

The image shows a corner of a brick building. On the left, there is a large, arched window with a decorative stone lintel. Below the window is a smaller, square window with a decorative stone surround. The building is made of dark red brick with light-colored stone accents. On the right side of the building, there is a large mural painted on the wall. The mural features a dark, abstract shape with a rainbow-like glow around it. The sky in the mural is a mix of blue and white. The overall scene is a blend of traditional architecture and modern art.

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Art and the City

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Vol. 1, No. 3 (2012) **Art and the City**

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Introduction

Mandy–Suzanne Wong
Joanna Demers

For now, you are nothing more or less than a *flâneur*.

It's tempting to offer such luxurious counsel to readers of this issue, the third issue of *Evental Aesthetics* and our last for 2012. A *flâneur* is a sort of person that we are perhaps most likely to associate with Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's work does not explicitly feature in the pages that follow, but the approach to urban realms that he deemed characteristic of *flâneurs* might indeed be useful to those readers who journey from the heart of Manhattan to Singapore and Brazilian shantytowns, via Paris, the suburbs of Los Angeles, and Lagos, guided by our contributors. It might even seem that some wish for a bit of *flânerie* guided the editors to this theme, *Art and the City*. It might seem that our aim is to entice city-dwellers and visitors to take the time to wander urban spaces in search of nothing in particular, except perhaps the insight – enlightening, disturbing, or both – that sometimes attends the experience of art, in this case art inspired or on offer by the city.

Who is Benjamin's *flâneur*? He is a wanderer for whom the city comes alive. The place through which he passes deep in reverie, at the tempo of a tortoise, becomes more for the *flâneur* than what it is.¹ It is at once far away and hyperpresent; he is in the city and in some long ago time; his experience is that of abstract thought and of his multiple senses. His perspective is piercing and distracted.

At the approach of his footsteps, the place has roused; speechlessly, mindlessly, its mere intimate nearness gives him hints and instructions... Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room... That anamnestic intoxication in which the *flâneur* goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge — indeed, of dead facts — as something experienced and lived through.²

We might also say that the perspective *du flâneur* is conscious, self-conscious, and unconscious; or that it is at once analytical and inattentive, bent on pleasure — reflective, self-reflective, unreflective all at once.

Why don't we simply say that the *flâneur's* experience of the city and urban life is an aesthetic experience?

Most famously developed by [Charles] Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is the casual, often aimless urban roamer, who leisurely ambles through the city streets. Unlike his counterpart, the thoroughly modern man who passes by in his routinized hurry, the *flâneur* takes up a new stance to the world he passes through. He embodies a simultaneous attitude of detachment and involvement, disengaging himself from the crowds and humdrum street life, yet nonetheless engages from a distance, gazing and probing his surroundings. This curious perspective, [Howard] Eiland notes, enables the *flâneur* to take up a position that permits a privileged mode of experience, one that poises him to consciously register many of the overlooked textures of modern life. For Benjamin, who brought together a wide range of seemingly disparate influences to inform this idiosyncratic conception of experience — Baudelaire, Freud, Bergson, and surrealism, to name a few — it is an intensely heightened kind of receptivity. It is a transformed experience of both space and time that has been shaken loose from deadened habit, and which has become open to the disclosure of deeper truths about both the past and the historical embeddedness of our social, cultural, and political present.³

In Michael Bacal's account above, the *flâneur's* perspective could be likened to that of an attentive visitor to an art museum (slow-moving, index finger pressed lightly to cheek), or a wide-eyed reader of a weighty, classic tome: one wanders the city not in pursuit of an appointment, a parking space, new shoes, but a "heightened kind of receptivity...that has been shaken loose from deadened habit, and which has become open to the disclosure of deeper truths..."⁴

"The disclosure of deeper truths."

Our contributors demonstrate how art in the city, art "about" the city, art compared to the city, can indeed bring to attention the insidious forces underlying every city's gleaming, wide-awake veneer.

Louis Ho and Mayee Wong (no relation to Mandy-Suzanne) discuss how the work of SKLO, the "Sticker Lady" of Singapore, challenges the claim that street art is a form of vandalism, a postulation that has brought SKLO into several direct conflicts with Singapore's conservative authorities. At the same time, SKLO's defenders in the Singaporean media compare her to the American street artist Banksy, a shadowy figure whose works fetch extraordinary prices on the global art market. As Ho and Wong suggest, underlying Singapore's ambivalent reception of SKLO is a confused set of ideological priorities. Is Singapore best served by the stringent aesthetic protection of its streets, or by an artist who might put the city-state on the map alongside other major players in the art market?

From a vastly different perspective, and across the Pacific Ocean, Alan Nakano describes the sonic, visual, and online installations of Inouk Demers, a Canadian-American artist based in California's South Bay. Demers' work subtly calls attention to what Nakano calls "the incidental," those details of a place, or of its history, that typically pass unnoticed. But to make the (keen but well-worn) argument that the "truth" about a situation lies in its obscure details is the prerogative of neither Nakano nor Demers. Rather, Demers' work implies – suggestively but unassumingly – that the proliferation of "incidental" sounds, coincidences, images, and happenstances in every environment precludes any insistence on any particular truth.

