

# Nanna Debois Buhl: Street Haunting



*Night Map*, 2012, Slide installation, Dimensions variable

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)

# Nanna Debois Buhl: *Street Haunting*

September 19 - October 16, 2012

# Walking

Jen Kennedy

I'd like to be in a labyrinth with you.  
We already are.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the works in this exhibition is the trace of a walk, a collection of fragments from a different route at a different moment in time, but all beginning at the same point: the threshold between inside and out. Or, as Virginia Woolf describes in the essay from which this exhibition takes its title, they begin at the moment when "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughness a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye."<sup>2</sup> More than marking the boundary between private and public, our homes and the street, the threshold here signifies the often ambiguous passageway between our inner/psychic and outer/material, or social lives. Indeed, the walks Nanna Debois Buhl takes us on in the three works that make up *Street Haunting* are both concrete and imaginary, through cities and through literature, calling into question the stability, the veracity, of the distinctions between these terrains. As Woolf describes walking as shedding the figurative shell that separates individuals from the rest of the world, exposing us not only to new modes of perception but, in doing so, to new modes of being, Buhl imagines the walk as a process of subjective becoming; as we ramble through the streets, inevitably modifying (even if incrementally) the world around us with each step, we too are transformed.

The street permits bold gestures, experiments for the realization of desire.

The eponymous series of prints, *Street Haunting*, begins with a walk and a happenstance encounter. One day, when the artist was wandering through a New York neighborhood, she happened to find an envelope lying on the sidewalk. A year later, the

<sup>1</sup> This essay incorporates language from Michèle Bernstein's novel "La Nuit" (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1961) delineated in courier font.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" (1927), [New York and London: Penguin, 2005]

contents of this envelope, a series of photographs of a young woman standing in the plaza of a modern-looking building, sometimes posing, sometimes seemingly unaware of the camera, were given to five psychics along with a list of questions taken from a chapter on character development in a scriptwriting book. Each psychic was then asked to invent a character for this anonymous woman; a play on the premise of Woolf's essay of the same title in which she fabricates life stories for the people she passes while drifting through the streets of London late one winter afternoon. Like Woolf, the psychics imagine this anonymous woman's disposition and her background, they describe her relationships and her desires. *She is not a woman who walks alone at night. She is a tourist in the city where the picture was taken. She prefers to cross town on foot [...] She walks fast but enjoys the walk. She takes the subway or a cab only if absolutely necessary. In a certain way this girl is invisible.*

*In a certain way this girl is invisible.* Invisible how? Invisible to whom?

The mythology of the *flâneur* or *flâneuse*, the solitary urban wanderer, continues to conjure images of the city of strangers theorized by Georg Simmel at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> The *flâneur* walks without an itinerary, sees without being seen, is at home among the crowd where he is physically close to but intellectually and emotionally distant from the other bodies and everything else that occupies the street. (This relationship between proximity and separation is questioned by Buhl when she asks the psychics to tell her about the stranger in the photograph.) The *flâneur* is also, according to Walter Benjamin, a keen observer, a sort of anthropologist of the metropolis and expert in human nature with the unique capacity to ascertain the character and social rank of those that pass him by - ascertain or *imagine*, that is. In the phantasmagoria of the city, the relationship between perception and knowledge is always a tenuous one. For the Surrealists, avid urban

<sup>3</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Modern Life" (1903), *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (London: Blackwell, 2010), 103-110



*Street Haunting* (details), 2010, Prints on archival paper, 12 prints: 16 x 12 in. each

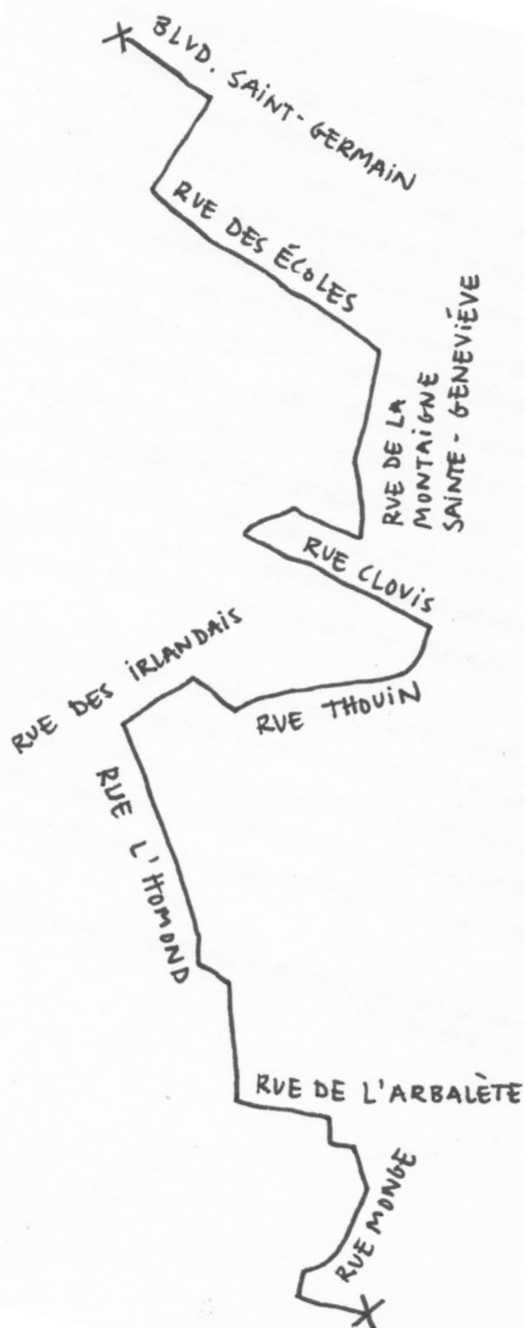
wanderers that they were, this slippage was interpreted as a portal to the unconscious. In *Street Haunting*, this tension - between the identifiable and the unknown, between the concrete and the imaginary, between the things we see and the things we imagine we see - is both the subject and the material of the works.

