic turn taken by the arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Another phase of his career began in 1988, when he founded the prolific Acconci Studio (based in Brooklyn), devoted to landscape and architecture design. Acconci’s architectural projects are a reflection on the meanings of public space and the possibilities of exchange between buildings and their environments. In addition to revisiting the foundational discourses of architecture, Acconci’s installations and architectural work have repeatedly targeted the cultural discourses of Americanism and their global dissemination.

Acconci’s use of spatial tropes in his interviews and essays betrays a deeply entrenched spatial thinking that informs his artistic vision in a marked way. When he refers to his first forays in performance art in the 1960s, he mentions the fact that art for his generation was a “non-field.” Open, indefinite, lacking clear specificity and still to be invented, it welcomed newcomers and innovators who felt they could bring elements from other fields: “I felt free to come to it from the closed field of poetry, in which the parameters were set” (Acconci quoted in Poggi 1999, 255). Poetry and the arts are designated as fields, open, closed or running counter to the very notion of “field.” While poetry is considered

to be an already-structured intellectual domain with set rules and conventions, the arts in the context referred to by Acconci are seen as open to experiment, to new parameters and forms. Although it is reductive to pit the “set parameters” of the supposedly “closed” field of poetry against the “non-field” of art open to novelty and fluid reinvention, an opposition constructed in these schematic terms reflects Acconci’s passage from the practice of poetry he knew well to the practice of artistic performance, followed by further explorations in other fields. Acconci’s use of the words “field” and “non-field” also beckons polemically to the notions of “medium” and “medium specificity” associated with Clement Greenberg.<sup>3</sup> His comments implicitly refer to the transformation and hybridization of the media of arts, including Acconci’s own experiments that combined freely poetry and performance, voice and printed matter.

Although at first sight it might seem that Acconci is opposing the fixed rules of poetry to the experimental practices that reinvent the “non-field” of art, he articulates a more complex relationship between poetry and the arts in an interview where he expresses his belief that poetry lies at the foundation of the arts and makes itself manifest in different spaces and media, from film to architecture, from sentence to event:

I’d put poetry at the bottom of a hierarchy of the arts – not because it’s lesser, but because it’s the base, the undercurrent, the sub-structure of the arts. But, as a base, it’s only a beginning. Poetry has nothing to do with concentration of language, or distillation of language; poetry is an attempt to get through language and arrive at a state of pre-language – it’s a cry, a gasp, a screech. [...] Then, later, poetry throws the voice into spaces, events; poetry grows up to become a novel, or a movie, or music, or architecture. But: once a poet always a poet – or, at least, once a language-user always a language-user. I don’t know how to think – more exactly, I don’t know how to know I’m thinking – except by language. I start a project by naming the conditions and playing with words, punning on those names. Or I start a project by subject-verb-object: I parse a space, I use sentence-structure to plot possible movements through that space. (Acconci quoted in Taylor et al. 2002, 9–10)

A primordial relationship to language lies at the origin of artistic thought and action, informing self-awareness and epistemology as well. Playing with words, naming, decomposing sentences, syntactic parsing constitute a point of departure and an operational model (that is, a

set of procedures) for artistic projects inscribed in space (the museum, the street, the body). A correspondence is developed between syntactic structures (“subject-verb-object”) and spatial movement (“plotting movement through space”). The notion of “language-user” suggests a pragmatic approach to language, which is difficult to reconcile with the quasi-mystic understanding of poetry as primordial inarticulate language (“a screech, a cry”). One cannot help but establish a connection between Acconci’s activity of “naming the conditions and playing with words” and Wittgenstein’s “language games,” discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), which stem from the latter’s critique of Saint Augustine’s description of language learning and language usage in the *Confessions*. The builders’ language game illustrates Saint Augustine’s view of language and language use, with the implicit assumptions that language is governed by rules and is activity oriented. Wittgenstein points at the limits of this view and also at the vast array of language practices that exist beyond this model.<sup>4</sup>

#### INSIDE/OUTSIDE: BOUNDARIES OF THE PAGE

Before he found his way *off* the page, Acconci tried to find his way *on* the page, playing with the distribution and configuration of words, and with the selective transfer of words from existing texts to new ones he was creating in the process. Any attempt to understand the motivations and specific forms of Acconci’s city-oriented projects should start from the observation that in his interviews and statements about his art he identifies the origin of his urban performances in his poetic experiments, after years of using minimalist procedures of cutting and transferring words from other texts and placing them on the page according to certain set rules. A continuity exists between the literary and the urban phases, but it is the *a contrario* continuity of an artist looking for new forms of expression. Acconci’s lack of interest in meaning and linguistic transitivity in favor of the material configurations of language in print results in a vision of the page and the book as site endowed with certain physical properties (a rectangular shape, boundaries, pages as sequential units) and certain conventions of using space imposed by the repertoire of technical possibilities inherent in the technology of printing. The mimeograph revolution facilitated the reproduction of these texts with their quaint, old-fashioned, low-tech aspect for today’s readers, familiar with word processing. As Craig Dworkin contends, in his early writings,

Acconci is laying bare “the gravity of linguistic material” in a way that is reminiscent of Robert Smithson’s *A Heap of Language* (1966), which is a crossover between visual poetry and artwork, writing and drawing (Dworkin 2001, 92). The analogy between Acconci and Smithson cannot be taken further, and their divergence is visible in their distinct artistic trajectories. While Smithson’s pencil drawing/handwriting of the “heap of language” is consigned to paper by the artist’s hand, Acconci is foregrounding the constraints of mechanical presentation and reproduction typical of the printed page, with its neat layered configuration of letters and words embedded in the Western conventional framework of reading and writing (left–right, up–down). As a corollary of this interest in the “monumentality” of language and its status of “printed matter,” the spatiality of the page and the localized nature of printed words come to the fore.

Acconci’s use of the medium of writing results from a spatial vision of the book and the page as physical sites where linguistic sequences are performing, inviting both the writer and the reader to wander across, as he declares in an interview: “The poems were already performances: the page was a field over which I as a writer, and then you as a reader, travelled” (Acconci in Taylor et al. 2002, 13). The term “performance” appears in poem titles, as is the case with “My Performance of Ezra Pound’s *Alba*.” Acconci’s definition of performance insists on the acts performed (movement across the page) and the support (the spatiality of the page) but leaves aside subjectivity and the origin of the performance itself. Words become “props for movement,” as Acconci calls them in “Notes on Work. 1967-1970” that is catalysts of a journey across the materiality of the page, regulated by constraints imposed by the writer himself (Acconci 2001, 350). Acconci’s writing displays a version of the modernist impersonality identified by T. S. Eliot in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, which manifests itself in the cultivation of depersonalized processes, like systematic transfers of whole sequences from other texts. Acconci’s texts whose choice of words is dictated by the reliance on other printed texts, most of the time archival, encyclopedic and systematic in nature—telephone directories, dictionaries, maps—project an understanding of creativity not as a fluid discursive process that develops in sentence units, but rather as a parsing and displacement of small verbal units from their source to a new textual formation. The writing is parasitical on existing conventional systems of representation, linguistic, numerical and visual in various combinations. The process certainly

carries a dose of subversion, whose success is dependent on the playful and obsessive colonization and decomposition of preexisting materials.

Thus, “Contacts/Contexts (Frame of reference): ten pages of reading *Roget’s Thesaurus*” offers a selection of dictionary definitions, from “existence” to “insanity” (Acconci 2006, 229–238). The page numbers of the chosen entries are always indicated, thus pointing to the randomness of the selection. The final entry (“insanity”) is truncated, ending lamely in “bereft of reason, de-” (Acconci 2006, 238). The constraint of only reproducing certain lines and not paying attention to the overall meaning and to the continuity of semantic development disregards completeness to the point where words are no longer carriers of meaning, but simply blocks of letters that can be taken apart. Again, a spatial kind of thought and action is at work, disorienting the reader away from predictable patterns of reading and interpretation, as Acconci argues in a 1969 letter to Clayton Eshleman: “words have charge, they develop an orientation in the reader. Therefore, it is the work of the art situation to jolt the reader out of that orientation. That work cannot be accomplished by playing up to that orientation, by repeating that ‘charge’” (Acconci 2006, xiv).

Another line of action consists in focusing on specific parts of the page (right/left/up/down). The “Transference” series (1969) also follows a principle of dictionary selection, but instead of targeting individual entries, it focuses on individual letters that can be found at the end of each line (Acconci 2006, 241–275). Concentrating on the “left margin: from page 1, *Roget’s Thesaurus* (St. Martin’s Press, 1965) to page 241,” this “installation” (as Acconci calls it) reproduces the vertical line of letters to the far right of the chosen pages, leaving the rest of the page blank. The word “installation” signifies an artistic analogy at work, as Liz Kotz suggests: “An ‘installation’ of words on the physical space of the page analogous to an installation of objects in the physical space of a room, his poems use words as objects to be accumulated, arranged, stacked, dispersed, and moved” (Kotz 2007, 156). Other Thesaurus “installations” interact with different pages in the dictionary, in a long series that draws attention to the horizontality and verticality of the lines on the page. This looks like a variation on the conventional metaphor of textuality as a form of weaving, an intertwining of the warp and weft. Here, rather than leading to the composition of a text through layering and gradual, sequential addition, the process of selection functions as a radical decomposition of an existing text which is stripped of the majority of its words and lines. A single

vertical line subsists, a minimal and meaningless tower of Babel made of stranded letters that draw attention to the large blank of the empty page it towers above. Although it seems to make *tabula rasa* of the initial text that constitutes its raw material and point of departure, this left margin installation points to the limitlessness of what lies beyond the vertical line, inside and outside the book. The left margin as survivor of a slashed text has an unframing effect, since a single boundary remains out of four. In a conversation with Shelley Jackson, Acconci discusses these “installations” as resulting from the need to escape the linearity of the page. This contemporary perspective sheds light on the points of convergence between the experiments of a writer/artist like Acconci who reflects on how to evade linearity in the 1960s and recent hypertexts.

Acconci’s work inspired by cartography is particularly interesting since the drive to aesthetic autonomy of the resulting texts is necessarily complicated by their relationship to reference and referentiality, and to the specific conventions used in cartographic representation (for instance, the grid coordinates). The use of road maps and city maps calls for closer scrutiny in light of Acconci’s transition to the urban environment later in his career. An analogy between map and textual space is implicitly asserted, with place names and grid locations circulating from one to the other.<sup>5</sup> This balancing of the two invites us to consider the cartographic poems as transitional pieces leading to the later urban performances. The transference piece that deals with “the right boundary of a road map, New York” (Acconci 2006, 312) or his “Set/Reset” series lists the place names that are spatially on the edge of the chosen map and transports them on a different page, recontextualizing the visual and linguistic system of cartographic representation. The New York map purports to function as an accurate instrument of orientation, whereas the transference piece operates through selective disorientation, playing with the referential function of place names.

These manipulations of cartography translate a system of signs into another, a visual representation into an unsettling poetry project, distorting the medium of print as well. The map as a referential construct offering a visual approximation of (or a proposition about) existing territories is submitted to selective duplication which results in a textual map that renounces the visual component of cartography.<sup>6</sup> The following excerpt from a piece entitled “Transference: The Right Boundary of a Road Map, New York, Copyright R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Getty Oil Company” is based on massive erasure:

Vergennes  
 Fair River  
 Addison  
 Lake Champlain Bridge (Toll)  
 Bridgeport  
 Middlebury Col.  
 Lemon River  
 Shoreham  
 Fort Ticonderoga  
 Orwell  
 Lake Hortonia  
 Putnam Station  
 Dresden Station  
 Dresden Cen.  
 (...)  
 (Acconci 2006, 312–313)

Functional way-finding with the help of the map turns into a material poetics of way-finding on the page. The operation of selecting specific parts of the map and reprinting and replacing them on a separate sheet of paper creates an effect of selective doubling and haunting referentiality. The above list is homogenous insofar it transfers only place names, recognizable as such, but a different example is more unsettling in its heterogeneity of elements gleaned from a map. “Set/Reset:1: The left boundary of Hagstrom’s Map of the Bronx” features five distinct columns in which place names, disparate words, truncated words, as well as numbers are listed indiscriminately:

Park  
 Boat  
 Basin  
 ation  
 S  
 Re  
 558  
 35  
 668  
 622  
 D  
 ll  
 U  
 tan

Man  
 630  
 H  
 Ri  
 N.  
 Parkway  
 St.  
 Pl  
 12  
 182  
 La Salle  
 160  
 Grant's  
 (...)  
 (Acconci 2006, 361)

The left boundaries of Hagstrom's *Maps of Brooklyn and Manhattan* are presented in "Set/Reset" 2 and 3. Acconci explores the cartographic grid by focusing on frontier spaces at the edge of the map that make no immediate geographical sense when expressed in this form, but stand for abstract data resulting from the conventional vocabulary of rational urban planning.<sup>7</sup> A translation of the Manhattan grid into poetic experiment and of the map as mixed medium into the printed text is given by "Removal, Move (Line of Evidence): the grid locations of streets, alphabetized, Hagstrom's *Map of the five boroughs*: 3. Manhattan":

J12 G13 G12 B11 K9 B11 F11 F14 D13 C6 C14 F2 A9 C14 J9 B12 B12  
 C12 C12 C12 C12 C12 C12 D13 D13 D13 D13 D13 D13 D14 D14 C5  
 C14 C14 C14 H13 G2 B6 F14 G4 J9 F3 F6 F6 J7 H14 D14 K12 (...)  
 (Acconci 2006, 368)

And on it goes for pages on end. These notations of coordinates combining letters and numbers project a Cartesian space, rational and repetitive, dependent historically on the model of the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, which was the fruit of early modern conceptions of space (Ballon 2012, 95). Although Acconci's "Removal/Move" might seem an autotelic exercise in mechanical intertextuality, there is a strong historical dimension inherent in the kind of representation it uses (Hagstrom's map and the grid coordinates). The map looks like an abstract model, mathematical and linguistic, which corresponds to a conceptual approach to space, but the gridded streetscape is a historical construct that involved urban planning, real

estate development and a certain idea of progress for a rapidly growing city at a given point in time. The urban grid is textualized and enumerated step by step, within an implicitly historical perspective.<sup>8</sup> Layers of history underlie the grid and the idiom of Cartesian coordinates signifies movement, location and development in time. The etymology of the word “map” is revealed: a support to write on. Acconci’s pieces that excise dictionaries and maps draw attention to the vast territories of blankness left on the printed page, with selected lists of words crowding in a vertical line along the margins of the page. Acconci’s cartographic pieces play with the possibility of a literary map inscribed in gridded historical representations, whose visual outline results from the configuration of words on the page. Such a map is only remotely connected to the more conventional geographical maps included in literary texts like R. L. Stevenson’s map of treasure island, although it seems closer in spirit to Lewis Carroll’s blank *Ocean Chart* in *The Hunting of the Snark*. The precise notation of coordinates and a strong awareness of location will remain central in Acconci’s later forays into performance art in the metropolis, as is the case in *Following Piece*. In the verbal transfers from maps, Acconci never loses sight of the world beyond the circuit of intertextual traffic that loops from maps to poems, and he seeks to establish a link between the page and the street. Thus, in “Notes on Work. 1967-1970,” he calls forth a vision of the “page as a map” made possible by making “reading time equivalent to the time required to perform an activity in outside space” (Acconci 2001, 350).

The step beyond the page is not fortuitous or whimsical. Rather, it results from the logic of Acconci’s procedures within the boundaries of the page, which finally give way under the pressure of the accumulated words towering steadily.<sup>9</sup> There was no debate about the nature and limits of the medium of literature similar to the debate about the medium in art, especially in painting, in the USA of the 1950s and 1960s. In his musings on literature, Greenberg simply indicates that the medium of literature is more difficult to pin down than the medium of painting and laments the constant tyranny of literature over painting, which had come to an end with the advent of abstract expressionism. In “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Greenberg’s praise of modernist poetry is underscored by his belief that in order to reach that state of purity, poetry “had to escape from ‘literature’” (Greenberg 1986, 30). Greenberg’s “literature” in quotation marks is a highly pejorative term synonymous with narrative development, but also with a dubious decorative penchant. Acconci’s writings, by encompassing not only language, but also

the site of the page, produce a hybrid between literature and the visual arts. The stacks of words in the margin draw attention to their verticality, which is meaningful in conjunction with the processes of transfer and selection they originate from. The dissatisfaction that surfaces in some of Acconci's remarks about his early writings leads to the move beyond the page, a liberating gesture that takes the writer outside the matrix and medium of his art, in a polemical response to the traditional definition of the artistic medium, summarized by Mary Ann Doane as follows: "a material or technical means of aesthetic expression which harbors both constraints and possibilities, the second arguably emerging as a consequence of the first. The potential of the medium would thus lie in the notion of material resistance or even of matter itself as, paradoxically, an enabling impediment" (Doane 2007, 130). From a formalist perspective, material limits need to be observed and a specific aesthetic language must develop only within those boundaries. The impediments of the medium are indeed understood as fundamentally enabling, a negativity that is experienced in a constructive way. However, Acconci considered the impediments of the technical support to be anything but enabling. The definition of writing itself was (and still is) too restrictive as well, as Shelley Jackson argues in her interview with Acconci: "I often ask myself why writing, of all the arts, is so narrowly defined." Acconci places minimalism's concern with un-framing at the origin of his transition from paper to what lies beyond: "Minimalism was my father-art. For the first time, I was forced to recognize an entire space, and the people in it (...). Until minimalism, I had been taught, or I taught myself, to look only within a frame; with minimalism the frame broke, or at least stretched" (Acconci 1993, interview with Richard Prince, 169).<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the 1960s, Acconci stopped experimenting with purely typographic material and became a performance artist roaming the streets of New York, starting with hybrids between poetry and activity:

(Around 1968) my conception of poetry was starting to change just then, heading more towards performance-type pieces. [...] The idea was to conceive of a situation, to create all the conditions for a performance that wouldn't be limited to the printed page, but would use other means as well. For example: record a text on tape, reading it as fast as possible. Or pick up a letter that had been left on a table at a coffee shop by some unknown customer, and use it as the starting point for a new idiom, a new phrase. In other words, it was no longer just about writing poetry, but

about situating it in real space. Transfer things so that it was no longer just a question of reading poetry, but acting it out. (Acconci 2005, 26)

The page becomes a counterpart to artistic events taking place in the street, through acts that stand at the crossroads of poetry reading and performance: “the page as a map (make reading time equivalent to the time required to perform an activity in outside space)” (Acconci 2001, 350).

While Acconci’s performances that investigate urban space aim at disorienting the viewer, they often play with very precise coordinates of New York City that allow one to generate an abstract map and to situate the artist on that map. Terry Fox recalls what may have been Acconci’s last poetry reading, which never took place. Acconci “walked from his apartment to the place where the reading was held and every block that he walked he phoned into the place and they put it on speakers and he announced ‘now I am on 42<sup>nd</sup> street’ and described the situation. And of course he never made it in time to give an actual reading” (Acconci 2006, xii).

The artist’s future presence is announced by telephone, and his voice becomes the only trace of his person, the harbinger of a presence to come. The very careful monitoring of his trajectory through precise spatial indications is counterbalanced by that “jolting out” act of disorienting the audience. This vocal mapping of New York is made up of a series of announcements that function as locative specifications whose aim is to report on his getting closer to the site of the poetry reading. The repeated announcements offer information about an event that will never happen, transforming the reading into a Beckettian *Waiting for Acconci*.

### URBAN NUISANCES: *FOLLOWING PIECE* AND BEYOND

In “Projections of Home,” Acconci describes his first street activities as ways of “breaking the margins” of the page and of the house, the same margins that he had painstakingly constructed by transferring words from other texts into his own:

Before I did work in an art context, I was writing poetry. My first pieces, in an art-context, were activities in the street: this excursion into the street could be seen as an attempt to leave home, a home shaped by the contact of writing-person and desk-top, through means of paper and pen and defined by the boundaries of light. The sheet of paper, looked down at on the desk, was analogous to the plan-view of a house; going out into

the street was a way of literally breaking the margins, breaking out of the house and leaving the paper behind. (Acconci 2001, 388)

Acconci's urban cartographies begin with the gesture of leaving home behind. *Following Piece* is one of Acconci's most famous activities, performed for the exhibit "Street Works IV" organized and sponsored by the Architectural League of New York in 1969.<sup>11</sup> Located in New York City, the activity covered over three weeks in October 1969 and consisted in following strangers in the street until they reached a private space.<sup>12</sup> This "activity" is no longer restricted to textual operations, but rather physically anchored in an urban environment and embedded in the "non-field" of art, contributing to the translation of the work of art into process and performance:

Each day I pick out, at random, a person walking in the street. I follow a different person everyday; I keep following until that person enters a private place (home, office, etc.) where I can't get in. (The terms of the exhibition, "Street Works IV," were: to do a piece, sometime during the month, that used a street in New York City. *Following Piece*, potentially, could use all the time allotted and all the space available: I might be following people, all day long, everyday, through all the streets in New York City. In actuality, following episodes ranged from two or three minutes – when someone got into a car and I couldn't grab a taxi, I couldn't follow – to seven or eight hours – when a person went to a restaurant, a movie...). (Acconci 2001, 78)

Only traces of the event subsist, the artist's notes and the photographs taken by Betsy Jackson, which were exhibited in "Street Works." Also, a precise logbook was produced, specifying not only the time and place, but also certain characteristics of the person followed (color of clothes and gender):

October 3

9:12AM, in front of door, 102 Christopher St, my home: Man in gray suit – he walks W on Christopher, S side of street.

9:17AM: he gets into car parked outside post office, Christopher & Greenwich, and drives away.

October 4

9:25AM, Christopher St & Bleeker, SW corner: Woman in black coat – she walks E on Christopher, N side of street.

9:28AM: she walks into A&P, Christopher St & 7th Ave.

9:59AM: she leaves A&P and walks W on Christopher.

10:03AM: she enters building, 95 Christopher St.

([http://www.vitoacconci.org/portfolio\\_page/following-piece-1969/](http://www.vitoacconci.org/portfolio_page/following-piece-1969/))

It has been argued that Acconci moves away from a “centered to a decentered subject” and “from a modernist vision of the world to a post-modernist one” (Linker 1994, 7). The argument that the modernist self was centered, coherent and cohesive is not a tenable one. The opposition between the “modern” and the “postmodern” self does not take into account the many slippages, divisions and inconsistencies that modernism already intuited and acted out.<sup>13</sup> Acconci’s work explores the notion of social territories (ideological and cultural ones as well in some of his installations), but “the self” as a psychological construct is not central here; rather, what matters is the “subject function” within a space or a system. The prerogatives of the “subject function” emerge in movement (moving in, moving out, moving the contents of one’s home around the city, having personal items—letters—sent to a different destination), territory delimitation (private vs. public) and imitation or surveillance (following strangers around the city). This “subject function” is not disembodied and ahistorical. It is the mobility of the artist’s body that activates the prerogatives of the “subject function,” and the oppositions he highlights, especially private vs. public, should be understood as major concerns of the 1960s in terms of social interaction and opposition to authority (protests, demonstrations, marches that occupied public space). Also, these divisions undergo historical evolution. In an essay published in 1990 entitled “Public Space in a Private Time,” Acconci remarks on the fact that the opposition public vs. private space has become obsolete in the electronic age, when it is no longer necessary to leave home and public space is redefined as “the presence of other bodies” and an “analogue for sex”: “you go out to shake your body loose” (910).

There is consensus among critics about the fact that *Following Piece* is akin to Acconci’s previous language games: following a rule, accomplishing a recursive activity, interacting with existing systems. It is certainly relevant that this performance evolved from previous linguistic experiments. But such similarities should not distract us from the huge novelty of taking performance into the urban arena. A change of perspective and of medium, although motivated by linguistic concerns akin to those that generated the earlier textual experiments, leads to an explosion of

differing aesthetic insights and consequences.<sup>14</sup> In his theoretical writings, Acconci does express a distrust of the word “performance” on the grounds that it is implicitly associated with the theater as a traditional space of representation that creates a separation between performer and audience (Acconci, “Performance after the Fact” 2001, 353). In this sense, his performances are not a “resuscitation” of a canonical type of dramatic production. However, Acconci’s “activities” still retain a strong performative dimension that cannot be reduced to linguistic models and that plays with existing social conventions formalized through the language of theater (performing movement, putting on a face...).

Even if one accepts the assumption that a logic of continuity underlies Acconci’s passage from the page to the street, still, it is not clear why the poetic experiments presented above led to the specific format of a performance like *Following Piece*.<sup>15</sup> First of all, Acconci claims that in order to roam the city, he needed “reasons” to be there, which can be understood as aesthetic reasons for renouncing writing in favor of urban performance. The “reasons” he was looking for were provided by the various schemes and algorithms of following or moving in/out that he devised and put into practice. Such “reasons” are nothing like the banal “reasons” of everyday life movements across the city, which involve the routine of work, home, shopping and leisure. It seems that, for Acconci, in order to be in the city, one needs to discard banal routines and imagine different, circuitous and surprising justifications for leaving home. The city becomes the place where the artist submits to patterns of behavior that are unique and extravagant, and that nobody else shares, except unwittingly or forcibly. Their repetitive nature can be traced back to the seriality of minimalism and, superficially, to the urban games played by the avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century with totally different motivations and objectives. The relationship with the city is mediated by tortuously premeditated scenarios or “schemes” as he calls them that always involve movement from one place to another (Acconci in Taylor et al. 2002, 39).<sup>16</sup> The strangeness and artificiality of Acconci’s schemes (following people in the street or moving one’s belongings from home to a museum) reveal the constructed nature of the accepted scenarios of being in the city. His protocols achieve a denaturalization of conventional social justifications and patterns of navigating the city. Indeed, following people in the street appears as questionable ethically and socially, but going to the movies is perfectly acceptable, part of an inventory of “normal” social behavior. Acconci’s “city” starts out as opposed to “home” in order to

highlight the divisions of space as a social construct, but gradually the artist attempts to invert the functions of the various compartments (home/city, artist studio/gallery, home/museum), for instance by staging performances at home or by taking up residence in a museum. Acconci's urban performances are set in New York City, and the city's specific locations and institutions are certainly relevant, but more generally he takes "the city" to the more abstract level of social configurations and interactions. It is a social and cultural mapping of New York as generic city that Acconci performs. The procedures are still algorithmic in nature, but additional discourses imported from the sociology of interaction shape the understanding of site in a fundamental manner. Acconci's interest in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, psychologist Kurt Lewin and anthropologist Edward T. Hall has already been pointed out, starting with the artist himself. However, it is worth inquiring what kind of urban space Acconci projects by absorbing the conclusions of these authors and what artistic forms he brings into play in order to foreground a number of phenomena at the core of the sociological, psychological and anthropological inquiries of the 1960s. In 1966, Kurt Lewin's *Principles of Topological Psychology* (originally published in 1936) was republished. The same year was published Edward T. Hall's *The Hidden Dimension*, whose main theme is social and personal space and man's perception of it, through the study of "proxemics," a term coined by Hall to refer to the theories of man's use of space (Hall 1990, 1). Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was published in 1959.

In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between Acconci and Goffman, since Goffman's peculiar methodology of covert participation seems to have overlapped in extremely interesting ways with some of Acconci's performing strategies. Goffman was an independent spirit in the field of sociology, who disliked being pigeonholed and did not consider himself part of a direction or group in sociological research. Trained in the tradition of the Chicago School, he used ethnographic methodology and shared George Herbert Mead's interest in symbolic interaction. Goffman pioneered microsociology, focusing primarily on relations in public, the territories of the self, the fashioning of the self in public, body language, social regulations, acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Acconci's move from writing to performance in the city takes him, in Goffman's terms, from disembodied to embodied communication, from messages that "hold information long after the organism has stopped informing" (writing included) to messages that a sender conveys by

means of his own current bodily activity (speech included) (Goffman 1963, 14). Acconci's use of "body idioms" in the city places him at the intersection of semiotics and sociology, to include the signs typical of urban social interaction, especially in contexts of improper behavior (Goffman 1963, 33–35). *Following Piece*, *Proximity Piece* and others that Acconci created at the end of the 1960s all dealt with the normative frameworks of social life, with the ideas of nuisance, aggressiveness, exposure and invasion of privacy. The artist himself becomes a possible "nuisance." When asked to think about an epitaph he would write for himself, Acconci chose "public nuisance": "There's a legal term for a problem in public space: something that might draw people to an area – say, across train tracks – where they might be caused harm. It's called a 'public nuisance.' I wouldn't mind being called that, for my life's work. But there won't be any epitaph" (Acconci in Taylor et al. 2002, 15).

Acconci's city is a sociological aggregate that functions according to certain tacit or formal regulations, whose transgression the artist simulated repeatedly. It has been argued that Acconci is fascinated with the boundaries between private and public. This is certainly the case, but more largely he is fascinated with the diffuse normative and regulatory mechanisms of spaces and social behavior, of which the distinction between private and public is only one aspect. Goffman's own discussion of behavior in public places is not governed by rigorous definitions; rather, he acknowledges from the very beginning the fact that he relies on "the familiar distinction" and the "simple dichotomy" between "acts that are approved and acts that are felt to be improper" (Goffman 1963, 4). This reference to the choice of terminology is a rhetorical strategy on Goffman's part meant to give him creative license in his work and prevent rigid categorization. Similarly, Acconci's *Following Piece* does not rely on precise legal definitions, but rather on intuitive or accepted definitions, which give him more freedom of action.

Acconci's experiments did not lead to the "criminal" artist being caught in the act and questioned by the people he followed (in the case of *Following Piece*) or sued for indecent behavior (in *Seedbed*) or aggressive behavior (in *Proximity Piece* or *Claim*).<sup>17</sup> But such legal outcomes can be imagined as entirely possible, deriving from the counter-normative logic of his art. Issues of litigation are central to the art of the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the case of land property and land use: Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark are cases in point. Acconci is not involved in the administrative, legal and cultural values (and complications) of property,

he rather explores civility conventions and “situational proprieties” or “improprieties” as Goffman calls them in *Behavior in Public Places*. But what is at stake here is not just the potentially criminal aspect of these pieces. A pathological motivation might also be discernible in the obsessive patterns of *Following Piece*. Goffman gathered material for *Behavior in Public Places* after having spent one year observing mental patients in 1955–1956. In Chapter 1, he links the diagnosis of mental disorder with psychiatric observations that certain kinds of behavior are “inappropriate in the situation” and consequently symptomatic of illness (Goffman 1963, 3). Also, following is a gendered enterprise, strongly inflected as masculine, and Acconci anchors some of his works in the domain of sexual and gendered stereotypes, not only in *Following Piece*, but also in other examples, especially *Broadjump* (1971), a parodic replay of a sexual contest. Acconci’s scenario of following can be interpreted as an undertaking that sheds light on the legal, ethical, pathological and gendered implications of certain forms of misconduct.

The notion of nuisance is in keeping with the occasional exploration of marginal spaces in New York connoted as dangerous and threatening, like basements (in *Claim*) and remote piers whose menacing potential is enhanced by the choice of nocturnal scenarios. In *Untitled Project for Pier 17* (1971), Acconci stood at the far end of the pier at 1 am alone, for one hour every night over a period of 29 days, ready to confess something about him that could be used against him as blackmail (Acconci 2001, 140).<sup>18</sup> In *Security Zone* (1971, activity), Acconci imagined standing at the far end of the pier with a person he has “ambiguous feeling about, a person I don’t trust.” The artist is blindfolded, his hands tied behind him, his ears plugged, in a deprived position, forced to have trust in the only person who can prevent him from walking off into the water. In *Under-History Lessons* (1976), Acconci used the boiler room of an old schoolhouse—which was going to become MoMa PS1—for an installation that mimicked a schoolroom (Acconci 2001, 180). *Sub-Urb* (1983) takes the meaning of “suburbia” literally (the city under the ground) by presenting an underground housing complex turned upside down. Acconci had already shown a certain fascination with margins in his early writings, constructing towers of selected sequences and transferring fragments from the margins of other texts. In the urban installations and performances, marginality acquires urban and social significance, but also refers to the marginality of the artist, who uses it as leverage to contradict “the main body of the text of a culture” (Acconci 2001, 383).<sup>19</sup>

The methods and efficiency of these attempts at contradiction deserve further scrutiny. What is particularly surprising in *Following Piece* is the paradoxical combination of epistemological certainty and uncertainty about the local coordinates and the global picture. Following another person instead of one's own self-determined aims results in not knowing where one is going but knowing exactly where one is at every given point, which looks like a weak model of agency, whose potential for criticism is extremely limited. How does *Following Piece* harness its critical energy and how does it tap into the critical reservoir of 1960s protest culture (if at all)? Although Acconci claims in an interview that his "early work came out of the context of the Vietnam War: self-immolation, boundary protection, aggression" and mentions his participation in the "usual demonstrations," such claims are not directly supported by the works themselves. Acconci himself is aware of the distance: "The problem was that the work generalized those themes away from a particular target. It made them 'ideas' and not political action" (Acconci 1993, interview with Richard Prince, 171). Explicit examples of staging songs, plays, parades and protests in public places are studied by Martin D. Bradford in *The Theater Is in the Street* (2004), which examines the freedom singers of the civil rights movement, the Living Theater, the Diggers, the Art Workers Coalition and the Guerilla Art Action Group, all of whom intersect New Left concerns and the counterculture of the 1960s. In 1970, Yvonne Rainer presented two overtly political performances, *WAR* at Douglass College (a dance protesting against the Vietnam War) and *Street actions* in Lower Manhattan (a march against the American invasion of Cambodia), both inspired by the tactics of public demonstrations (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 199–252).

In comparison with these, Acconci orchestrates conceptual intrusions into public space. *Following Piece* does not embrace the usual modes of action or protest of the 1960s, but its unsettling procedure is germane with the spirit of the era, with its defiance, panache and questioning of authority. It is tempting to activate the prominent context of protest of the 1960s and 1970s, as Frazer Ward does, and project some of Acconci's works against the background of the "claims to the public realm" that were being made by civil rights activists, feminists, gay rights activists and their opponents. However, if Acconci deals with the "ideological functions of the self," as Ward suggests (64), the way these ideological functions are explored is through complicity and discretion, and not through blatant contestation or infringement.

*Following Piece* relies on the acceptance of existing patterns and structures in the urban realm, to which the artist “adheres,” a term he uses repeatedly in his essays, intent on highlighting their workings from within (Acconci 2001, 350–351). The element of critique results from this highlighting, which is performative and conceptual, and remains paradoxically discreet. Acconci blends in his environment and his invisibility is a statement in itself, a hallmark of a critical reflection elaborated from within the city, through the adoption of existing circuits of movement and an attitude subordinate to the volition of others. Acconci mirrors here the main conclusions of Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which stress the ceremonial, normative and performative aspects of social interaction, seen as a choreography of masks. The disturbing underside of this theatrical component is that “the self” disappears behind the mask and remains ungraspable. Masks are illusive; their usage is temporary and cannot be trusted. Social interaction is thus a ballet of surface *personae* who act according to certain patterns, and whose authenticity and sincerity are questionable. Goffman’s conclusions were subversive in their insistence on surfaces and the dramaturgy of role-playing, which resonated with structuralist readings about shifting and elusive signifiers, although Goffman did not openly acknowledge structuralism as an intellectual interest.

In *Following Piece*, New York preexists the artist, who throws into relief its social boundaries and spatial trajectories. As such, the piece carries an element of institutional critique, although the “institution” or “institutions” it targets are vast and diffuse: New York as regulated social space, public space, the correlation between spatial boundaries and acceptable/inacceptable behavior. The ethical and criminal dimension of following remains a potential that is not actualized (in any case, it is not recorded in the artist’s documentation). The whole work is a statement about complicity verging on transgression, submissiveness verging into impropriety, repetition signifying as implicit critique. *Following Piece* adopts a mood of understatement and a shadowy, subdued dynamic that is even more upsetting for being inconspicuous. This approach is reminiscent of Erving Goffman’s covert participation in his research for *Asylums* (1961). For one year, Goffman worked in an asylum for the mentally ill posing as “assistant athletic director” and being an observing participant, as he explains in the preface. Only a few members of the staff were aware of his real identity and research motivations.<sup>20</sup> Goffman’s unorthodox methods of observation seem to be reflected in Acconci’s

own unobtrusive insertion in the urban fabric, although Acconci was constantly followed by a photographer during his “activity.”