According to object-oriented ontology (OOO), such ambiguity is not just a quality of a place, but, in the words of Kris Coffield, "an agential act committed within a particular set of relations and topological deformations." Acts and events are themselves not only occurrences but

also objects. Even signifiers and terms are as much agential objects as they are affective occurrences. Within the framework of OOO, Coffield interprets New York City's controversial 9/11 Memorial in relation to the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City (the event known as "9/11" and its aftermath) and the signifying term "9/11." His perspective, which grants all three phenomena the multiple and fluid ontologies promised by OOO, reveals how the 9/11 Memorial simultaneously endorses and subverts ideological myths – concerning unbridgeable difference, an incurable, nationwide wound, and revenge masquerading as security – that pervade American politics and culture in the new millennium.

The varied perspectives of our contributors differ from that of the *flâneur* in at least one important sense: they are far from "leisurely." Instead, they incisively question. So it's fitting that this issue also includes reflections on perspective itself, on how we may interact with art and the city. Self-reflection, in other words. Our contributors suggest idiosyncratic ways in which audiences or visitors may approach artistic representations of a city, or even the city itself: thoughtful approaches that encourage more sensitive relationships with the world we live in, and with the very notion of *place*.

At a time when studies of non-Western peoples still insist on "fieldwork," "from-the-trenches" perspectives that are inevitably invasive to the subjects under consideration, Carol Magee bravely proposes a "distanced" approach to distant art. From such perspective, and a distance of several thousand miles, she analyzes photographs and sound art by, respectively, Abraham Oghobase and Emeka Ogboh, both of Lagos, Nigeria. Following Martin Heidegger's and Jeff Malpas' philosophies of place, she proposes that stillness and distance – which may manifest in several ways – may not necessarily hinder interpretations of faraway art, but in some cases might just enhance our sensitivity towards those who are unlike ourselves.

Ljubica Ilic interrogates listening as a potential avenue towards productive and sensitive co-existence. Analyzing Claude Chabrol's short film *La Mulette*, Ilic notes the characters' participation, and lack thereof, in listening and communication. Comparing Chabrol's film to the *Eclogues* of Virgil, who equates sound with freedom, she assesses the functions of listening and sound in Chabrol's urban (Parisian) setting, as compared to the same in Virgil's "pastoral" setting. From this analysis, she extrapolates a "post-pastoral" perspective that attempts to elide the questionable yet loudly lamented rift between "nature" and "culture."

In an entirely different vein, Diana Boros uses an artistic thought-experiment to consider how a Western city-dweller might be persuaded to alter his or her perspective on his or her urban environment. In Manhattan, for example, Boros finds that most inhabitants hurry through the city without noticing it, intent instead on their personal agendas, typically motivated by the materialistic success promised by the capitalist system. She speculates as to whether music idiosyncratically inserted into public environments, in the form of what she calls "musical-intervention art," might just encourage urban dwellers to look up from their agendas, and engage with non-materialistic aspects of their own and others' personalities. Interestingly, Boros' hypothetical artwork aims to tempt urbanites away (if only momentarily) from their habitual, typically consumerism-driven perspectives, *using* the aesthetic techniques of commercial advertising: invading the public environment with deliberately chosen music.

Finally, David Goldblatt wonders if we might approach the city itself, at least certain of its architectural structures, in a manner similar to how we listen to music. Comparing the creative processes involved in "straight-ahead" Western jazz to the construction of Brazilian *favelas*, he finds that the constructive processes that result in shantytowns are comparable to musical improvisation. Drawing on philosophies of improvisation by Philip Alperson, David Davies, and many others, Goldblatt proposes that architecture and the city might be best considered not only as "final products," or collections of fixed structures within and around which we perform our roles as denizens, but also as performances and living processes in their own right.

So then: *flânerie* as a self-reflexive mode of questioning. But is even that enough? For the city wearied by recession, its beseeching eyes boarded up; for the completely artificial environment that fills the atmosphere with fumes, an environment constructed to feed ravenous ideologies and clamoring markets – things that give rise to wars and egg them on – is "heightened receptivity" enough of a reaction? Mere *response*, stickers, songs, dioramas, thoughts: what good is it, what help, what *use* is any of it? In the twenty-first century, philosophical considerations of the environments that we humans create and destroy cannot but brush up against this kind of question, even if it's only as we brush by a passing shadow.

But you see, our contributors emphasize and exercise the creativity involved in productive response. So that their responses no longer constitute mere reactions. Is it enough, to think and to create. For human beings, thought and creation are precisely that with which conscious change begins. And, as Benjamin points out, to wander the city, to be in a place reflective–unreflectively, is not necessarily to attempt to resolve oneself of one’s responsibility toward a place, one’s responsibility for its wounds and ornaments. The observer, the writer, the philosopher, does not absolve himself from anything by virtue of the deliberative and abstracted qualities of his perspective. Despite whatever distance a *flâneur* may claim from his bustling subject of observation, despite that as an author he may mask himself from his readers using descriptors and deductions of unquestionable accuracy, he remains “a true suspect,” and pretends to nothing less.⁵

• Notes •

¹ Benjamin writes, “In 1839 it was considered elegant to take a tortoise out walking. This gives us an idea of the tempo of *flânerie* in the arcades.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002), 422.

² *Ibid.*, 416-417.

³ Michael Bacal. “Walter Benjamin, the *Flâneur*, and Redemption.” *TELOSscope*, 29 November, 2011. http://www.telospress.com/main/index.php?main_page=news_article&article_id=485

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 420.

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