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Walking in and out

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The Swiss local newspaper *La Gazette du Valais* reports that on the morning of 17 June 1917, at eight o'clock, in response to management's refusal to recognize the union and honor the promised wage increase, the workers of the Chippis aluminum factory AIAG began a strike through walking out of the industrial premises the way the faithful leaves the church on Sundays. Eventually, on July 1st, the workers were forced to return to the factory due to the intervention of the army prompted by the Confederation. Two years later, the circularity of the Chippis protest and its demobilization was portrayed by artist Edmond Bille in the zincography *The Workers* (1919). The print shows in the foreground a round of workers who, hands in their pockets, heads down, enter and leave a factory. The latter is represented in the background by a forest of dark and smoking chimneys, in accordance with the topos of satanic manufactures. An oversized personification of Death, as red as the chimney smoke, monitors the comings and goings of the workers in a spatial configuration that pays tribute to Van Gogh's *The Prisoners' Round* (1890), thus reinforcing the dystopic equivalence between factory and correctional institute. An early attempt to portray protesting bodies in movement, Edmond Bille's *The Workers* fails to seize the political nature implied by the walking practice in the Chippis strike, i.e. its ability to suspend the inherent, daily functionality of the workers' roundabouts in and out of the factory.

The breaking of the functional expectation of the workers' movements in the factory environment echoes with several art walking practices and walking protests that do "re-enchanted" quotidian places "by walking through them".¹ One is reminded of Senga Nengudi's *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* (1978), a collective improvisational

1. Waxman, L. (2019). *Keep Walking Intently. The Ambulatory Art of the Surrealists, the Situationist International, and Fluxus*. 13. London: Sternberg Press.

dance exercise to inaugurate the artist's intervention Freeway Fets by the overpass of the Harbour Freeway, around Los Angeles. The performance – that was carried out in collaboration with David Hammons, Maren Hassinger and other members of the local collective Studio Z – introduce a ritual, alternative temporality in a most trafficked urban area, the dance and sound performance transposed elements of black cultural parades in the daily body flux of the Los Angeles suburbs.

In her *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit inscribes “parades, demonstrations, protests, uprisings, and urban revolutions” within walking practices on the ground that they all imply “members of the public moving through public space for expressive and political rather than merely practical reasons”.² Several strikes and protests are situated in a hybrid zone between performance, aesthetic networking, antagonism and renewal of the contexts of artistic production. In general, because, as Michael Hardt and Toni Negri remind us in their *Assembly*, there is an artistic trait to the forms of labor that do not result in a material outcome.³ In other words, writes Judith Butler, because of the proximity between uprising and artistic practices in the regime of adhocacy, the simultaneous and silent presence of bodies in the public space is prioritized over the verbalization of demands.⁴

In 1968, when sixty participants entered their heads in the cuts that artist Lygia Pape had opened in a monochrome white cloth and started parading across the streets in Rio de Janeiro, the work *Divisor* (*Divider*) came to existence. Conceived as a parade without a slogan, the participative performance does not verbalize a demand, though claims the right to temporarily occupy public space through collective strolling. Simi-

larly, in 1992 the balconies in the Sicilian city of Palermo were covered with white bedsheets as a form of silent protest against the Mafia murders of Judge Falcone and his police escort. Though not unfolding as a march, the Palermo white bedsheets protest equally implied a dynamic and symbolic signaling of the public space the way a march or a parade does. Pape and Palermo's white cloths constitute a chromatic breach in the quotidian landscape of the city, in a way that recalls the disruptive yet silent performance *Azul* (*Blue*, 1982) by the Chilean collective *Teatro Urbano Experimental*, where walking performers completely painted in blue, like corpses, visualized the unspeakable reality of the “desaparecidos” across the University of Concepción. Similarly, in 1963, Fluxus African-American artist Benjamin Patterson suggests in his *Man Who Runs* (1963) the presence of a running male black body across the New York Public Library. One year later, Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à part* (*Gang of Outsiders*, 1964) will immortalize the three young protagonists in the act of running across the Louvre Museum in record time, and inscribe in public imagination the collective gesture of occupying institutions to divert them from their State-determined paradigms and re-assert the need for open spaces that around 1968 artists' movements such as *Art Workers' Coalition* will manifest in extensive picketing on the sidewalks of art institutions.⁵

Patterson's Fluxus gesture and *Teatro Urbano Experimental*'s action embody a performative dimension that is proper also to the strike, namely the fact that the body presence and its movement imply an inherent form of testifying⁶ and attempt to turn the visitor of the public institution into a participant rather than a passive walker. However, what Rebecca Solnit ascribes to the non-ver-

2. Solnit, R. (2001). *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. 216. London: Verso.

3. Hardt, M. & Negri, T. (2017). *Assembly*. 117. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. 8-9. Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press.