Finally, the intertextual dynamic at work here reveals an approach to the city mediated by previous cultural patterns. *Following Piece* brings together interlocking supports and layered conventions, comprising the artist’s body, the camera, New York City as site, the captions accompanying the photographs and alongside these, all the generic and cultural subtexts about the city as locus of modernity. The intertextual dimension that was also visible in the transference pieces becomes more complex, since a host of cultural discourses are activated. Repetition is intrinsic to the act of following a person in the street the way one would follow an artistic predecessor. *Following Piece* distills previous literary and artistic explorations that have counted in the modern experience of the city and that have grounded the city firmly at the core of modernity. *Following Piece* weaves together a number of cultural and urban representations that situate the performance on a terrain that overlaps only partially with that of Acconci’s earlier literary installations, whose intertextuality was mechanical in nature. The very idea of “following” involves rereading, appropriation and distortion of existing models (Surrealist and Dadaist urban games, the Situationist *dérive*, Poe’s “Man of the Crowd”), but precise literary and artistic comparisons need to be nuanced. *Following Piece* certainly looks like a game reminiscent of Surrealist and Dadaists urban games, notably through shared interest in chance, but they develop within distinct conceptual frameworks.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Surrealism and Dadaism viewed the city and psychic life as mutually dependent entities linked by what Rosalind Krauss calls a “double arrow” (Krauss 1981, 33–38), Acconci does not include the psyche among the dimensions that are relevant in the elaboration of his urban artistic practice. If the acts of following and wandering in the city lead to observation, amazement, boredom, discovery or unexpected encounters that leave a mark on the walking subject, these are left untold because they are not meant to shape the performance and to play a role in its conception and transmission. Moreover, the Surrealists and Dadaists chose the city as the privileged site of exploration and articulation of a new artistic idiom because of its climactic and unsurpassed embodiment of modernity. This is not the case here, where New York can only indirectly be seen as a site of modernity (which is certainly true because of the huge and varied amount of literary and artistic experimentation going on there in the 1960s). But urban modernity is not the point and Acconci

is not an avatar of Baudelaire's flâneur who lets the kaleidoscopic spectacle of the city sink in and experiences its intoxication. There is no focus on the libidinal tangle that irrupts in the chance encounter with the Baudelairean *passante*.<sup>22</sup> The disorientation and defamiliarization of the familiar sought by the *dérive* are not at stake here either. The precise, neutral notations of time and place show that the artist is moving across well-known territory and does not seek to get lost, in the way the Situationists did, although a subversive dimension underlies the surveillance undertones of following.<sup>23</sup> *Following Piece* is only remotely connected to the writers and artists of the *flânerie* and *dérive* and has no manifest link to earlier precursors like Poe's tale "The Man of the Crowd," which is one of the first texts (if not the first) to present and problematize the situation of following a stranger in the street. Acconci's piece and Poe's text are often mentioned together in discussions of artistic experiments investing urban space and generating patterns of walking and following.<sup>24</sup> Poe's text appears as a relevant term of comparison and literary counterpart that is spontaneously associated with Acconci and others, although no specific evidence supports the rapprochement. This is not a Borgesian case of artists choosing their predecessors in a spirit of affinity, but rather a case of writers (Poe) and artists (Acconci) creating works in different media and producing similar external patterns (walking, following, urban setting) that have widely distinct significances and are triggered by divergent concerns.

In 1970, one year after *Following Piece*, Acconci did three pieces that invited exchanges between the art gallery and the city. *Room Piece* was performed over three weekends in January. On each weekend the artist would take the contents of a section of his downtown New York apartment to the Gain Ground Gallery located eight blocks away. Every time he needed any personal items he had to go to the gallery and get them. First kitchen, then living room, bedroom, and bathroom, and finally workroom objects were moved to the gallery. A daily journal documented his comings and goings between gallery and apartment: the objects he needed, the means of transportation he used, his itinerary. Personal property seen as an annex to the self is dispersed in two distinct locations and constantly transported between the two. The person's universe is artificially extended by planting personal landmarks (a toothbrush for instance) elsewhere, away from home. In this activity, objects cannot be duplicated. A toothbrush cannot be replaced; rather, it needs to be retrieved. *Room Piece* is a reflection on the spaces

we inhabit and the way personal objects become markers of the self and its space. The artist is forced to be in constant transit, like a commuter confronted with the incompressible two-location problem. A somewhat similar encroachment upon institutional space is manifest in *Service Area*, which was Acconci's contribution to the exhibition entitled *Information* held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from June to September 1970. During those months, Acconci had his mail forwarded to the museum. Ward points out that the Museum of Modern Art was a privately owned public museum and the postal service was at that time a federal agency, thus complicating the interweaving of public/private and federal/private (Ward 2012, 57). These activities did not involve an audience, but *Step Piece* opened the doors to the artist's apartment inviting spectators to attend a recurrent activity. For thirty minutes every morning the artist would step on and off a stool and then send monthly progress reports. No spectator showed up for the activity (Ward 2012, 162).

Acconci keeps making analogies between spaces seen as superficially similar, but which, in retrospect, appear to have been fundamentally different. Thus, the page is analogous to the home, the street is analogous to the gallery, but some of these analogies are misleading. Written in 1989, Acconci's "Performance After the Fact" lucidly deconstructs the street/gallery analogy in a way that is reminiscent of Benjamin's denunciation of the flâneur's complicity with the department store:

We saw the gallery (we wanted to see the gallery) as an analogue of the street, a representation of the street; our model was the New York gallery, like 420 West Broadway, where – rather than having just one gallery as a destination – you walked from floor to floor, you meandered through five floors. The gallery, like the street, was not a node you stopped at but a circulation route that you passed through; going to galleries was like window shopping. Seeing the gallery as a street was a formalization, or a self-imposed blindness. The building-full-of-galleries should have been seen, more sharply, as the analogue or representation of the convention center or the shopping mall. (Acconci 2001, 353)

Back in the gallery, Acconci becomes much more explicit in his criticism of social and urban modes of living together. The 1976 installation *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway)* staged a parody of democratic forum and the Ciceronian "civitas" (the social

body of citizens) around a wooden table in the Sonnabend Gallery in Manhattan. A forty-foot long wooden plank surrounded by stools extended from the gallery out of the window, suggesting a diving board. A sense of potential community seems to be encoded in the shared table, except that this was no participatory activity and the installation also included an audiotape that undermined the impression of collective harmony.<sup>25</sup> On the tape, one could hear a clock ticking and a medley of voices talking to one other: “Now that we’re all here together... And what do you think, Bob?” The dialogue is interrupted by music and commands (“rise,” “change places,” “take your seats”), suggesting a game of musical chairs and the inevitable exclusion of participants (“But there’s one left over. What do we do with him? Where do we put him?”). The tape constructs a social and political narrative in which decision making stems from an illusively all-inclusive, collective “we” whose acts and results are ethically dubious because they are based on exclusion. The community is shown as an ambiguous formation working with a sense of urgency made manifest by the ticking clock. In an interview with Rousseau, Acconci declares: “I found a way to use a gallery as if it was a town square, a plaza, a community meeting place” (2007). Acconci sees New York as “an old model of a city” because “it maintains the idea of a center, it keeps vestiges of piazzas and town-meetings.” Opposite that model is the “new city” “like a blob, like ooze, like L.A.” (Acconci 1993, interview with Richard Prince, 181).<sup>26</sup> And yet, Acconci is aware that the analogy between gallery and plaza is an illusion: “a gallery or museum is never going to be a public space” (*ibid.*). The meeting place is dominated by cacophony and riven by expulsion and rejection. The city outside is waiting to pull down on the person walking the plank. The mechanisms of exclusion and marginality that lurk behind the surface of communion and community are embedded in democratic decision-making processes. Urban spaces signify then also as political spaces, characterized by a false rhetoric of togetherness, manifest in the use of “we,” the imperative and the interrogation. Language remains a major parameter in the construction of a layered narrative in which physical space and the ways it is organized (chairs, tables, rooms), social configurations (the forum) and power cannot be dissociated. Any imbalance, oddity, impropriety or nuisance (illustrated by the imaginary person without a chair) is removed from the body politic, thus shedding light on the exclusions that undermine the practice of democracy.

## AMERICAN GIFTS: HOME AND ARCHITECTURE

Acconci's cartographies of New York gain to be understood in light of his cartographies of the printed page and also in light of his cartographies of American culture and ideology in the 1960s–1980s, during the Cold War. This triptych is fundamental in understanding his interlocking explorations of space as medium, urban space and cultural/ideological territory of circulation, exchange and domination. Acconci stopped performing in 1974, but his metamorphic quest for new forms in new media continued in the same playful spirit of experimentation grounded in spatial and linguistic concerns, with a growing ideological component. From 1974 to 1979, he made a series of installations often using video and sound, mainly in gallery spaces, frequently constructing rooms within the rooms of exhibition spaces. While his first installations, like *Memory Box III* (1974), focused on the self, subjectivity and memory, his later installations give prominence to cultural and ideological issues and integrate slide projections and audiotapes with the artist's voice. American discourses and mythologies come to the fore in these later works and become even more prominent in the architectural projects. Instead of the spatial units of "the page" or "the street," Acconci enlarges and encompasses the whole of the USA as a vast geographical and cultural construction, as is the case in *The Red Tapes* (1977). American landscapes, grids and emblematic American forms like the suburb become prominent. The focus is not simply on their Americanness, but rather on the complicity they surreptitiously impose with American ideology and its cultural circulation. This later phase is a meditation on cultural complicity and an unveiling of its mechanisms.

One of the works representative of this explicitly ideological phase is *The American Gift* (1976), an installation with a minimalist sculpture at its center. This ironic "gift" is a comment on the cultural relationship between America and Europe, and it provides a good prelude to Acconci's reflection on Americanness. *The American Gift* (commissioned and first exhibited at the CAPC-Museum of contemporary art in Bordeaux in 1976, now in the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou) is a black box in a white cubicle with entrances at the four corners, with benches or chairs placed along the walls. In the middle of the cubicle, hanging from the ceiling, the black box (eight feet high, four feet long base square) hovers one foot above the floor. A strip of blue light is glowing along the four sides of the cube, at the

bottom. A speaker is installed inside the box. Acconci's voice utters sentences in English and French addressing "the Europeans": "You are the Europeans. You wait and see. You don't have to speak for yourselves. You have America at the back of your minds Listen, listen. L'Amérique parle. America speaks. Écoutez: la, la, la, la. Repeat. Répétez: la, la, la, la. You learn the language" (Acconci 1976). The "Europeans," a French man and woman with robot-like voices, repeat his words, transforming the personal pronouns from "you" into "we": "Nous sommes les Européens. [...] Nous apprenons la langue" (Acconci 1976). On the tape, one can also hear snippets of music (songs, classical music) introduced by Acconci in the manner of a radio broadcast: "Quiet if you please. One minute of America" (Acconci 1976). According to Acconci, "the Europeans 'learn' the American message" (Taylor et al. 2002, 31). The tape lasts forty-two minutes and reminds one of the *Voice of America*, the American radio station that broadcast American values and culture to the world during the Cold War (and not only). 1976 marks the celebration of the bicentennial of the USA, and *The American Gift* reflects ironically on the linguistic and cultural "gifts" that the USA has disseminated to the world ever since.

The black box in *American Gift*, opaque and impenetrable, cannot be opened. Its status of gift remains doubtful since what is inside is invisible and inaccessible. Perhaps better so, since any such box is potentially a Pandora's box or a Trojan horse. Its monolithic appearance, the darkness and the solemn voices emphasize its totemic and oracular character, and the aura of blue light has connotations of epiphany. The black box is similar to a minimalist sculpture, reminding one of Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) or Tony Smith's *Die* (1962–1968) and *Black Box* (1962–1967). Unlike the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the USA, *The American Gift* is not a triumphant acknowledgment of exceptionalism, but rather a performance in skepticism. The visitor hears the voices on the tape and contemplates the immobile massiveness of the black box hovering above the floor. The audio performance pulls him or her in, inviting identification with the Europeans and/or the Americans, but also suggesting a lucid distance toward the models and authorities discussed. A game of irony is played, with the same dimensions of constraint and freedom that we have seen at work previously: the constraint to admit one's involvement in this process of cultural circulation, but also the freedom to criticize it.

The piece encapsulates the deep awareness of a specific cultural situation of exchange, contact, transmission and circulation between Europe and the USA. As an American artist, Acconci feels bound to foreground his Americanness, and also to reflect on the prestige and resonance of American cultural models. This grounding in Americanism, although deeply parodic, is triggered in part by Acconci's desire to foreground his status of American artist with a foreign sounding name, as he confesses in "Home-Bodies. An Introduction to My Work. 1984-1985": "Call me Ishmael, call me Vito Acconci. My obsession with Americanism comes, perhaps, from my having a very un-American name. I have to prove myself an American..." (Acconci 2001, 381). This desire to "prove himself an American" is combined with the desire to "prove himself a serious artist" and thus work in a museum context, as he claims in "Notes on My Photographs. 1969-1970":

I wonder if, in the back of my mind, there wasn't the urge to prove myself as an artist, prove myself a serious artist, make my place in the art-world: in order to do this, I had to make a picture, since a picture was what a gallery and museum was meant to hold (all the while, of course, I was claiming that my work couldn't, shouldn't, have the finished quality of a photograph, my work was an event and a process that couldn't, shouldn't, be stilled by a camera and hung up on a gallery wall – all the while I was claiming that my work was meant to subvert the enclosure of museum and gallery). (Acconci 2001, 349)

Paradoxically, the artist who exposes the dominance of American models attempts precisely to be recognized as an American artist, with all the implicit significance encoded in this status in the case of *The American Gift*, in a French museum context. "Call me Ishmael," with its reference to Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and to Charles Olson's *Call me Ishmael* (1947), anchors Acconci in the canon of American literature, but also suggests a process of reinvention based on this canon. In this complex quest for artistic legitimacy meant at the same time to subvert the canonical channels and venues of legitimation, Acconci started outside the museum, then moved inside, then left again to found Acconci Studio in 1988, with a focus on public spaces.

Contexts of education, learning and schooling appear in *The American Gift* and elsewhere: *Learning Piece* (performance, 1970), *Under-History Lessons*, *Channel* (performance, 1971), *The Red Tapes*

(video, 1976–1977), all include invitations to repeat or rehearse certain predetermined lessons, messages or scripts, and thus adopt their assumptions and consequences. In the architectural installations, this “repetition” or “rehearsal” is translated into a mechanical process that triggers a whole set of material structures, often carrying recognizable American symbols. *Instant House* (1980) is a self-erecting architectural unit made of wood, painted over with the American flag on the inside and the Soviet flag on the outside, suspended by cables and pulleys. The Soviet flag is not visible in the initial phase, lying flat against the floor:

When a person sits on the swing in the middle, the swing goes down and the flag swings up, making the walls of a house around the person sitting; the flags are cut out for window and door. The underside of the US flags are Soviet flags, which are uncovered now to make the outside walls of the house. Inside the house, the person on the swing sits alone within US walls, while raising the Soviet flag, outside, for others. When the person gets up, the swing rises back to its original position, and the flags fall back down to the floor. (Acconci 2001, 210)

The “instant” aspect of this house points to capitalist efficiency, which solves problems easily, almost magically (the house is prefabricated and then fabricated in a wink). The swing undoes this efficiency with its playful function, which infantilizes its user. The person sitting on the swing inside the house activates the mechanism of architectural fabrication, although that person is not the architect or the builder, but simply the inhabitant of the house. Inhabiting becomes an act of cultural construction, one leading simultaneously to the other by virtue of the sheer fact of sitting down and occupying the space inside the house. The instant house is American on the inside, and its walls stand for boundaries with the Soviet world outside.<sup>27</sup> The built environment is configured according to Cold War ideological oppositions, in a climate of defense and defiance. The instant house is a fortress of American domesticity, with strong cultural and ideological overtones. It is “home” itself, which is the result of an act of “building-from-within,” a phrase Acconci uses in “Projections of Home” (Acconci 2001, 386). Leaving the fortress signifies entering a polarized world of conflict and danger. Acconci often uses American flags in his architectural installations, whose meanings ramify over vast cultural and political territories. The person sitting on the swing and global politics are inextricably linked, the act of sitting is a

form of unwittingly endorsing the Cold War and participating in its rhetoric. The emphasis is shifted from the earlier urban concerns to larger issues in which architecture and ideology are conflated.

Similar mechanisms are used in *Mobile Home* (1980), which is a self-erecting house, activated by a bicycle:

At the end of a space, a stack of five pitched-roof houses, with open fronts; each smaller house is stored inside a larger house. The houses are on wheels; the wheels sit on tracks that extend to the other end of space. At the other end, a similar house, one size smaller, faces the stacked houses. All the houses are blue-gray, sand-textured; the stacked houses are filled with music (when the houses are stacked, the sound is jumbled – but there’s something recognizable, there’s a strain of a vaguely familiar song). Inside the stack, a tricycle is fit inside the smallest house, and connected to it. The tricycle faces the house at the other end; the tricycle is joined to this house by a clothesline – a row of seven red shirts, clasped together cuff to cuff, hang on the clothesline. When a person rides the tricycle, each house pulls out of the next-larger house. The tricycle drags along a larger and larger string of houses. The tricycle-rider rides into the receiver house, at the other end: the rider is enclosed in a tunnel of houses, a mausoleum of houses. As each house pulls out of the stack, one phrase of the jumbled music becomes distinguishable from the next. Each house plays one phrase of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, a marching band instrumental version. When a person gets off the tricycle, the houses spring back into their original stack. (Acconci 2001, 214)

The same principle is at work here, except that a whole row of identical houses is sprung into existence by the person riding the tricycle, suggesting the fact that the instant house is a unit in a larger series of housing structures. Standardized American housing had been a major theme for artists of the 1960s: Robert Smithson in “The Crystal Land” (1966) compares New Jersey suburban housing with the regular and inert structures of crystals. Dan Graham in *Homes for America* (1966) examines the seriality of minimalism through the imagery of the suburbia. Acconci’s take fourteen years later is quite different. Architectural seriality is placed within the scope of Americanism. *The Star-Spangled Banner* suggests both the national anthem and the national flag, with triumphant connotations. Individual action (riding the tricycle) sets in motion the complex mechanism of unpacking the embedded housing units. Complicity verges on intentionality, given the greater effort and

longer time it takes to complete the action. The utopian character of the embedded houses is ironically counterbalanced by the ludic aspect of the construction, which takes the form of child's play.

*Sub-Urb* (1983, temporary underground installation in Artpark, Lewiston, no longer extant) literalizes the meaning of suburbia, “the city below,” which is also mentioned by Robert Smithson in “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (Smithson 1996, 91). The underground city is a complex turned upside down, with many constitutive units, and lined with American flags, which serve as indicators of cultural belonging. Inscribed in the spatial discourse of Americanness, the suburban house has connotations of secrecy and concealment. Similar to a cellar lying under a house, the “sub-urb” is accessible from the ground thanks to ladders that suggest an atomic shelter, a defensive space difficult to detect from the outside. Its reversed position is reminiscent of other upside-down works like Smithson’s *Upside Down Trees* (1969). The world of the underground had fascinated artists like Matta-Clark, who explored the spaces beneath New York City (in *Substrait. Underground Dailies*, 1976). But Acconci performs a gesture that is quite different from Matta-Clark’s investigations of an already-existing nether urban world. Acconci starts from a word to creatively construct a world. His understanding of poetry as the “sub-structure” of the arts is reflected in the architectural “sub-urb” built on the verbal “suburb.” This is an illustration of Acconci’s poetic vision of architecture and the built environment, combined with an ideological perspective on cultural artefacts and their creators/users/inhabitants. Vidler’s pronouncement that Acconci’s architectural creations operate “on the poetic edge of architectural belief” is particularly apt (Vidler 2000, 137).

It has been argued that Acconci found inspiration for his architectural installations in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) in that he gave prominence to the use of signs (American flags, for instance), which Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour placed under the category of “symbolism.” Acconci’s architectural relationship with *Learning from Las Vegas* seems to be more complex. Acconci shares Venturi’s interest in “boring architecture” like the suburban house or the mobile home (Venturi et al. 1972, 3). “To find our symbolism we must go to the suburban edges of the existing city that are symbolically rather than formalistically attractive and represent the aspirations of almost all Americans, including most low-income urban dwellers and most of the silent white majority” (Venturi et al. 1972, 161).

But Acconci does not share Venturi's "more tolerant way of looking at things" in order to "gain insight from the commonplace" (Venturi et al. 1972, 3). Venturi's constructive approach, whose aim is not to offer an explicit critique of the architecture of the Strip (although an implicit critique does exist), but rather to "learn" from it, is not Acconci's. Acconci shows no willingness to suspend judgment. His installations are critical machines that use the symbolism of Americanness to render explicit the implicit connections between the built environment, inhabiting and larger cultural and ideological frameworks. Venturi's positive concept of "learning" is divergent from the parodic ways in which Acconci stages learning in his "lessons" of history and culture. Also, Venturi's methodology of separating "architectural variables" from "cultural and aesthetic variables" (6) is not at all Acconci's methodology, which is synthetic and connective. However, Venturi and Acconci meet on the terrain where disciplines overlap and "painting, sculpture, and graphics are combined with architecture," an old tradition of interdisciplinarity which had been abandoned by modern architects (Venturi et al. 1972, 7). Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour see this new collaboration of sculptural forms, billboards, advertising and casino or motel architecture at work in Las Vegas. Acconci's inherent hybridity is manifest early on in his writings (a crossover between text, visual design and a sculptural approach to words) and in his performances (which combine text, photography and drama). Acconci's use of flags and acoustic material (*The Star-Spangled Banner*, recorded dialogue) in his architectural installations intersects the mottled landscape of graphic, visual, sculptural and architectural diversity that *Learning from Las Vegas* identifies on the Strip. Finally, the literary references that surface occasionally in Venturi's book must have appealed to Acconci, especially the comments about Joyce's *Ulysses* and its urban inspiration. Venturi quotes Richard Poirier identifying a "decreative impulse" at work in *Ulysses*, with its "extraordinary vulnerability...to the idioms, rhythms, artifacts, associated with certain urban environments or situations" (Venturi et al. 1972, 72). So much so that Poirier has trouble identifying Joyce's distinct voice standing apart from a "mimicked style" (ibid.). For Venturi, this logic of circulation of clichés is visible in "the architecture of inclusion" of Las Vegas (53). Poirier's distinction between the original and the mimicked is artificial, since the mimicked is part of a personal stylistic strategy, an artistic choice, not a "decreating impulse," but a "creating impulse" intent on appropriation. T. S. Eliot's remarks (quoted by Venturi) about Joyce doing the best he can "with the material

at hand” (Venturi et al. 1972, 53) capture the spirit of Acconci’s experiments with textual, urban and architectural spaces. From this point of view, a modernist genealogy is discernible from Joyce to Acconci, from Joyce’s 1920s to Acconci’s “age of promiscuity” that he mentions in “Projections of Home,” an age in which artists “used whatever materials were conveniently available, switched media at will, worked on the spot in different and specific sites” (Acconci 2001, 388). This description suggests both the continuity with and the rupture from Joyce’s modernism, showing the distance covered by Acconci from text to architecture passing through the streets of New York.

## NOTES

1. Some critics point out the continuities between his texts and performances, claiming that Acconci only gave up writing to explore similar concerns in different forms. See, for instance, Dworkin’s “Fugitive Signs” (2001).
2. Craig Dworkin entitled his edited volume of Acconci’s early poems *Language to Cover a Page* (2006).
3. On medium specificity, see Clement Greenberg’s essays included in *Art and Culture* (1961), familiar to Acconci and the artists of his generation, especially “‘American-Type’ Painting” and “The New Sculpture.” Acconci was also familiar with Michael Fried’s response to minimalist art in “Art and Objecthood” (*Artforum*, 1967).
4. The connection between Acconci and Wittgenstein is made by Dworkin in his introduction to Acconci’s early poetry (xiii). Acconci is not mentioned in Marjorie Perloff’s study of Wittgenstein and poetic language, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (1996). For a discussion of Wittgenstein’s language games, see Hertzberg (2010, 41–50).
5. See also Acconci’s “performance situation using magnetic tape, voice, atlas” (1969): “the tape used was a recording of the Index to Political-Physical Maps (the *Encyclopaedia Britannica World Atlas*), the first line of each column, page 264–383. My tape was played at fast-forward speed, so that no voice was heard. At intervals, while the tape was being played, I stated location at the particular city named on the tape. The following scheme was used: tape footage 10 At this point I am at Alsuma, Tulsa, Oklahoma etc.” (Acconci 2004, 36).
6. Two distinct definitions of maps concern their nature of “representation” or “proposition about the world.” According to the first definition, geographical knowledge is encoded visually. The cartographic gaze, associated with the exercise of power, translates space into a visual representation. This traditional view is contested by critical cartography,

which rejects the notion that maps reflect an existing reality and asserts instead that maps make propositions about the world that activate and produce space (Wood 1992).

7. Acconci's use of maps as representations to be transferred to a distinct medium and reduced to snippets of verbal notation is quite different from other conceptualist artists' use of maps. See the examples discussed by Peter Wollen in "Mappings: Situationists and/or Conceptualists": On Kawara's *I Went* series (which started in 1968), Douglas Huebler's *Location Pieces* and *Site Sculpture Projects* (late 1960s and early 1970s) and Fiona Templeton's *You—the City, Manhattan Itinerary* (1988). All of these use actual maps either as self-documentation (On Kawara) or as part of a new form of sculpture (Huebler) or as a scripted itinerary through the city (Templeton).
8. In Dworkin and Goldsmith's *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, the poem "Removal/Move" based on Hagstrom's *Map of Manhattan* is said to "encode a geographic and social account of the island's historical development" (22–27).
9. Other critics, like Stephen Melville, have discussed the teleological pursuit discernible in Acconci's art in the decade that straddles his poetic and urban experiments. Its aim was to "find its way off the page and into the streets" (9–80).
10. In the same interview, he adds later on that he also wanted to kill minimalism, his "father-art" (Acconci 1993, interview with Richard Prince, 177).
11. Other artists who participated in "Street Works IV" include Shusaku Arakawa, Bernadette Mayer, Les Levine, Scott Burton, Eduardo Costa, Marjorie Strider, John Perreault. The Architectural League sponsored the event and the participants were selected. "Street Works" was a series of four events organized in 1969 by poet and critic John Perreault, artist Marjorie Strider, and visual poet Hannah Weiner, which drew a large number of artists and a big audience. The "Street Works Series" and the Judson Dance Theater were two major sources of performance art at the time. For a detailed description of Street Works, see Lippard "The Geography of Street Time: A Survey of Street Works Downtown" (1976).
12. Wagner points out that Acconci's version of "private space" in this performance does not correspond to the legal definition, since "an intrusion on an individual's privacy occurs not when spatial barriers are violated but when 'social personality,' as upheld by 'civility rules,' is injured" (Wagner 1999, 62–63).
13. Ward also takes issue with Linker's distinction, but in order to reach a conclusion which is different from mine, arguing that Acconci departed from both of these models: "if it is true that Acconci attempted to secure the definition of the self, he did so in order to get away from it" (Ward 2012, 59).

14. It is difficult to agree with Liz Kotz's pronouncement that Acconci generated "a new, entirely nontheatrical performance" (165).
15. McDonough formulates this question: "as significant as the implications of Minimal and Post-Minimal sculptural practices were for him, there is no reason why they should have necessarily resulted in something like *Following Piece*" (McDonough 2002, 113).
16. Talking about Sophie Calle, Yve-Alain Bois mentions her desire to place herself under "the absolute control of inalienable protocols" (Bois 2006, 49).
17. In *Proximity Piece* (1970), the artist walked around the Jewish Museum in New York, choosing visitors at random and intruding on them until they walked away. In *Claim*, a three-hour performance at the *Avalanche* magazine office in 1971, Acconci sat blindfolded in the basement with two lead pipes and a crowbar in his hands, talking to himself about wishing to be left alone and suggesting he is going to "claim" his space if somebody comes down to visit him.
18. Acconci gives a very vivid description of the derelict setting: "An abandoned pier, on the west side of downtown New York. The pier is enclosed, like a warehouse; from the entrance, on the street, it's a long distance, the space of two or three blocks, to the far end of the pier, over water. At night, it's difficult to see where you're walking: here and there, floorboards are missing—precarious piles of rubble crowd in from either side of the clearing through the middle—sections of the ceiling are caving in, the beams are rotten, gaping holes in the walls open out onto the river below" (Acconci 2001, 140).
19. In "Coming Out (Notes on Public Art)," Acconci is very explicit about the marginality of the artist: "The artist's position, in our culture, is marginal. The public artist can turn that marginality to his or her advantage" (Acconci 2001, 383).
20. On covert research and Goffman in particular, see Calvey, *Covert Research: The Art, Politics and Ethics of Undercover Fieldwork*, 2017, 55–59.
21. On Surrealist games, see Brotchie and Gooding, *A Book of Surrealist Games* (1995).
22. Sharpe mentions the contemporary versions of the *passante* motif in New York by quoting from Peter Conrad's *The Art of the City*, who cites the "Personals" columns in the *Village Voice* as evidence of New York being an "aleatory island." The ads that Conrad quotes (and which are quoted by Sharpe) are attempts to track down passersby: "Woman eating at 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave Deli (E 10<sup>th</sup> St) Fri aft at 4. You had small Barnes & Noble bag w/ you. I'm the man you saw getting his check when you turn around. Call 777-5291 any time after 2 pm" (Sharpe 1990, 14).
23. Acconci's piece features in an exhibition catalogue about the relationship between art and surveillance: Thomas et al. (eds.), *CTR-L Space. Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (2002).

24. See McDonough (2002) and Cocker (2007). Despite fundamental dissimilarities, the emphasis on chance remains, together with a particular feature of *flânerie*: Acconci engages in a potentially criminal pattern that is one of the hallmarks of the traditional *flâneur*. In his analysis of *Following Piece*, Tom McDonough brings into discussion Benjamin's explicit connection between the *flâneur* and crime: "No matter what trace the flâneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime" (Benjamin quoted in McDonough 2002, 101).
25. The table as communal form of gathering appears in earlier examples of sculpture, for instance in Constantin Brancusi's *The Table of Silence* (1938).
26. Acconci's description of Los Angeles as "a blob" or "ooze" is in line with the reputation of the city as either a multicentered city or a sprawling suburb ("100 suburbs in search of a city") that has consolidated its lasting association with postmodern space. See Whiting, *Pop L.A. Art and the City in the 1960s* (2006, 1–18).
27. One cannot help thinking of Gordon Matta-Clark's 1976 performance in Berlin. Initially, he had wanted to make a whole in the Berlin Wall, but was discouraged to do so and simply wrote "Made in America" on the wall and drew the hammer and the sickle. In 1970, Allan Kaprow had performed *Sweet Wall* with a group of collaborators in West Berlin, in an empty lot not far from the actual wall. Kaprow's wall was a parody: Cinder blocks held together by bread and jam as mortar.

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## Eternal Cities: Rome/Passaic. On Robert Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic"

### AN "EXPLORATORY PATH": FROM PASSAIC TO ROME

In what follows, we will embark on a tour of New York's conventionally designated "other": the suburbs of New Jersey at the end of the 1960s. An important premise of this book is that cities resonate beyond themselves discursively (since they recall other places elsewhere and are mediated by existing representations), spatially (as figures of spatial connection inscribed in a network of traffic and circulation) and also historically (as stratified and constantly changing historical entities that are part of larger ideological formations). These three dimensions overlap and intervene in their mutual construction, the spatial and the historical being discursively articulated and discourse being shaped by spatial and historical considerations. In the case of Robert Smithson, New York is a starting point for various journeys, excursions and expeditions, to Passaic or to the Yucatan peninsula, a basis and a home that functions in dynamic relationship to marginal places like the suburbs or the desert. Leaving New York to go to Passaic is a commuter's routine, but also a gesture loaded with art historical significance in the context of the 1960s, part of a quest for alternative, derelict and abandoned spaces. Smithson's Passaic is ambiguously posited at the intersection of its own eluded history, Smithson's personal intellectual history and the dissemination of cultural allusions to other cities, one of which is Rome. Cartography (actual maps as material objects and cartography as a trope) is central to Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic,"



**Fig. 5.1** Robert Smithson, *Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments Along the Passaic River*, 1967, photostat map, 8 1/8 × 8 inches. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway. Courtesy James Cohan, New York. Art © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

which combines a tour of Passaic on a specific day in 1967, recounted with deadpan conciseness, and a map called the *Negative Map Showing Regions of the Monuments Along the Passaic River* (Fig. 5.1) whose shape is echoed by various discussions of infinity, mirroring and progression in the text. Smithson projects a historical and cultural mapping that links Passaic, New York and a certain model of Rome as the Eternal City in a discontinuous trajectory across space and time.

“The Monuments of Passaic,” published in *Artforum* in 1967, is a short essay with six black and white photographs and a map documenting a day trip that Smithson made to Passaic in order to visit what he called the “monuments” of his hometown, although he does not acknowledge Passaic as home and the monuments are quite un-monumental (a bridge, pipes, pumping equipment, a sandbox).<sup>1</sup> Smithson boarded a bus in Manhattan choosing a route taken by commuters, but made the journey on a Saturday, a particularly uneventful day of the week. He carried a copy of *The New York Times*, a science fiction novel by Brian W. Aldiss called *Earthworks*, a notebook, and his Instamatic camera. Passaic is shown in all its suburban anti-splendor as a place of quiet devastation: bland, ruinous, immobile, suffused with entropic torpor.

Smithson's essay is considered a classic exploration of liminal landscapes offering an irreverent alternative to the centralized New York art establishment (Roberts 2004, 61). The "new monuments" of Passaic are described in dispassionate language and immortalized in six photographs selected out of many: a rotating bridge (*The Bridge Monument*), an assembly of drainage equipment (*Monument with pontoons: the Pumping Derrick*), a group of wastewater pipes (*The Great Pipe Monument*), more pipes (*The Fountain Monument*), the same pipes seen from a different angle (*The Fountain Monument—Side View*) and a playground sandbox (*The Sand-Box Monument*). Smithson monumentalizes everyday structures and introduces the concept of "ruins in reverse," that is "all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built" (72). Smithson identifies these "ruins in reverse" not only in Passaic, but also elsewhere, for instance in Mexico, where he showed great interest in the ramshackle (or "de-architecturized," as he calls it) Hotel Palenque: a recent building falling into ruin just as it was being built and renovated by its owners (Smithson 1995).

This was not Smithson's only expedition to New Jersey. Born in Passaic, New Jersey, and raised in Rutherford, New Jersey, where his pediatrician was none other than William Carlos Williams, Smithson left the "stifling suburban atmosphere where there was just nothing" (271) to work as an artist in New York, where he was based throughout his career. Smithson had a preference for "low profile landscapes" (293) and "infernal regions" as he called them (155), some of which he found across the Hudson: suburban areas, slag heaps, polluted rivers, rock quarries, burnt-out fields, abandoned airstrips, swamps. These provided an alternative to urban areas, too charged with cultural meaning: "I can't really work in towns. I have to work in the outskirts or in the fringe areas, in the backwaters" (Smithson 1996, 297). These trips to New Jersey and elsewhere were a performative aspect of his artistic practice, which allowed him to identify disused sites suitable for the construction of permanent works and to perfect his theory of the "non-site," which is also a name he gave to the mixed-media sculptures he started making in 1968, made of metal bins containing rocks and sand from various sites, maps and photographs.<sup>2</sup> "Non-sites" are not illustrations or materializations of the sites to which they correspond.

They are “representations without resemblance,” as Smithson calls them in “A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites” (1968), in the sense in which a map represents a site without resembling it (364). The site and “non-site” are linked by a phenomenon of displacement, each directing the viewer to the other, which is absent, and back again. What binds the two together is a mental and geographical traffic between the site and the sculpture made of rocks, photographs and maps, as mutual displacements of each other.<sup>3</sup>

The Passaic essay is an example of “non-site” with its combination of text, maps and photographs. Paradoxically, in spite of its blandness, Passaic is a complex, stratified construct whose many layers result from the profusion of references in Smithson’s text and also from his use of shifting generic tonalities. Smithson superposes the suggested “actuality” of Passaic, a place in New Jersey and his hometown, and the many allusive discourses (literary, historical and art historical) in which Passaic is dispersed. There is constant tension in the essay between Passaic as a place Smithson visits, whose history has resulted in the apathy that he describes, and Passaic as a discursive construction. Smithson definitely succeeds in configuring Passaic as an “actual” place that can be visited and revisited in a gesture that is similar to a performance: Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt took artists Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow on a visit to Passaic on January 6, 1968 (Reynolds 2003, 265). Smithson posing as a tourist distills ironic references to the theme of tourist sightseeing, to Ulysses’s journey (“my suburban Odyssey,” 72) and to the expeditionary tradition.<sup>4</sup> Smithson’s Passaic itinerary has been the object of a number of reenactments that confronted visitors, decades later, with the historical evolution of Passaic from the Passaic visited and immortalized by Smithson in 1967 (Lejeune 2011). His itinerary is easy to infer from a close reading of the text. He walked north along the riverfront, where the highway construction was under way, then turned west on Main Avenue until he reached the center. He then walked south and stopped by the Stadium before returning to Manhattan.

My interpretation will complicate the accepted configurations of Passaic in connection mainly with New York and New Jersey. I will start from one of the most striking images in the text, that of a straight line of cities, leading Smithson to connect Passaic and Rome in an ironic way:

Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City? If certain cities of the world were placed end to end in a straight line according to size, starting with Rome, where would Passaic be in that impossible progression? Each city would be a three-dimensional mirror that would reflect the next city into existence. The limits of eternity seem to contain such nefarious ideas. (74)

Smithson's rhetorical questions place Passaic within a larger structure of supposed continuity and pyramidal mirroring. What does it mean to "start with Rome" and imagine such an "impossible" urban progression?

Two readings in particular have provided impetus for my own reflection on Smithson's Passaic essay, whose distinct approaches, art historical and literary, illustrate two orientations in Smithson's text, which most of the time do not intersect in critical studies of Smithson's essay. Art historian Jennifer Roberts has attempted to replace the histories of Passaic, including its racial history, at the center of the essay, from where it appears to be absent, with the intriguing effect of creating an explicit historical discourse meant to accompany Smithson's narrative of historical lethargy (Roberts 2004, 60–85). It is not her historiographic approach that has inspired me, but rather her methodology of reconstructing an alternative discourse which is not manifest on the surface of Smithson's travelogue, resulting in a restoration of context and of less obvious discourses whose foregrounding illuminates the text in an original way. Such a reading convincingly acknowledges and confronts the abysses of implicitness and allusiveness in the Passaic essay. I will highlight Smithson's own intellectual history in relation to Passaic and Rome seen as places that signify as cultural markers in his artistic development.