In other words, following Woolf, Buhl questions the flâneur's claim to distance and knowledge, focusing instead on the contingent, on the mutable connection between the subject's formation and her perception. Her emphasis is strongly on the power of the imaginary, or at the very least on the porousness of the boundaries between ourselves and the world around us. The all too often taken-for-granted activity of walking (to get from point A to B, as a leisure activity, as exercise, even as a potentially subversive act) becomes the catalyst for investigating this exchange.

Invoking the practice of psychogeography as it was described by the Situationist International in the 1950s and 60s, this exhibition is itself a sort of map, a compendium of the effects of geographical settings on the consciousness of the artist. Psychogeography is an attempt to articulate the unequal relationships between the different areas of a city and the comportment of the subjectivities who occupy these spaces, and is therefore based on the perhaps obvious hypothesis that different sites, places, and paths will affect the walker in different ways. Exploring and recording this uneven terrain should give insight to the ways in which urban development has consequences not only for the built environment, but alters the emotions and behaviors of the city's inhabitants and visitors too. *Street Haunting* is an experiment in mapping this psychological topology.

Walking is thus at once a way of using public space, of making that space, and of making and remaking ourselves. If space is an emporium of possibilities, the act of walking galvanizes

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these possibilities, and takes them in any number of directions. The relationship between the wanderer and the city or the sidewalk is, in many ways, akin to the relationship between the reader and a book: the grammar may be set but what we do with it is infinite.

In *Collected Walks*, the acts of reading and walking become entwined as Buhl weaves a literary map - a fragmentary history of the flâneuse throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries - into a map of her own daily walks through different neighborhoods and cities. As we look at the artifacts from the artist's walks, cyanotypes which are not only a vestige of each particular place and time but also, because they are produced using sunlight, a record of each day's atmospheric conditions, the accompanying soundtrack synchronously takes us through a chimerical cityscape, a montage of walks through Paris, Copenhagen, New York, and beyond. The effect is a heterotopic picture of the city, as an abstract idea and as a real place, as a site of inspiration and as a repository of the creative ways women have utilized walking as a mode of production, as an act of resistance or subversion, as therapy, as intellectual stimulation, as sexual awakening, and as so many other things: A script that you make, but that also makes you.

The figure of the flâneuse makes a claim to the activity of flânerie for women, and has been debated as a category of identity for reasons most often concerning the gendered construction of social space. In Paris in the 19th century, the starting place of the theory and practice of flânerie, walking was undoubtedly a deeply gendered practice and, as scholars like Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff have convincingly argued, if the male flâneur was a resolutely bourgeois character, the women who inhabited the streets were usually associated with the underbelly of society and, in particular, prostitution.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is impossible to imagine a female counterpart for the flâneur without first understanding how women's mobility

<sup>4</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 245-256; Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneur," *New Left Review* 191 (January - February 1992), 90-110; Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse? Women and the Literature of Modernity," *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989)

and spatial practices were delimited both by physical and ideological gender conventions and codes. This is not to say that women did not traverse and use the city in myriad, often unexpected, ways, but that if we continue to identify the 19th century flâneur as the subject-par-excellence of walking, we might fail to see them. Perhaps flâneur is too restrictive a model for the ever-enigmatic flâneuse? In *Street Haunting*, Buhl asks us to consider the history and activities of the flâneuse somewhat differently: acknowledging limitations but thinking about possibilities.

Serious work, with lots of thick books and lots of papers on a big table... And walking. Mostly just walking.

Beginning at ISCP, the site of this exhibition, the walk represented in *Night Map* uses the map of Paris described in Michèle Bernstein's 1961 novel *La Nuit* to navigate the streets of Brooklyn. Appropriating the Situationist practice of using a map of one city to explore, and get lost in, another, Buhl turns Bernstein's détournement of Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* and Roger Vadim's filmic adaptation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* into the template for a sort of choose-your-own-adventure walking game. Using the atemporal and fragmentary formula of the *nouveau roman* (which, by 1961, was quickly falling out of fashion), Bernstein's novel recounts, in scrupulous detail, the evolution of the relationship between Gilles (a parody of Bernstein's then husband, Guy Debord) and Carole (his young mistress) as they *dérive* through Paris over the course of a single night, April 22, 1957. Indebted to flânerie, *dérive* is the practice of abandoning all of our usual motivations for walking, letting loose of all of the relations and commitments that might restrain us, and drifting through the varied psychogeographical ambiances of the city. In *La Nuit*, the *dérive* is also a moment of rupture after which the two walkers are irrevocably changed.