5. Bryan-Wilson, J. (2009). *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

6. Solnit 2001, *Ibid* 216.

bal collective of bodies in the march – i.e. the constant shifts from a role of participant during the march, to one of audience at the rally points – also applies to museums as public spaces: “When bodily movement becomes a form of speech, then the distinctions between words and deeds, between representations and actions, begin to blur, and so marches can themselves be liminal, another form of walking into the realm of the representational and symbolic—and sometimes, into history”.⁷ This symbolic re-investment plays out with particular strength in Glenn Ligon’s painting *Untitled (I am a Man)* (1988) and Ahmet Ögüt’s installation *Bakunin’s Barricades* (2014), that both attempt to bring the body movements of a protest march inside a public gallery space.

Ligon’s *Untitled (I am a Man)* (1988) reproduces one of the 1,300 signs carried by Memphis sanitation workers in April 1968 further to the death of two of them. The black text is painted against a white background; its surface covers with oil and enamel an abstract painting that Ligon had previously executed, and deliberately confound the work’s statute of painting and/or banner. The protesters’ slogan “I AM A MAN” underlined the presence and right to the appearance of black bodies that Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952) had powerfully framed in the incipit: “I am an invisible man”. Whereas the 1,300 protest banners phrased the claim “I AM / A MAN” in two lines, Glenn Ligon alludes to the contours of a human black body through breaking the sentence in three lines (I AM / A / MAN).⁸ During the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial March in Memphis, in November 1968, a protestor corrected the sanitation workers’ slogan into “I AM A (WO)MAN”. Afri-

can-American artist Adrian Piper’s performance *Catalysis III* (1970) that brought her to walk bearing on her the black-on-white sign “Wet paint” and materialize the unexpected presence of a black body at the Macy’s department store in New York. The implication of a protesting body movement outside the museum space is also at work in the double political and aesthetic register of *Bakunin’s Barricades* (2014), where the artist Ahmet Ögüt proposes a museum review of a protest strategy designed by Mikhaïl Bakounine during the Dresden revolution in 1849. It is said that Bakunin proposed to confine Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (1513-14) to the *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Museum* in Dresden and place her on the barricades as a shield to block, by religious intimidation, the Prussian army’s attack. The story, haloed with legend, was reported by Guy Debord in 1963, when a group of Caracas students sequestered a series of paintings in a French art exhibition, proposing their restitution in exchange for the release of political prisoners. In 2014, at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Ögüt is building a barricade including a series of paintings from the museum’s collection – including Asger Jorn, *Le Monde perdu*, 1960; Oskar Kokoschka, *Augustusbrücke Dresden*; 1923, Fernand Léger, *Une Chaise, un pot de fleurs, 2 bouteilles*, 1951; Pablo Picasso, *Nature morte à la bougie*, 1945; René Daniëls, *Grammofoon*, 1978; Jan Vercruyssen, *Schöne Sentimenten*, (1986)1988; Marlene Dumas, *The View*, 1992; El Lissitzky, *Proun P23, No. 6*, 1919. Furthermore, Ögüt stipulated a contract with the Van Abbemuseum, claiming that the installation should be lent to any social movement that wished to use it in fights for social transformation.

7. bid 217.

8. Bordowitz, G. (2018). *Glenn Ligon: Untitled (I Am a Man)*. 13-14. London: Afterall Books.

Walking (in)visibilities

In accordance with the performative nature of the occupation of the museum, the factory and the public square described in the previous paragraph, the images of a strike seem to primarily challenge the private dimension of work. At a deeper level, according to Judith Butler, the dynamics of the “self-sequestration” of the one who interrupts the social and productive order by mobilizing the bodies serves to build the material conditions so that protest can appear in the public sphere. Indeed, the association of bodies in the public space constitutes the necessary premises for the protest to become an image and the subject of public debate.⁹ Linda Nochlin suggests that what ensures its dual nature of political and aesthetic gesture is the frequent proximity between the methods of art in the public space and forms of social self-awareness.¹⁰ We will think back to the performative cohabitation, in November 2011, of the Occupy Wall Street movement at Zuccotti Park and the art biennial Performa in the New York urban space. Or, on the other hand, we will reconsider the forms of withdrawals, strikes and aesthetic protests that renounce live performance while refusing, at the same time, the implementation of an artistic work or of her/his presence (Kai Althoff, Stanley Broun, Christopher D’Arcangelo, Carla Lonzi, Lee Lozano, Gustav Metzger, Julien Prévieux). There are however other forms of aesthetic protests that play on the deferred presence and are more closely related to political uprisings. In 1913 in New York, two performative marches forced the visibility of histories excluded from the public sphere and both take on the hybrid form of a procession and a performance. The first, *The Star of Ethiopia*, was organized by writer W.E.B DuBois between 22 and