The other reading that has informed my own is that of Lytle Shaw (2013), who has examined the practice of fieldwork in postwar poetics and has traced the move from place to site in a composite literary and artistic corpus whose dual nature is quite unique in art historical and literary studies. Shaw foregrounds Smithson as a writer and pays attention to the complexity of Smithson's writing, to its play with genres and varying tonalities, and its ability to simultaneously enact and destabilize the site. In his insistence on Smithson's shifting style and reliance on a wide range of different materials, Shaw has attempted to give a unified

assessment of Smithson holding in careful balance many constellations of genres, references, subtexts and allusions, which signify in their togetherness and through interaction.

Thinking about the conjunction of Passaic and Rome invites us to follow a certain itinerary through the text in a more localized and selective approach. As Smithson puts it, “everything follows an exploratory path” (Smithson 1996, 52). This exploratory path is a reflection on the kinds of operations that allow such polar urban models, both historical and discursive, to even come together and inhabit the same sentence, the same visual structure, the same cartographic correlation and the same crystal-line progression.

The mere fact of considering Smithson and the urban condition is a statement about the interests of artists associated with earthworks. Including Robert Smithson’s “Monuments of Passaic” in a study of urban cartographies corresponds to new readings of Land Art, which are more inclusive spatially and conceptually. Although Land Art has been superficially considered to be exclusively oriented toward open natural spaces and the materiality of the earth, this limited understanding is starting to lose currency in the wake of the *Ends of the Earth. Land Art to 1974* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2012, which countered a few myths about Land Art, one of which referred to its supposed disconnection from the urban sphere and urban issues (Kaiser and Kwon 2012).<sup>5</sup> Seen from this perspective, Smithson’s work appears to nourish a reflection on the city as necessarily related to nature, in the spirit of his dialectical thinking about sites and the relationship between the built environment and natural spaces.<sup>6</sup> Smithson articulated a vision of the natural and the man-made that made them inseparable, for instance in his “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape.” Smithson’s vision of sites is fundamentally relational, albeit these relations are often informed by contrast and contradiction. Thus, the urban and the suburban are dynamically interrelated, polemically or constructively, along the lines of a “dialogue” between “the center and the edge of things” (Smithson 1996, 296). The artist himself is part of “an apparatus” through which he is “threaded” (263). Smithson’s art practice in urban and suburban contexts cannot be divorced from the rest of his projects. Sites refer to other sites, either actual or intertextual, either accessible

or inaccessible. Even the moon is conceptualized by Smithson as a non-site. The moon shot, he claims, was “a very expensive non-site” (268). Suburban Passaic is negatively connected not only to New York, which is its obvious opposite, but also to cities elsewhere, whose associations are shored up in the essay.

### CULTURAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMES

From the perspective of its geographical and locational scope, Smithson’s Passaic has been discussed within the paradigm of artistic interest in the American suburbia in the 1960s and 1970s, a topic that has recently come to the fore in museum contexts, especially as far as New Jersey is concerned. Artistic experimentation is perhaps not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks about the Garden State. A treasury of jokes testifies to the aura of New Jersey as “non-place,” a condensation of mediocrity and unrecognizable identity. In an age when we hear constant academic and political warnings against the dangers of essentialism, New Jersey seems to steer clear of such pitfalls, simply because it is perceived as nondescript and nonessential. Its essence in other words is a non-essence. Usually seen as New York’s other, a backwater state on the margins of a cosmopolitan center, New Jersey appears as a composite of suburban dullness, industrial waste, desolate zinc mines, monotonous highways, strip malls, summer houses on the New Jersey shore, Miss America pageants in Atlantic City, but also, more pleasantly, large untainted areas of vegetation in the Pinelands National Reserve. Strikingly, in Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City*, the interviews conducted with dwellers of Jersey City in 1960 revealed that no symbolic landmark of their own city stood out to any of them, except for the sight of New York City across the river (29).

The history of Passaic that Smithson leaves out of his essay and that Jennifer Roberts sets in dialectical relation with the omissions in the text starts with the establishment of a Dutch settlement in 1679 and the nineteenth-century development of Passaic into a major textile and metalworking center that attracted large groups of immigrants. The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926, over wage issues, was the first Communist-led strike in the USA and an important landmark in American labor history. By mid-century, Passaic declined as an industrial center and lost its

place as an important center in the retail industry. Racial conflict between existing ethnic groups and newly arrived African American and Puerto Rican residents marked the 1960s (Roberts 2004, 66). Smithson obliterates the history of Passaic and only confronts his readers with a blighted landscape whose immobility and dereliction suggests a non-place with ahistorical connotations.

Recently, a less familiar narrative of New Jersey as non-place has emerged, one that acknowledges the above portrait of contrasts but also highlights the artistic potential of the Garden State as a negative space for a host of postwar artists interested in ruins, vacancies and desolation not only as themes but also as conditions of art. According to this alternative narrative, in the 1960s and 1970s, New Jersey functioned as a major laboratory of artistic experimentation for a variety of artists of different sensibilities. Two recent exhibitions at the Princeton University Art Museum in 2013 (Baum) and the Montclair Art Museum in 2014 (Tuchman) have demonstrated that New Jersey was an important arena for experimental art after World War II, laying emphasis on the state's otherness in relation to New York and the welcome decentralization brought about by this choice of site.<sup>7</sup>

Several representative examples culled from these exhibitions include Robert Smithson, born in Passaic, New Jersey, whose first "non-sites" were inspired by the landscapes of New Jersey, for instance *Non-Site: Line of Wreckage (Bayonne, New Jersey)* (1968), which comprised maps, photographs and rocks from a dumping ground in Bayonne. Allan Kaprow, an Atlantic City native, staged his first Happenings in New Jersey, some of them on sculptor George Segal's chicken farm in South Brunswick. Dan Graham, who grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey, produced the photographic series *Homes for America* (1966) as a record of the serial architecture of the New Jersey suburbia. Nancy Holt, another native of New Jersey, conducted "stone ruin tours" (1967) for Robert Smithson and Joan Jonas in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, around a dilapidated stone mansion, mimicking the tours of traditional sightseeing. Gordon Matta-Clark made one of his best known architectural cuts, *Splitting*, in Englewood, New Jersey, in 1974, consisting of the dissection of a suburban house, followed by a tour of the shaky house offered by the artist to friends having come by bus from New York.

The pioneering figure of the narrative about New Jersey as site of artistic experimentation is artist Tony Smith, another New Jersey native who, in his famous 1966 conversation with Samuel Wagstaff Jr., discussed

the new understanding of art brought about by the experience of driving on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike at night at the beginning of the 1950s with “no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape.” Smith felt that he was confronted with “created worlds without tradition,” with an “artificial landscape without cultural precedent,” an assessment that will leave its mark on Smithson and that will make ripples all over the art world at the time (Smith 1995, 386).<sup>8</sup> Tony Smith’s account became an inspiration for many American artists of the 1960s who were drawn to his unorthodox vision of aesthetic experience that he described as possible outside venerable cultural models and away from culturally and artistically inflected landscapes.<sup>9</sup> Smith suggests that art itself can be conceived on a much vaster conceptual scale and in relation to contexts not conventionally defined as artistic. In the same interview, he laments the smallness of vision and scale in contemporary art, which he calls dismissively “an art of postage stamps” (Smith 1995, 384). Smith’s interview adumbrates a knot of concerns that come to the fore in the artistic mutations of the 1950s and 1960s: the intuition that an aesthetic paradigm was coming to an end; the shift from object to process; the dissatisfaction with the picturesque landscape tradition; the emphasis on perception and its temporal dimension; the interest in artificial, unstructured, amorphous scenery; the engagement with site not as a mere context for the work but as part of an expanded artistic practice; the choice of language as vehicle for artistic expression in conjunction with other artistic expressions; the trip as a form of artistic investigation and the geographical dispersal of art away from the art centers to the suburbs and further to the American desert.

The two exhibits certainly succeed in proving that New Jersey was a privileged site of experimentation by uncovering a critical mass of works and artists, but the fact of unifying them around the opposition New York–New Jersey and playing constantly on the difference and otherness of New Jersey in relation to New York involves a risk of literalizing the site and restricting the historical and cultural framework within which some of these works can be understood.<sup>10</sup> The logic of dispersal in Smithson’s “Monuments of Passaic” does not inhabit well within limited spatial frames, but rather favors larger contexts and a multiplicity of spatial and cultural relations. A middle ground can be envisaged in which New Jersey is acknowledged as a major paradigm of site-specific work, but also enters in cultural dialogue and geographical resonance with other sites and spatial constructs.

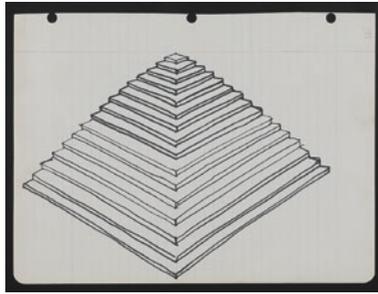
Let us pause to consider the final pages of the essay, where Smithson wonders about a possible relationship between Rome and Passaic, with parodic overtones, and about a possible line of cities starting with Rome and including Passaic, which I have already quoted (Smithson 1996, 74). The absurd substitution of Rome by Passaic in the first place (“Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City?”) gives way to a more nuanced vision of an imaginary urban line that starts with Rome (“If certain cities of the world were placed end to end in a straight line according to size, starting with Rome, where would Passaic be in that impossible progression?” 74). In Smithson’s line, Rome occupies a privileged place as origin and starting point, in relation to which the place of Passaic is uncertain, the object of an interrogation. In this line of cities, “eternity” provides the link between Rome and Passaic, defined by Smithson as artifice and fiction: “Eternities are all artificial or they are fictions in a sense” (187). Two different eternities are confronted here: the eternity of Rome, the immutable city of preserved ruins, and the eternity of Passaic, defined as the balance of past, present and future in a state of ongoing ruin. The association between Rome and Passaic is suggested to Smithson by a parking lot at the center of Passaic, which “divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection – but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. One never knew what side of the mirror one was on. There was nothing interesting or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity” (74). This spatial mirroring of the two halves of Passaic, both ambiguously original and copy at the same time, leads Smithson to project a relation of absurd substitution and then a relation of progression from Rome to Passaic. Phenomena of mirroring imply sameness as much as difference, as Smithson reminds Michael Fried: “Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes – *ad infinitum*” (67). It is in this sense of refutation in a mirror that Passaic and Rome are reflected doubles.

The suggestion that Passaic has replaced Rome as the Eternal City sounds preposterous, a mere joke and a strained impossibility that one is tempted to immediately dismiss as irrelevant on a conceptual level. This jocular, ironic and absurdist register is common in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, as we have seen in Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece* and as we will see in Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Reality Properties. Fake Estates*. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that both Acconci’s and Matta-Clark’s projects combine a humorous *and* an earnest consideration of the conditions of social interaction and property ownership in New York. But the

ironical dimension does not exclude a deep engagement with the issues at stake. Smithson's suggestion may be dependent on an unsettling combination of irony and meaningfulness.

Smithson's questions about the place of Passaic in relation to Rome imply at least two underlying concerns. The first is a concern with the distinctions between places, with the suburban as not sharply distinct from the urban, with cities in general as connected in structures of continuity and repetition. Secondly, the expansion of vision that takes us from Passaic to Rome grants a spatial, but also cultural and intertextual amplitude to Smithson's text, which shows his engagement with an elsewhere beyond Passaic, Rome itself and its cultural identity as a city of history and monuments. Arguably, Smithson takes Tony Smith's "created worlds without tradition" and "artificial landscape without cultural precedent" and endows them with the ironical tradition and the parodic cultural precedent of Rome. Smithson visiting Passaic echoes the trope of the American visiting Rome and replays the international theme in an incongruous suburban context. Smithson's remarks imply a reflection on the cultural significance underlying the spaces of Europe in relation to those of America. The impossible substitution of Rome by Passaic, although blatantly inappropriate, succeeds in "bringing the landscape with low profile up" (297), even if fleetingly.

As far as the possible meanings and sources of the visual and geometric configuration of the itinerary from Rome to Passaic are concerned, Smithson made several ink sketches of this urban progression for the Passaic essay, which he did not include in the final published version. He toyed with the pyramid and the horizontal display of sections of a pyramid in constant ratio to each other. The *Sketch for Mirrored Ziggurat* (Fig. 5.2) illustrates the pyramid structure in the Passaic essay. There are several possible explanations for Smithson's interest in pyramids and modular structures. Smithson's uncovering of structures was influenced by structuralism, in particular by Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whom he quotes repeatedly. Modular structures also represented a possible response to his quest for abstraction and abstract forms in the mid-1960s, when he was looking for a way out of anthropomorphism. The pyramid itself appealed to him as a puzzling architectural form of ancient civilizations, but more prominently it is a geometric shape that came out of his fascination with crystals and the growth of crystals, an aspect of his art that has already been elucidated (Roberts 2004, 40–42; Dryansky 2009). The pyramid and



**Fig. 5.2** Robert Smithson, Sketch for *Mirrored Ziggurat*, circa 1966. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt papers, 1905–1987, bulk 1952–1987, “Writings,” box 3, file 46. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Art © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

the principle of incremental growth are borrowed by Smithson from crystallography and reproduce the sedimentation of certain kinds of crystal in layers. Abstract forms and crystals intersect in the crystal pyramid, which Smithson saw as a synthesis midway between nature and abstraction. The pyramid is an abstract geometry that one finds buried in the structures of nature. It is on the basis of the crystalline forms of nature that Smithson rejected the thesis of Wilhelm Worringer in his *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), where Worringer posited abstraction as opposed to nature. But, to complicate things further, for Smithson, crystals are not the prerogative of nature. Crystal structures appear in “The Crystal Land” to refer to suburbs whose “boxlike arrangements” he compares with the neat lattices of crystals (8). The parallel between the architecture of suburbs and crystals is inspired by a 1964 book about crystals by Charles Bunn that Smithson was familiar with, *Crystals. Their Role in Nature and in Science*, where Bunn compares the structure of a pair of semidetached houses with the crystal of ammonium sulfate (Dryansky 2009, 66). The crystal is Smithson’s model of the deposition of time in slow accretions, but also of the deposition of space manifest in the work of Donald Judd: “He (Judd) is involved in what would be called ‘The Deposition of Infinite Space.’ (...) What seems so solid and final in Judd’s work is at the same time elusive and brittle” (6).

The pyramid structure that Smithson toyed with in the preparatory phase of the Passaic essay is reflected in the *Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River* (Fig. 5.2), which takes the form of a staircase that cuts out parts of the area in sharp geometric angles and suggests a cartographic itinerary along the Passaic River. Smithson's sculptures *Alogon* and *Alogon #2* (1966), as well as *Pointless Vanishing Point* (1967) also explore this form. The staircase, which is germane to the pyramid, could be imagined to stretch beyond its chosen limits, to Rome and further away. Smithson's tour of Passaic is an overlap of two types of representation: the disembodied cartographic one and the embodied sightseeing involved in the close inspection of the monuments. The cartographic model and the immanent trajectory through Passaic concur to give a conceptual and a material configuration to the site that are emblematic of Smithson's understanding of the dialectical site–non-site relationship.

Passaic as non-site is remembered and actualized in the map, the photographs and the text that refer back to the actual visit, but do not limit the interpretative possibilities of the site. As Smithson puts it, "although the non-site designates the site, the site itself is open and really unconfined and constantly being changed" (295). The negative map and the site engage in a "relational" tension that prevents sites and objects from being considered in themselves, as "specific objects" (296), a transparent reference to Donald Judd and the specific objects of minimalism and also, perhaps, to the Kantian "thing in itself" that Smithson mentions in the essays "The Artist as Site-Seer" (341) and "Pointless Vanishing Points" (359). Elsewhere, he states clearly that his whole work "has always been an attempt to get away from the specific object. My objects are constantly moving into another area. There is no way of isolating them – they are fugitive" (240). His sites are "fanning out from a central point" and "dissipating" themselves, as he says about *Asphalt Rundown* made in Rome in 1969 (239). Instead of the "thing-in-itself," we have "a process of ongoing relationships" (160). The "fugitive" sites are implied in the form chosen for the map reproduced in "The Monuments of Passaic." The "negative" quality of the map foregrounds the manipulation of cartographic material, but also a certain directional and dynamic impulse: Smithson repeatedly folds and cuts out maps in spiral or pyramidal shapes, thus insisting on their

verticality and on their role as vectors of movement, both spatial and intellectual, in the sense of inviting active associations and relocations within unexpected cultural paradigms. The cartographic staircase is also a reflection on the etymology of the word “scale” that Smithson develops in “The Spiral Jetty”: “After a point, measurable steps (‘Scale skal n. it. Or L; it. Scala; L scala usually scalae pl., l. a. originally a ladder; a flight of stairs; hence, b. a means of ascent’) descend from logic to the ‘surd state.’ The rationality of a grid on a map sinks into what it is supposed to define. Logical purity suddenly finds itself in a bog” (147).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the negative map is a “scalar” illustration of the sinking movement from the abstraction of the map to the matter of the site, the “bog” of Passaic.<sup>12</sup>

### ROME: “THE ROTTING REMAINS OF A VANISHED AGE”

The novelty of the pyramid described in “The Monuments of Passaic” consists in the fact that Rome and other cities are co-opted in the crystalline structure, giving a greater geographical and historical perspective to the pyramid. There appears to be a cultural cross-structure forming here with an inescapable, mineral regularity and seriality that takes us from Rome conventionally seen as a hyperbolic sedimentation of history and exemplary ruins to Smithson’s Passaic as a non-place of new monuments and forgettable ruins in reverse. The trajectory from Rome to Passaic cuts across Smithson’s artistic career as a whole and is built on much more than mere intertextual allusion. It encompasses Smithson’s evolving relationship with literary and artistic modernism and European models, and his recognition of American sites as central to his artistic project. Smithson’s references to the Eternal City deserve to be considered in the context of the artist’s two trips to Rome in 1961 and 1969, which stand out as antinomic in terms of the types of artistic practice he was interested in on those two occasions. In 1961, when Smithson was twenty-three years old and spent the summer in Rome, he was a different artist from the one visiting Passaic in 1967. The two seem incompatible because in 1961, Smithson was an artist with a religious discourse, a painter finding inspiration in Byzantine icons and a poet writing religious poetry expressing anguish and despair. Smithson’s correspondence with

George Lester, owner of a gallery in Rome, captures his anguished mood of “spiritual crisis,” couched in a rhetoric reminiscent of St. John of the Cross’s “night of the soul.” The paintings he produced at the time are variations on Christian themes, sometimes with contemporary elements inserted to grotesque effect. A certain number of visual details that will become hallmarks of his later work and that reflect his longstanding intellectual preoccupations with the natural sciences are already apparent: unicellular organisms and the motif of the spiral as well, which Smithson will develop in later works in different contexts and media, notably in *The Spiral Jetty*.<sup>13</sup>

Smithson’s religious poetry written between 1959 and 1961 is inspired by authors and sources of different horizons: T. S. Eliot, Blake, Dante and the universe of Hieronymus Bosch. He also mentions the influence of Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and T. E. Hulme, although he later dismissed them as the “antidemocratic intelligentsia” (161). Only five of his many religious poems have been published, the rest are kept in the Smithson-Holt Papers at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. It is extremely interesting to see Smithson at this stage advancing along the lines of both poetry and painting in equal measure, placing the two arts in dialogue, creating for himself a writer persona alongside a painter persona. He was contemplating the publication of his poetry with a Catholic press, with reproductions of his paintings, but the project was not completed. The urban imaginary, although present in poem titles (“From the city”) and in a few individual lines, remains vague and mainly associated with technology: “We shall fly to Rome/In an airplane;/ Flying,/Flying” (317). Rome, Babylon, Jerusalem, Dante’s City of Dis (“From the Walls of Dis”) are the main urban centers of Smithson’s religious drama. Space is structured around a number of significant focal points: Golgotha (“From the City”), the desert of St. Jerome (“From the Temptations”), Gethsemane (“To the Blind Angel,” unpublished), the wilderness and “God’s kingdom” (“To the Dead Angel,” unpublished), but the universe of Smithson’s religious poetry is not primarily a spatial one. Rather, it is an immaterial space of invocation and lament, fragmented in broken lines, interspersed with Latin and Greek quotes. The dimension of purity and transcendence coexists with a naturalistic and grotesque strain: “Angel created/By a brain shot with leprosy,/By spiritual stumps instead of hands,/By an eye crushed into pulp” (“To the

Dead Angel,” unpublished).<sup>14</sup> The “nada” of St. John of the Cross is explicitly present in “To the Man of Ashes” (unpublished) which projects a spiritual wasteland whose ruins and desolation are consonant with the disused and blighted sites of Smithson’s later career: “This is our inheritance. On the dim landscape./On the desolate mountain./On the parched earth./On the barren field./On the burnt desert./On the dusty ground./On the garbage dump./On the dung heap./On the blasted heath./On the empty plain./This is our inheritance.” The poem ends with a cumulative, ever growing “nothingness”: “Nothingness./More nothingness./Again nothingness./Amen.”<sup>15</sup> Apocalyptic imagery seeps in, for instance in the unpublished poem “To the Flayed Angels”: “The footprints of the Beast are everywhere.”<sup>16</sup>

It is during this phase that Smithson took a two-month trip to Rome—a trip that he imagined would provide the ideal setting and nourishment for his spiritual quest. Once in Rome, he became ambivalent in his response to the city. Smithson’s 1961 trip to Italy, mostly to Rome, but also Siena and northern Italy, took place on the occasion of a solo show at the George Lester gallery. Few discussions of Smithson’s early painting and early trip to Rome exist, and no in-depth analysis of his poetry exists, for several reasons: most of these paintings were destroyed by the artist himself or lost before his death, and most of the poems and his correspondence have not been published, which makes this period difficult to grasp. Besides, Smithson’s religious discourse is hard to reconcile with his later demystifying stance and his mature artistic practice (Roberts 2004, 12–35).<sup>17</sup>

In several interviews he gave a decade later, Smithson associates that early phase and Rome with an interest in “origins” and “archetypes” embedded in a personal search for the roots of modernism and the interdependence of religion and art: “I was very interested in Rome itself. I just felt I wanted to be a part of that situation, or wanted to understand it” (282). His early exposure to Europe “had a tremendous impact” on him because it was instrumental in the shift far from its “cultural overlay” (284). He remarks that the trip to Rome helped him understand that Europe had “exhausted its culture”: “out of the defunct culture of Europe I developed something that was intrinsically my own and rooted to my own experience in America” (284). The quest for “origins” drives him away from the ruins of Europe: “And then it became a matter of just working my way out from underneath the heaps of European history to find my own origins” (286). The movement is vertical and suggests

an escape through a tunnel, like a prisoner's evasion from the prison of history and ruins. The image of Smithson working his way from underneath the pile of ruins is reminiscent of the negative map and its staircase along the Passaic River, which contains the dynamism of a trajectory. From Rome as origin to Passaic as fringe, Smithson is charting a cultural itinerary that takes him up and away from the privileged locus of Western culture and the metaphysical sources of modernism to American landscapes and a worldview that no longer relies on anthropomorphism and "redemptive situations" (286).

The letters Smithson sent to Nancy Holt, his future wife, from Rome, couched in delirious, meandering language, express Smithson's perception of the city as continually sinking "in the mire" and disintegrating, with drawings of broken pillars, and human figures or monster-headed figures in contorted attitudes. Blake's figurations of the city as location of a continuous apocalypse come to mind. In the nine postcards he sent to his parents in Clifton, New Jersey, mostly with views of Rome, he adopts an utterly conventional tourist discourse giving them succinct news about the show and about the sites he visited. Repeatedly, Smithson tells his parents that he has been taking pictures, sounding like a tourist dutifully accomplishing his mission as expected.<sup>18</sup> In his correspondence however, he ambiguously identifies with Nero and projects a Nero persona. On one of the postcards to his parents, representing a head of Nero from the Capitoline Museum, he writes: "I am letting my hair grow like Nero" (August 8, 1961).<sup>19</sup> The reference resurfaces in a letter to Nancy Holt: "From the keeper of Derangement himself, now vacationing in the Eternal City. In order to walk the path of the Vandals and the Saints, and to concoct flaming rhapsodies for a crippled God. The Nero from New Jersey watches the fire on the tip of Lucky Strike" (August 1, 1961).<sup>20</sup> This identification is consistent with Smithson's vision of Rome "still falling," although the emphasis is now on the legend about Nero as agent of destruction, who set Rome on fire. Indeed, Smithson is destroying his own mythical version of Rome and, in the process, is unsettling his own intellectual foundations.

As a tourist cityscape, Rome is not discarded wholesale: Smithson is particularly appreciative of the catacombs, especially their concentration of decay, their labyrinthine nature, their "uselessness" and their "savage splendor" (287). The "uselessness" is significant, since the absence of function, the dis-use, is a condition that Smithson will later celebrate in the sites he would choose, from suburban sites like Passaic to abandoned quarries.

In the “savage splendor,” one can intuit the “rawness” of site that Smithson would look for later, perhaps the catacombs as a more disorienting and unsettling layer of Rome than the conventional architectural monuments. It is important that the catacombs are beneath the city, just like, in a way, the suburbs, which (Smithson reminds us) signify literally a “city below” (91). Passaic is, in a sense, such a catacomb, but out in the open.

Smithson the tourist is highly critical of tourism, visiting monuments, sending postcards, taking pictures, but criticizing the whole ritual. He says in a letter to Nancy Holt: “This is the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the whole world is on a tour inspecting the rotting remains of a vanished age” (July 24, 1961).<sup>21</sup> What is worse, the visitors looking at his works of art exposed in the Roman gallery are compared by Smithson to the tourists staring aggressively and indecently at the works of art in museums. Uncomfortable with the museum situation, he mentions in the same letter his preference for a subdued, restrictive kind of visual context: “I would rather have people look at my paintings with a flashlight with the room faintly lit by violet lights.”<sup>22</sup> This visual context would be ideally provided by the dimness of Roman churches, which Smithson appreciates. The dimness of Italian churches is a recurrent motif in Henry James’s *Italian Hours*, positively or negatively connoted depending on context. James celebrates “the sacred dusk” inside St. Mark’s as a catalyst of mystery (James 1993, 292), but decries the same dimness in the case of Giotto’s “ill-lighted” frescoes, whose details are impossible to perceive (James 1993, 499).

Smithson’s ambivalence about Rome can be placed within the literary tradition of the “dangerous pilgrimage” of the American in Rome (as Bradbury calls it), to which Smithson alludes in an essay he wrote after his return from Rome, entitled “The Iconography of Desolation” (c. 1962), where he quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun* on the “smell of decay” that pervades Rome and the moral invincibility of the American Protestant in Rome (Smithson 1996, 321). Hawthorne’s “smell of decay” and the international theme it underlies resonate beyond nineteenth-century American literature through an unexpected connection with William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, which he was reading at the time and which had been published two years before, in 1959. What brings Rome and *Naked Lunch* together in Smithson’s view is their common emphasis on the labyrinthine and the ceremonial:

I remember wandering around through these old baroque churches and going through these labyrinthine vaults. At the same time I was reading people like William Burroughs. It all seemed to coincide in a curious kind of way. (...) There was a kind of grotesqueness that appealed to me. As I said, while I was in Rome I was reading William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and the imagery in that book corresponded in a way to a kind of grotesque massive accumulation of all kinds of rejective rituals. (286–287)

Rome seen by Smithson and *Naked Lunch* read in Rome meet on the terrain of decadence and grotesque rituals. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* does not allow for a simplistic opposition between Europe and America to emerge. Early in Burroughs's novel, America is presented as "old" and tainted from time immemorial: "America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting" (Burroughs 1992, 13). Smithson also adopts the Beat experience of hitchhiking through the USA and parts of Mexico in 1956 (Jones 1996, 304).

Such perplexing intersections between Roman art and American fiction create surreal effects, which underlie Smithson's iconoclastic pairing of cultural references. The intellectual operation that associates the Roman baroque and *Naked Lunch* is also at work in Smithson's attitude to the Roman countryside, whose serene pastoralism he cannot stand. The verdant sunshine makes him long for the opposite. He says in a letter to Nancy Holt: "Today, I returned from Siena (...). During the ride back to Rome, the Italian landscape made me yearn for the parched land of Aztec Mexico" (July 24, 1961).<sup>23</sup> This longing for the desert in a pastoral context foreshadows the dynamic of Smithson's artistic practice to come, which tends to "spin him out to the fringes of the site" (181). Rome and its surroundings are haunted by other references and spaces, American and Mexican, and made to resonate. Smithson's concern with the remote, the abandoned, the marginal and the derelict is manifest in his mental projection of the arid instead of the Arcadian. Mexico and Utah are conjured by the Roman countryside. In this logic of resonance, Smithson's Passaic echoes Rome, and Rome is replete with the suggestions of other potential sites. The Aztec-Mayan connection also has its source in Smithson's reading of *Naked Lunch*, where he identifies a "savage Mayan-Aztec imagery" (287). These spatial and cultural cross-references are not foreign to the universe of Burroughs's novel, with its picaresque charting of the USA, South America and North Africa.

The mirroring between Rome and Passaic is given additional weight by Smithson's reference to the City of the Immortals in Borges's short story "The Immortal" (1947), included in *The Aleph*. Borges's story intersects at least three of Smithson's concerns with temporality (eternity in particular), the vacuity of certain architectural monuments and the doubling effects of originals and copies. The narrative is embedded within a framework of erudition that is typical of Borges, involving the circulation of manuscripts and apocryphal tales. The narrative spans several centuries, from the times of the Roman emperor Diocletian to 1929, and also a large geographical territory mapped from London to Thebes, from Africa to Smyrna. The story revolves around a Roman soldier, Marcus Flaminius Rufus, who is in search of a river whose water grants immortality, in the vicinity of a city known as the City of the Immortals. The condition of immortality is not a happy or desirable one. The Immortals appear to be primitive Troglodytes who consume serpents and lizards. They are apathetic and abject, stultified by the endless passage of time. Fortunately, the condition of immortality can be reversed by drinking from another river, which Rufus finds at the end. The philosophical gist of Borges's story refers to the undesirability of eternal life and the impossibility of original thought (even of thought itself) in a world whose inhabitants live eternally. The artistic consequences of eternity are repetition and recurrence. Any destruction is followed by a parodic copy of the work destroyed, any creation is nothing but the imperfect reproduction of an existing work. Thus, the short story opens with an epigraph from Francis Bacon's *Essays*: "Salomon saith: *There is no new thing upon the earth. So that as Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Salomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion*" (109). The Immortals had destroyed their initial splendid city and built a copy of it out of the ruins, which is the City Rufus visits, "a kind of parody or inversion" (116). The City has no gates or visible entries, and it can only be accessed from underneath, after a grueling experience of trudging through dark, forking subterranean passages. It is uninhabited and yields several impressions: of great antiquity, of madness, of endlessness. Above all, Rufus is horrified by its purposeless architecture marked by dead-end passages, inverted stairways and chaotic architectural structures that will haunt his nightmares. The City is a concentration of negativity and abomination that exceed words: "I do not want to describe it; a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull pullulating with teeth, organs, and heads monstrously

yoked together yet hating each other – those might, perhaps, be approximate images” (Borges 1964, 114). Passaic is then the City of the Immortals, the copy of a lost original, interpreted by Smithson to be none other than Rome. Smithson’s “Ultramoderne” ends with a sentence that echoes, partially, Bacon’s epigraph: “Nothing is new, neither is anything old” (65).

It is significant that upon his return to Rome in 1969, for a show at the L’Attica gallery, Smithson chose the desolate outskirts of Rome for his first major Earthwork, *Asphalt Rundown*. In an abandoned quarry near Rome, Smithson poured asphalt down a slope in a gesture that was not simply a performative illustration of the entropic metamorphosis of matter. *Asphalt Rundown* can also be seen as Smithson’s displacement of the whole concept of “Rome” and a sequel to his earlier preoccupation with origins, archetypes and models. In an eerie mirroring, the bleak photographs on the outskirts of Rome point to all the negative spaces of New Jersey and elsewhere that Smithson was so eager to explore. The quarries of the Eternal City and the quarries of New Jersey beckon to one another across the Atlantic. And even if the ruins of Rome are not visible in the photograph, they are still part of the whole artistic situation, an invisible counterpart to the slope as site, only apparently devoid of history. Smithson relocates and expands the view of the ruins to the quarry, where one can see Rome still sinking “in the mire.”

The mirroring of Rome and Passaic has its origins in the homecoming of the Nero of New Jersey. Passaic and Rome become versions of Eternal Cities pointing at each other in Smithson’s biography, cultural trajectory and artistic practice, as two fictions of eternity. Both Passaic and Rome are inscribed in the rhetoric of tourism, are contingent upon the practice of taking pictures and are inscribed in visions of the monumental. Among the photographs that Smithson did not include in the final version of the essay, there is one that is vaguely Roman, showing a statue of the Virgin standing with open arms in front of a tile shop (Fig. 5.3). Next to the statue, a white marble staircase leads to nowhere, a parodic suburban version of the Christian motif of the ascending spiritual ladder of St. John Climacus, a ladder that mimics the “negative map of Passaic.” The tiled floor and the stepped forms are reminiscent of the elements of space included in traditional religious paintings and their inscription in linear perspective, which is precisely what the text refutes in the way it functions, multiplying focal points, what Smithson calls “pointless vanishing points” in the essay of the same title (1967).



**Fig. 5.3** Robert Smithson, photograph taken in Passaic for the “The Monuments of Passaic,” not included in the final version. Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt papers 1905–1987, bulk 1952–1987, “Project files,” box 4, file 41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photo © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

New York is certainly much closer to home (that is to Passaic) than Rome. It has been suggested that Smithson is confronting the issue of architectural and historical preservation both in the Passaic travelogue and in “Ultramoderne,” published in 1967 (Roberts 2004, 66–68). Smithson was opposed to preservation, since its futility was obvious in the face of advancing entropy. “Ultramoderne” defines the relationship between a certain kind of architecture (Art Deco buildings in the Central Park West area, which Smithson calls “ultramoderne”) and historicity. Smithson sees these Art Deco buildings as representative of an arrested historic movement, flaunting a monumentally parasitical on ancient monumental traditions, apparently outside of time. Their reliance on architectural motifs typical of ancient monuments of various cultures (ziggurats, pyramids) is, according to Smithson, the sign of an “archaic ontology” that “puts the Ultramoderne in contact with the many types of monumental art from every major period – Egyptian, Mayan, Inca, Aztec, Druid, Indian etc.” (63). Smithson’s text is itself shaped like an upside-down pyramid, with

the indentation of the lines following the contours of a progressively shrinking architectural structure. It is illustrated with several stills from Andy Warhol's *Empire*, showing the Empire State Building at night. Roberts reads the Passaic essay against the backdrop of the Landmarks Preservation Act passed in 1965. The Art Deco buildings entertain the illusion of a temporal simultaneity with ancient monumental forms, disconnected from the issue of preservation because these buildings were too new to be a priority for preservation efforts (Roberts 2004, 68).<sup>24</sup>

"Ultramoderne" is one of Smithson's most ambiguous texts given the absence of a clear assessment of Ultramoderne architecture on the author's part. The suspension of judgment is belied by a seeping irony that surfaces from time to time. The style is one of philosophical argumentation highly reminiscent of the Borgesian rhetoric of fiction as parable, with the effect that in "Ultramoderne" (as often is the case in Borges as well) the intellectual positioning of the argument is unclear.<sup>25</sup> The impression of a perfectly poised discourse is subverted by the suspicion that this might be an ironic statement whose irony might never become fully apparent, but which comes to the fore in details such as the use of certain dubious adjectives: "Incessant and unreachable limits are built not into an 'architecture,' but rather into a 'cosmos' that dissolves into fatigued and tired distances" (63). "Fatigued" and "tired" signal a latent critique that breaks the polished surface of abstract terminology. Smithson's use of punctuation is also revealing, with exclamation marks and question marks vaguely and suavely suggesting critical distance: "The Ultramoderne exists *ab aeterno!*" (63). Or in the rhetorical question: "No doubt the thirties will be falsified into a style, perhaps endless styles, or maybe it has been already – who knows?" (63). The overarching illusion of mastery of the topic is fissured by such disingenuous confession of indifference parading as ignorance. Smithson's whole essay mimics, in its literary procedures, the apparent faultlessness, smoothness and specular perfection of Ultramoderne buildings. The text enacts the timeless monumentality of Ultramoderne architecture in its unruffled monolithic argumentation, well preserved from the passage of critical displacements.<sup>26</sup>

Ultramoderne architecture offers the 1930s version of the monumental that is synchronous with other, distant paradigms of

monumentality (the ziggurat, the temple, the pyramid). From this type of urban monument (which carries an illusion of eternity and preservation without actually needing to be historically preserved at the time when Smithson wrote his text), Smithson moves to Passaic and its very different version of monuments: pipes, a sandbox, a rotating bridge, all projected against the wasteland of the suburbia. These monuments are ruins in a way in which Smithson claims Ultramoderne architecture will not become. Ruins are simply not its conceptual condition and its imaginary horizon. From this perspective, the ruins of Passaic have much more in common with the ruins of Rome, in a way in which Smithson's Ultramoderne New York does not. The ruins of Passaic are the redefinition of the ruinous in a suburban environment, a present version of antique relics. Suburban and Roman ruins are entangled conceptually in the same way in which the labyrinthine Hotel Palenque and the tortuous Mayan monuments are connected in Smithson, on the same level of irony: "My feeling is that this hotel is built with the same spirit that the Mayans built their temples" (Smithson 1995, 120). But Hotel Palenque and the Mayan monuments were at least geographically close and Palenque is called "the city of the snake," Smithson reminds us (118), hence the serpentine character of recent and ancient buildings.