There is a sense in which Buhl uses *La Nuit* in the same way that Bernstein used her own literary and filmic precedents, as a map

by which to reimagine the well-worn story of an unconventional marriage and the person who threatens it. The formula of *La Nuit* is the structure of *Night Map*. The former, which has been described as akin to a slow-motion movie sequence wherein every detail, every still lingers onscreen, is multiplied in the latter, a loop of endless combinations of routes and relationships. In both, the same piecemeal and fragmented narrative is strung together by a walk, recounted through careful descriptions of the built environment and its atmosphere: a close-up of a streetlamp, the rust on a park gate, the smell of Chinese food, the dark corners of an abandoned construction site. Indeed, it is only by imagining the *dérive* - by imagining how the varied ambiances of the city might affect the perception and the psyche of the walkers - that the absent third character, the narrator (Geneviève, Bernstein's self parody, or Buhl), is able to "see" the bond between the others grow. Once again, the walk is a catalyst for the realization of self-consciousness, a constant negotiation not only between multiple consciousnesses but also between those consciousnesses and the forms they create in the world.

Each of the works presented here is an experiment in the potential of walking as a creative interpretation of these relationships: Between ourselves and others and between ourselves and the world. For Buhl, walking is at once a physical act (something done out of necessity or otherwise), a mode of production, and a metaphor.

Jen Kennedy is a Montreal-based writer and PhD candidate at Binghamton University.

## Works in the exhibition:

1)

### *Collected Walks*

2012

Installation

Framed cyanotypes and sound (loop)

Variable dimensions

Sound mix: Pejk Malinovski

Voice: Heather Rogers

The soundtrack of the installation is a montage of literary quotes describing walks made by women through cityscapes. The fragments have been compiled into a single narrative spoken by one voice, thus creating a hybrid fictive persona that travels across time and space.

Over the course of the months leading up to the exhibition, Nanna Debois Buhl created a daily cyanotype print during her walks in different cities. Produced by exposing photographic paper to sunlight without the use of a camera, Buhl's series of monochrome cyanotypes is a diary or logbook connecting walking and photography, each print an abstract registration of the weather and light conditions at a given time and place along her itinerary.

2)

### *Street Haunting*

2010

Prints on archival paper

12 prints: 16 x 12 in. each,

framed in pairs: 21 x 29 in.

The starting point for this work is a series of found photographs of a young woman and Virginia Woolf's essay *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* (1927). In the essay, Woolf invents stories about the lives of the people she passes while walking across town. The work presents the found photographs alongside diverse readings from five psychics who speculate about the young woman's life and persona based on a set of questions used for character development in scriptwriting.

3)

*Night Map*

2012 (in collaboration with Jen Kennedy)

Slide installation

Michèle Bernstein's novel *La Nuit* (1961) is a typical ménage-à-trois story. Bearing imprints of Roger Vadim's 1959 film adaptation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Bernstein's novel describes a love story between Geneviève and Gilles, a couple of Parisian intellectuals, and their younger lover Carole - the story being a fictionalized version of Bernstein's life with Guy Debord in the 1950s.

*La Nuit* describes a turning point in the trio's relationship mapping Gilles and Carole's seemingly endless walk through Paris on the night of April 22, 1957. Like a slow motion sequence in a film, we follow the couple through the streets as their relationship unfolds.

Borrowing the method of détournement of texts and maps (strategies often used by the Situationists International group, of which Debord and Bernstein were members), Buhl has traced the walk of Gilles and Carole on a map of Paris and transferred their route onto a map of New York. The itinerary starts from ISCP's location, 1040 Metropolitan Avenue, Brooklyn. Over the course of a night, Buhl walked and photographed the route along her way, with the resulting images creating a new setting for the story.

*Night Map* is a site-specific work. For every future installment, Buhl will create a new series of photographs by transferring and documenting the route of Gilles and Carole to the surrounding area of the location where the work is shown.



*Night Map*, 2012, Slide installation, Dimensions variable

Nanna Debois Buhl (born 1975, Denmark) received her MFA from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2006 and participated in The Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, in 2008-09. She has exhibited internationally, with recent shows that include Art in General, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Bureau, NY; Lunds Konsthall, Lund, Sweden; Ar/Ge Kunst, Bolzano, Italy; Kunsthallen Brandts, Odense, Denmark; and Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, Herning, Denmark. Her work is in the collections of the Museum for Contemporary Art and The National Museum of Photography in Denmark. In 2010, Revolver Publishing published her artist's book "A Journey in Two Directions" and the collaborative book "City Grammar" (with Liz Linden). Her work has recently been reviewed in Art in America, Artforum, and The New York Times.

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