31 October 1913 and was situated at the crossroads of theatrical performance and protest. Scripted as a monumental theatre piece, DuBois’ project aimed to inscribe Afro-American history in an alternative constellation through the live incarnation of a counter-scheme. Just like many strikes at the time, the performative form of the pageant here connects to the strike through the claims stated in the demands as well as in the way it involves bodies in motion in the public space.¹¹

An intense evocation of the history of humanity corrects the absence of African and African-American histories, depicting in the last acts the passage from conditions of slavery to those of work, to connect history to the present. The chronicles of the time report the presence of 350 actors and about 30,000 spectators, although the distinction of roles in popular theatre is partly artificial in the choral reality of the pageant.

This was confirmed on June 7 of the same year by Mabel Dodge Luhan and John Reed’s Paterson Pageant, in collaboration with the Provincetown Players, which ended with audiences and performers gathered to sing the International. The Paterson Pageant was intended to financially support the textile workshop strike in the namesake city of New Jersey and to draw public attention to the event. About 1,000 performers, including many workers invited to play their own roles, took to the Madison Square Garden stage to “broadcast” their memories of Paterson’s events on a 1:1 scale. As in Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), an evocation of the miners’ strike of June 18, 1984 at the time of Thatcher, the workers are the source of the story and the heroes of his performance. While Deller describes *The Battle of Orgreave* as the “exhumation of a corpse to perform a good autopsy”, the living bodies of the per-

9. Butler, 2005, Ibid.

10. Nochlin, L. (1974). *The Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913*. In *Art in America*, (62), 64-68.

11. DuBois, W.-E.-B. *The Star of Ethiopia: A Pageant*. Pamphlets and Leaflets by W.E.B. DuBois. White Plains, NY: Kraus-Thomason, 161-65, 206-309.

formers in motion and the unknown part of the memory revisited restore the emotional sphere of historical investigation to its primary role.¹²

The 1:1 personal transmission of traumatic memories through collective walks across public spaces still proves a major artistic and activist strategy in recent years, particularly in feminist* practices. As in the pageant, the visualization of memories in the present (re) enacts the reactions triggered by the original event and prevents open, live questions to be filed as cold cases. In Emma Sulkowicz's (artist and art student) durational *Mattress Performance (Carry the Weight)* (2014-15), this translates in the public display of a 23 kg mattress that they* carry around in their* daily whereabouts for almost a year while waiting for their* rapist to be expelled from the Columbia University. Rosa José Galindo's *Piedra* (2013), performed on the public street in front of the Universidade de São Paulo, works in a symmetric way. The artist still, naked body is painted in black, like a stone, folded on the ground and, though not moving, it records the voyeuristic wandering of passersby around it. The body, therefore, records the choreography of (social) movements around the artist and – metaphorically – around the perception that a naked female body in public space is disposable. *Piedra*, therefore, addresses the gendered vulnerability of a walking female body in public space through reversing the movement trajectory and proposing itself as a site in space around which passersby walk. The approach is opposite to the 1970s

feminist Reclaim the Night movements, who protested violence against women through walking across the city at night so to suspend the existing social codes of female insecurity in public spaces after dark. If Rosa José Galindo's *Piedra* does not propose catharsis but primarily emphasizes the predominant conducts and structures in current public spaces, on the other hand, Reclaim the Night adopts Surrealist strategies of aimless night walking and its refusal of the "home/factory/factory/home" functional walk related to standardized production time.^{13 14} Drifting away from given social frames, walking practices are here performed as a means to create a temporary autonomous zone within a strictly codified and increasingly inaccessible public space.¹⁵ More often, in recent times, as both the Black Lives Matter and feminist* movements show, art and political performative strategies overlap and co-exist within the same events. The June 14 Swiss feminist* strike has shown one more time that a clear-cut separation between aesthetic and political walking practices contradicts the multi-layered participation from every social sector, which includes art blocs (and art) as part of the civil society itself. The circulation and sharing of strategies and vocabulary in art performances and political protests – if they may be defined separately – rather than introducing a clear-cut distinction between two walking practices, shows a common desire to point at existing vulnerabilities and collectively redesign urban spaces through when mobilizing collective bodies in public spaces.

12. Deller, J. (2002). *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike*. London: Artangel.

13. Careri, F. (2006). *Walkscapes. Camminare come pratica estetica*. Torino: Einaudi.

14. Waxman 2009, *Ibid.*

15. Careri 2006, *Ibid.*

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