Renovation also represented a major topic in the intellectual and artistic debates of the nineteenth century, which triggered distinct responses from architectural theorists and practitioners like Ruskin (who defended the aesthetics of ruins and abhorred renovation) and Viollet-le-Duc (who defended and practiced renovation). As far as Rome and Italy are concerned, Henry James, in *Italian Hours* (written between 1882 and 1909), is making a case against renovation marked by an entropic (*avant la lettre*) understanding of old buildings that undergo a natural and organic cycle of decay. Restoration would interfere with the historical process of ruination.<sup>27</sup> Smithson is, of course, opposed to any kind of anthropomorphic perspective, but beyond the issue of anthropomorphism it is interesting to note the transatlantic intersection of concerns involving entropic architectural evolution.

The association between Passaic and Rome erupts in Smithson precisely because it is counterintuitive, a challenge to common sense

and to the most imaginative observer. Smithson is dismissive of the conventional rapprochement between American natural ruins and European architectural ruins, which he mentions in “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape” (1973). The essay celebrates Olmsted’s instauration of a primordial condition in the middle of the city in the tradition of the picturesque and illuminates the persistence of the mythology of European ruins in the USA, but not in an urban context, rather in the context of the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Yellowstone in 1969. Smithson quotes from the diary of David E. Folsom, a rancher, who compared America’s natural ruins in Yellowstone with European architectural ruins. Smithson goes on to say that “John Ruskin never visited America because it lacked castles” (167). Ironically, Smithson creates his own model of writing and reading the American suburbia that plays with the international theme and with old scenarios of transatlantic confrontation. While the prevailing interpretation of Smithson’s text insists on the tension between Passaic and New York, it seems to me that the transatlantic tension at work here points at the emergence of a trail (a recurrent form in Smithson), with Rome, Passaic and New York as stops on an imaginary line. In the logic of fugitive sites, visiting Passaic is visiting other places as well, as Smithson claims in a text he wrote to promote tours of Passaic guided by himself, adopting the rhetoric of tour guides:

SEE THE MONUMENTS OF PASSAIC, NEW JERSEY. What can you find in Passaic that you cannot find in Paris, London, or Rome? Find out for yourself. Discover (if you dare) the breathtaking Passaic River and the eternal monuments on its enchanted banks. Ride in Rent-A-Car comfort to the lands that time forgot. Only minutes from NYC. Robert Smithson will guide you through this fabled series of sites...and don’t forget your camera. Special maps come with each tour. For more information visit DWAN GALLERY, 29 West 57<sup>th</sup> Street. (Smithson 1996, 356)

Obviously, Passaic on the one hand and Paris, Rome or New York, on the other, beg to be considered as polar opposites. They correspond to certain models of the city relevant for his artistic practice. Thus, in a note

in the archives one finds an unpublished description of “Two Attitudes Toward the City” in terms of art, which actually features three descriptive possibilities:

- I. The Old City
  - a. The City as an organism.
  - b. The metaphor of biology. (natural architecture): footnote: Frank L. Wright called NY a peptic ulcer.
  - c. The nostalgia for the country or nature. (the pastoral—the rustic life among shepherds and dairymaids—the simple, the peaceful, the innocent.)
  - d. Idyllic past.
  - e. Life creates art.
  - f. The myth of the Renaissance as Humanism (defined in terms of space).
- II. The New City
  - a. The city as a crystalline structure.
  - b. The metaphors of physical science.
  - c. Interest in façades, the abstract monuments, idea architecture, highly structured parks, with labyrinths and mazes.
  - d. The Future as artifice (science fiction).
  - e. Art fabricates life.
  - f. Grandeur and emptiness. (the sublime) (defined in terms of time).
- III. The technological apparatus
  - a. Faith in the mechanical or electrical technology—kinetic art.
  - b. Automobile centered.
  - c. Technology at best is only a tool.
  - d. Technology is not art (confusion of space and time).<sup>28</sup>

The unlikely collusion between Passaic and Rome brings into play the first two models, the Old City and the New City. Inevitably, Rome as model is obsolescent intellectually, whereas the New City corresponds to a new artistic vision of monumentality, patterning and artificial futurity. The old lives on parodically in the new, with Rome activated in the paradoxical operation of comparison with Passaic, and its instant rejection as an impossibility. In this concomitant logic of superposition and antagonism, Passaic and Rome keep changing places, illustrating one of the many cultural narratives opened up by the “Monuments of Passaic,” and at the same time emerge as contraries marking the beginning and end of an urban structure that plays on reflection and distortion.

“The Monuments of Passaic” was written before Smithson did his major earthworks in the American desert. Unlike “The Spiral Jetty” essay, which purportedly explained certain choices made by Smithson when he created the outdoor sculpture *The Spiral Jetty* in Utah, “The Monuments of Passaic” does not operate in correlative terms to a sculptural work created by the artist.<sup>29</sup> It is an implicit meta-comment about what might constitute a site, a seminal question in Smithson and in earthworks in general. The Passaic essay constantly foregrounds the double nature of the site: its referentiality anchored in historical evolution and actualized in the trope of the tour and its discursive nature, with its frequent shifts in tone and forays into erudition. The conversion of Passaic from a historically determined place to a seemingly ahistorical one is not incompatible with Craig Owens’s early understanding of the linguistic mediation of site in Smithson, although there may seem to be a conceptual contradiction there (Owens 1979, 127).<sup>30</sup> The historicity of Passaic buried in the text (and unburied by critics like Jennifer Roberts) is part of the processes of sedimentation both literal and metaphorical that Smithson identifies in the passage of time, in the configurations of sites and in language itself (as is the case in *A Heap of Language*, 1966). These processes of sedimentation are central to his procedures of discourse as well, producing a layering in each of his texts. This layering is not a neat superposition of discrete strata confined within strict boundaries, but rather a more dynamic interplay of possible narratives that are latent within Smithson’s texts, with each narrative generating others.

Within this model of sedimentation, Passaic is inscribed in several strata of discourse (some more prominent than others) pointing in different geographical, historical and cultural directions: Passaic as industrial wasteland and blighted suburban other in the 1960s standing in contrast to New York City; Passaic as an anti-pictorial place contradicting a certain idea of the picturesque typical of landscape painting; Passaic as a place of suspended temporalities; Passaic as a residue of geologic pre-history; Passaic as a city in New Jersey with a history of its own; Passaic as an illustration of a Nabokovian and Borgesian fantasy of eternity; Passaic as a response to William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*; Passaic as the hometown of an artist/writer who forecloses any expression of subjectivity; Passaic as a copy of Rome... These versions and discursive strata of Passaic are not competing narratives. They stand together as possibilities

of an inexhaustible location. Just as the Passaic essay as a whole (text, photographs and map) holds all these narratives together, it also rejects available theories and concepts which might seem relevant at first glance. The concept of *terrain vague* circulated by the Surrealists seems to apply here, defined as the unresolved, the outmoded, the interstitial existing outside the circuits of urban life. But the *terrain vague* of the Surrealists is not Smithson's *terrain vague*, which lacks any potential of enchantment or uncanny resurgence. Smithson does not interpret the obsolescence of Passaic from the most obvious theoretical perspective, the Marxist one, which posits the inextricable link between obsolescence (including architectural) and capitalism (Abramson 2016, 6–7, 35–37). Smithson is wary of available theories, including his own “provisional theory of non-sites”: “Theories like things are also abandoned. That theories are eternal is doubtful. Vanished theories compose the strata of many forgotten books” (364).

Smithson's suggestion that “certain cities of the world” be placed “end to end in a straight line according to size” does not result in a seamless fabric. The relational nature between Rome and Passaic, or between the site and the non-site, does not imply a generalized spatial cohesion. Smithson is interested in gaps, ruptures and negative spots in the organization of space and ignores the dominant canon of landscapes that qualify as acceptable or suitable for artistic practice, generating certain artistic genres (like landscape painting for instance). Smithson is wary of the unified gridded perspectives that result from techniques of land surveying: “all air and land is locked into a vast lattice” (54). Consequently, he is acutely aware of the fact that certain sites function as holes or tears in this neat lattice. In “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site” (1967), Smithson refers punningly to “the boring,” a term that plays both on the verb “to bore” (draw a hole) and to boredom: “the boring” is both a hole in actual space and in its networked representations, and a boring place, uninteresting and lacking artistic potential. We will also see a reflection on the “boring” interstices of New York City in relation to land possession and property in Gordon Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties* (1973), analyzed in the following chapter. Four out of the six photographs included in Smithson's essay are of pipes, which are holes that puncture the landscape. Passaic as a symbolic hole can be read as a vortex of narratives and references that spiral within, toward the heart of emptiness, and also disperse without, in a concomitant centripetal and centrifugal movement. That boring and vacuous

Passaic should be understood, even ironically, in relation to Rome is the result of Smithson's unorthodox spatial and cultural cartographies that disrupt both Passaic and Rome as fixed notions that would stand simply for "suburbia" and "the Eternal City." This transatlantic perspective should be understood in light of Smithson's own intellectual evolution within modernism and break away from it, which is emblematically encapsulated in the ironic mirroring of ruins on both sides of the Atlantic.

## NOTES

1. The essay is included in Smithson's *Collected Writings* under the title "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." Before the Passaic trip, the working title of the essay was "A Guide to the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (Reynolds 2003, 101).
2. Caroline Jones places Smithson in the "post-studio" tradition and emphasizes his "peripateticism" (Jones 1996, 270). On the significance of fieldwork in Smithson, see Scott (2010) and Shaw (2013). Scott's focus is on the group dimension of the trips in which Smithson was a participant in 1966–1968, prior to the Earth Works exhibition at the Dwan Gallery (1968). Shaw examines Smithson's method in "The Monuments of Passaic" and what exactly Smithson meant when he claimed that his essay was an appendix to William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*. Shaw's broader aim is to follow the tribulations of the concept of site-specificity and the interactions between the fieldwork undertaken by a number of American poets and artists (Olson, Williams, Baraka, Judd, Smithson) and the discourses of historiography, geography, anthropology, architecture history "in order at once to conjure and displace the authority of each" (Shaw 2013, 255).
3. Brian Wallis describes the relation between the non-site and the museum in the following terms: "Like the readymade, the key to the Non-site is the concept of displacement, how the meaning of an object is changed by removal to another site. But unlike the readymade, the Non-site retains a connection to its original site (through the negative impression it leaves as well as the documentation that accompanies it), thereby setting up a dialogue about context, removal and recombination that echoes the very terms of the collecting or archiving project that underlies the museum itself" (Wallis in Kastner 2010, 30). An analysis of site-specific work that focuses on Smithson and his contemporaries up to 1978 can be found in Dell's *On Location: Siting Robert Smithson and His Contemporaries*, 2008.
4. Smithson's sardonic replay of the expeditionary tradition is manifest not only in "The Monuments of Passaic," but also in "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan." See Roberts (2004), 62; 86–113.

5. On an earlier analysis of the relationship between earthworks and urbanism, see Myers (2006). Myers is also a contributor to the *Ends of the Earth* exhibition catalog. For a critical review of the *Ends of the Earth* exhibit that claims to identify inconsistencies and omissions, see Boettger (2012).
6. Smithson rejects the idea that his dialectical vision is Hegelian in nature, since he is interested (like Olmsted, Price and Gilpin before him) in “physical contrasts” rather than “mental contrasts.” Such physical contrasts may consist for instance of “having an orchid garden in a steel mill, or a factory where palm trees would be lit by the fire of blast furnaces” (Smithson 1996, 158). An example of Hegelian dialectical thinking he gives is that of Thoreau in *Walden Pond*: “Walden Pond became a small ocean” (159). In a footnote, Smithson insists that “Hegelian dialectics exist only for the mind. This is close to Thoreau’s mental dialectic of mixing the local with the global” (170).
7. Solnit and Jelly-Schapiro’s recent *Nonstop Metropolis. A New York City Atlas* (2016) features a map and a text entitled “The Suburban Theory of the Avant-Garde: New Jersey’s Greats”: “This is a map in praise of the suburban avant-garde in music, poetry, art, and other media, of the birth of new forms and styles west of Hudson, and a map in praise of the need to sometimes turn the background into the foreground and vice versa” (179–184).
8. Robert Smithson alludes to Smith’s ideas several times, for instance in the “Letter to the Editor” in response to Michael Fried, “A Sedimentation of the Mind” (104), “The Artist as Site-Seer; or a Dintorphic Essay” (1966–1967) (340), “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site” (1967) (58–59), “The Monument: Outline for a Film” (357). On Smithson’s relationship to Smith’s account, see Reynolds (2003, 87–91). Allan Kaprow equates Smith’s experience with an “amplification” of the domain of art in “Segal’s Vital Mummies” (1964). Michael Fried discusses Smith’s narrative at length in his “Art and Objecthood” (originally published in 1967) and singles out its expansive and theatrical components as emblematic of a new artistic paradigm (Fried 1998, 157–160).
9. Although, as Reynolds points out, Smith’s description of the highway experience can be easily placed within the tradition of linear perspective and the vanishing point, which can be seen as the “precedent” of the nocturnal vision (Reynolds 2003, 89).
10. Reynolds contends that New Jersey provided Smithson “with a foil for the New York art world, of which he was increasingly a part” and “a set of opportunities for viewing New York” (Reynolds 2003, 79). Tuchman gives a Jersey-centric account of Smithson in which even the *Spiral Jetty* is interpreted as “a coda to the artist’s New Jersey period” (Tuchman 2014, 35).

11. The “surd” is a concept Smithson borrows from Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, but also from number theory: a surd is an irrational number (Smithson 1996, 231). In his conversations with Dennis Wheeler (1969–1970), Smithson explains that a “surd area” is “a region where logic is suspended” and which is “incommensurable” in the sense that “there is no commensurable relation” (199). For instance, the site of the *Spiral Jetty* allows for an eruption of the “surd.”
12. For a reading of this “negative map of Passaic” as a questioning of perspective, the conditions of seeing and surveying, see Reynolds (2003, 93–100). For an overview and analysis of the use of maps in Land Art, including Smithson, see Tiberghien (1995, 163–195). Tiberghien does not discuss Smithson’s “negative maps.”
13. For an analysis of Smithson’s religious art, see Roberts (2004, 12–35). For a survey of Smithson’s early career, see Tsai (1991, 3–25).
14. “To the Dead Angel,” unpublished, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Writings,” box 3, folder 67. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
15. “To the Man of Ashes,” unpublished, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Writings,” box 3, folder 67. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
16. “To the Flayed Angels,” unpublished, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Writings,” box 3, folder 67. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
17. Although, as Caroline Jones claims, “the continuities between these early works and the mature sculpture run surprisingly deep” (Jones 1996, 284).
18. A photograph of Smithson at the Colosseum in 1961 is reproduced in his *Collected Writings*, 273.
19. Postcard with a head of Nero from the Capitoline Museum, August 8, 1961, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Correspondence,” box 1, folder 15. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
20. Letter to Nancy Holt, August 1, 1961, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Correspondence,” box 1, folder 15. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
21. Letter to Nancy Holt, July 24, 1961, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Correspondence,” box 1, folder 15. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
22. Letter to Nancy Holt, July 24, 1961, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Correspondence,” box 1, folder 15. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
23. Letter to Nancy Holt, July 24, 1961, Smithson-Holt Papers, “Correspondence,” box 1, folder 15. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

24. It is also possible to read the Passaic essay against the backdrop of contemporary discourses on urbanism and architecture, although they are not explicitly mentioned, for instance Kevin Lynch's analysis of urban legibility (one of Lynch's examples of the illegible city is Jersey City in New Jersey), Venturi's emphasis on signs and billboards (such signs are indeed mentioned in the Passaic essay), discussions of the urban sprawl (William H. Whyte's *The Exploding Metropolis* had been published in 1958) and Lewis Mumford's lament over unchecked urban development in *The City in History* (1961) (Reynolds 2003, 83–89; Lejeune 2011).
25. In an interview, Smithson discusses his interest in Borges as a philosophical writer: "Although I was always interested in Borges's writings and the way he would use leftover remnants of philosophy" (294).
26. Watten offers a cogent analysis of the style of "Ultramoderne" as an enactment of stasis and also as a parody of the language of art criticism (Watten 1985, 79).
27. For an analysis of Henry James's perspective on architectural renovation in *Italian Hours*, see Manolescu (2010).
28. "Two Attitudes Towards the City," undated, Smithson-Holt Papers, "Writings," box 3, file 57. Text © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
29. Although, as Shaw points out, the essay "The Spiral Jetty" (1972) does not really answer the questions about the choice of site one might ask about the sculpture *The Spiral Jetty*, and all the questions are left open (Shaw 2013, 206).
30. Owens understood the centrality of Smithson's writings within his canon from the angle of poststructuralist theories of textuality and recognized their literary value (Owens 1979, 127). Owens identified allegory as the guiding principle of Smithson's use of language (124). Smithson's whole artistic endeavor, according to Owens, aims at the ruination of the metaphysical tradition. More recent readings of Smithson try to combine the literary and the historical angle, notably by identifying historical discourses that Smithson encodes in (or seemingly eliminates from) his texts.

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## Gordon Matta-Clark's Urban Slivers and "Word Works"

This chapter offers a reading of Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978) as an urban explorer of several strata and scales of the city, not just the large-scale buildings where he performed his famous cuts, but also the urban grid underneath and its unexpected interstices, visualized in cartographic material. Matta-Clark has often been discussed in terms of his monumental works, or rather “non-u-mental” as he called them, and a shift in attention to his less grandiose, more slippery and provisional works is bound to offer a new perspective on the artist’s play with scale and his interest in mapping the infinitely small and inconspicuous.<sup>1</sup> Matta-Clark repeatedly qualified the urban and architectural approaches cultivated by the Anarchitecture group to which he belonged as “metaphorical” or “poetic,” as well as “humorous.”<sup>2</sup> Although vague, these terms capture an unconventional and transformative spirit meant to uncover and precipitate a possible state of affairs ensconced in the actual one. It is from this poetic and metaphoric perspective that Matta-Clark’s cartographies of New York will be examined, especially through the interaction of cartographic and linguistic materials, which will counterbalance the attention given so far to the architectural aspects of his artistic practice. An artist who is particularly adept at crossing boundaries, Matta-Clark creates his urban cartographies using the medium of architecture, sculpture, photography, film, but also writing, in a nexus of collaborating strategies in which the political and the poetic interact.

The difficulty of categorizing the art of Gordon Matta-Clark and the untangling of his various artistic allegiances are major concerns in the studies dedicated to him starting with Pamela Lee's pioneering monograph published in 1999, *Object to Be Destroyed. The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*. Lee discusses Matta-Clark's reworking of the sublime, his debt to minimalism and more generally his attack on the ontology of the work of art through an embrace of destruction and "unbuilding." Thomas Crow also stresses the difficulty of placing Matta-Clark within clear-cut art historical categories, taking the example of *Day's End* (1975), an abandoned warehouse on Pier 52, on the Lower East Side waterfront, through which Matta-Clark drew an eye-shaped hole and whose floors he sliced to show the water underneath. Crow points out the work's remote inscription in minimalism: the Pier is box-shaped, although much larger than the usual minimalist boxes, and its metallic, industrial fabric reminds one of the cherished materials of minimalism. He also notes the displaced inscription of *Day's End* in Land Art, called forth by allusions to the sublime, but a sublime relocated in the city (Crow 2003, 20–21).<sup>3</sup> The work defies any straightforward association with minimalism and Land Art, but rather adapts them within a transformative vision that resists easy categorization. One can add, along the same hybrid lines, Matta-Clark's comparisons of *Day's End* to a modern-day version of religious architecture (a basilica, a cathedral or "a sun and water temple on the Hudson River"<sup>4</sup>), which show the artist's fondness for sacred references that he applies to a socially aware art with a guerilla approach. Matta-Clark, who projected but never completed an *Arc de Triomphe for Workers* (Milan, 1975), was also deeply interested in alchemy and spiritual writings having to do with Gnosticism, inner transformation and alchemical metamorphosis, as documented by the list of books in his personal library and suggested by a work like *Museum* (1970).<sup>5</sup> An artist who has affinities with both Lefebvre and Paracelsus presents a challenge for the researcher, not that eclecticism is uncommon in twentieth-century art, but Matta-Clark forges an unsurpassable model of paradoxical intellectual cohabitations.<sup>6</sup> His relationship with modernism is fraught with ambiguity as well. There is no consensus about the overall meaning of his work in relation to modernism. Should we understand it as an attack against formalism (central to modernism) or a more ambiguous engagement with modernism that violates rather than destroys boundaries and forms?<sup>7</sup>

Matta-Clark blithely accommodates such paradoxes and foregrounds a multidimensional eclecticism which is cultural and spatial (American/

European/South American), linguistic (English/French/Chilean Spanish), artistic (using various media, falling between schools and disciplines) and philosophical (Marxism/Gnosticism and alchemy). He was the most international artist of his generation, both in terms of locations (he completed works in New York, Chicago, Paris, Genoa, Antwerp, Berlin, Milan) and in terms of the crystallizations of combined American and transatlantic artistic practices where we find minimalism and earthworks, but also some relevant connections with Surrealism.

In what follows, I will stress the resonance of Matta-Clark's work with certain procedures and concepts central to Surrealism and I will highlight his interest in potentiality and possibility rather than simply destruction. Encompassing and perhaps elucidating the propensity for combining and transforming distinct strands are the dreamlike quality of Matta-Clark's work, as pointed out by John Baldessari: "His work was incredibly dreamlike. It was stuff you would only do in your dreams. He made the transition between minimalist concept and a kind of expressionist execution" (Diserens 2003, 100). Indeed, the impressive building "cuts" seem oneiric in their dependence on arduous sculptural gestures of "unbuilding" performed with chainsaws and sledgehammers and in their attempt to unsettle architectural perspectives and question the very possibility of building. Judith Russi Kirshner described Matta-Clark's whole work as an encounter between Piranesi and *Alice in Wonderland*, using an architectural and a literary reference that highlights the impossible, the absurd and the dreamlike (Jacob 1985, 121).<sup>8</sup> This "dreamlike" quality that dissolves boundaries and alters the built environment can be linked to the "poetic" and "metaphorical" dimension of Matta-Clark's work that he puts forth in his descriptions of Anarchitecture and that I would like to emphasize.

Gordon Matta-Clark's constant penchant for writing and punning can be placed within the transatlantic cultural contexts of Dadaism and Surrealism. His understanding of the relationship between art and architecture along with his view of the role of the artist/architect in the city is dependent on acts of wandering meant to identify the neglected, the disused and the ruinous spaces or buildings suitable for legal or illegal artistic intervention. These acts of wandering can be situated, historically and conceptually, within and against two frameworks, the most obvious one being that of SoHo artists occupying and renovating the warehouses that had been abandoned by failing businesses. Matta-Clark was adept at both renovating and splitting, which partake of the logic of identifying

and exploiting the potential of an architectural space. Urban walks also belong to the traditions of Surrealism and later Situationism, which are echoed by Matta-Clark's permanent quest for spaces and structures to be invested and transformed in the context of gradual decline of whole areas of lower Manhattan in the 1970s. Matta-Clark urban methodology relied on tours and explorations that led to the serendipitous discovery of intervals of emptiness:

Work with abandoned structures began with my concern for the life of the city of which a major side effect is the metabolization of old buildings. Here as in many urban centers the availability of empty and neglected structures was a prime textural reminder of the ongoing fallacy of renewal through modernization. The omnipresence of emptiness, of abandoned housing and imminent demolition gave me the freedom to experiment with the multiple alternatives to one's life in a box as well as popular attitudes about the need for enclosure... The earliest works were also a foray into a city that was still evolving for me. It was an exploration of New York's least remembered parts of the space between the walls of views inside out. I would drive around in my pick-up hunting for emptiness, for a quiet abandoned spot on which to concentrate my piercing attention.<sup>9</sup> (Matta-Clark 2006, 141–142)

The question of how exactly Gordon Matta-Clark can be placed in resonance with Surrealism is not simple, and trying to solve it by relying on a model of influence would be reductive. It is certainly tempting to give a central position in this respect to Gordon Matta-Clark's father, Roberto Matta Echaurren, who studied architecture in Chile and worked for two years in Paris for Le Corbusier before becoming a painter and a member of the Surrealist group in the 1930s. However, the relationship between Gordon Matta-Clark and his father was complex and conflicted, and the issue of transmission from father to son is extremely opaque.<sup>10</sup> Matta-Clark's widow, Jane Crawford, discussed Gordon's familiarity with Surrealism from a biographical perspective, in relation to the work of his father and his exposure to Marcel Duchamp. She insisted primarily on the lightness and playfulness that Gordon Matta-Clark inherited from Duchamp:

He'd been in Europe and had grown up with the Surrealists and the Abstract Expressionists in the art world. Teeny and Marcel Duchamp lived on 10<sup>th</sup> Street between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> and Gordon's mother lived on 11<sup>th</sup>

Street between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, just a block away, and was close to Teeny. The Duchamps were just around for a while. I think that the most important thing that Gordon got out of that (relationship) was learning to play with his art – it didn't have to be serious. (Crawford quoted in Attlee and Le Feuvre 2003, 25)

Matta-Clark's connections with Surrealism should not be viewed in a strictly deterministic sense, but rather as a series of elusive affinities that are not always traceable back to specific sources. An argument focused on influence would be problematic given Matta-Clark's propensity to borrow from a variety of discourses and strategies, transcending and distorting them all. In the 1976 interview with Donald Wall, Matta-Clark acknowledged the spirit of Dada (specifically): "I should mention my feeling about Dada since its influence has been a great source of energy. Its challenge to the rigidity of language both formal and popular, as well as our perception of things, is now a basic part of art. Dada's devotion to the imaginative disruption of convention is an essential liberation force. I can't imagine how Dada relates stylistically to my work, but in spirit it is fundamental" (Matta-Clark 2006, 63). But relying on the artist's statement projects a similar debt to biographical and discursive elements emanating from primary sources viewed as "authoritative." While Matta-Clark's own acknowledgement of the liberating potential of Dada is illuminating, a critical analysis should start by examining the dialogue between Matta-Clark's works and projects themselves and certain strategies and representations that are associated with Surrealism.

Matta-Clark's material legacy is scarce, consisting of fragments of buildings, photographs, films, letters, writings (many of which were written on index cards which curators and critics call "art cards") and interviews. In the introduction to *Object to Be Destroyed*, Lee discusses the methodological dilemmas raised by the "worklessness" of Gordon Matta-Clark, whose body of work has disappeared, outlived by its documentation (Lee 1999, xvii). His work was once there to be seen and experienced (sometimes at one's own risk), but was often performed on decrepit architectural structures and resulted in demolition, usually by urban authorities, and only scattered fragments remain.<sup>11</sup>

Although all of Matta-Clark's projects share the condition of elusiveness and evanescence, there is one in particular that stands out in this respect given its unfinished state and the uncertainty regarding its final form: *Reality Properties. Fake Estates*, which investigated political and

poetic themes related to urban property, minuteness and the resistance to functionality. The dreamlike quality of the building cuts is here redeployed in a totally different register. Rather than focusing on the monumental splitting gesture, *Reality Properties* selects the invisible odd lots in the urban plan, investing them with a dynamic of possibility and opening them up to projection. Inviting both a dreamlike act of surveying almost invisible slivers and a dreamlike concept of imagining their creative potential, *Reality Properties* magnifies the microscopic both in terms of size and symbolic force. Having originated in a series of performative gestures of buying odd lots and surveying them, the project has survived in an unfinished state as a medley of maps, photographs and statements of intention, but was posthumously solidified by Jane Crawford, thus raising questions about authorship and the choices made in the process of reconfiguration.

### IN THE RUINS OF NEW YORK

Matta-Clark's interest in urban dereliction is inextricably linked to the ruinous lower Manhattan of the 1960s and 1970s. Several factors explain the demise of New York. The port of New York lost its preeminence, as ocean passenger travel declined and freight transportation relocated to the New Jersey coast; large areas of Lower Manhattan were plagued by demolition and lack of interest from investors after the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, included in Truman's Fair Deal. Thus, it was more profitable for landlords and the city administration to liquidate aging houses and failing infrastructures rather than maintaining them. Robert Moses was responsible for many "revitalization" programs that failed to materialize for years. It was only in the mid-1980s that a full-scale gentrification started. Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) was the expression of the fierce grassroots opposition to urban renewal projects.<sup>12</sup> The 1970s saw the emergence of major public schemes for Manhattan: the construction of the World Trade Center and the aborted plan of the Lower Manhattan Expressway, south of Houston Street, which would have linked the east and west sides of the island and would have affected the area later known as SoHo, a disused neighborhood that was attracting a large community of artists seeking spaces for work and living. Many vacant locations downtown were renovated and appropriated by artists who transformed them into exhibition spaces and studios.<sup>13</sup>

The metaphor of the desert appears in studies that made a case for redevelopment, for instance *The Wastelands of New York*, which is the title given to a 1962 planning study produced by the City Club of New York, an organization interested in efficient city government, who examined the situation in SoHo and the neighboring areas (Shkuda 2016, 35). Members of the organization interviewed tenants and visited buildings, reaching the conclusion that there was no building worth saving among the thirty they studied, urging for redevelopment. The fiction of the era also captures the disintegration of the city, for instance in *Herzog* (1964), where Saul Bellow's protagonist catches occasional glimpses and sounds of a city falling apart, whose dust fills the atmosphere: "hearing the sounds of slum clearance in the next block and watching the white dust of plaster in the serene air of metamorphic New York" (166).

The metaphor of the desert present in studies of urban planning of the era coexists with its opposite, a model of density and compactness that one finds for instance in Robert Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic" (1967), examined in the previous chapter. Smithson contrasts the density of New York City and the loose fabric of suburban New Jersey: "Passaic seems full of 'holes' compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures" (Smithson 1996, 55). Smithson's axiom that New York is synonymous with extreme concentration is a familiar one. In *The American Scene*, returning to Manhattan in 1904 after twenty-one years abroad, Henry James laments the congestion and relentless growth, both horizontal and vertical, of the city's architectural structures, ruminating on the "powers of removal" of the old by the new and the "terrible erection" of tall buildings (James 1993, 434).<sup>14</sup>

Decline and emptiness do appear, however, as relevant conditions of a new phase in the history of New York City. It is within this paradigm of obsolescence that new artistic approaches to the city start to burgeon, sensitive to the potential of ruins and discontinuity. In *Formless*, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss argue that Matta-Clark's building cuts imply that architecture is waste and consequently deserves to be stripped of its fossilized and monumental prestige, precipitated into dissolution by the gesture of gutting buildings (190).<sup>15</sup> For Bois and Krauss, Matta-Clark's refusal to build and his metamorphic approach to architecture are embedded in the category of "formlessness," inspired by Bataille's "informe," a notion the latter described very briefly in a dictionary entry

he published in the Surrealist journal *Documents* in 1929 (Bataille 1985, 31). *Reality Properties. Fake Estates* has been interpreted as constituting another facet of Matta-Clark's interest in detritus, no longer architectural in nature, but rather the minute and invisible detritus resulting from the conjoined practices of drawing boundaries and building in urban planning and architecture.

As convincing as this residual perspective is, it seems to me that Matta-Clark's endeavors can be read as an overarching polemic against structures that involves more than the undoing of architecture seen as residue. Denis Hollier starts his book about Bataille, *Against Architecture*, by pointing out that in the wake of the May 1968 revolt there was an attempt to "loosen the symbolic authority of architectures" and that the Latin root of "structure" ("struere") is linked with the idea of construction (Hollier 1993, ix). Being "against construction" is then equivalent to being "against structure," not just against architecture as residue. Matta-Clark takes issue with the limited usages of space perpetuated by time-honored models, in an attempt to exploit the full potential of spatial impossibility and think of space as potentially extendable: up in the air (in the performance *Tree Dance* at Vassar College, 1971), along the vertical axis of skyscrapers (in *City Slivers*, 1976), framed in neighbors' windows (in *Chinatown Voyeur*, 1971), down in the underground world of tunnels, vaults, subways and tracks (in *Substrait. Underground Dailies*, 1976), or collapsed into flatness and horizontality (in *Reality Properties. Fake Estates*, 1973). The anti-functional and anti-practical are courted with candid freshness and complex equipment. In his utopian housing projects, alternatives to living and building on the ground are shifted to the most unexpected places and dimensions, especially in the projects that involve aerial elevation: *Rope Bridge* (Ithaca Reservoir, 1968), *Tree Dance* (Vassar College, 1971), *Jacob's Ladder* (Kassel, Germany, 1977) and the 1978 sketches for *Sky Hook (studies for a balloon building)*. Natural elements (trees and air) are enlisted as unusual extensions of habitat high above the ground, in a defiance of gravity favored by other artists of the same generation, Trisha Brown in particular, in her antigravitational dance *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970), of which Matta-Clark's girlfriend Carol Goodden took photographs, and *Roof Piece* (1971), in which Carol Goodden participated as a dancer.<sup>16</sup> The exploration of the subterranean layers beneath New York and Paris in the films *Substrait (Underground Dailies)* (1976) and *Sous-sols de Paris* (1977) takes the viewer in an underground rife with

urban legends and extravagant rumors. *Substrait* shows burial chambers underneath the cathedral of St. John the Divine, tracks running under Grand Central Station and sewage structures that make up the "arteries and veins" of the city (a comparison explicitly made in the film). Invisible and abstract structures are also targeted, like the urban grid (notably in *Reality Properties*), as well as the structure of language itself, playfully redeployed in the art cards. Matta-Clark's use of maps and reflection on the urban grid in *Reality Properties* unveils his conceptual interest in structures as tacit forms that underlie the built environment. There is a difference between understanding Matta-Clark's work as an engagement with waste or as a polemic against the order and regularity of structures, not just modernist buildings, as has been amply demonstrated, but the urban grid and verbal structures as well. The shift moves from waste as end result to structures as predetermined conditions, shown to be fallible and anomalous despite expectations to the contrary.

*Reality Properties* began as part of a quest for alternative art spaces in New York City to which Matta-Clark was exposed thanks to Alanna Heiss, director of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, founded in 1971, who sought to transform abandoned buildings in New York City into art spaces. With the help of his assistant, Manfred Hecht, Matta-Clark bought fifteen-minute parcels of land for 25\$–75\$, fourteen in the Borough of Queens and one on Staten Island, at two auctions organized by the City of New York on October 5 and 16, 1973. The strangeness of the project resides in the infinitesimal sizes of these plots of land with quirky shapes, and also in the inaccessibility of some of them (a lot in Queens was completely locked between buildings). Their dimensions vary, but given their minuteness and their occasional inaccessibility, it is clear that they were not suitable for building purposes and it is difficult to conceive of any functional purpose they may have served. Lot 1 in Queens is  $2.77 \times 100$  feet, lot 5, also in Queens, is  $2.33 \times 355$  feet and lot 14 on Staten Island is  $2 \times 25.17$  feet. These leftover spaces were anomalously interpolated between property lines: a thin strip along an alley, a modest triangle locked among three buildings.

Matta-Clark is not the only artist who explores urban and suburban marginality in the 1970s, which had become a fascinating topic in the previous decade, in the work of Vito Acconci or Robert Smithson. But Matta-Clark is interested in a different paradigm of concepts that connects urban space, the illogical minutia of its divisions, ownership, bureaucracy, next-to-nothingness, invisibility and anti-functionality in

a poetic exploration of uselessness within an absurdist and comical register. Doing fieldwork on territories as small and anti-functional as the slivers of *Reality Properties* becomes significant only on a metaphorical level, where their minuteness and invisibility become relevant urban features. Matta-Clark's project can be read as a parody of the Surrealists' valorization of the *terrain vague*, except that here the lots are invisible to the naked eye and gain contour only on city plans marking property limits.<sup>17</sup> The existence of these infinitesimal urban spaces is certified only by bureaucratic archives and by the possibility of individual ownership granted by the City of New York.<sup>18</sup> The minute and the interstitial in the urban fabric are intuited to have a special potential (left unspecified) for creative development and subversion rather than practical use. There is a connection to be made with the privileged urban spaces of Surrealism, discontinuous, disruptive and heterogeneous.<sup>19</sup> Matta-Clark's lots constitute a serial system of anomalies perpetuated within the larger, supposedly orderly, system of the urban plan. But as Ian Walker makes clear in his analysis of the *terrain vague*, the Surrealists' celebration of Paris was "undercut by other values: the natural, the primitive, the raw" in an organic interpenetration of nature and culture (Walker 2002, 114). Matta-Clark is indeed interested in the amorphous edges and interstices of the city, but the blending of nature and culture in the city is less prominent in his work, although it does exist, for instance in *Cherry Tree* (1971), planted in the basement of 112 Greene Street.

Matta-Clark envisaged to either sell the documentation he had assembled for *Reality Properties*, together with the land itself, as artworks, or to distribute the plots among artist friends for the pursuit of art projects. A 1973 article in *The New York Times* quotes Matta-Clark after one of the auctions:

Gordon Matta-Clark, a 28-year-old SoHo artist, walked away with five pieces of New York – four in Queens, one in Staten Island. "I got more than I expected," he said, "and I'm very happy about it." Mr. Matta-Clark said he intends to use his new properties in works of art he will create during the next several months. The artworks will consist of three parts: a written documentation of the piece of land, including exact dimensions and location and perhaps a list of weeds growing there; a full-scale photograph of the property, and the property itself. The first two parts will be displayed in a gallery, and buyers of the art will purchase the deed to the land as well. "I had to buy small properties because they're manageable,

I can hang the photographs on a gallery wall," the artist explained. "I have one piece that's 1 foot by 95. It will go on a long wall. Another piece I bought I understand from the catalogue I can't even get to. There's no access to it, which is fine with me. That's an interesting quality: something that can be owned but never experienced. That's an experience in itself." (Carlinsky 1973, 1, 12)

While the building cuts undo existing architectonic structures, *Reality Properties* confronts a situation prior to construction, although the very idea of construction is absurd given the size. By buying land surplus at auctions, Matta-Clark was copying the pose of Manhattan real estate buyers and speculators who had appeared and multiplied in the wake of the Commissioners' Plan of 1811: "with lots available to the highest bidder, the grid was a framework for the free market and social mobility" (Ballon 2012, 87). In the mid-nineteenth century, it was common to organize public auctions of Manhattan lots, which were the result of the "professionalization and regularization of the real estate business, which had suffered from bogus sales and other shady practices" (Ballon 2012, 88). The Real Estate Exchange opened in 1885. Certain auctioneers required a minimum purchase of several lots, thus "orienting sales to developers rather than single house/lot owners" (Ballon 2012, 91). Matta-Clark poses as a real estate speculator who engages in artistic (rather than economic) speculative activities. It should be noted that no other borough apart from Manhattan implemented a master plan, although grids are very common in some of the other boroughs, where they were originally conceived as a method of subdivision rather than an overarching framework.

The humorous dimension of *Reality Properties* that ensues from the useless ownership of tiny slivers of land in New York is combined with the deadpan seriousness and meticulousness of the mapping procedures that follow. Owner of no less than fifteen pieces of "gutter space" or "curb space" that had resulted from rezoning or from the leftovers of architectural construction, Matta-Clark gathered the maps and deeds of the parcels, used measuring tape to establish the exact boundaries of the lots, took numerous photographs of each lot, in serial fashion, covering every inch of land with systematic and painstaking care, and invited artist friends on tours of the sites, like a proud landowner. Artist Jaime Davidovich filmed one of these tours and a fragment of footage has survived. The project is both a form of institutional critique and a parodic

replay of American myths related to land use: property, home, land surveying, ownership inscribed in the American Dream.<sup>20</sup> The figure of the surveyor looms large over Matta-Clark's ritual of measuring and listing of plants, although the latter was never conducted. It is of course ironical that, as an "artwork" (dispersed, of uncertain composition, referring to inaccessible or unusable land), *Reality Properties* resists ownership even as it pressures the landowner into entering the circuit of real estate logic that implies responsibilities and the acceptance of legal duties (tax payment) in order to validate possession.

Matta-Clark left behind a cardboard box with documentation material (photographs, maps and administrative documents) for fourteen estates and incomplete elements for the fifteenth estate, which was inaccessible. Duchamp's *Green Box* (1934) immediately comes to mind, but while Duchamp's choice of the form of the box was intentional (a balance between containment and disorder, with the advantage of reproducibility), Matta-Clark's box was more accidental than intentional, an unfinished project. Duchamp meant the *Green Box* to exist as a box containing a finite number of documents that could be rearranged at will by its possessor. Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties* documents were reconfigured in fourteen collages produced by Matta-Clark's widow after his death. The Anarchitecture group to which Matta-Clark belonged organized an exhibit at *112 Greene Street*, the gallery run by Jeffrey Lew, only two blocks away from the artist-run restaurant *Food* founded by Matta-Clark, Tina Girouard, and Carol Goodden, in 1974, and Matta-Clark showed a series of collages of *Fake Estates*, but no record of the exhibit or the actual configuration of the collages subsists. Gordon Matta-Clark gave Norman Fisher the box telling him (according to Jane Crawford) that "he could assemble the pieces any way he wanted. They didn't have to be done sequentially or even kept separated by property. They could be assembled in a crazy shape, or left loose in a pile" (Kastner et al. 2005, 51). When both Matta-Clark and Fisher died a few years later, the documents were left in the box and the fifteen plots of lands returned to the ownership of the city for nonpayment of taxes. In 1992, Jane Crawford found the box when a retrospective of Matta-Clark's career was organized at the IVAM Centro Julio Gonzalez in Valencia in 1992 and produced her own collages of *Reality Properties*. *Fake Estates*, reconstructing them according to her recollections of his descriptions and according to the recollections of the friends that assisted him.<sup>21</sup> From that moment on, *Fake Estates* was granted the status of accepted "artwork" and

entered the official circuit of exhibition and ownership by individual collectors and museums. Issues of authenticity and authorship bothered the Guggenheim Museum when it acquired *Reality Properties. Fake Estates—Little Alley Block 2497, Lot 42*. Curator Nancy Spector decided to go on with the acquisition but presented it as a posthumous collage (Kastner et al. 2005, 57). Spector rightly points out that much of the work of the period was never actually meant to be a conventional "work" falling in the categories of traditional media, as is the case with Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque* (1969), also owned by the Guggenheim, which was a talk accompanied by thirty-one photographs he took in Palenque, Mexico. The titles of the fourteen *Reality Properties* collages were given by Jane Crawford posthumously: *Jamaica Curb* or *Maspeth Onion*, more appealing and easier to remember than "GMC-1221," the administrative labels of the sites (Kastner et al. 2005, 54). The names she chose have stayed with us and have become the norm in the literature on Matta-Clark. Clearly, the conceptual nature of the work welcomes such assemblies and reshufflings. Still, Crawford's gesture of reassembling the work can be questioned, as Lee does when she suggests that if the collages had not been reassembled, their conceptual nature would have been more prominent, but Lee accepts the fundamental "variability" of *Fake Estates* (Kastner et al. 2005, 59).

The many photographs Matta-Clark took of the fourteen accessible estates are superlatively banal, showing metal gates and fences, corners and parking lots. It is the pavement that elicits the most striking photographic methodology, which consists of taking close-up views in contiguous fashion, unit after unit of asphalt and soil being immortalized in a cumulative attempt to map the whole surface of the property, almost on a one-to-one basis in which the representation appears to cover the represented space without scale distortion, as is the case in *Jamaica Curb* (Fig. 6.1).

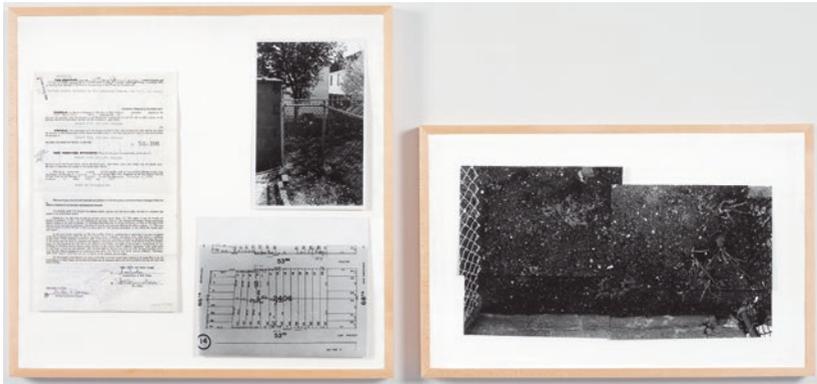
This unusual methodology is reminiscent of Borges's short story "Of Exactitude in Science" (1946) in which the map and the territory are equivalent. What the artist seeks to transmit is the lot itself in all its detailed fabric, with no attempt at sublimation or selection. It is perhaps the infinitesimal size of the lots that encourages this literal correspondence between map and territory, between visual representation and surveyed land. Matta-Clark's lots seem to be a literal version of Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha, which the latter called his "little postage stamp of native soil" (Prenshaw 2004, 113). But while Faulkner's



**Fig. 6.1** Gordon Matta-Clark, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates, "Jamaica Curb," Block 10142, Lot 15, 1974*. Collaged gelatin silver prints, deed, and three maps. Map (top left): 13 7/8 x 11 inches; Map (top right): 13 7/8 x 11 inches; Map (bottom right): 14 x 8 1/2 inches; Map (bottom left): 13 7/8 x 11 inches; Documentary photograph: 5 x 3 7/8 inches © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York. Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong

"little postage stamp of native soil" gave rise to a saga of family life in the American South, Matta-Clark's "postage stamp" odd lots are not conducive to narrative outbursts or the disjointed flow of stream of consciousness. In terms of scale, one senses the implicit possibility that these photographic units of scrutinized gutter are a microcosm of the city as macrocosm: New York as overgrown pavement of which the lots are metonymic fragments, for instance in *Maspeth Onion* (Fig. 6.2).

Matta-Clark adopts the immanent perspective of the obsessive, painstaking surveyor with no transcending or redeeming horizon, at least not a discernible one. The seriality of the fifteen lots, as well as the seriality of the picture-taking strategies at work here, is inherited from minimalism. Arguably, the concentration of sight on the parsed street segments is also minimalist in origin but taken to the extreme. The grain of the overlooked stares us in the face, along with the details of grass and dust that normally pass unnoticed. The photographs give visibility to the humble texture of urban space, but this overlooked texture that we tread on without noticing it is not being poetically transmuted in the process. The prosaic matter-of-factness displayed in the photographs is bathetic and uninspiring, disrupted only by the discrepancy between the meticulous



**Fig. 6.2** Gordon Matta-Clark, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates, "Maspeth Onion," Block 2406, Lot 148, 1973*. Collaged gelatin silver prints and documents. Deed: 13 7/8 × 8 3/8 inches; Documentary print: 9 3/4 × 6 1/2 inches; Map: 8 × 9 7/8 inches; Collaged prints: 9 3/4 × 18 1/8 inches © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York. Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong

photographic approach and the size of the estates. It is this discrepancy that carries a poetic potential. What Matta-Clark called the “poetic” or “metaphorical” approach of anarchitectural perspectives is not a transformative one in a positive sense, but a mere possibility. Matta-Clark in the *Reality Properties* photographs is not Walt Whitman celebrating the grass under his feet in “Song of Myself” and inviting his readers to pay attention to the individualized constituency of the most overlooked element of nature. Whitman’s romantic ethos and his Transcendentalist leanings that underpin the reverence for the spears of summer grass and the child’s curious interrogations about the nature of grass are far removed from Matta-Clark’s project of making lists of the plants on the odd lots, which he did not complete. Apart from a cumulative effect of enumerated plants that would have echoed the cumulative effect of the contiguous photographs, there is no hint at projecting the lots in some idealized version of the everyday. While the juxtaposed photographs allow us to see what we usually do not notice in the gritty fabric of streets, pavements and curbs, they also defy framing and reproduction in their almost endless accumulation on a horizontal line that cuts across normative barriers of book pages, exhibition catalogs and framed works of art. These estates require “a long wall,” as Matta-Clark put it. To develop the “postage stamp” trope further, Matta-Clark’s breaking of frames is reminiscent of Tony Smith’s expansive vision of art on the New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s, which made him consider existing forms of art as “an art of postage stamps,” no longer satisfactory in their conventional scope (Smith 1995, 384). Faulkner’s “little postage stamp of native soil” meets Smith’s refusal of the “art of postage stamps” in a reversed correlation between the actual size and the method of deceptively mimetic enlargement, whose magnifying principle unsettles the very idea of imitation.

What Jane Crawford found in the *Reality Properties* box left behind was a series of documents with nothing similar to a user’s manual to orient the efforts at ordering the contents. Some of the photographs ended up being juxtaposed horizontally in an unwieldy configuration that made its visual reproduction extremely difficult. This play on making the invisible visible and then making the visible hard to reproduce in museum documentation translates Matta-Clark’s defiance of wholeness and his challenge of conventional framing. An idea of unframing is present from the start, consonant with the vastness of urban spaces and structures that he sought to open up and whose enclosures he broke apart.

Matta-Clark's photographic technique of extended horizontalization is his take on the pictorial vanishing point, which peters out in a flatness that is always equal to itself. The collage of never-ending pavement photographed one step at a time resonates well with the hammered down and cutoff wall slivers in the building cuts. Ed Ruscha's "no-style" photography and his accordion format of folded photographs come to mind in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), but there is a larger affinity in terms of subject matter, seriality and ordinariness in Ruscha's photographs of gasoline stations, parking lots, apartments and hotel swimming pools of consummate blandness. Matta-Clark's resolutely horizontal approach to the slivers contrasts with the commonly celebrated vertical dimension of New York City. For Le Corbusier, whose functionalism Matta-Clark rejected with all his might, New York, which he visited in 1935, is "a vertical city, under the sign of new times" (Le Corbusier 1964, 36).<sup>22</sup> It is significant that the slivers are in Queens and on Staten Island, where the vertical attributes of New York City are much less apparent than in Manhattan. Nevertheless, this challenge to verticality is not encoded simply in the chosen location. Rather, it is a matter of method: Matta-Clark surveys the less commonly acknowledged horizontality of New York through the leveling technique of photographic parsing on the horizontal. The ground underneath comes into focus as the flatbed of New York.

The meticulous effort at documenting minute lots that are utterly uninteresting and unmemorable seems to be remotely indebted to the literary modernist tendency to monumentalize everyday structures and to find beauty in the commonplace, but upon closer scrutiny Matta-Clark does not embrace this perspective. In an urban context, Nabokov's short story "A Guide to Berlin" ("Putevoditel' po Berlinu") written in Russian and published in 1925 is a good example of targeting ordinary street scenes and paraphernalia in order to make them cohere in a meaningful urban itinerary despite their glaring ordinariness. Playing with the codes of conventional tour guide and the rhetoric of tourism, "A Guide to Berlin" selects the hackneyed in order to confer upon it a poetic aura tinged with nostalgia. There certainly is a granular dimension of literary modernism that shows interest in cumulative futility, especially in urban contexts (Carver 2014). But modernist examples in literature display a compensatory fantasy about the commonplace and the everyday that often involves transfiguration or epiphany. Matta-Clark steers clear of such epiphanic endeavors, at least in *Reality Properties*, whose

grainy gravitational pull invites more attention to the texture of the commonplace but does not seek to go beyond it. Surrealist representations of the *terrain vague*, like for instance Man Ray's photograph *Terrain vague* (1932), display a visual coarseness and interest in banality that we find in Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties* photographs as well, but Man Ray's photographs cultivate an ambiguity and indeterminacy about the nature of the site which is not at all explored by Matta-Clark.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the interest of the slivers is condensed in the quality that Smithson called "the boring" (to which I refer in the chapter devoted to him). Boring locations are, in Smithson's enumeration, "pavements, holes, trenches, mounds, heaps, paths, ditches, roads, terraces" (Smithson 1996, 56) which are consonant with Matta-Clark's "boring" parking lots and alleyways. "The boring" is not epiphanic but carries an aesthetic potential that results from its very lack of visual interest. The lots are set apart by their seriality and minuteness, eschewing uniqueness and monumentality. They are also set apart by their material and symbolic value as property in New York City belonging to Matta-Clark, a truly unique quality that none other of his works possesses.

### CARTOGRAPHIC GAPS

Two seminal strategies at work in *Reality Properties. Fake Estates*, both in the existing collages and in the process of documentation, are reminiscent of Robert Smithson's: the use of maps as part of the site/non-site dialectic and the collective tours of a given site. Maps and mapping procedures are part of the layered format of *Reality Properties*. To each lot correspond one or several Sanborn maps that show the location of the plot using the Sanborn conventions of lot numbering system and delineation of individual properties. The maps prove that the slivers, which are otherwise inconspicuous, blended in the smooth configuration of streets and alleyways, exist as properties, against all odds, and are inscribed in the illogical and aberrant history of real estate evolving through time. The autonomous status of some of these tiny lots is difficult to explain, as shown by the archival research that led to the *Odd Lots* exhibition organized by *Cabinet* magazine and White Columns at the Queens Museum of Art in 2005–2006 (Kastner et al. 2005). This illogical quality of the slivers is one of the elements that confer a "poetic" and "dreamlike" aura to the project.

The maps record the impersonal evolution of the successive redrawing of property boundaries. As maps of bureaucratic memory, they are proof of the precision of the administration and hold a real estate potential: the lots may become valuable in the future despite their apparent lack of interest. As mementoes of the obscure partitioning of property, they transmit dispassionate information emanating from urban authorities that are immune to the absurdity and uselessness of gutter space. Matta-Clark plays on this perpetuated absurdity and pushes it to its limits by surveying and listing the features of the site, as any owner would feel bound to do. The impersonal cartographic discourse of the maps in *Reality Properties* stands in contrast to the passion that owners, both private and institutional, attach to private property and the respect of property boundaries. Friends who accompanied Matta-Clark on trips to the lots offer converging accounts of the suspicion and anger of neighbors who react against what they see as trespassing on Matta-Clark's part, although technically he is a legal owner occupying and surveying his "land." Jaime Davidovich's extant footage of *The Queens Project* shows the angry outbursts their presence and actions provoke (video, 1975). The issue of land and building possession, with its litigious aspects, is central to the work of many artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark in particular.<sup>24</sup> Smithson struggled to obtain permission to build his earthworks, and Matta-Clark was sued by the City of New York for the dissection of Pier 52 (*Day's End*) in a million dollar trial, as a result of which he left for Europe to escape the legal outcomes and eventually the charges were dropped.

One of the major conceptual aspects of *Reality Properties* consists of its questioning of spatial divisions and pattern predictability in urban planning, and the very possibility of regular partitioning always equal to itself and obeying an unflinching organizational principle. While exposing the anomalies of the odd lots, Matta-Clark exposes the impossibility of a perfectly regular larger spatial order capable of faultless reproduction. The accidents of rezoning result in anomaly, and the fact that there is room for accident and irregularity opens a poetic and metaphoric gap in the texture of urban space, a subversive "heterotopia." The critical reflection on the principles of spatial organization and its deviances in the urban context of New York City stems from Matta-Clark's training as an architect, but the issue of spatial partitioning has much larger artistic and cultural ramifications, especially in the modernist interest in the grid as organizational principle of the surface of the canvas.

Matta-Clark's odd lots beg to be inscribed polemically in the visual tradition of the painterly grid, which is, according to Rosalind Krauss, the emblematic form of modernist painting constantly disseminated throughout the twentieth century. The grid is characterized by a series of paradoxes that allow it to be read as a mythical form, in the sense that Lévi-Strauss gives to "myth" as being underlined by contradictions that are not dissolved but covered up (Krauss 1986, 12). The grid can be seen as centrifugal (extending to infinity) or centripetal (delimited by the frame); the grid foregrounds the materiality of the medium (surface, line, pigment), but is also felt to be an expression of spirituality by a number of artists (Klee, Malevich, Mondrian); the grid is anti-natural in its rejection of natural forms, its straight-angle geometry and flatness; it posits the autonomy of art cut off from nature and it maps not a space outside itself but rather a surface of inscription. Its exclusively visual character suggests a "hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse," thus serving as a "model for the antidevelopmental, the antinarrative, the antihistorical" (Krauss 1986, 22).<sup>25</sup>

But certain grids are less obviously non-referential, espousing a kinship with the urban forms of the grid, as is the case for instance in Mondrian's *New York City* series of paintings, which suggests a city seen from above and which is revolutionary in its celebration of a new type of horizontal paradigm due, among other things, to the artist's choice of painting on a table in a way that is similar to Pollock's.<sup>26</sup> Mondrian's *New York City* is not just a schematic representation of a city seen from above, but rather a different kind of pictorial vision, "a diagram, a battle plan against the longitudinal section of representation" (Bois 1990, 183).<sup>27</sup>

Postwar artists of different sensibilities dismantle, distort and reinterpret the urban grid. The growing relevance of the city as site starting with the 1960s leads to the embrace of the urban grid as artistic material and space of critical investigation, although the repetitive visual vocabulary of the modernist grid is a latent presence, often combined with stylistic elements borrowed from other paradigms, notably the seriality of minimalism or the photo-conceptualism of artists like Dan Graham and Robert Smithson. In minimalist and conceptual-driven works or performances, grids are no longer catalysts of visual phenomena and ways of mapping the surface of the canvas, they become sites of action and critical thinking. Urban grids are revisited in parodic soft sculptures (Claes Oldenburg's *Soft Manhattan #1. Postal Zones*, 1966) or are disabled,

with parts of them removed from the integrity of the city plan (Sol Le Witt's *Photograph of Part of Manhattan with the Area Between the John Weber Gallery, the Former Dwan Gallery, and Sol LeWitt's Residence Cut Out*, 1977). In performances, urban sites are often presented in terms of location as series of coordinates. The focus is no longer on the visual pattern and experience of seeing, but rather on the situated individual, on movement or location. Extreme precision and interest in exact location become the hallmark of artists that follow itineraries (imposed or not), like Vito Acconci in *Following Piece* (1969).

Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties. Fake Estates*, with its insistence on the rigorous notation of coordinates of the various plots, mimics both the dry language of bureaucracy and real estate designations, but also the precise expression of Cartesian coordinates cherished by minimalism and conceptualism. However, he is less concerned with location and anchorage as he is with property boundaries in land ownership and, more importantly, with the resemblance between these lots with strange shapes and the architectural cuts of walls, floors and buildings that are a staple of his architectural work. Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties* is far removed from the model of the modernist grid, first and foremost in its fascination with the accidents and irregularities of urban forms of structuring (architecture, urban planning).

The architectural grid of modernism is also a privileged polemical interlocutor in *Bingo* (1974), a performance in which Matta-Clark cut sections from a house in Niagara Falls, New York, after having divided the façade into a numbered nine-square grid and removed all the squares except the central one. This orthogonal division is a subversive debt to Colin Rowe (one of Matta-Clark's professors at Cornell), his generic structural grid, his *découpage* of surfaces into geometrical shapes suggesting homogeneous seriality and centered symmetry.

Another work and performance which can be considered in conjunction with *Reality Properties*, and which is the result of forceful intervention on urban surfaces, is *Window Blow-Out* (1976), a series of black and white photographs of vandalized housing projects in South Bronx, Twin Parks, whose windows had been broken, underscoring the bleak underside of idealized urban projects. Matta-Clark had been invited to show a project in an exhibit entitled *Idea as Model* at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in Manhattan, headed by Peter Eisenman (Fig. 6.3).



Fig. 6.3 Gordon Matta-Clark, *Window Blow-Out*, 1976/2006. Gelatin silver print 11 × 14 inches © The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York. Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong

The exhibit was meant mainly as a space for the New York Five, a group of five architects who privileged the architectural idiom of modernism in the tradition of Le Corbusier: Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier (although Eisenman and Graves later steered away from the modernist positions of the group). Meier had designed the Twin Parks housing projects. Matta-Clark was granted permission to break a few windows at the Institute in order to display the photographs in the empty casements. But he showed up intoxicated after a party and shot all the windows of the Institute with an air gun borrowed from Dennis Oppenheim, which led to his exclusion from the show and indignant comments from Eisenman. The broken windows were swiftly replaced. This intoxicated performance casts Matta-Clark as guerilla artist and visceral opponent to the architectural ideas of the organizers, their authority and prestige (Cohn 2000, 77–90). Oppenheim called it a “radical gesture” and a “definitive statement – a metaphor about architecture” (Jacob 1985, 21).

*Window Blow-Out* is legible as an act of negation, the epitome of a fiercely oppositional attitude. It is significant that the window grid translates a certain ideal of form and transparency, and the iterative destruction to which it is submitted conveys both a social stance of bellicose unease and an aesthetic rejection. The broken window is the result of a forceful intervention into the inevitable entropic course of architectural decline that besets any monumentalized structure. Oppenheim's reading of the act and result as "a metaphor about architecture" implies a transport or transformation of a notion into another. Indeed, the grid-like window structure preserves its order, but the missing panes and the jagged, irregular patterns of broken glass grow into a matrix whose negative, anticlimactic voids retain no promise of redemption.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to *Reality Properties*, Matta-Clark played with the grid of painterly perspective and of architectural drawing, and with classical models of the human body in *Hair* (1972). Just like *Reality Properties*, *Hair* looks like a prank. On the first day of 1972, Matta-Clark decided to let his hair grow in absolute freedom and without intending to have it cut, in some sense like a bodily entropic growth. On the last day of the same year, a performance of haircutting took place, during which Carol Goodden took pictures of the artist's head against a white surface with a mesh of wire surrounding it, and each clump of hair attached to a specific part of the grid. The individual tresses were then assigned a letter and number in order to be easily traced for future use in a wig sculpture that was never made (Jacob 1985, 48). The centrality of the artist using his own bodily extensions to make art is paired with a rereading of perspective and with the anthropomorphic analogy between the human body and architectural monuments.<sup>29</sup>

The specificity of Matta-Clark's vision of the urban grids lies in their inevitable gaps, ruptures and tears. The object of Matta-Clark's deconstruction is the grid as meta-language of visual and architectural modernism. With various instruments of excision, he tears out pieces of walls and floors, or, using the mechanism of the real estate market he subtracts a few "odd lots" from the seemingly uniform matrix of the urban pan and treats them as "vacancies" (as Smithson calls them in his Passaic essay) to be explored and inscribed. *Reality Properties* shows no sign of the usual violence associated with the sculptural efforts of splitting and cutting. The lots are already part of an existing urban situation, forming an archipelago of possibilities scattered here and there, although leading to no construction.

### “WORD WORKS”

Some commentators have discussed Matta-Clark’s marginal and surplus spaces in terms of a “readymade” urban situation (Crow 2003, 71), but Matta-Clark was wary of being associated with the readymade as a concept (and also with a readymade concept). In a letter to Germano Celant, he mentions the “surface deep ready-made designed surroundings” that “start getting already-unmade” under his touch (January 17, 1975).<sup>30</sup> Apart from fueling the debate about the relevance of the comparison with the readymade, these short quotes allow Matta-Clark’s punning talent to come to the fore in his replacement of the “readymade” as idea and term with the “already-unmade.” While the extent of Matta-Clark’s overlap with the Duchampian readymade is an open question, his preference for punning certainly has Duchampian overtones. The term “anarchitecture” itself is reminiscent of Duchamp’s definition of himself as “anartist” in an interview he gave in 1959 on the BBC Third Program: “I’m against the word ‘anti’ because it’s very like ‘atheist’ as compared to ‘believe.’ An atheist is just as religious as the believer is, and an ‘anti-artist’ is just as much of an artist as the other artist. ‘Anartist’ would be much better, meaning ‘no artist at all.’ That would be my conception” (Duchamp 2000, 33). Upon Duchamp’s death in 1968, Matta-Clark produced a *Memorial for Marcel Duchamp* at Cornell University, which consisted of the inflation of a pneumatic tunnel that forced the audience out of the room: a fitting tribute that downplayed the conventional gravity of memorials and homages, and offered a transient monument gradually removed from its spectators.<sup>31</sup>

Puns are characteristic of Matta-Clark’s style in conversations, correspondence and art cards. Matta-Clark’s shifting textual forms that he called “work works” in his letter to the Anarchitecture group deserve further scrutiny in the context of *Reality Properties* and in the general context of his art practice, since they are an important aspect of his poetic and metaphorical approach to the city, but before examining them it is worth mentioning that a cursory glance at Matta-Clark’s correspondence shows an incredible talent for rhetorical adaptation. If the use of maps in *Reality Properties* is symptomatic of a conceptual undoing of structures and a critique of the idea of structuring space from within the official structures of space themselves, what I call rhetorical adaptation in some of Matta-Clark’s letters to institutions like the World Trade Center can be interpreted as a tactical attempt to set foot like a Trojan

horse within architectural and corporate forms of authority. Matta-Clark is strikingly versatile in his ability to change registers and discourses in his correspondence depending on interlocutors. Thus, his often quoted 1975 "letter to the meeting," which is addressed to the members of the Anarchitecture group, is a long list of disjointed, inchoate projects, combining short texts and drawings.<sup>32</sup> The letter is similar to an explosion of intellectual fireworks formulating a consistent institutional critique. But in letters sent to firms and institutions such as the World Trade Center, Milwaukee Electric Tools and Rockwell Tools, Matta-Clark tones down his critical ebullience and displays a much more constructive attitude, showing willingness to offer photographs of his own projects or himself at work to be used for the promotional purposes of these institutions in exchange for new equipment or collaborative opportunities. In the same letters, Matta-Clark presents himself to these firms in a very favorable light as an important artist who has received "some serious attention" for the ambitious scale of his artworks and "for redirecting major Post-Minimalist concerns in architecture."

Matta-Clark's rhetoric sounds deeply ironical when he writes to Rockwell Tools (on the same day he wrote his punning letter to Celant) to praise the quality of their saws and wheels and to ask for a donation of new tools in exchange of photographs of himself using the tools in his artistic work: "these projects were done with Rockwell Tools which I am sure is not only a substantial test of your products durability, but must have some interest to your company as a unique application of both your reciprocating tiger saw for wood and worn drive circular saw with carborundum wheel for masonry" (January 17, 1975).<sup>33</sup> He wrote a similar kind of letter to Milwaukee Electric Tool Corporation, asking for sponsorship and suggesting they create together a modified version of their standard tools. Rockwell Tools promptly and politely replied that they recognized the innovative aspects of his work but felt that they could not use the material they received in any of their programs.<sup>34</sup>

It is interesting to consider the type of persona and attitude that Matta-Clark puts forth to promote his work and the Anarchitecture group. In a letter to Robert Lendenfrost, the graphic consultant of the Art and Design Program at the World Trade Center, Matta-Clark adopts a constructive rhetoric and is careful to strip the term "anarchitecture" of negativity: "I represent a group of well-known, often-published, New York artists who have held periodic meetings and presented exhibitions under the loose category of 'anarchitecture.'" This term does

not imply anti-architecture but rather is an attempt at clarifying ideas about space which are personal insights and reactions rather than formal socio-political statements.” In the same letter, Matta-Clark argues that the group’s interest in using the spaces of the World Trade Center is to “provide some positive insights within the new scale and complexity of the Center” (January 21, 1975).<sup>35</sup> The taming of the term “anarchitecture” in his explanations and the “positive” display of intentions are meant to open the doors of the World Trade Center for the Anarchitecture group. I am not trying to suggest that these letters show chameleonic opportunism, but simply to highlight the flexibility and pragmatism of Matta-Clark’s epistolary rhetoric. The irony is also quite heavy-handed. Matta-Clark’s reference to the “positive insights” he and his friends might provide into the World Trade Center beckons to one of the projects that Matta-Clark had in mind and that he mentions in his “letter to the meeting”: “scroll of endless city world trade towers printed top to top bottom to bottom on a long roll.” It is of course possible to accept that criticism can have positive virtues, but it is misleading to soften the oppositional character of Anarchitecture (even if its intended origin was not in the prefix “anti”). Matta-Clark’s rhetoric is a diplomatic one, shifting emphasis to a less critical center of gravity and favoring the choice of one term over another. In part, it is the problematic urban and legal status of the kind of artwork that he was doing that forced such rhetoric into being. Thus, when the City sued him for vandalism in *Day’s End*, Matta-Clark, ensconced in Europe, mentions in a letter how his friends attempted to persuasively couch his act of taking possession of the abandoned warehouse in the language of gift-giving: Instead of an act of vandalism, they insisted “it should be understood as a generous donation of a work of art to a decaying city” (September 8, 1975).<sup>36</sup> This innovative argument was actually used by many SoHo artists in the 1960s to make a case for the legitimacy and legality of loft housing in SoHo, a combination of home and studio they had invented and which they occupied on a wide scale, illegally and under the threat of eviction until the state Multiple Dwelling Law of 1971 (Shkuda 2016, 7). The argument of the “generous donation of a work of art to a decaying city” is relevant for the specific historical and urban context of SoHo in the 1960s and, in the case of Matta-Clark, also sheds light on the artist navigating institutional norms and legal impositions having to do with acceptable and unacceptable uses of property.

The feature of rhetorical adaptation is perhaps a peripheral one in understanding Matta-Clark, although it brings into focus his strategically nuanced interaction with urban institutions, corporate groups and possible sponsors. Central to Matta-Clark's artistic practice is the phenomenon of writing, which shows an understanding of language as participating in the crystallization of meaning and aesthetic reflection. Art and architecture merge in much of Matta-Clark's work, and language also contributes to this hybrid layering and methodology. Matta-Clark's art cards, recently published in a bilingual English/Spanish edition under the title *Art Cards/Fichas de arte* (2014), as well as his notebooks, bear witness to his constant propensity to jot down pithy, elliptic statements, most of the time in capital letters, that form a sizable corpus of written work. This corpus can be seen as illustrating a "physical poetics" based on a vision of language as matter (Richard 2005). The cards and notebooks suggest an undoing of verbal integrity, in line with Matta-Clark's undoing of buildings in his architectural splittings and his conceptual undoing of the regularity of the urban plan in *Reality Properties*. For Matta-Clark, words are carriers of vast possibilities of alteration, submitted to whimsical spelling, unusual pairings and gestures of decomposition. Jottings on the back of an invitation to Edith Schloss's 1974 exhibit record a Nabokovian talent for taking words apart and making them signify differently in their new parsing: "abstract" becomes "abstract," "specifications" become "space-ifications" and "non-sense" is read as "non-things."<sup>37</sup> If a basic principle of Matta-Clark's spatial vision is that architecture and space should be broken open, then language is also part of this dynamic which looks destructive, but is at least partly driven by an element of play. Jane Crawford stresses the nonsensical dimension of Matta-Clark's work: "at that time, most people didn't know what to make of Gordon's art. Even his friends often weren't sure if Gordon was making art or just fooling around" (Kastner et al. 2005, 52).

Marcel Duchamp's fragmentary notes offer a striking parallel to Matta-Clark's plural strategies in which he associated performance, photography, film, sculpture in architectural structures and writing. Duchamp's handwritten notes associated with his art, which have come to be known as "notes" but have also been designated as "papers" or "text-pieces," are organized in three boxes, primarily the *Green Box* underlying the *Large Glass*, but also the 1914 box and the *White Box/À l'infinifit*.<sup>38</sup> Duchamp started writing notes in 1912 in preparation for

his paintings, but soon the notes became a “double” of painting in the sense of a substitute to it, illustrating his interest in new forms of art (Le Penven 2003, 28–31). Duchamp stated that the notes in the *Green Box* had been written all along the execution of the *Large Glass* and were meant to complete the visual experience of the work in the manner of a guide (Duchamp 2008, 213). However, not all the notes are restricted to the preparatory phase as mere appendices to the main corpus of Duchamp’s work. They come to play a more complex role and to suggest new perspectives on the relationship between language and visual representation, which interfere and change places. In the *Green Box* for instance, he imagines a series of correspondences between dictionary terms and colors that are meant to lead to an imagined “writing of a painting” (Duchamp 2008, 67–68). However, Matta-Clark’s art cards should not be considered solely on the basis of their similarity with Duchamp’s notes. The former are more ungraspable given their uncertain status and connection to specific projects (with some exceptions), and it is best to analyze Matta-Clark’s art cards on their own, as a coherent corpus related to the rest of his work, but not simply as supplements. Gwendolyn Owens, in her introduction to *Art Cards*, notes that Matta-Clark’s cards can also be linked to the way filmmakers use storyboards to order ideas and to architects’ sketches (Matta-Clark 2014, 23).

It is an open question whether the art cards should be treated as “literature” or “poetry.” The question becomes even more complicated if we think of possible literary influences, which prove difficult to pin down, although it is tempting to speculate. Gordon Matta-Clark studied French literature at the Sorbonne in 1968, but what exactly he studied and how his readings may have crystallized in his artistic practice are quite impenetrable issues. The only literary text in the list of books in his personal library is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which he annotated heavily. Considered as discursive creations, the cards are definitely “poetic” and “metaphoric.” In Acconci’s case for instance, Acconci called himself a poet and his textual production was qualified as “poetry,” although the term “installation” and the minimalist procedures of carving language invited associations with sculpture and art. The author’s own choice of category (in this instance, but not in others, which are a challenge to categorization) offers a convenient label from which to begin, although of course it should not be taken for granted. But in Matta-Clark’s case convenient categories are not there from the start. In his letter to the meeting, Matta-Clark calls some of his textual creations “word works,” a term

that has the advantage of stressing both their verbal character and their inscription in the realm of art. Another valid possibility would be to consider them linguistic and conceptual "slivers" that translate into discourse the beloved shape and gesture of cutting. Matta-Clark's practice of the "language of Anarchitecture" is a laconic splitting apart of words, and his art cards are similar to his architectural slivers, extracting thoughts out of a reflexive texture.<sup>39</sup>

The slivers Matta-Clark bought for the *Reality Properties* project were anticipated in the letter to the Anarchitecture group he sent on December 10, 1973, in which he inserts a poem about a project that involves the quest for minute liminal spaces. Matta-Clark's letter includes a long list of Anarchitecture ideas ranging from the enigmatic to the absurd: the "un-monument," "Fake Estates: property slivers with some projected ideas for them," "shopping cart housing," "help preserve our short-age of gas-oline (sic) energy: burn a neighbor's house," "paper bag privacy," "the collision between a house on wheels and a bridge shown," "the perfect structure: erase all the buildings on a clear horizon; return to an infinite horizon off-man," "photos of endless façades with a pile of the windows cut away," "scroll of endless city world trade towers printed top to top bottom to bottom on a long roll," "for display a box of glass termites at work," "buildings are for eating."<sup>40</sup>

The letter to the meeting is reminiscent of certain Surrealist games, notably the game called "Certain possibilities relating to the irrational embellishment of a city. For any number of players. The players are asked whether they would conserve, displace, modify, transform, or suppress certain aspects of a city. (As a procedure, these questions could be applied to other objects, systems or concepts)." The partial transcript of a game played on March 12, 1933 and whose subject was "Paris" yielded the following responses:

The Arc de Triomphe? Lie it on its side and make it into the finest pissoire in Paris. The Obelisk? Insert it delicately into the steeple of Sainte-Chapelle. The Eiffel Tower? Conserve it as it is but change its name to "The Glass of Milk." The Tour Saint-Jacques? Demolish it and have it rebuilt in rubber. An empty scallop-shell to be placed on the roof. The Vendome Column? Demolish it, carefully repeating the ceremony of 1871. The Church of Sacré Cœur? Make a tram depot of it, after painting it black and transporting it to Beauce. Le Chabonais (a famous brothel)? Replace the women with generals. Brothel for dogs. Notre Dame? Replace it with

an immense oil cruet in the shape of a cross, one container filled with blood, the other with sperm. A school for the sexual education of virgins. The Statue of Alfred de Musset? The muse will put her hand in his mouth, people will be invited to punch him in the belly and his eyes will light up. The Statue of Clemenceau? Place on the lawn surrounding it by thousands of bronze sheep, one of which is made of camembert. The Pantheon? Slice it through vertically and position the two halves 50 centimeters apart. The Statue of Louis XIV? Replace it with a bunch of asparagus adorned with the Legion of Honour. (Brotchie and Gooding 1995, 120–121)

A similar spirit of irony and irreverence is at work in *Reality Properties* and in the Surrealist “irrational embellishment” game, aimed at the monumentality of the built environment, except that the Surrealist proposals are spectacularly interventionist and Matta-Clark’s are more austere, leaving more room for natural disasters and blighted urban situations.

As far as Matta-Clark’s use of language is concerned, his punning elliptical style seems to have run in the family. His father loved word-play. Gordon Matta-Clark produced puns like “deaf-phenician” (for “definition”) and “ant-che-tector” (for “architecture”).<sup>41</sup> His spelling is often dubious (“spatial” is most of time spelt “spacial”), sometimes intentionally so, as is the case with *Hammer and Sycle* (1975). Roberto Matta Echaurren was also adept at producing oneiric and bombastic Surrealist prose. He published a text in the French Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1938 that reads like an architectural manifesto against traditional enclosures and in favor of organic forms that espouse individual needs. Entitled “Sensitive Mathematics – Architecture of Time,” Matta Echaurren’s prose was illustrated by a project for an apartment which offered a space on different levels, a stairway without banisters to master the void, a psychological Ionic column, supple armchairs, and inflated materials that would adapt to the occupant. The recurrent imperatives in the text are addressed to a group, perhaps a communal humanity (“we”), who is urged to rethink its relationship to history and inhabited space:

Let us put aside the techniques which consist of setting up ordinary materials and brutally push him who inhabits them into the midst of a final theater where he is everything, argument and actor, scenery and that silo inside of which he can live in silence among his friperies. Let us reverse all the stages of history with their styles and their elegant wafers so that the rays of dust, whose pyrotechnics must create space, will flee. And let us stay

motionless among revolving walls to rid ourselves with fingernails of the crust fetched from the street and from work. (Matta Echaurren 1969, 168)

The text is replete with organic metaphors combining references to the body and to artistic forms: "We need walls like damp sheets which lose their shapes and wed our psychological fears; arms hanging among the interrupters which throw a light barking at forms and to their susceptibly colored shadows to awake the gums themselves as sculptures for lips" (Matta Echaurren 1969, 168). Apart from the shared topic of architecture that both father and son sought to revolutionize and that they both envisaged as a field of possibilities, their discourses have little in common. Matta-Clark forged an elliptical and abstract style, far removed from Matta Echaurren's intensely ornamental outbursts. In the following text about the building cuts, Matta-Clark expresses a philosophy of space and a philosophy of action (action upon and in space) in a paradoxically verbless syntax. Matta-Clark refers to processes and actions without having recourse to verbs, using mainly nominal structures. The general effect is a conceptualizing one. It is as if we were moving in the abstract world of ideas, although the material accomplishment of these actions is meant to be a physical and embodied one, involving the hard labor of the artist and the strenuous splitting of buildings:

Completion through removal. Abstraction of surfaces. Not-building, not-to-rebuild, not-built-space. Creating spatial complexity reading new opening against old surface. Light admitted into space or beyond surfaces that are cut. Breaking and entering. Approaching structural collapse, separating the parts at the point of collapse.

Translating the diagram into its structural context. What's beyond the building's surface. Rather than using language, using walls. Looking through the thing. The ambiguity, what's there and not, as much not as the whole. Usurpable void. What happens when weight is released and working contained energy.

The meeting point released: spatial intersection where things are layered or suspended. Simple gestures, spatial complexities and admitting new light. (Matta-Clark 2006, 89)

Matta-Clark's discourse is a weaving together of abstractions and oppositions (completion/removal, simple/complex, there/not there) resulting in hyphenated notions that become the semantic currency of a new aesthetic language ("not-to-rebuild"). The force of novelty draws holes

in the fabric of old walls, surfaces and partitions. The dense abstractions sound ahistorical, unmoored, but this unmooring effect is only an illusion, since Matta-Clark's whole artistic project is anchored in urban space, more specifically the urban space of the 1970s and the demise of the modernist utopia of clarity and structure. Matta-Clark invites a new form of transparency in the urban and architectural debate, one that is the result of aggressive removal and cutting, allowing for light to come in, but also provoking "collapse." The text enunciates ideas, reaching a conceptual clarity that is similar to the effect the artist wants to achieve through architectural splitting: "looking through the thing." Each sentence is a sliver cut out from a larger surface. The transparency of language is mirrored by the transparency of walls obtained through forceful intervention. References are buried in the text, in depths of implicitness where one senses the antinomical and antagonistic presence of modernist discourses.

The above text displays a certain discursive fluidity, but many of Matta-Clark's writings are much more laconic and condensed. The project that will be known as *Reality Properties* is both announced and enacted in a poem centered on replacement, repetition and removal, which features in the "letter to the meeting" (December 10, 1973):

THE SPACE IT TAKES TO HOUSE ENEMIES

“ “ “ “ “ LOVERS  
 “ “ “ “ “ DODGE A BULLET  
 “ “ “ “ “ REMOVE “ “  
 “ “ “ “ “ YOUR HAT  
 “ “ “ “ “ “ “ HOUSE  
 “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ 42

The removal of words from the initial line takes us down to a world of growing silence, emptiness and uniformity, where the ditto marks suggest recurrent ellipsis and mark the graphic occupation of space on the page. The urban slivers, just like the missing words and the punctuation that signals their shadowy place, are microscopic interstices that carry an undeniable potential. It is in the unexpected blanks of the grid, in the intervals of an increasingly broken poetic discourse that one senses implicit possibilities that lie dormant and are not actualized. The modest space in which one dodges a bullet or removes one's hat, (which he also associates in the same "letter to the meeting" with the home of

"the old lady who lived in a shoe" in the nursery rhyme) becomes the focus of discursive and cartographic attention in the poem and the visual documentation. The poem is not simply an illustration of or an addition to the *Reality Properties* project, but one element among many that act together like a cumulative series of verbal, cartographic and photographic slivers.

Other "word works" jotted down in the same letter to the meeting are based on the principle of verbal variation, with only one word changing from one line to the next. The resulting lines have the opacity and the incantatory force of a philosophical poem riven by contradictions. "Absence" is the keyword, giving sculptural density to the void of what is not there, not uttered, removed from discourse:

DESIGNING FOR MEMORY  
 DESIGNING FOR FAILURE  
 DESIGNING FOR COLLAPSE  
 DESIGNING FOR ABSENCE<sup>43</sup>

Here and elsewhere, Matta-Clark's brief statements encapsulate an undeveloped narrative situation that alludes to homelessness, psychological unease and life-threatening situations. One senses the social and political force latent in these existential conditions:

BEING WITHOUT A PLACE TO LIVE  
 NOT BEING COMFORTABLE IN ONE'S SKIN  
 NEVER GETTING OUT OF TOWN ALIVE<sup>44</sup>

Space is the central concept explored in the art cards through a listing of idiomatic expressions referring to it:

TAKING A FIX  
 FIXING YOUR POSITION  
 A FIXED IDEA  
 A FIXED POINT IN SPACE  
 THE ORIGINAL PLACE<sup>45</sup>

While the term "fix" remains the pivot of this spatial and linguistic construction, an "original place" where thoughts and expressions literally and metaphorically originate, the whole "word work" remains unfixed

and unfixable, a moving reflection which is always gesturing somewhere else, to another “point” and “position” where it might linger briefly, before taking off again. Matta-Clark’s dynamic wanderings through urban space are mimicked by this shifting verbal landscape of “fixed positions” that are always on the move. Several distinct media and structures (language, urban plans and buildings) are subjected to similar procedures that result in a displaced unhinging and a metaphorical transport into a quite different, modified version of themselves. The “fixed position” is dynamic in its search for idiomatic associations, the odd lots are industriously surveyed and documented in their bureaucratic identity with no pragmatic purpose in view, the walls are cut up in order to reveal rather than conceal. Matta-Clark is mapping the material and conceptual terrain of urban space on Sanborn maps scattered over with fake estates, in grainy photographs and in “word works” that cut poetic slivers in the fabric of language. There is no clear hierarchy in this choreography of methods and tactics that work together to “house” a diminutive and subversive alternative of urban interstices that lie beneath a crumbling city. The intense negativity and destruction of Matta-Clark’s splitting projects are counterbalanced by the constructive and projective potential of *Reality Properties*, a project that also introduces a new temporal dimension of futurity in the dominant temporal regime of disappearance of the architectural works. The odd lots are still there in the cartographic fabric underlying the city, awaiting the inscriptions imagined by dreamy and dreamlike surveyors.

## NOTES

1. Matta-Clark mentions the “non-monument” in the “letter to Carol Goodden/the meeting he sent to New York from the Netherlands in December 1973. Another version is the “non-u-ment”: “the Non-umental, that is, an expression of the commonplace that might counter the grandeur and pomp of architectural structures and their self-glorifying clients” (Gordon Matta-Clark, 1976 interview with Donald Wall, *Diserens* 2003, 183).
2. In a letter to Robert Lendenfrost, graphic consultant of the Art and design program at the World Trade Center (January 21, 1975), Matta-Clark presented the Anarchitecture group and its first exhibition as follows: “our cast exhibition in a downtown gallery was photographs and some written work that used a poetic and often humorous catalogue of concepts about experienced rather than built space.” A few lines later,

he adds: "our group's energy works off of architecture as a metaphorical reference" (PHCON2002:0016:003:017, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark).

3. Matta-Clark worked with Dennis Oppenheim on *Beebe Lake Ice Cut* and *Gallery Transplant* for the *Earth Art* exhibit organized at Cornell University in 1969, where he also met Robert Smithson.
4. Gordon Matta-Clark, letter to Malitte Matta, August 13, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003-116, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
5. The list of books in Matta-Clark's personal library (on hold at the Canadian Center for Architecture) features no less than twenty books on alchemy and spirituality, from Gurdjieff to Jung. *Museum* invites a reflection on entropy in an installation at the Bykert Gallery in New York (1970) in which Matta-Clark hung some of his *Agar* pieces (combinations of organic matter like sugar, yeast, corn oil, concentrated milk, etc., and an agar base) on a wall to suggest the arrangement of works in a conventional museum. Matta-Clark was not the only American artist interested in archetypal forms at the time. Pollock had set the example. Early in his career, Robert Smithson also professed a fascination with myths, origins and archetypes, notably through Jung, six titles by whom we find in his personal library (Reynolds 2003, 331).
6. In spite of manifest similarities, there is no proof that Matta-Clark was familiar with Lefebvre's work (Walker 2005, 129).
7. Lee puts forward a vision of the "object to be destroyed" at the center of Matta-Clark's work. Adopting a different perspective, Walker suggests that Matta-Clark is violating the tenets of modernism after having internalized them, rather than simply embracing destruction (2009).
8. Matta-Clark's personal library included John Wilton Ely's *The Mind and Art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, published in 1978 by Thames and Hudson, with an inscription by Roberto Matta Echaurren to his son.
9. Lee points out that the use of organic metaphors in relation to cities is problematic since it implies a natural history of cities (Lee 1999, 95). On the other hand, "the metabolization of old buildings" as organic metaphor is meaningful when one thinks of Matta-Clark's interest in the entropic evolution of matter within the tradition of alchemy (in *Museum*, 1970, for instance).
10. Carol Goodden mentions Gordon Matta-Clark's reluctance to be associated with his father, hence his search for a different name. His *Fresh Air Cart* (1972) was done under the pseudonym George Smudge, but he finally settled on Matta-Clark, adding his mother's maiden name (Jacob 1985, 39).

11. Lawrence Weiner fell through Matta-Clark's *Circus-The Caribbean Orange* (1978) (Fer 2007, 138). Some remaining fragments are from *Splitting* (1974), called *Splitting: Four corners*, in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Others are from *Bingo*, entitled *Bingo: Three Building Fragments* (1974), in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (see Scheidemann 2007). Elsewhere, I have examined the relation between *Reality Properties* and the concept of "disappearance" (Manolescu 2016).
12. On the artistic responses, photography in particular, to the decline of New York in the 1970s, see *Mixed Use, Manhattan* (eds. Cooke and Crimp 2010).
13. For an excellent discussion of how artists' actions generated urban change in SoHo, see Shkuda (2016). On SoHo as an artist neighborhood and artist community, see Simpson (1981). On the architecture of SoHo and the development of the area in terms of urban planning, see Stern et al. (1995, 259–277). For an autobiographical perspective, see Kostelanetz (2015). For investigations of the alternative art scene in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond, see Ault (2002), Rosati and Staniszewski (2012), and Terroni (2015).
14. Shaw's discussion of artistic projects that reflect on urban transformation in New York City from the 1970s onwards starts from Henry James's reactions in *The American Scene* (Shaw 2010, 229–271).
15. Bois and Krauss warn against the seduction of "beauty" and insist on the critical dimension of Matta-Clark's work (190).
16. The premiere of *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* took place at 80 Wooster Street, New York, April 18, 1970. Trisha Brown had a dancer walk down the façade of a seven-story building, strapped into a mountaineering harness. According to Brown's description, this was "a natural activity under the stress of an unnatural setting. Gravity reneged. Vast scale. Clear order. You start at the top, walk straight down, stop at the bottom" (interview with Trisha Brown; Brayshaw and Witts 2014, 124).
17. On the *terrain vague* in Matta-Clark's work in general, see Attlee (2008).
18. On "nothingness" as a premise of contemporary art, see Broqua (2013).
19. On the connections between Surrealism and contemporary art as far as liminal spaces are concerned, see Dezeuze and Lomas, *Subversive Spaces: Surrealism and Contemporary Art* (2009). Gordon Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* (1974) and the film *Sous-sols de Paris* (1977) were presented in the exhibition catalogued by Dezeuze and Lomas.
20. In his reliance on decrepit buildings, Matta-Clark was revisiting another theme that is central to the American imagination throughout the nineteenth century that of romantic ruins absent from the American landscape and present in the European scenery. Symbols of a rich past deemed

vital for artistic creation (as Hawthorne presents them in the preface to *The Marble Faun*, 1860) or dead remainders of the past (as Thomas Cole sees them in his *Essay on American Scenery*, 1836), ruins become a different aesthetic paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s.

21. Some of the *Fake Estates* collages are now in private and public collections, while others remain in the Gordon Matta-Clark Estate administered by Jane Crawford and the David Zwirner Gallery in New York.
22. However, it should be noted that Le Corbusier's response to New York was a mixed one. He admired the regularity of the grid ("a model of wisdom and greatness of vision," Le Corbusier 1964, 50), but thought it was too densely spaced. He celebrated the skyscraper, but claimed that "the skyscrapers of New York are too small and there are too many of them" (55). Despite the criticism, he still considered that New York held the promise of a great modern city (40). For an in-depth discussion of Le Corbusier's reactions to New York and the USA, see Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America* (2001). Koolhaas also discusses Le Corbusier's "passionate involvement" with New York in *Delirious New York*, 235–282.
23. For an analysis of Man Ray's *Terrain vague*, see Walker (2002, 115–117).
24. An example that is sometimes invoked in connection with *Reality Properties* is Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971). For an analysis of Haacke, see Deutsche (1996, 159–194).
25. For a different reading of the grid, see Higgins's *The Grid Book* (2009), which presents it as the most prominent visual structure in Western culture across centuries in a transdisciplinary theory of artistic form.
26. Charmion von Wiegand identified in the painting "the geometric rhythm of city traffic seen from above" (quoted in Bois 1990, 180–181).
27. The city seen from the air is a major trope of modern and contemporary art (Lampe 2013, 325–362).
28. "Transparency: literal and phenomenal" is the title of an article by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky (1963, 45–54). On transparency as a haunting trope of architectural modernity, see Vidler (1999, 217–225). The window is, for Matta-Clark, a central architectural motif that he reimagines in several versions and media: *Window Blow-Out* (1976), *Chinatown Voyeur* (1971) and *City Slivers* (1976).
29. Walker reads it as a critique of architectural drawing (Walker 2009, 129–130).
30. Gordon Matta-Clark, letter to Germano Celant, January 17, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003-013, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.

31. One cannot help thinking of Marcel Duchamp's similar play on funereal traditions and objects in the *Urn containing the ashes of Rrose Sélavy* (1965), which contained ashes from Duchamp's cigar.
32. The Anarchitecture group was a loose artist community whose members Matta-Clark enumerates in his letter to Robert Lendenfrost, where he also specifies their artistic specialty: Laurie Anderson (writer, performance, film), Joel Fisher (painter, sculptor, performance), Tina Girouard (dance, stage, design, video), Susan Harris (choreography, sculptor, video), Gen Heighstein (sic) (sculptor), Bernard Kirschenbaum (engineer, architect, sculptor), Richard Landry (musician, composer, photographer), Gordon Matta-Clark (architect, sculptor, photographer), Max Newhous (sic) (electronic music, flutist), Richard Nonas (sculptor), Alan Saret (environmental sculptor, performer). He does not mention Carol Goodden. Tina Girouard's recollections about the group's composition are convergent with Matta-Clark's letter, but she adds Goodden to the list (Jacob 1985, 121).
33. Gordon Matta-Clark, letter to Rockwell Tools, January 17, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003:011, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
34. Letter from Rockwell Tools to Gordon Matta-Clark, February 7, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003:046, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
35. Gordon Matta-Clark, letter to Robert Lendenfrost, January 21, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003:017, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
36. Gordon Matta-Clark, letter to Wolfgang (unidentified last name), September 8, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003-126, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
37. On the back of the invitation of an Edith Schloss exhibition 1974, "Writings," PHCON2002:0016:001:001:007, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
38. Duchamp's 1914 box contained sixteen handwritten notes and two drawings. There are five known copies. *The Green Box* was reproduced in box format in twenty *de luxe* copies and three hundred regular copies in 1934. It contained ninety-three documents all in all, among which various studies for the *Large Glass* and about fifty loose notes in no specific order. *The White Box* (published in 1966) was made up of seventy-nine handwritten notes organized in seven thematic files. All of these were transcribed and published in various French editions by Michel Sanouillet.

39. Gordon Matta-Clark refers to "the language of anarchitecture" in one of his notebooks ("Notebook with *Automation House, Tree Dance, A W-Hole House, Anarchitecture*," PHCON2002:0016:024, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark). Mark Wigley insists on treating the art cards as works in themselves rather as semantic appendices to the architectural work (Wigley 2012, 12–27).
40. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Letter to the meeting," December 10, 1973, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
41. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Letter to the meeting," December 10, 1973, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
42. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Letter to the meeting," December 10, 1973, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
43. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Letter to the meeting," December 10, 1973, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
44. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Letter to the meeting," December 10, 1973, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
45. Gordon Matta-Clark, "Letter to the meeting," December 10, 1973, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.

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Cartographies and the Texture of Cities:  
Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City*.  
*A San Francisco Atlas*

THE DEATH AND RENEWAL OF MAPS

This chapter follows the itinerary of the map into contemporary urban cartographies and considers one of the most significant turns taken by cartography in recent years, which consists in a renewal of the map as a conventional form of representation, hybridized by artistic and literary discourses. The various case studies examined so far have traced the challenges to conventional mapmaking which are central to the reflection developed by site-oriented practices, starting with the move from framed spaces and media (books, pages, canvases) to the streets of the city and the suburbia. In Buckingham's *A Man of the Crowd*, Glowlab's *Following the "Man of the Crowd,"* Acconci's *Following Piece*, Smithsonian's "Monuments of Passaic" and Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties*, artists explore urban and suburban sites and question their conditions of organization and readability. Mapping procedures appear to take precedence over the map. In these examples, the map is divorced from its integrity. It is folded, cut out, dispersed in series, fragmented in collages, sometimes associated with site-specific itineraries and trajectories.

The urban site that emerges from these artistic approaches is one of localized perception and ephemeral intervention, of fugitive encounters and inevitable decline, with emphasis on transience and change, features that stand in contradiction to the cartographic totality and apparent immutability of the map. The map is confronted and redeployed,

translated into various artistic expressions that do not take it for granted and think about it critically and creatively. All of these artists elaborate ways of undoing the map and transpose its strategies into artistic idioms that produce itineraries, walking and following scenarios, or parodies of tourist sightseeing. The map is a potent source of inspiration for more recent visual artists and it is worth stressing the relevance of discourses (literary, cultural and art historical) that shape the aesthetics and politics of site. The discursive element in what Kwon calls the “discursive site” is already present in site-specific works and in works that privilege institutional critique. The growing relevance of discourses (individual and communal) in a new understanding of cartography is of particular interest in what follows. The representation of space is closely linked to the production of stories associated with maps. Together, stories and maps offer a new perspective on identities in relation to places, leading to the emergence of a new cartographic paradigm, which is not inscribed in a specific art historical or literary lineage, although its forms of expression show awareness of the literary and artistic models and tendencies that I have discussed (the flâneur, anti-monumentality or the Situationist drift). More accessible and democratic, these new cartographies display different approaches to experimentation, addressed to larger audiences. The origin of these new cartographies lies in the deep distrust of the map theorized by critical cartography and by a more general critical approach to forms of totalizing vision and representation.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, originally published in 1980, Michel de Certeau starts from the experience of viewing New York from the top of the World Trade Center to formulate a critique of panoptic vision and urban legibility, denounced as a myth. The empowering view from above lifts the viewer from the grasp of the city and transforms the latter into an orderly but lifeless artefact. The god-like perspective only embraces “cadavers,” a cityscape whose “ordinary practitioners” are “below the threshold at which visibility begins” (de Certeau 1984, 93). This kind of vision is paradoxically a form of blindness. De Certeau’s meditation on the detached altitude of the scopic drive points to the shortcomings of a constellation of related concepts, fields and approaches to urban space: rational urban planning, cartographic point of view, sociology and anthropology as disciplines showing little interest in the specificity of everyday life in urban contexts.<sup>1</sup> The lifelessness of maps as creations of disembodied and detached knowledge also looms large in geographer’s Brian Harley’s lament over the human anonymity encoded in maps in

his ground-breaking article “Deconstructing the Map,” published in 1989, several years after *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He considers road atlases, among the best selling paperback books in the USA, and imagines how they affected ordinary Americans’ perception of their country. Their schematic nature leaves out the variety of nature, the history of the landscape or the details of human experience (Harley 1989, 14). Harley concludes that ordinary cartographic representations are oversimplified and unsatisfactory. The deconstructed map is revealed to be not only a powerful rhetorical instrument embedded in frameworks of authority, but also a representation that anonymizes human experience.

The map in its traditional form, ridden as it is with suspicions of reductive normativity and discretionary authority, has become highly problematic and has given rise to all sorts of attempts to wrestle it from that dubious entanglement, or at least to recode its power. In what follows, I will examine one of the most complex and far-ranging examples of recent urban mapping, which is particularly interesting in its embrace of other cultural forms, literature in particular. The spatial turn in the humanities has given impetus to the study of spatiality and mapping in literature, as well as the study of the appropriation of cartography by the visual arts.<sup>2</sup> Considering the issue from the other end, one could legitimately wonder: if literature and the arts succeed in transposing cartography to their medium, does cartography allow itself to be influenced or hybridized by texts and artistic expression? In other words, has cartography as a discipline benefited from the vision and aesthetic reflection elaborated in certain relevant examples of fiction and art? Rebecca Solnit’s *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas* (2010) actualizes that intriguing possibility and crystallizes a few important tendencies in recent cartographic practices.

The title of *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas* spells out the book’s allegiance to the atlas genre, but the indefinite article points to a whole series of creative misreadings of cartography. Centered on urban representations at the intersection of several fields (mapmaking, art, literature, film), *Infinite City* foregrounds subjectivity, creativity and experimentation, working with the assumption that “the city” is not an entity that already exists in immutable forms, but is rather constantly reimagined from many individual and collective perspectives. *Infinite City* is a case not of subversion but rather of an aesthetic and political appropriation of mapping that attempts to offer a new understanding of how mapping could function, creatively and constructively (although

this constructive stance necessarily builds on the earlier “deconstruction” phase), in close relationship to individual and communal experience.

Directed by Solnit, *Infinite City* is the result of the collaborative efforts of thirty writers, artists, cartographers, sociologists, all of whom are San Francisco or Bay Area residents. This inventive atlas is made up of twenty-two color maps of San Francisco or the Bay Area, nineteen of which are accompanied by an essay and occasional photographs. Solnit was the main inspiration behind the book and is the author of nine of its essays. *Infinite City* benefited from the institutional support of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where some of the twenty-two maps were launched in 2010. Before *Infinite City*, Solnit published about fifteen books, in which she combined the work of the cultural historian and art critic with autobiography and highly personal observation to produce works that discuss landscape in its evolution and representation, also addressing the personal experience of place and migration as well as the role of communities in facing disaster and renewal.<sup>3</sup> Her writing is often, but not always, driven by activism, political protest and environmental concerns and is strongly anchored in San Francisco, California, and the American West. The ideological framework of *Infinite City* is no exception, but the book goes beyond activism to deal with the “texture of place,” a concept in humanist geography first explored by Yi-Fu Tuan, who considers place as a nexus of human relations and symbolic representations, as a weaving together of social interactions and hierarchies, but also as a texture of words, images, affects and tactile experience (Adams et al. 2001; Bruno 2002). *Infinite City* translates the texture of place into cartographic discourse, providing a meditation on and a performance of original ways of creatively mapping place and its relationship to the self. *Infinite City* activates the concept of renewal in a variety of ways, notably through an understanding of renewal both in the sense of bringing under the scrutiny of the present something belonging to the past and in the sense of making something new again by transforming it.

This San Francisco atlas starts from two truisms: (1) cities are inexhaustible and (2) maps are selective. Despite their apparent banality, these statements provide unexpected angles for exploring the city. Solnit’s introduction expresses what could be called the despair of mimesis, the awareness that no given space can be entirely or accurately represented in all its details. Solnit confronts us with the vision of a storm of cartographic leaves falling off imaginary trees: “maps floating, falling, drifting, an autumn storm of maps like leaves, off the trees of memory

and history, a drift of maps, an escarpment of versions" (4). These vegetal and textual leaves map the changes that occur in the same landscape across time. The maps/leaves fall on the ground in thick layers, accumulating in strata as recorded versions of a given place, reminiscent of Borges's trope of the infinite library in "The Book of Sand" and "The Library of Babel." Although the storm, the trees and the falling leaves are elements of a natural metaphor, they also suggest an archaeological layering of leaves as artefacts.<sup>4</sup> Geographical representations are thus translated into historical representations of lost civilizations, and mapping becomes analogous to archaeology. The vision implies that ancient landscapes of which no written trace or living memory exists become alive again (as objects of study, contemplation and remembrance) through cartographic representation, not only in their momentary configuration, but also in their evolution across time. The mutability of the world transforms mapping into a constant necessity that verges on utopia: "infinite" places require infinite mapping. Barry Lopez's short story "The Mappist" (2000) includes a similar example of a cartographer who has embarked upon the utopian project of exhaustively mapping the various states of the USA. His North Dakota series includes a thousand six hundred and fifty-one maps.

The awareness of the inexhaustibility of urban space gives way to a compromise that seems both sensible and playful: the choice, by individual authors, of one or two dimensions of the city that they consider meaningful from a personal or collective point of view and that they explore in a given map and an essay attached to it. Traditional atlases have always relied on the representation of conventional cartographic themes such as demographics or transportation, but some of the topics chosen here (and especially certain correlations of topics) are quite idiosyncratic, reflecting the variety of interests and experiences of individual authors, from the seriously historical to the humorously playful. A conventional topographical map of San Francisco or the Bay Area is the underlying basis upon which are projected, in divergent visual styles, from the minimalist to the baroque, the topics that the various maps open up to exploration. "Monarchs and Queens" shows, on the same map, butterfly habitats and queer public spaces, the underlying assumption being that they both unfold gradually and undergo metamorphosis. "Poison/Palate" highlights gourmet San Francisco (a trope of tourist discourse), but also the sites of toxic production (chemical factories, laboratories, gold mining). "Phrenological San Francisco" humorously

associates feelings and attitudes to various parts of a head-shaped city, revisiting Madeleine de Scudéry's *Carte de Tendre*. "Treasure Map: The Forty-nine Jewels of San Francisco" is Solnit's rewriting of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* map, showing forty-nine sites she considers worth visiting. "Fillmore: Promenade through the Boulevard of Gone" is the map of a single street, mirrored in a Rorschach blot—"an enigma that can be read many ways" (68)—while the text documents its metamorphosis through history. "Dharma Wheels and Fish Ladders: Salmon Migrations, Soto Zen Arrivals" shows on the same map salmon migrations (dwindling) and the sites of Zen Buddhism (growing), two phenomena that have no manifest connection at first glance.

History looms large at the heart of this mapping project. Starting from the assumption that "the familiar vanishes" (6) in an evolving city, Solnit brings to life cityscapes that no longer exist and whose disappearance is due to brutal acts of destruction in the face of community protest (see, for instance, the map entitled "The Lost World: South of the Market, 1960, before Redevelopment"). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau is concerned with the "knowledge (about places) that remains silent," what he calls "inward-turning histories" or "stories held in reserve" (de Certeau 1984, 108). Solnit excavates these buried stories, placing fragments of memory on the map. The result is an attempt at localizing memory through acts of remembrance that combine cartographic and narrative forms, showing the life and history of the city deemed inseparable from the lives of ordinary people, those practitioners of space who are invisible from de Certeau's panoramic view of New York from the top of the World Trade Center. One of the maps in *Infinite City* traces four lives "that have unfolded largely within the confines of the seven-mile-square city over the past century" (115), lives that are "historically dense, geographically static" (119).

The book revisits the mythologies associated with San Francisco (Muybridge, Hitchcock, homosexuality, culinary excellence), and certain maps come close to the discourse of tourism and tour books. To the extent to which tourism is an activity aiming at locating and experiencing local authenticity (in Jonathan Culler's analysis of the "semiotics of tourism"), *Infinite City* might seem to provide useful insight into authenticity from the perspective of the locals—except that the concept of usefulness is problematic. If the "Treasure Map" showing the "forty-nine jewels" of San Francisco could very well orient a tourist in the city, the map of salmon migrations and Soto Zen arrivals is certainly out of place in

a tourist's quest. Similarly, the map entitled "Death and Beauty: All of 2008's Ninety-Nine Murders, Some of 2009's Monterey Cypresses" does not partake of a tourist logic at all. Rather, such a map is futile and metaphorical, not only because it shows a disconcerting coupling of contraries, but also because it is not destined to invite quests on the actual terrain. It is, rather, a mythological or imagined city that is explored here: one that lives in the imagination of the mapmaker, who produces this yoking of opposites in order to best express his or her perspective on the city. The gourmet-toxic map entitled "Poison/Palate" ironically plays with the restaurant map in tour guides, by grafting pollution onto food and by pointing out that any form of consumption inevitably produces waste. This is not to say that *Infinite City* totally resists tourist appropriation—it parodies or questions some of its stereotypes—but it defines a different kind of urban exploration, mental or real, of the unexpected, the extinct, the lyrical dimensions of the city.

The various maps and texts navigate between individual and collective meaning. Some of the authors choose to include autobiographical passages in their texts, but there is always the sense that they belong to a larger community and that the city itself binds that community together. Although the various texts accompanying the cartographic material are quite diverse, the book as a whole is a unified example of how renewal can be not only materialized in a given work but also generated further, offered up as a series of infinite possibilities. This generative force opens the atlas up to new additions, new maps, new narratives. In her introduction, Solnit talks about the "living maps" (3) that all individuals carry within themselves. Cartography becomes grounded, above all, in "relevant" individual meaning: "We select, and a map is a selection of relevant data that arises from relevant desires and questions" (9). The maps we are looking at are embodiments of some of these living maps—maps alive with stories and routes. Such an approach to mapping tries to make sense of the self in place, to give it both orientation and meaning, a visual and semantic trajectory, although the result is, paradoxically, a disorienting labyrinth of simultaneous trajectories that are produced by multiple sources, subjectivities and biographies. Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the map as distinct from the mere tracing offers an apt term of comparison. The map is interpreted as open to revision and adaptation, strongly related to performativity, whereas the tracing is read as a fixed and static representation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 12–13).

*Infinite City* is certainly not performative in the usual sense of the word. Had it been a hypertext instead of a printed book (and indeed, the hypertext would be particularly appropriate for its idiosyncratic uses of cartography), its performative dimension would have been activated in more manifest ways. Its openness, adaptability and transformative qualities do, however, tap into the performative potential of the map. The interest it shows for all the forms of cultural, literary and artistic mediation of the city, for its visual and textual inscriptions, greatly contributes to the complexity and subtlety of the urban construct it produces, which is both referentially and intertextually substantial. *Infinite City* relies on an eclectic combination of disciplines, literary perspectives and cartographic styles that provides a renewed context for the debate about the meaning and role of cartography, its death and possible resurrection. Renewal comes from outside the map—from literature, sociology and art, but it is tempting to argue that their interaction with cartography in *Infinite City* should not be seen as a one-way influence, but rather as a form of contact in which all the participating discourses exert pressure on one another, and ultimately “recode and deform” one another (Shaw 2013, 242).

Some of the sources of inspiration for the book, both explicit and implicit, are Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), Jorge Luis Borges’s *Labyrinths* (1962), Henry David Thoreau’s meditations on walking and archaeologies of place in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, alongside Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974), de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) and Situationist practices of *dérive* and *détournement*. Solnit’s “Introduction” opens with a quote from *Invisible Cities* (on the questions, rather than the answers, that a city formulates for its dwellers) and another from Thoreau’s *Walden* (“I have travelled a good deal in Concord”). Walter Benjamin’s autobiographical writings about his childhood in Berlin (*A Berlin Chronicle*, *A Berlin Childhood Around 1900* and *One-Way Street*, written in the 1930s) also come to mind thanks to Benjamin’s expressed desire to represent his own life on a map of the city: “I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life – bios – graphically on a map” and calling it “lived Berlin” (Benjamin 1979, 295).

*Invisible Cities*, one of the most influential literary texts on the urban imaginary, is a series of urban portraits of fifty-five cities with feminine names that Calvino’s Marco Polo purports to have visited on his trips across Kublai Khan’s empire.<sup>5</sup> These invisible cities do not exist, and Marco admits he has never *actually* visited them, but he claims that each

of them contains an “implicit” city, Venice itself: “Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice” (86). Marco’s invisible cities are possibilities, utopian or dystopian projects that illustrate a philosophical question about the relationship between illusion and reality, past and present, desire and memory. They can be read as a collection of versions of a given city—as a personal catalog of fluctuating configurations of home. *Infinite City* takes Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* as a model of representation and intertextual guide for the ways in which recording or recollecting a city is creating it. Any existing city subsists in the realm of possibility, inseparable from the images it has nurtured, albeit not restricted to them.<sup>6</sup> Rather than presenting the wonders of China, as the historical Marco Polo does in *The Description of the World*, Calvino’s version of Marco Polo focuses only on Venice, multiplied and transformed into a constellation of improbable cities encountered on Marco’s “journey through memory” (Calvino 1972, 98).

Calvino’s text offers a double perspective and has a double center of gravity: on the one hand, a fabulous dissemination of imaginary cities, and on the other, their unique implicit source and urban matrix (they are all avatars of Venice). Marco Polo attempts to reach the perfect city, “discontinuous in space and time” (164), which is none other than Venice, the ultimate narrative and emotional destination, the lost origin. Solnit has never lost San Francisco in the literal sense, but the city’s many layers of meaning and ephemeral configurations through history entitle her to explore its various forms of invisibility and infinity. In the process of mutual recoding of literature and cartography in *Infinite City*, we move from Calvino’s Venice as a city of nostalgic recollection and remoteness to Solnit’s San Francisco as a city of presence and closeness, still ungraspable because endless. The dialogic framework of *Invisible Cities* is implicitly preserved—all the essays and maps in Solnit’s atlas are addressed to a larger community of individuals: “While my story is mine, my map of San Francisco is also potentially yours” (8). However, the interest of *Infinite City* transcends its purely local character and whatever site-specific dimension it may appear to carry, since it highlights the larger question of the place of the self through a combination of mapping, historical and geographical discourse and personal narrative.<sup>7</sup> In their history of objectivity that focuses on scientific atlases, Daston and Galison comment on the fact that nineteenth-century atlases were meant to replace their predecessors and to offer a definitive *summa*: “Every atlas is presented with fanfare, as if it were the atlas to end all atlases. Atlases aim

to be definitive in every sense of the term: they set the standards of a science in word, image, and deed – how to describe, how to depict, how to see” (26). *Infinite City* is the antithesis of this “definitive” model. It is open to new versions of maps and sets the standards of an imaginative model of mapping cities.

### POINT OF VIEW AND RENEWAL

One of the most interesting maps in *Infinite City* reconsiders point of view and the relationship between the different modes and contents of representation. Entitled “Cinema City,” it documents three connected historical and thematic dimensions: (1) the places in San Francisco associated with Eadward Muybridge, who lived there intermittently between 1855 and 1881 and took panoramic photographs conceptually related to his interest in the techniques of photographing motion that made possible the birth of cinema; (2) Alfred Hitchcock’s making of *Vertigo* (1957) in San Francisco; and finally (3) the apotheosis and decline of movie theaters in the city between 1958, when *Vertigo* was released, and 2010.<sup>8</sup>

The essay accompanying the map, written by Solnit and entitled “The Eyes of the Gods,” is concerned with the ghosts of the past that continue to haunt the present and envisions cities as spectral sites, in which the past shines through the present. One of the founding assumptions of *Infinite City* is that cities always signify beyond themselves and exist only in a correlative state. The map and the essay about “Cinema City” discuss the cinema as a paradoxical medium, which animates characters and brings them to life, but also as a spectral medium, which projects the past into the present. Solnit quotes Thomas Edison’s prophetic pronouncement about the imminent emergence of a new medium, capable of blurring the boundaries between past and present: “[G]rand opera can be given at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York ... with artists and musicians long since dead” (26). The map and the essay deal with images of the city and with image making in the city, focusing both on what is represented and how it is represented. This intertwined historical exploration of content and form production examines the passage from fixed to moving images and the emergence of visual fluidity as a modern way of representation.

The map, though static, urges the viewer to move from one topic to another and from one site of San Francisco to another. Christian Jacob talks about the cinematographic movement induced by atlases that invite

us to link cartographic sequences in a coherent spatial narrative (Jacob 1992, 106–109). Here, this dynamism animates a single map, which constructs a narrative of growth, a partial *Bildungsroman* of cinema. The map invites horizontal movement but is the product of vertical movement as well, through the strata of history, from the nineteenth century until today. This archaeological mapping digs through the various layers of the city’s memory and puts them in dialogue with one other.

“Cinema City” is a map about ways of seeing and different types of gaze. According to Bruno, “in portraying the city as a panoramic subject of observation, panoramic photography contributed to establishing modernity’s particular way of seeing” (Bruno 2002, 39).<sup>9</sup> Modernity’s panoramic way of seeing implies the extension of the field of vision and relies on the increasingly mobile gaze of the camera capturing the scene.<sup>10</sup> Panoramic photography and the cinema experiment with gazes that are more fluid and mobile, gazes that see what the human eye cannot see. In *Vertigo* Hitchcock uses the “dolly zoom,” also known as the “*Vertigo* effect,” which gives an unsettling impression of perspective distortion, since the background appears to change size relative to the object in focus. The “dolly zoom” exploits a subjective manipulation of perception to suggest a loss of inner balance and disorientation. Maps are also the result of a certain kind of gaze, the holistic or panoptic cartographic gaze—the gaze of Icarus flying above the earth (Buci-Glucksmann 1996) or the divine gaze encompassing the universe. “Cinema City” is, then, an artefact of embedded and stratified media (photography, cinema and mapping), just as it is a slice of stratified time. This map can be read as a meta-device, as a reflexive representation inviting us to meditate on the act of mapping and its ability to collect and recollect previous modes of representation. An embedded structure of narrative, photographic, filmic and cartographic points of view, “Cinema City” is also replete with *mise-en-abyme* effects. It is a map of San Francisco indicating the sites where Muybridge photographed the city, the sites where Hitchcock filmed it in a medium made possible by Muybridge’s techniques, and the sites where theater halls once stood.

The essay accompanying “Cinema City” provides the narrative impulse necessary to set the map in motion, while also mapping, in words, the writer’s interest in Muybridge and Hitchcock and her experience as a moviegoer in San Francisco. The essay adds biographical depth to our understanding of the two image-makers and autobiographical depth to our view of Solnit herself, as she remembers the cinema halls of

San Francisco and the intensely sensory dimension of the ritual of movie going: the “aroma of the popcorn,” the worn carpets, the crumpled ticket later found in her pocket (29). If the map tries to document the relationship between vision and representation in three different media (photography, cinema, maps), with special emphasis on the emergence of ever more encompassing and mobile images, the essay shifts from the wholeness of artistic vision to the deeply personal point of view of the narrator. There is a phenomenological filtering of experience through first-person narrative and through Hitchcock’s “dolly zoom.” Solnit, looking at Charles Bronson’s eyes on the screen, declares herself humbled by the magnitude of this awe-inspiring image that is likened to a totemic figure. The eyes on the screen induce a state of worship in the viewer, who experiences something akin to Rudolf Otto’s description of the sacred in *The Idea of the Holy*: “mysterium tremendus et fascinans.” Seated in the darkness of the cinema hall and staring in wonder at this new idol, Solnit compares herself to Saint Foy as she is depicted on the western façade of the abbey in Conques, “a tiny figure bent in prayer” by the huge hand of God (30).

More subtly, the map and the essay comment indirectly on the articulation of totality and fragmentariness that lies at the heart of *Infinite City*. This atlas of San Francisco only offers versions of the city and does not aspire to the wholeness that often underlies nostalgia—transcendent, certainly awe-inspiring, but inaccessible and inappropriate. Alternative points of view replace totalizing vision. An open-ended sum of first person pronouns is substituted for the all-seeing eye. “Cinema City” reflects on the blending of physical perception and subjectivity, on the possibility of reconciling global and local perspectives, and on the necessary passage from purportedly objective omniscience to subjective, partial vision. A major claim made by cartography as a discipline for centuries concerns the supposedly inherent transparency of maps as faithful recorders or objective representations of the earth. What *Infinite City* does is to make the point of view of the map, on the map, manifest, by surrounding the map with autobiographical material and by making clear that the choice of themes presented on the map has its origin in specific individuals with specific life stories. The literary notion of point of view modifies and enriches the cartographic notion of point of view.

## IDENTITY AND PERFORMATIVE CARTOGRAPHY

If “Cinema City” reflects on embedded points of view and on the primacy of the perceiving self through a more conventional combination of text and cartography, the map entitled “Who Am I Where? /¿Quién soy dónde?” focuses on the related issue of how identity is articulated in connection with place through an original fusion of map and text (Fig. 7.1).

The map is framed by a bifocal and bivocal poetic creation about “contingent identities and circumstantial memories” (102), as is spelled out in the title. Two poems, authored by Solnit and by Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, respectively, record a vast spectrum of possible



**Fig. 7.1** Rebecca Solnit and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Who Am I Where? /¿Quién soy dónde? A Map of Contingent Identities and Circumstantial Memories*, cartography by Ben Pease, from Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas*, University of California Press, 2010 © 2010 by the Regents of the University of California Press, Published by the University of California Press

identities associated by each of the authors with specific urban scenes. The map is parsimonious in its selection of San Francisco sites. Forty-four major landmarks are shown, from the Golden Gate Bridge to Hunters Point. Although the two poems seem to be autonomous monologues, they are, in fact, articulated along dialogic lines. Two vocal identities respond to each other across a cartographic bridge, offering complementary views. Solnit constructs a narrative of identity as experienced by the speaking “I”:

In the Japanese Tea Garden I am always six year old  
 In the Richmond District, I am wrapped up in dim sum steam, fog, and  
 the fatigue of the grid. (102)

Gómez-Peña weaves together the ways in which he is seen, classified, even monumentalized or fossilized by others. He is “mistaken for a tourist from Spain or Argentina” when in Chinatown, he is “nobody” in the Financial District, a “scary local myth” at SFMOMA, “a regular asthma patient whose tattoos perplex the doctors and the nurses” at the Kaiser Medical Center at Divisadero (103).

In many respects, “Who Am I Where? / ¿Quién soy dónde?” revisits the pose and favorite themes of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Individual heterogeneity as a site of conflicting versions of the self reunited in a “knit of identity” (Whitman 1982, 190) is precisely one of them: “I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (Whitman 1982, 246). The interaction between the poems and the map is shaped distinctly by specific factors. Gender, language and ethnicity are crucial categories for the definition of the self and its relationship to place. Linguistic, sexual and ethnic diversity are part and parcel of the human and cultural urban fabric of San Francisco. The rational structuring of the cartographic grid fades into a human landscape of swarming heterogeneities.

The effect of the text’s framing the map is that of an artistic synergy, a cartographic poem or a performative, declamatory map. Together, they form a text and context continuum. Without the text, the map is devoid of semantic density, while the text is disembodied without the map. The map anchors the speaking self in place, delimiting the perimeter of its various movements and metamorphoses. Inseparable creators of significance, the poems and the map respond to each other and signify through a dynamic movement back and forth, reminiscent of hypertext. The map

and the poem function as a shifting semiotic unit of signifier (map) and signified (poems), the latter being dependent on the speaking voice. The map seems immobile, in contrast to the ever-changing identities that hover above it. Its immobility is heightened by the fact that it is easily recognizable as a rigidly codified form of spatial representation. In contrast to this massive representational anchorage, the flowing quality of the poems is even more striking. The fluidity of the poems is not only thematic but also formal because, beyond the printed page, they could go on forever. They are, in a sense, “infinite poems,” whose open-endedness matches that of the atlas itself. Just as the self drifts across the city, the map itself seems to drift from one person to another, as it is impersonated in each and every speaker. The fixity of the map is, of course, illusory, since the urban image is only reflected in the changing self.

This vocal map of identity also raises the philosophical problem of what defines and determines the self. For Émile Benveniste, the locus of subjectivity in language is the first person pronoun: “I” is the person saying “I” (Benveniste 1966, 255). Here, the definition of subjectivity takes into account the context: “I” is the person saying “I am here in time and space” and placing himself/herself on the map. Linguistically, this constitutes a pragmatic understanding of the speaking “I” in specific circumstances. Together with a reference to place, “I” is the anaphoric nucleus of both poems. The interrogatives of “Who Am I Where? /¿Quién soy dónde?” draw a deictic map whose changeable meaning relies on contextual information. The poems are actually verbal maps of the self as much as they are verbal maps of the city. Solnit’s poem suggests an empathetic identification with the various San Francisco sites. Identity is born out of identification but is not limited to the sum of its contextual instances. The self resonates and is synchronized with the places it passes through.

The poems are the result of a choice of format shared by the two authors from the outset, which can be deemed artificial. Yet the constraint of associating specific sites with “contingent identities and circumstantial memories” mimics the constraints of the map itself; namely, the cartographic grid, what Solnit calls “the fatigue of the grid” (102). Identity, just like space, is subjected to the grid of a joint poetic and geographical exercise. The boundaries of home, as an inherently familiar sphere, are stretched to include the unfamiliar—not in the sense of the strangely familiar *unheimlich*, but rather in the sense of the *terra incognita* blank. Solnit declares that she is “home in the known and unknown” (102), projecting a personal map of the city not unlike the

medieval maps that show a world whose margins harbor the mythical *terrae incognitae*. Urban space, as it emerges from the various personal experiences mapped in *Infinite City*, is a place of constant negotiation that leaves ample room for unpredictability, lacunae and hesitation.

San Francisco appears as a microcosm paradoxically closed upon itself and open onto the world. With its repetition of twenty-two maps of the same city, *Infinite City* reminds one of the popular sixteenth-century atlases of islands called *isolarii*, inventories of the archetypal remote and inaccessible cartographic object, the island. San Francisco becomes almost unreal, a fictionalized place, hermetic in the sense of referring only to itself. And yet, the constant awareness of its inscription within larger networks of ideology, migration and cultural imagery is always present, giving rise to competing claims to external connectivity and autotelic involution.

### “THE PHANTOM OF PLACE”

The paradoxical nature of San Francisco conveyed by *Infinite City* succeeds in giving the city an actuality and a substance, while at the same time preserving its elusiveness, dispersal and refusal to coalesce. It projects San Francisco as home, but it also asserts its inscription in global networks of exchange. From this point of view, *Infinite City* illustrates a tendency discussed by Miwon Kwon at the end of *One Place After Another*.

Kwon reflects on two opposing models of the relationship between the self and place. One insists on the “lure of the local” and on notions of home, belonging and the uniqueness of place, while the other celebrates identity as dispersed and unanchored in a globalized world in constant flux. The dichotomy local/global, one could add, has been reformulated in the past decades to oppose the national and the transnational/postnational. Kwon contends that Lucy Lippard’s *The Lure of the Local. Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1998) and David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) illustrate the former, while Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) exemplify the latter. It is actually Heidegger’s phenomenology of place that inspires Lippard’s plea for the necessity of a stronger connection between place and identity in a global landscape of undifferentiated transience inhabited by unmoored individuals.<sup>11</sup> Part autobiography and part investigation of site-specific art, *The Lure of the Local* urges one to engage with a place of one’s own, with *the* place of one’s own, thus coming close to the contemporary practice

of “reinhabiting home” pursued by the so-called reinhabitants—domestic explorers charting their homelands.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to this search for place authenticity and differentiation seen as vital formative elements of identity, Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadic thought articulated in *A Thousand Plateaus* expresses itself in dynamic, decentered itineraries, both conceptual and spatial. Ungrounded and unfixed, nomadic thought informs spatial theory and critical theory, bringing together the openness of meaning and the openness of space, the fluidity of identity and the fluidity of territories. The theorization of nomadic thought in the past decades has run concurrently with the emergence of artistic practices that have downplayed or utterly dismissed the notion of fixed site, along with local circumstances and contingent bonds. Kwon takes issue with both paradigms: Lippard’s invitation to feel the “pull of the local” appears retrograde and suspect, while the celebration of nomadism overlooks the vulnerability of the migrant, who is often a tragic figure. A problematic aspect of nomadism is thus revealed, since nomadism as a form of critique and inquiry is anti-capitalist in nature (in Deleuze and Guattari’s reading), but also a typical mode of capitalism itself.<sup>13</sup> Kwon goes on to acknowledge the persistence of the site as a fantasy and a means of survival: “Despite the proliferation of discursive sites and fictional selves, however, the phantom of a site as an actual place remains, and our psychic, habitual attachment to places regularly returns as it continues to inform our sense of identity.” This attachment is interpreted as “a means of survival” rather than “a lack of theoretical sophistication” (Kwon 2002, 165).

Kwon argues for a different relationship with place, situated in between nostalgic rootedness and anti-nostalgic fluidity, which she calls “a new model of belonging-in-transience” (8), a phrase with a resolutely phenomenological ring in a study that does not adopt the perspective and language of phenomenology. Such a model would rely on a paradoxical combination of “intimacies based on absence, distance and ruptures of time and space” (9), but since no examples are given in her book, it remains the expression of a vague desire to escape the binary logic of local specificity and nomadic un-specificity, a conundrum attempting to reconcile two positions which seem philosophically incompatible. But the power of imaginative thinking (literary and artistic) resides precisely in expressing ambiguity and allowing polar opposites to coexist. *Infinite City* seems to correspond to this model of “belonging-in-transience” and to suspend the city midway between “the lure of the local” and nomadic circulation. This is quite a feat, since Lippard’s “lure of the local” is not

the privilege of cities. There is little or no room for cities in Lippard's discussion. Her "lure of the local" leads to an implied preference for non-urban sites of reduced mobility and small-scale social interaction. However, cities are necessarily present in Lippard's work as inescapable points of reference to the non-urban places designated as "home," although it is implicit in her reading that cities do not carry the mythical aura of authenticity that qualifies for "the lure of the local." No wonder this is the case, since local and affective anchorage seems to be in contradiction with a widespread vision of the metropolis as alienating nexus of capital and social flows (precisely the aspect of nomadism that is complicit with the mobility of late capitalism).

However, examples of cities that generate narratives of intimacy, attachment and layered individual and collective memories abound in literature, the arts and critical theory: Walter Benjamin's autobiographical texts about Berlin show the impact of the modern city on the history of the self; Michel de Certeau's forays into the practice of everyday life against an urban backdrop insist on firsthand experience and growing intimacy with the contours of urban geography through walking and the uncovering of local stories; Giuliana Bruno presents cities as sites of affect and subjective configurations shaped by personal/cultural memories.<sup>14</sup> Critical cartographers and urban historians have, in recent years, emphasized the relevance of micro-narratives and communal/individual voices from within the city in the shaping of their cultural identity, pleading for an inclusive approach to urban spaces and their historiography.<sup>15</sup>

The "actual" in Kwon's "phantom of a site as an actual place" might suggest that "actual" places precede representations and the "actuality" of place is transferable in its mediations. But Kwon's emphasis on the "phantom" of site encapsulates precisely this diminished actuality, the spectral afterlife of a place that is lost and lingering in residual form. Representations and mediations of a given place always produce versions of that place that involve slippages, selections, reconfigurations, so much so that no "actual" place can survive intact in its artistic transpositions.

### THE ATLAS AS METHOD

Another source of aesthetic and ideological renewal stems from the ways in which the relationship between geography and narrative is reinterpreted in *Infinite City*, by going beyond the limits of the codified atlas genre. Historically, atlases sum up knowledge in a monumental way, functioning

as geographical archives of a given context and offering “a symbolic mastery of space” (Jacob 1992, 97–98). Monuments of possession and authority, atlases claim to be omniscient and omnipotent, since knowledge cannot be dissociated from power. As Daston and Galison explain, the term “atlas” derived from Gerardus Mercator’s 1595 world map (*Atlas, or Cosmographical Meditations on the Fabric of the World*), whose title uses the name of the titan of Greek mythology who carries the world on his shoulders. By the mid-nineteenth century, the term “atlas” migrated from geography to astronomy and botany, actually to all the empirical sciences, but the idea of mapping remains: atlases “aim to ‘map’ the territory of the sciences they serve” (Daston and Galison 2007, 23).

*Infinite City* operates a series of shifts in mode and perspective from the monumental to the fluid, from omniscience to individual points of view, and from knowledge to the intimate experience of the texture of place. It plays with the codes of the atlas and regenerates it by using literary filters and by placing storytelling, subjectivity, together with a combined individual and communal relevance at the center of a new understanding of mapmaking. This is one of many recent examples of cartography undisciplined or unbound, appropriated by individuals or groups outside the field of cartography itself.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from these obvious shifts, I would like to speculate on the atlas as a method of cultural investigation. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the atlas as form in art historical contexts thanks to the work of German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), one of the most influential art historians of the twentieth century. Aby Warburg’s final work, left unfinished when he died in 1929, called *The Atlas of Mnemosyne*, was a picture atlas which occupied the last four years of his life. *The Atlas of Mnemosyne*, which survives only in black and white photographs, was an enigmatic work that consisted of seventy-nine wooden panels covered in black cloth on which Warburg pinned thousands of reproductions of artworks, but also newspaper clippings and contemporary photographs. The logic behind the choice of images is not always apparent. There are some visual clusters around classical motifs and their transmission (which was one of Warburg’s major interests), with no captions and no written texts. Warburg kept reconfiguring the panels for years, creating myriads of visual itineraries that kept changing. He considered it his most important piece illustrating a new method of cultural investigation based on affinity, selection, mutability and fragmentariness. Recently, *The Atlas of Mnemosyne* has come under scrutiny from

historians who have tried to make sense of its motivations, implications and vision, and who insist on the originality of its method, as is the case with Didi-Huberman, who curated an exhibition and devoted the third volume of his series *The Eye of History* to Warburg's atlas and to the atlas as a genre revisited by artists. For Didi-Huberman, Warburg's atlas, driven by the imagination, does not exhaust all possibilities, but rather suggests that they are endless (Didi-Huberman 2010). The atlas as a free and exuberant configuration of texts and maps might be a particularly illuminating contemporary form of organizing and visualizing cultural and scientific forms of knowledge, vanished and extant, but also potential, through the lens of the imagination.

*Infinite City* revives the map as a type of representation that de Certeau and Harley, who speak of the deathly or disembodied quality of maps, consider as an exhausted form. In an even more profound way, *Infinite City* renews mapmaking as a form of knowledge (self-knowledge as well) and understands it as an instance of Jean-Marc Besse's restorative epistemology, a dialectical counter-mapping that confers visibility on subaltern values and discourses that have never been included in canonical maps (Besse 2008, 22).<sup>17</sup> Recent historiography has done much to take into consideration alternative points of view, but there have also been changes in the understanding of geography and cartography as ways of producing knowledge through practices of counter-mapping. Two such examples of restorative epistemology from *Infinite City* are "Green Women: Open Spaces and Their Champions" (on the women environmentalists of the Bay Area) and the map of "The Names before the Names," which is the result of research into the complex history of the names of the Native American communities that were spread all over the Bay Area in 1769, at the moment of contact with the Spaniards. Such examples of restorative mapping (the latter, in particular) rely on the conventions of traditional cartography in order to subvert or supplement dominant epistemic paradigms. In doing so, the map of "The Names before the Names" raises a certain number of problems because of the illusion of historical accuracy and representational fixity that it gives. The essay dispels that illusion of fixity and accuracy, since it mentions the scarcity of evidence, the necessary recourse to deduction and speculation, the haziness of some of the areas on the map and the chain of translation and transcription of some of these names (12–17). It undermines the accuracy of this map (voluntarily or involuntarily), suggesting that it is a nostalgic construct, based on a fantasy of origins.<sup>18</sup> "The Names before

the Names” relies on appropriating a conventional western form that does not take into consideration mapping representations in the Native American tradition: pictographs or ephemeral maps, for instance (Lewis 1998, 51–182). Visually, *Infinite City* is a far cry from the uniformity of digital imagery that is associated with the democratization of cartography. *Infinite City* privileges a return to older styles of maps, which bespeak nostalgia for the map as an artistic object, without escaping the representational confines of the western mapping tradition.

There is a certain authorial form of community that the book circumscribes. The project is inspired by participatory mapping, which has become more and more common in recent years and also by aesthetic theories about the nature of contemporary artistic practice as a group-oriented process.<sup>19</sup> *Infinite City* is certainly not open to the accidents of context and interaction. It is a material object, a finite book that carries infinity in its title. It is not participatory in the strict sense of the word, but it displays an interest in forms of community, both social and authorial. We are dealing with a consensual heterogeneity. Not a single dissenting voice can be heard, the authors share the same counter-hegemonic ideology.

*Infinite City* seems to be a perfect case study for Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, but upon closer inspection, the neat dismantling of the “grand narratives” of totalizing meaning it undertakes is not as thorough or as radical as it may appear. It does renounce official versions of wholeness, but not without expressing nostalgia for an alternative wholeness, which passes through a communal production of meaning. The utopian strain of this project resides in its emphasis on participatory, community-based sharing of maps and stories. *Infinite City* suggests that cartography is most human when it charts not the faraway, but the nearby, with the same sense of wonder, but a nearby whose explorers are always aware of the larger picture of global forces and networks within which place is inserted. *Infinite City* breathes life into the form of the atlas, and each of its maps breathes life into the imaginary and subjective life of a city that is both intensely familiar and unfamiliar. Through repetition and variation, *Infinite City* produces twenty-two unexpected, oblique and unsettling ways of looking at a potentially infinite San Francisco. The city becomes a place of lived experience and interweaving representations and projections, where the highly personal narrative of the self moving in space is written over the palimpsest of literary, artistic and cultural artefacts that have created its mythology over the years.

## NOTES

1. A discussion of the ways in which de Certeau's passage about the view from the World Trade Center can be articulated with the debates about the problematic nature of cartographic representation as objective and detached can be found in Pinder's "Subverting Cartography: the Situationists and Maps of the City" (409–410). Massey criticizes de Certeau's passage on the view from the World Trade Center by pointing out the binary oppositions that he projects: high/low, abstract view from above/the streets, theory/practice (2005, 46–47). Although her criticism is relevant, it can be argued that de Certeau did point out a major problematic aspect of the entanglement of maps and power and that his *Practice of Everyday Life* did succeed in foregrounding the importance of everyday urban experience.
2. On literature and space, see Robert T. Tally Jr. (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* (2017). On art and cartography, see Katherine Harmon, *The Map as Art. Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography* (2010) and Gilles A. Tiberghien, *Finis Terrae. Imaginaires et imaginations cartographiques* (2007).
3. See, for example, Solnit, *Wanderlust. A History of Walking* (2001); *Yosemite in Time* (with Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, 2008); *A California Bestiary* (with Mona Caron, 2010); *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2010). Solnit has recently published two other atlases: with Rebecca Snedeken, *Unfathomable City. A New Orleans Atlas* (2013) and with Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis. A New York City Atlas* (2016). Solnit was awarded the 2015–2016 Corlis Benefideo Award for Imaginative Cartography from the North American Cartographic Information Society for her work on the atlas of cities trilogy.
4. Solnit's storm of maps is reminiscent of an episode in Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" essay (1972) where he discusses his wish to shoot "the earth's history in one minute" for the *Spiral Jetty* film. To do so, he threw "handfuls from ripped-up pages from books and magazines" over the edge of a quarry in New Jersey. "Some ripped pages from an Old Atlas blew across a dried out, cracked mud puddle" (Smithson 1996, 151).
5. Some book and urban projects inspired by Calvino include Malutzki and Ketelhodt, *Zweite Enzyklopädie von Tlön* (1997–2006, artist's books, 50 volumes): volume 6, "Città," is based on Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Another work in which Calvino is prominent is *City A–Z* (Pile and Thrift 2000). A project directly inspired by *Invisible Cities* is Van Vankelburgh's "Eudoxia" (1986). See also *Detroit: Imaginary Cities* (Reichert and Aubert 2007). In 2013, MassMoca organized an exhibition called

*Invisible Cities* devoted to ten contemporary artists who take their cue from Calvino's text.

6. But Marco Polo reminds the Khan that "the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between one and the other there is a connection" (Calvino 1972, 61).
7. In 2011, Solnit also conducted a community mapping project with students from the creative writing program at the University of Wyoming to produce an atlas of Laramie similar to *Infinite City*. See Gilman (2011).
8. Solnit has written a book on Muybridge entitled *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (2004).
9. On painted panoramas, see Oettermann (1997); on Muybridge's panoramas, see Harris and Sandweiss (1993).
10. On the close relationship between cities and the emergence of the cinema, see Bruno (2002, 15–53).
11. The argument is revisited in Lippard's subsequent work, for instance in *Undermining. A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (2014). Kwon traces Lippard's stance back to Heidegger's essay on "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1951) and to later conceptual variations by followers like Christian Norberg-Schulz and Yi-Fu Tuan. On Heidegger's relevance for architects, see Adam Sharr, *Heidegger for Architects* (2007) and Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn. Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (2010). Sharr synthesizes Heidegger's stance on architecture as follows: "a particular morality; a promotion of the value of human presence and inhabitation; an unapologetic mysticism; a tendency to nostalgia; and a drive to highlight the limits of science and technology" (3). For a detailed account of Heidegger's varied discussions of place throughout his writings, see Casey (1998, 243–284). Casey points out that Heidegger's reflections on place, although heterogeneous, all share an interest in "closeness, the intimacy of things as they are gathered, and themselves actively gather, *in a particular place*" (281).
12. The concept of reinhabiting home refers to mapping home as a form of empowerment. Three notable examples come from Canada. See Aberley (1998), Harrington (1999), and Harrington and Stevenson (2005). Another example of participatory mapping based on local knowledge is discussed in Williamson and Connolly (2009).
13. For a discussion of the problematic and paradoxical aspects of the concept of nomadism, see Noyes (2004).
14. See especially Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion* (2002). *The New Blackwell Companion to the City* (2011) features a long section on affect (277–375) that did not exist in the 2002 edition.

15. See Hayden, *The Power of Place. Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1995); Orvell and Benesch (eds.), *Rethinking the American City. An International Dialogue* (2013).
16. Crampton and Krygier use the terms “cartography undisciplined” (2006, 12). Pinder uses the phrase “cartographies unbound” in the title of a review that discusses several recent publications, among which Harmon’s book about art and mapping (2007).
17. On the deconstructive and reconstructive aspects of recent feminist and postcolonial approaches to cartography, see also Doreen Massey, *For Space* (2005, 108–110).
18. This is where *Infinite City* comes closest in spirit to Lippard’s *Lure of the Local*. In terms of detail, Lippard also discusses the importance of native place names in Chapter 4 of *The Lure of the Local*, “In a word” (46–54).
19. I have already discussed the “social turn” in art in the chapter devoted to Poe’s “Man of the Crowd.” Let me add that apart from the “relational art” theorized by Bourriaud (who defines it as an interest in human relations as theme and process), there exist other descriptive models of artistic sociability: “connective aesthetics” (Gablik 1995), “community-specific work,” which addresses the site as a social framework (Kwon 2002), “dialogical art” (Kester 2013) at the intersection of art and activism, outside museum networks, “experimental communities” (Basualdo and Laddaga 2009), which insist on art as open process in relation both to the contingencies that may occur while the project is being carried out and to the makeup of the communities that they assemble.

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## Conclusion: “Write a Book to Get Lost”

In the Introduction, I claimed that *Cartographies of New York and Other Postwar American Cities* tells a different story of the American city from the one told by Morton and Lucia White in *The Intellectual versus the City. From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (1962). Their thesis is that even if the decay of the American city at the beginning of the 1960s, when they published their book, was a pressing concern (they call it, more ambiguously, a “fashionable” concern), this concern did not rely on a history of positive intellectual engagement with the city. In their words, “enthusiasm for the American city has not been typical or predominant in our intellectual history” (1). They go on to say that the city planner has “no mythology or mystique on which he can rest or depend while he launches his campaigns in behalf of urban improvement” (1). One of the consequences of this thesis is Morton and Lucia White’s belief that “the American intellectual has been alienated from the society in which he has lived, that he has been typically in revolt against it” (2). Apart from Walt Whitman and William James, “who could at times speak affectionately about New York” (2), there are no celebratory voices in the chorus of American writers, philosophers and officials they discuss (Franklin, Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, Adams, Howells, Norris, Dreiser, William James, Dewey, Santayana, Wright etc.). To give one example, in their analysis of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” they insist on its vision of London as Gomorrah (“it may be too late to save it from crowd and crime,” 47) and on the overall

impression “that the city *is* the home of ‘the genius of deep crime’” (49). But beyond this bleak assessment, there is no appreciation of the fruitfully destabilizing potential of the nocturnal city that Poe’s short story explores. Many of the intellectuals they discuss are ambivalent about the city for the reasons explained by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (published two years later, in 1964), which *The Intellectual versus the City* announces in some ways, notably through its emphasis on the American tradition of pastoralism.<sup>1</sup> Marx unravels the central significance of the pastoral ideal for “the meaning of America” and the “metaphor of contradiction” that pastoralism and the city form together (Marx 2000, 3–4).

I take no issue with the narrative that insists on the prevalence of the pastoral ideal in American culture and on the negative connotations of city life and the city itself.<sup>2</sup> However, I offer a reading of the aesthetic potential of New York (in particular) in the 1960s and 1970s as feeding precisely on this negativity. The visions of the urban that I have foregrounded project New York as a space of bold and varied experimentation and interrogation, where the self confronts its otherness and where artists test alternative ways of art-making. Of course, these confrontations and elucidations need not be restricted to New York or to urban and suburban sites; they may as well be staged in other kinds of spaces. And yet, it is precisely because of the negativity of New York in particular, and because of the “versus” in *The Intellectual versus the City* that these intellectual operations acquire a specific significance in urban contexts, quite different from the one they may acquire if staged elsewhere. The urban “mythology” and “mystique” that Morton and Lucia White claim the urban planner needs in order to launch his urban renewal projects actually do exist and have existed in American literature and art for some time, except that their spirit is not the positive and celebratory one that Morton and Lucia White had in mind as a prerequisite of “improvement.” After all, urban renewal need not rest only on expectations of clarity, legibility and a festive ethos, which smack of conventionally comfortable and rigid phantasms and myths. What might the urban planner learn from Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), which describes the imaginary cities of Isidora, whose buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells, Anastasia, with concentric canals watering it and kites flowing over it, Isaura, city of a thousand wells, or Leonia, where objects are thrown out each day to make room for new ones the following day? Calvino’s book has been very influential in urban studies.

Its spirit of unfettered urban celebration, its restless invention in the domain of urban possibility and its jubilant approach have certainly helped urban planners launch "campaigns in behalf of urban improvement." Calvino's vision bespeaks of a very personal and subjective relationship that binds the city and each of its inhabitants, a relationship that results from inhabiting it and hence producing it daily as material and social structure, but also as a plural and evolving representation shaped by memories, affect, existing texts and artistic experiments. Calvino's proliferation of urban narratives actually leads us back to one city, Venice itself, which remains impossible to appropriate and escapes complete possession, dispersed in its many reflections. Indeed, the urban planner has already learnt a lot from *Invisible Cities*, above all the fact that cities cannot be subsumed to a single totalizing model, in a utopian attempt at systematization. In a text discussing the city of Prague but referring to cities in general, Derrida offers similar remarks:

The categorical imperative of every major urban project (...) is to be respectful and responsible: every construction which tries to totalize, to inscribe – in the present of urban or architectural structures which are saturating, non-transformable, and subtracted from<sup>3</sup> a sort of flexible grammar capable of new syntaxes, new harmonious developments, new integrations which are not contradictory with the first ensembles – to inscribe a violence, a wrong, a wound which I would be tempted to call moral, which would come to pierce or maim the soul and the body, destroys the integrity as indeed the proper name of a city. I will distinguish here *incompletion* from *non-achievement*. It is the incompletion and not the non-achievement of works through incompetence or through the inability to provide its own means, it is the non-saturation of urban space that should constitute the golden rule of every project of urban restoration or renovation today. (Derrida 1991, 14–15)

To pursue the idea of what urban authorities might learn from artists, the question of illegal action in artistic practice is highly relevant. What is there to learn from *Day's End* (1975), Matta-Clark's splitting of an industrial warehouse in Manhattan, discussed in Chapter 6? He was sued for vandalism, but it is worth reflecting on what arguments and vision the artist and his supporters brought to bear in the debate about intervention, occupation and destruction of abandoned property. His friends' rhetoric when they tried to defend him was actually quite illuminating when they claimed that *Day's End* "should be understood as a generous

donation of a work of art to a decaying city.”<sup>4</sup> The “splitting” of *Day’s End* can be read as a condensation of spatial and historical concerns related to the ruinous condition of New York in the 1970s and as a critical reflection on the role of the artist in exploring the potential of decay. The unlawful status of the “splitting” is precisely what gives it prominence in the confrontation with authority and what draws attention to the conditions of urban decay.

Poe’s city, together with the city configured by Acconci’s *Following Piece* and his instant houses, Oldenburg’s gritty and ephemeral *The Street*, Matta-Clark’s “splittings,” Smithson’s inert Passaic and Solnit’s inexhaustible San Francisco are, in very different ways, figurations of conflict and tension, where ideas are tried out and certainties do not endure. For Kaprow, Acconci, Matta-Clark, Smithson and Solnit, cities signify both as sites of artistic and cultural reflection and as sites of political and social action. Cities coalesce as places of dark otherness, where the menacing underworld becomes visible and palpable, where laws are issued and broken, where the senses come under siege, where one gets lost. Perhaps the “ideal city” projected by this book is one in which one gets lost, like Yoko Ono’s *Map Piece* analyzed in Chapter 3, which says simply “Draw a map to get lost” (Ono 2000, n.p.). Projects of urban renewal, then, do not make much sense unless they leave room for disorientation, that creative form of defamiliarization whose aesthetic potential has been foregrounded by the examples discussed in this book. How exactly this room for disorientation might be envisaged and how the open city might be planned are vital topics in a continued reflection in which artists, architects, writers and city planners have participated together for some time.

Of course, writing a book to get lost and drawing a map to get lost look so much easier to accept and perform than accepting or performing Acconci’s ethically questionable acts of following strangers in the street or engaging in a Situationist drift through a crime-ridden neighborhood. And yet, I would like to argue, at the bottom of it, the conceptual challenge is the same, although the risk to one’s life may vary greatly. Smithson visiting Passaic, declaring that the completely uninteresting “monuments” of his hometown are “ruins in reverse” and asking whether Passaic has replaced Rome, the Eternal City, is actually accomplishing one of the most radical mutations of vision and artistic practice in art history. In a way, Smithson’s “Monuments of Passaic” is a monumental version of conceptual disorientation. One may retort that the

purpose or effect of an academic book should by no means be to disorient its readers or its author. Utmost clarity and efficient orientation are expected. I hope this book both orients its readers by diligently following the thread of mapping practices in American arts and discourses *and* shows them the benefices that can be obtained by intentionally or unintentionally getting lost. In this conundrum, I find myself in the situation of Allan Kaprow when he created the environment *Words*, discussed in Chapter 3, an environment meant to recreate the chaotic, allusive and imprecise linguistic conditions of everyday life in the city, although such an environment was implicitly at odds with Kaprow's written production as a professor of art history at Rutgers, marked by clarity and precision.

This book has tried to demonstrate that ever since it became an emblem and matrix of modernity, the city has fascinated and repelled at the same time, and that it has been a paradoxical and ambiguous challenge to creativity, with its medley of sights and sounds, with its normative grids and rules of social conduct in public space, with its occasional ruins and decay, with its staged confrontations between authorities and ideologies on the one hand and alternative and subversive tactics on the other. Various forms of mapping have been discussed, which have projected the city as an illegible book (just like the face of the old man in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd"), as an arena of interactive theatricality and masks, as a site of abjection and poverty, as a texture of words and architecture, as an infinite source of maps and narratives. Even when the constitutive darkness of a story like "The Man of the Crowd" is channeled in the direction of artistic sociability and participation, as it is in Glowlab's Neo-Situationist experiment, a transgressive element remains, albeit to a very limited extent. It would be judicious, then, to redirect the notion of urban renewal toward the idea of building an open city, a porous and loose one, whose constitutive lines, streets and boundaries might be erased at will and then reimaged, like in George Maciunas's *Homage to La Monte Young* (mentioned in Chapter 3), which instructs that all lines be erased: "Erase, scrape or wash away as well as possible the previously drawn line or lines of La Monte Young or any other lines encountered, like street dividing lines, ruled paper or score lines, lines on sports fields, lines on gaming tables, lines drawn by children on sidewalks etc." (quoted in Waxman 2010, 185).

This book offers only one possible narrative of mapping New York and other postwar American cities, which necessarily leaves out many other discourses and artistic examples. It does not aspire to

exhaustiveness and knowingly adopts the form of a possible itinerary out of many. This itinerary has a genealogical outlook, since it starts with Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) and ends with Solnit's *Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas* (2010), spanning a quite vast temporal arc. All the case studies under scrutiny should be understood as stops on an itinerary that takes us from one of the first examples of obsessive mapping of the illegible city to a revisited atlas that rehabilitates the map and inscribes it in a redefinition of identity anchored in the city. From the "Man of the Crowd" to *Infinite City*, we move from a distrust of the map as totalizing representation to the dissemination of multiple mapping processes in the midst of the city and then back again to the map as representation existing only in the plural and making sense only when combined with individual narratives. In *Spatiality*, Robert T. Tally Jr. takes "mapping to be the most important figure in spatiality studies today" (Tally 2013, 4). This book certainly supports his point and insists on the constant tension between maps and mapping, between representation and process.

This book also plays this tension against another tension, between arts and discourses, namely between site-oriented practices and their discursive mediation, which has provided a hybrid framework for understanding artistic and literary creativity in the urban contexts under scrutiny. This study proves that all artistic reflections and engagements with site are necessarily embedded in discourses, either in the form of written texts or in the form of intertexts. I agree with Lytle Shaw's pronouncement in *Fieldworks* (2013) that the three kinds of site outlined by Miwon Kwon in *One Place After Another* (2002) (the phenomenological/experiential, the social/institutional and the discursive) all have a discursive dimension. It is only through close reading of individual examples that a nuanced understanding of what is at stake in each work is possible. Hence, the methodological choices of the book, which are a combination of contextualization, close reading and intertextual analysis.

Close reading in particular has allowed me to grasp the evolution of theoretical frameworks that are relevant (or not) for the various case studies discussed. Thus, Benjamin's influential reading of the city as matrix of modernity sheds light on Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and its artistic reworkings in Chapter 2 (Matthew Buckingham's *A Man of the Crowd* and Glowlab's Neo-Situationist project), but it proves less relevant in a discussion of Acconci's *Following Piece* (which, however, recycles intertexts having to do with the links between the city and

modernity), Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties. Fake Estates* or Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic." Other theoretical frameworks turn out to have more resonance and more appeal in these cases: for Acconci, Erving Goffman's sociology of interaction combined with his revisiting of the flâneur and the urban scenarios of Surrealism and Situationism; for Matta-Clark, an exploration of uselessness and the meanings of property within the international legacy of Surrealism; for Smithson, a discussion of his confrontation with the cultural myth of Rome and the staging of a conflict between European and American culture. A work like Kenneth Goldsmith's *Capital. New York, Capital of the 20th Century* (2015), which I mention in passing but do not examine in detail and which follows the stylistic, archival and intellectual model of Benjamin's convolutes, demonstrates that Benjamin's reflection on the city and modernity is still valid and highly significant for contemporary creative approaches to the city.

I have also shown that the concepts theorized by Baudelaire and later by Benjamin—the flâneur, crowds, the spectacle of the city—acquire different meanings and grow into quite different concepts in the artistic examples I have examined. Thus, the crowds in Buckingham, in Glowlab's experiment, in Kaprow's attempts at "blurring art and life" or in Solnit's collective atlas become expressions of artistic interaction, audience participation, often in a consensual exchange and togetherness. The flâneur lives on, but he or she has also moved online, never oblivious to the lure of the city outside, which gives rise to a dynamic play between the inside/outside and the actual/virtual. In many of the case studies I have discussed, the city is not an intoxicating spectacle, as it had been for Baudelaire's flâneur. Only Kaprow and Solnit retain a sense of wonder in contemplating the city, although this sense of wonder is not always synonymous with harmony and serenity. In Kaprow's *Words*, the city becomes an environment of cacophonous sounds and in *Calling* it is a site of ritual misdemeanors. Only Solnit, through Calvino's lens, embraces the wonder of the city as source of infinite representations. Otherwise, the city becomes a spectacle of abjection and residual decay (in Oldenburg's *The Street* and *Snapshots from the City*), a ruinous desert permeated with cartographic anomalies (in Matta-Clark's *Reality Properties. Fake Estates*), an apathetic place of suspended temporalities (in Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic").

The map as material object and set of conventions, together with mapping as strategy and dynamic procedure, have proved to be powerful

critical tools, capable of generating the cohesion of an interdisciplinary corpus and of inscribing the various analyses within a historical perspective, from Poe to Solnit. The reliance on the objects, forms and tactics of cartography has allowed several paradigms of urban representation and aesthetic experience to be discussed, from the interest in site, site-specificity and the question of redefining (the work of) art in the 1960s and 1970s to a more recent paradigm that stresses the emplacement of identity and its construction in relation to a given city. Thus, we have followed the metamorphosis of cartography in literary and artistic material from the mapping of site to counter-mapping.

Virtual cartographies and the emergence of hypertext have not occupied center stage in the analyses that I have offered here, but they have emerged in certain notable instances: in Glowlab's Situationist project in which walking in Manhattan is accompanied by acts of following on social media, in Acconci's experiments with the printed page in the 1960s which can be read from the perspective of the later development of hypertext, and in the performativity of Solnit's atlas, which invites comparisons with virtual mapping collaborations, although it is restricted to a traditional printed book form.

One of the ambitions of this book has been to trace the shift from traditional media (literature and painting) to the actual exploration of the city in artistic mappings that rely on walking, following and drifting. The conclusion of this analysis is that the "actual" in the "actual exploration," the immediacy of site and the embodied experience of mapping project a city which is no less mediated by a plethora of discourses and theoretical and cultural models. The actuality and tangible referentiality of the city are always filtered by readings and discursive frames of reference. New York and the other cities discussed here are perhaps no longer "unreal cities" (as the cities of modernist poetry are defined), but rather "real and unreal cities," both here and there, hesitating between materiality and dispersal, between the frameworks of American history and culture and larger transatlantic frameworks. *Cartographies* has mapped precisely the vast spaces between the inaccessible "actual" and the endlessly "mediated" in an attempt to follow (in the footsteps of Poe's narrator and of Vito Acconci) some of the most significant poetic and artistic postwar reconfigurations of New York and other postwar American cities.

## NOTES

1. Leo Marx does not mention *The Intellectual versus the City* in *The Machine in the Garden*.
2. A more nuanced take on the city exists in the scholarship published at around the same time *The Intellectual versus the City* was published. I am thinking of the confident and hopeful conclusion reached by Lewis Mumford in his monumental *The City in History* (1961) at the end of a very lucid and nuanced account of the evolution of the city that does not overlook the negative aspects of the contemporary city: "The final mission of the city is to further man's conscious participation in the cosmic and the historic process. Through its own complex and enduring structure, the city vastly augments man's ability to interpret these processes and take an active, formative part in them, so that every phase of the drama it stages shall have, to the highest degree possible, the illumination of consciousness, the stamp of purpose, the color of love. That magnification of all the dimensions of life, through emotional communion, rational communication, technological mastery, and above all, dramatic representation, has been the supreme office of the city in history. And it remains the chief reason for the city's continued existence" (Mumford 1961, 576).
3. I have modified the choice of verb in the English translation to avoid misunderstanding. The French original has the following phrasing: "des structures urbaines ou architecturales saturantes, non transformables, soustraites à une sorte de grammaire flexible." The published translation chose to render "soustraite à" by "tied to," which is misleading.
4. Gordon Matta-Clark, letter to Wolfgang (unidentified last name), September 8, 1975, PHCON2002:0016:003-126, Gordon Matta-Clark archives, The Canadian Center for Architecture, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. © Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark. The question of how art and urban planning can be articulated is an urgent one. Very few such discussions exist. A recent example that examines the meanings of land use in art and how "art can spur more nuanced ways of thinking about and interacting with the land" can be found in Scott and Swenson (2015, 1).

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# INDEX

## A

- Aberley, Doug, 229
- Acconci, Vito Hannibal, 2–4, 7–10, 14, 34, 41, 46–48, 51, 79, 80, 83, 86, 87, 91–125, 138, 171, 183, 190, 207, 238, 240–242
- Acconci Studio, 92, 117
- The American Gift*, 115–117
- Asylums*, 110
- Broadjump*, 108
- Channel*, 117
- Claim*, 107, 108, 124
- “Contacts/Contexts (Frame of reference): ten pages of reading *Roget’s Thesaurus*”, 96
- Following Piece*, 14, 100, 102–105, 107–112, 124, 125, 207, 238, 240
- “Home-Bodies. An Introduction to My Work. 1984–1985”, 117
- Instant House*, 118
- Learning Piece*, 117
- Memory Box III*, 115
- Mobile Home*, 119
- “Notes on My Photographs. 1969–1970”, 117
- “Notes on Work. 1967–1970”, 95, 100
- “Performance After the Fact”, 92, 105, 113
- “Projections of Home”, 102, 118, 122
- Proximity Piece*, 107, 124
- “Public Space in a Private Time”, 104
- The Red Tapes*, 115, 117
- “Removal/Move”, 99, 123
- Room Piece*, 112
- Security Zone*, 108
- Seedbed*, 107
- “Set/Reset” series, 97–99
- Service Area*, 113
- The Star-Spangled Banner*, 119, 121
- Step Piece*, 113
- Sub-Urb*, 108, 120
- “Transference: The Right Boundary of a Road Map”, 97
- “Transference” series, 96

- Under-History Lessons*, 108, 117  
*Untitled Project for Pier 17*, 108  
*Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway)*, 113
- Adams, Henry, 235  
 Adams, Paul, 210  
 Addison, Joseph, 30  
 Aldiss, Brian W., 130  
 Alighieri, Dante, 64, 143  
 Amin, Ash, 10  
 Arakawa, Shusaku, 123  
 Arias, Santa, 19  
 Artaud, Antonin, 70, 79, 80, 86  
 Attlee, James, 167, 198  
 Aubert, Danielle, 228  
 Augustine (Saint), 94  
 Ault, Julie, 198  
 Auster, Paul, 24
- B**
- Bacon, Francis, 148, 149  
 Bacon, Mardges, 199  
 Baldessari, John, 165  
 Ballon, Hilary, 99, 173  
 Balzac, Honoré de, 43  
 Banes, Sally, 86  
 Basualdo, Carlos, 230  
 Bataille, Georges, 169, 170  
 Baudelaire, Charles, 4, 9, 12, 24, 26–29, 35, 37, 39, 49, 50, 63, 66, 67, 112, 241  
 Baudrillard, Jean, 34  
 Baum, Kelly, 14, 136  
 Beckett, Samuel, 34, 70, 92, 102, 159  
 Beccroft, Vanessa, 52  
 Bellow, Saul, 169  
 Benesch, Klaus, 230  
 Benito, Jesus, 8, 19  
 Benjamin, Walter, 9, 12, 24, 27–32, 35, 37, 46, 50, 51, 63, 66, 67, 113, 125, 214, 224, 240, 241
- Benveniste, Émile, 221  
 Berman, Marshall, 28, 39  
 Besse, Jean-Marc, 226  
 Bishop, Claire, 47, 52  
 Blake, William, 143, 145  
 Blanchot, Maurice, 46  
 Boettger, Suzaan, 158  
 Boiffard, Jacques-André, 44  
 Bois, Yve-Alain, 124, 169, 182, 198, 199  
 Borges, Jorge Luis, 148, 149, 151, 160, 175, 211, 214  
 Bosch, Hieronymus, 143  
 Boulez, Pierre, 86  
 Bourriaud, Nicolas, 18, 47, 52, 230  
 Bradbury, Malcolm, 15, 146  
 Bradford, Martin D., 109  
 Brancusi, Constantin, 125  
 Brand, Dana, 28, 30, 50  
 Brantz, Dorothee, 18  
 Brayer, Marie-Ange, 6, 18  
 Brayshaw, Teresa, 198  
 Brecht, George, 63  
 Breton, André, 40, 44, 46  
 Bridge, Gary, 220  
 Broqua, Vincent, 198  
 Brossard, Olivier, 18  
 Brotchie, Alastair, 124, 192  
 Brown, Robert, 86  
 Brown, Trisha, 170, 198  
 Bruno, Giuliana, 210, 217, 224, 229  
 Brus, Günter, 34  
 Buchloh, Benjamin, 51  
 Buci-Glucksmann, Christine, 217  
 Buckingham, Matthew, 8, 12, 24, 29–39, 46, 48, 50, 51, 207, 240, 241  
*A Man of the Crowd*, 12, 23, 24, 33, 35, 36, 38, 50, 51, 207, 240  
*Amos Fortune Road*, 50  
*Definition*, 50  
 “Location notes”, 51  
*Mubbeahkantuck; Everything Has a Name*, 50

*Obscure Moorings*, 50  
*Subcutaneous*, 50  
*Traffic Report*, 50  
 Buell, Lawrence, 17  
 Buffèt, Laurent, 49  
 Bunn, Charles, 140  
 Burroughs, William S., 146, 147  
 Burton, Scott, 123  
 Bussard, Katherine A., 18  
 Byer, Robert H., 50

**C**

Cage, John, 63, 72, 74, 81, 85, 86  
 Calle, Sophie, 34, 124  
 Calvey, David, 124  
 Calvino, Italo, 17, 214, 215, 228,  
 229, 236, 237, 241  
 Canetti, Elias, 34  
 Cantalupo, Barbara, 49  
 Careri, Francesco, 49  
 Carlinsky, Dan, 173  
 Caron, Mona, 228  
 Carroll, Lewis, 100, 165  
 Carver, Beci, 179  
 Casey, Edward S., 35, 229  
 Cattelan, Maurizio, 52  
 Celant, Germano, 186, 187, 199  
 Céline, Louis-Ferdinand, 70  
 Certeau, Michel de, 208, 212, 214,  
 224, 226, 228  
 Christo, 86  
 Cochoy, Nathalie, 8, 19  
 Cocker, Emma, 49, 125  
 Cohn, David, 184  
 Cole, Thomas, 199  
 Connolly, Emmet, 229  
 Conrad, Peter, 124  
 Cooke, Lynne, 18, 198  
 Corbett, David Peters, 18  
 Cosgrove, Denis, 7  
 Costa, Eduardo, 123

Crampton, Jeremy W., 230  
 Crary, Jonathan, 49  
 Cravan, Arthur, 40  
 Crawford, Jane, 166, 168, 174, 175,  
 178, 189, 199  
 Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St John de, 235  
 Crimp, Douglas, 18, 198  
 Crow, Thomas, 85, 164, 186  
 Culler, Jonathan, 212

**D**

Darroch, Michael, 19  
 Dassin, Jules, 44, 52  
 Daston, Lorraine, 215, 225  
 Davidovich, Jaime, 173, 181  
 Davidson, Michael, 26  
 Davila, Thierry, 49  
 Dean, Tacita, 50  
 Debord, Guy, 17, 40, 44, 47, 52  
 Deleuze, Gilles, 5, 17, 213, 222,  
 223  
 Deligny, Fernand, 82  
 Dell, Simon, 157  
 Del Lungo, Andrea, 51  
 Delpoux, Sophie, 61  
 Derrida, Jacques, 237  
 Deutsche, Rosalyn, 199  
 Dewey, John, 61, 235  
 Dezeuze, Anna, 198  
 Dickens, Charles, 30, 35  
 Didi-Huberman, Georges, 226  
 Dine, Jim, 68, 80  
 Dion, Mark, 45  
 Diserens, Corinne, 165, 196  
 D'Ignazio, Catherine (kanarinka), 42  
 Doane, Mary Ann, 101  
 Donald, James, 4  
 Dreiser, Theodore, 235  
 Dryansky, Larisa, 7, 139, 140  
 Duchamp, Alexina ("Teeny"), 166,  
 167

Duchamp, Marcel, 74, 82, 166, 174,  
186, 189, 190, 200  
Dworkin, Craig, 8, 94, 95, 122, 123

**E**

Eisenman, Peter, 183, 184  
Eliot, T.S., 66, 95, 121, 143  
Ely, John Wilton, 197  
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 235  
Eshleman, Clayton, 96  
Evans, David, 49

**F**

Faulkner, William, 73, 175, 178  
Fer, Briony, 198  
Fisher, Norman, 174  
Fluxus, 7, 13, 59, 80, 82–84, 87  
Folsom, David E., 153  
Foster, Hal, 50–52  
Foucault, Michel, 7  
Fox, Terry, 102  
Foy (Saint), 218  
Franklin, Benjamin, 235  
Freud, Sigmund, 37  
Fried, Michael, 122, 138, 158

**G**

Gablik, Suzy, 230  
Galison, Peter, 215, 225  
Garbo, Greta, 28  
Genette, Gérard, 40  
Gillick, Liam, 52  
Gilloch, Graeme, 50, 51  
Gilman, Sarah, 229  
Gilpin, William, 158  
Giotto di Bondone, 146  
Girouard, Tina, 174  
Glimcher, Mildred L., 64, 85  
Glowlab, 4, 8, 10, 12, 207, 239–241

*Following the “Man of the Crowd”*,  
39–47, 207

Gluck, Maria, 25  
Godfrey, Mark, 31, 50, 51  
Goffman, Erving, 14, 87, 106–108,  
110, 124, 241  
Goldsmith, Kenneth, 51, 63, 123, 241  
Gómez-Peña, Guillermo, 219, 220  
Gooden, Carol, 170, 174, 185, 196,  
197, 200  
Gooding, Mel, 124, 192  
Goodman, Nelson, 5  
Graham, Dan, 37, 38, 51, 119, 136,  
182  
Graves, Michael, 184  
Greenberg, Clement, 93, 100, 122  
Grimshaw, Jeremy, 81, 82  
Guattari, Félix, 5, 17, 213, 222, 223  
Gurdjieff, Georges, 197  
Gwathmey, Charles, 184

**H**

Haacke, Hans, 199  
Hall, Edward T., 106  
Hannoosh, Michele, 49  
Hansen, Al, 63  
Harley, Brian, 208, 209, 226  
Harmon, Katherine, 18, 228, 230  
Harrington, Sheila, 229  
Harris, David, 229  
Harvey, David, 222  
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 23, 146, 199,  
235  
Hayden, Dolores, 230  
Hayes, Kevin J., 49  
Hecht, Manfred, 171  
Heidegger, Martin, 222, 229  
Heiss, Alanna, 171  
Hejduk, John, 184  
Hemingway, Ernest, 73  
Hertzberg, Lars, 122

Higgins, Dick, 13, 63  
 Higgins, Hannah B., 63, 83, 86, 87, 199  
 Hill, Christine, 52  
 Hinderliter, Beth, 52  
 Hitchcock, Alfred, 212, 216–218  
 Hochdörfer, Achim, 69, 70, 86  
 Hoffmann, Hans, 60  
 Hoffmann, Jens, 51  
 Höller, Carsten, 52  
 Hollevoet, Christel, 49, 50  
 Hollier, Denis, 170  
 Holt, Nancy, 132, 136, 145–147, 159  
 Howells, William Dean, 235  
 Huebler, Douglas, 123  
 Hulme, T.E., 143  
 Huyghe, Pierre, 52

I

Imhoff, Aliocha, 18  
 Irwin, William, 35  
 Isenberg, Alison, 9  
 Izenour, Steven, 120, 121

J

Jackson, Betsy, 103  
 Jackson, Martha, 65  
 Jackson, Shelley, 97, 101  
 Jacob, Christian, 6, 216, 225  
 Jacob, Mary Jane, 165, 184, 185, 197, 200  
 Jacobs, Jane, 9, 168  
 James, Henry, 146, 169, 198  
 James, William, 235  
 Janis, Sidney, 65  
 Jeanne-Claude, 86  
 Jefferson, Thomas, 1, 235  
 Jelly-Schapiro, Joshua, 158, 228  
 Jerome (Saint), 143  
 Johninke, Rebecca, 49

John Climacus (Saint), 149  
 John of the Cross (Saint), 143, 144  
 Jonas, Joan, 136  
 Jones, Caroline A., 147, 157, 159  
 Joyce, James, 73, 75, 92, 121, 122  
 Judd, Donald, 140, 141, 157  
 Jung, Carl Gustav, 197

## K

Kaiser, Philipp, 134  
 Kaprow, Allan, 2, 4, 13, 39, 59–65, 70–80, 85–87, 125, 132, 136, 158, 238, 239, 241  
*The Apple Shrine*, 75  
*Calling*, 13, 76, 78–80, 86, 87, 241  
 “Education of the Un-Artist, Part I”, 85  
*18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 85  
 “The Happenings are Dead, Long Live the Happenings!”, 64, 76  
 “Happenings in the New York Scene”, 62, 65, 73, 86  
 “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock”, 60, 65  
 “Manifesto”, 62  
 “Participation Performance”, 87  
 “The Shape of the Art Environment”, 62, 64, 75  
*Sweet Wall*, 125  
*Words*, 13, 65, 70, 71, 74, 75, 239, 241  
 Kastner, Jeffrey, 174, 175, 180  
 Kauffmann, Vincent, 40, 43, 44  
 Kawara, On, 123  
 Keaton, Buster, 34  
 Kelley, Jeff, 71, 74, 75  
 Kerouac, Jack, 11  
 Kester, Grant, 230  
 Ketelhodt, Ines von, 228  
 Kirby, Michael, 86  
 Kirshner, Judith Russi, 165

Klee, Paul, 63, 182  
 Klett, Mark, 228  
 Klüver, Billy, 65  
 Knowles, Alison, 86  
 Koolhaas, Rem, 199  
 Korzybski, Alfred, 5  
 Kostelanetz, Richard, 198  
 Kotz, Liz, 96, 124  
 Krauss, Rosalind, 16, 51, 111, 169, 182, 198  
 Krygier, John, 230  
 Kwon, Miwon, 36, 45, 51, 52, 134, 208, 222–224, 229, 230, 240

**L**

La Bruyère, Jean de, 35  
 Laddaga, Reinaldo, 230  
 Lambert-Beatty, Carrie, 109  
 Lampe, Angela, 199  
 Le Corbusier, 166, 179, 184, 199  
 Leddy, Annette, 80  
 Lee, Pamela, 164, 167, 175, 197  
 Lefebvre, Henri, 17, 164, 197, 214  
 Le Feuvre, Lisa, 167  
 Lejeune, Anaël, 132, 160  
 Lendenfrost, Robert, 187, 196, 200  
 Lennon, John, 84  
 Le Penven, Françoise, 190  
 Lester, George, 143, 144  
 Levine, Les, 123  
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 182  
 Lew, Jeffrey, 174  
 Lewin, Kurt, 106  
 Lewis, G. Malcolm, 227  
 Lewis, Wyndham, 143  
 Le Witt, Sol, 183  
 Linker, Kate, 104, 123  
 Lippard, Lucy R., 123, 222–224, 229, 230  
 Lomas, David, 198  
 Lopez, Barry, 211

Lorrain, Claude, 40  
 Lynch, Kevin, 46, 135, 160  
 Lyotard, François, 227

**M**

Maciunas, George, 81, 82, 239  
 Mac Low, Jackson, 63, 74, 81  
 Malevich, Kasimir, 182  
 Malutzki, Peter, 228  
 Manet, Édouard, 49  
 Manolescu, Monica, 18, 198  
 Man Ray, 44  
 Manzanas, Ana, 8, 19  
 Marchessault, Janine, 19  
 Marco Polo, 214, 215, 229  
 Marx, Leo, 236, 243  
 Massey, Doreen, 228, 230  
 Matta-Clark, Gordon, 2–4, 7–9, 11, 15, 16, 86, 107, 120, 125, 136, 138, 163–175, 177–201, 207, 237, 238, 241, 243  
 Architecture, 163, 165, 174, 186–188, 191, 196, 200, 201  
*Arc de Triomphe for Workers*, 164  
*Art Cards*, 167, 171, 186, 189–191, 195, 201  
*Beebe Lake Ice Cut*, 197  
*Bingo*, 183, 198  
*Cherry Tree*, 172  
*Chinatown Voyeur*, 170, 199  
*Circus-The Carribean Orange*, 198  
*City Slivers*, 170, 199  
*Conical Intersect*, 198  
*Day's End*, 164, 181, 188, 237  
*Fire Child*, 86  
*Fresh Air Cart*, 197  
*Fresh Kill*, 86  
*Gallery Transplant*, 197  
*Hair*, 185  
*Hammer and Sycle*, 192  
*Jacob's Ladder*, 170

- Memorial for Marcel Duchamp*, 186  
*Museum*, 164, 197  
*Reality Properties. Fake Estates*,  
 15, 16, 138, 156, 167, 168,  
 170–175, 178–181, 183, 185,  
 186, 189, 191, 192, 194–196,  
 198, 199, 207, 241  
*Rope Bridge*, 170  
*Sky Hook (studies for a balloon build-  
 ing)*, 170  
*Sous-sols de Paris*, 170, 198  
*Splitting*, 198  
*Substrait. Underground Dailies*,  
 120, 170  
*Tree Dance*, 170, 201  
*Window Blow-Out*, 183, 185, 199  
 “Notebook with *Automation House*,  
*Tree Dance*, *A W-Hole House*,  
*Anarchitecture*”, 201  
 Matta Echaurren, Roberto, 192, 193,  
 197  
 Mayakovsky, Vladimir, 47  
 Mayer, Bernadette, 123  
 McDonough, Tom, 44, 50, 51, 124,  
 125  
 McGarrigle, Conor, 40, 49  
 McNamara, Kevin R., 8, 18, 19, 52  
 Mead, George Herbert, 106  
 Meier, Richard, 184  
 Melville, Herman, 23, 50, 117, 123,  
 235  
 Mercator, Gerardus, 225  
 Merivale, Patricia, 50  
 Meyer, James, 45, 52  
 Meyer, Richard, 29  
 Michelangelo, 64  
 Milton, John, 190  
 Mitchell, William J., 42  
 Mondrian, Piet, 182  
 Möntmann, Nina, 52  
 Moore, Peter, 86  
 Morris, Robert, 116  
 Moses, Robert, 9, 168  
 Moure, Gloria, 124, 167  
 Muller, Jan, 60  
 Mumford, Lewis, 160, 243  
 Muschinski, Pat, 69  
 Muybridge, Eadweard, 212, 216, 217,  
 229  
 Myers, Julian D., 158
- N**  
 Nabokov, Vladimir, 11, 179  
 Nancy, Jean-Luc, 52  
 Nesci, Catherine, 50  
 Norberg-Schulz, Christian, 229  
 Norris, Frank, 235  
 Noyes, John K., 229  
 Nye, Timothy, 49
- O**  
 Obrist, Hans Ulrich, 18  
 Oettermann, Stephan, 229  
 Oldenburg, Claes, 4, 10, 13, 59,  
 65–71, 74, 75, 80, 86, 132, 182,  
 238, 241  
 “Observed Fragments”, 66  
 “Residual Objects”, 65  
*Snapshots from the City*, 13, 68–70,  
 80, 86, 241  
*The Store*, 13, 67  
*The Street*, 13, 65–67, 69–71, 74,  
 86, 238, 241  
 Olmsted, Frederick Law, 134, 153,  
 158  
 Olson, Charles, 117  
 Ono, Yoko, 13, 34, 81, 84, 85, 238  
 Oppenheim, Dennis, 184, 197  
 Orczy, Emma (Baroness), 74  
 Orvell, Miles, 230  
 Otero-Pailos, Jorge, 229  
 Otto, Rudolf, 218

Owens, Craig, 155, 160  
 Owens, Gwendolyn, 190  
 O'Rourke, Karen, 49

**P**

Paik, Nam June, 81  
 Paracelsus, 164  
 Pardo, Jorge, 52  
 Parreno, Phillippe, 52  
 Parsons, Deborah L., 49  
 Patterson, Benjamin, 10, 13, 81, 83, 84  
 Pease, Ben, 219  
 Pensky, Max, 51  
 Perloff, Marjorie, 122  
 Perreault, John, 123  
 Phillips, Patricia C., 18  
 Pile, Steve, 228  
 Pinder, David, 228, 230  
 Pink, Sarah, 49  
 Piper, Adrian, 34  
 Piranesi, Giovanni Battista, 40, 165  
 Plath, Carina, 51  
 Poe, Edgar Allan, 2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14,  
 19, 23–25, 28–30, 32–35, 37–46,  
 48–50, 59, 63, 67, 79, 80, 111,  
 112, 235, 236, 238–240, 242  
 “The Man of the Crowd”, 2, 11, 12,  
 14, 111, 112, 235, 239, 240  
 Poggi, Christine, 92  
 Poirier, Richard, 121  
 Pollin, Burton R., 49  
 Pollock, Jackson, 60–63, 65, 85, 182,  
 197  
 Pound, Ezra, 92, 95, 143  
 Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, 175  
 Price, Uvedale, 158  
 Prince, Richard, 101, 109, 114, 123

**Q**

Quiros, Kantuta, 18

**R**

Rachel, Vaughan, 86  
 Rachleff, Melissa, 18  
 Rachman, Stephen, 30, 50  
 Rainer, Yvonne, 109  
 Rancière, Jacques, 52  
 Rauschenberg, Robert, 82  
 Ray, Christina, 12, 39–42, 51  
 Ray, Man, 180, 199  
 Ray Gun, 65, 68, 74  
 Reed, Carol, 34  
 Reff, Theodore, 49  
 Reichert, Gina, 228  
 Rembrandt, 82  
 Restany, Pierre, 65  
 Reynolds, Ann, 132, 158–160, 197  
 Richard, Frances, 8, 189  
 Richter, Gerhard, 51  
 Roberts, Jennifer, 131, 133, 139, 144,  
 151, 157, 159  
 Rodenbeck, Judith F., 70  
 Rosati, Lauren, 198  
 Rousseau, Bryant, 114  
 Rowe, Colin, 183, 199  
 Rubin, Anita, 71  
 Ruscha, Ed, 179  
 Ruskin, John, 153

**S**

Sadler, Simon, 44, 52  
 Samaras, Lucas, 69  
 Sandford, Mariellen, 86  
 Sandweiss, Eric, 229  
 Sanouillet, Michel, 200  
 Santayana, George, 235  
 Scheidemann, Christian, 198  
 Schimmel, Paul, 60, 63  
 Schneider, Alan, 34  
 Scott, Emily Eliza, 157, 243  
 Scott Brown, Denise, 120, 121  
 Scudéry, Madeleine de, 212

- Segal, George, 60, 76, 77, 79, 136  
 Shannon, Joshua, 65, 69, 70, 86  
 Sharpe, William C., 8, 19, 30, 49, 124  
 Sharr, Adam, 229  
 Shaw, Lytle, 8, 15, 18, 133, 157, 160, 198, 214, 240  
 Sheringham, Michael, 46  
 Shkuda, Aaron, 169, 188, 198  
 Simmel, Georg, 12, 39  
 Simpson, Charles R., 198  
 Slutzky, Robert, 199  
 Smith, Tony, 116, 136, 137, 139, 178  
 Smithson, Robert, 2, 4, 7–11, 14, 15, 19, 95, 107, 119, 120, 129–153, 155–160, 169, 171, 175, 180–182, 185, 197, 207, 228, 238, 241  
*A Heap of Language*, 95, 155  
*Alogon* #2, 141  
*Alogon*, 141  
 “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art”, 120  
 “A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites”, 132  
 “The Artist as Site-Seer”, 141, 158  
*Asphalt Rundown*, 141, 149  
 “The Crystal Land”, 15, 119, 140  
 “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape”, 15, 134, 153  
*Hotel Palenque*, 131, 152  
 “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan”, 157  
 “The Iconography of Desolation”, 146  
 “Monuments of Passaic”, 14, 15, 129, 130, 134, 137, 141, 142, 150, 154, 155, 157, 169, 207, 238, 241  
*Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River*, 130, 141  
*Non-Site: Line of Wreckage (Bayonne, New Jersey)*, 136  
 “Pointless Vanishing Points”, 141, 149  
*Pointless Vanishing Point*, 141  
*Sketch for Mirrored Ziggurat*, 139  
*The Spiral Jetty*, 142, 143, 155, 158–160  
 “To the Dead Angel”, 143, 144, 159  
 “To the Flayed Angels”, 144, 159  
 “To the Man of Ashes”, 144  
 “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site”, 156, 158  
 “Two Attitudes Toward the City”, 154  
 “Ultramoderne”, 15, 149–152, 160  
*Upside Down Trees*, 120  
 Smudge, George, 197  
 Solnit, Rebecca, 7–9, 158, 207, 209, 210, 212–221, 228, 229, 238, 240, 241  
*Infinite City. A San Francisco Atlas*, 2, 5, 16, 17, 207, 209, 210, 212–216, 218, 222–227, 229, 230, 240  
*Nonstop Metropolis. A New York City Atlas*, 5  
*Unfathomable City. A New Orleans Atlas*, 5  
 Spector, Nancy, 175  
 Staniszewski, Mary Anne, 198  
 Stein, Gertrude, 92  
 Stern, Robert A.M., 198  
 Stevenson, Judi, 229  
 Stevenson, Robert Louis, 100  
 Still, Clyfford, 74  
 Stoichita, Victor I., 51  
 Storr, Robert, 6, 18  
 Strider, Marjorie, 123  
 Sweeney, Susan Elizabeth, 50  
 Swenson, Kirsten, 243

## T

Tally Jr., Robert T., 228, 240  
 Taylor, Mark C., 93, 95, 105, 107, 116  
 Templeton, Fiona, 123  
 Terroni, Cristelle, 198  
 Tester, Keith, 28  
 Thomas, Levin Y., 124  
 Thoreau, Henry David, 158, 214  
 Thrift, Nigel, 10, 228  
 Tiberghien, Gilles A., 5, 6, 61, 159, 228  
 Tiravanija, Rirkrit, 52  
 Tsai, Eugenie, 159  
 Tuan, Yi-Fu, 210, 229  
 Tuchman, Phyllis, 136, 158

## U

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman, 18  
 Ursprung, Philip, 79, 86

## V

Vaché, Jacques, 40  
 Vanderbeek, Stan, 86  
 Van Vankelburgh, Michael, 228  
 Vautier, Ben, 82  
 Venturi, Robert, 120–122  
 Vidler, Anthony, 120, 199  
 Vidor, King, 34  
 Vietnam War, 109

## W

Wagner, Anne, 38, 123  
 Wagstaff, Samuel, 136  
 Walker, Ian, 51, 199  
 Walker, Stephen, 197, 199  
 Wall, Donald, 167, 196

Wallis, Brian, 157  
 Wallock, Leonard, 49  
 Walton, Lee, 12, 41, 42  
 Warburg, Aby, 17, 225, 226  
 Ward, Frazer, 113, 123  
 Warf, Barney, 19  
 Warhol, Andy, 151  
 Waspe, Roland, 51  
 Watten, Barrett, 160  
 Waxman, Lori, 49, 82, 239  
 Weegee (Arthur Fellig), 44, 52  
 Weiner, Hannah, 123  
 Weiner, Lawrence, 198  
 Wheeler, Dennis, 159  
 White, Lucia, 1, 235  
 White, Morton Gabriel, 1, 235, 236  
 Whiting, Cécile, 125  
 Whitman, Robert, 60, 80  
 Whitman, Walt, 178, 220, 235  
 Whyte, William H., 160  
 Wiegand, Charmion von, 199  
 Wigley, Mark, 201  
 Williams, William Carlos, 15, 155, 157  
 Williamson, Dominica, 229  
 Wilson, Jane, 60  
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 94, 122  
 Wolfe, Byron, 228  
 Wollen, Peter, 123  
 Wood, Denis, 5, 123  
 Woolf, Virginia, 73  
 Worringer, Wilhelm, 140  
 Wright, Frank Lloyd, 1, 154, 235  
 Wrigley, Richard, 50

## Y

Young, La Monte, 13, 63, 81–83, 239