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The City and the Walls: an Experience of the Self
An essay on videos by Mikael Levin

A material and geographic reality, the city is also and perhaps above all, the experience by which the modern subject is constituted and thought. This diagnosis made by Baudelaire and Benjamin in their time, is confirmed by the fact that, for the first time in history, more than half of the world population lives in cities. But this statement needs more precision, for the urban modernity of today and tomorrow is not quite the same as what these two authors lived through and described. “The upcoming city”¹ has extended in huge networks of centers away from the center and enormous “suburbs” where people, goods and information move on a scale unknown to the past century. The urban modernity is no longer in the human types, in the out of the ordinary characters or archetypes that the city shelters and invents, nor in its remarkable architectures, constantly outdated and renewed, with their exuberances of style, nor in the almost complete summary of the possibilities it offers to the human genre, in a context of indifference and loss of aura. Today, the urban modernity is of a different kind and magnitude. None of these elements have disappeared but they have been integrated into a new dimension that surpasses and incorporates them. Instead of being the frame and matrix of life experiences, as it used to be in the past, the city has become, for half of the humanity, the founding metaphysical and anthropological experience, a sort of category of the theoretical and practical reason which shapes the body and codifies the gestures, which structures and enriches thought, which forges a particular way of seeing, looking, moving, and feeling. After having been a repertoire of human and material forms, a vocabulary, the modern city is henceforth a language that penetrates us, that makes us speak, speaks to us, speaks in us and for us. It makes us understandable, and in a way, it makes us understand.

This experience in which the city is the main matrix is above all an experience of time and space, apprehended first in the order and disorder of the streets, with their crowds of bodies following their daily but unpredictable trajectories, their cars that speed up and slow down at the pace of the traffic lights, their intersections where both unique and common destinies connect, and their thousands of ordinary details that make a neighborhood become a whole world with its own cycle, its bearings, its events, and its dialect of familiar and changing signs. The city as an experience is also the experience of being between the walls of a room, away from the noise and bustle of the outside. Thus, the street may become the stage for a show watched through a window, or it may be left aside, allowing thus a return to the self. But between the inside and outside of the walls, the interior of the room and the street, where does the border cross? The videos by Mikael Levin presented at the exhibition “The City and the Walls: An Experience of the Self” show that between these two poles there is no separation but a distance and a continuation, and that the variations of this distance make the city a metaphysical experience constitutive of the subject. In and out, inside and outside, private and public: the city is that place where the opposites merge without confusing, where a moving but solid line of division and unity is drawn between oneself and the street, as the base for the elaboration of the subject.

This subject is presented here as a way of looking, defined by its place and scope, its way to come and go between what is near and what is far, to cross or not the window, to remain inside or go out in the street. These criterions allow the distinction of four groups of videos. The first one is that of the immersion in the street (*Walking City*), where watching implies learning to unravel a world of signs, to find a way in a complex geography, to think of oneself as permanent in a world of movement, to perceive the outside as such. The second set brings together the videos where the street or the urban landscape is observed from a window, open or closed (*Long View, Pause, and Sidewalk*). The variable distances between the inside and the outside are always appreciated from the inside. In the third group, the eyes turn to observe the inside of the rooms (*Inside Looking In, Dia Chelsea 4th Flour, Watch, Wave*), but the outside is never fully absent. Finally, *Bricks Out the Window*, where the outside and inside almost merge and overlap, and *Replica*, that shows the reflections of the sky and the racing

¹ A reference to M. Henaff’s book, *La Ville qui vient*, L’Herne, Paris, 2008.

clouds scroll on a black marble table – as if the opposite poles, until now distant, were becoming a single dimension of time and space as they mingle on the same surface – form a fourth set, perhaps the most important: the one that reflects the conscience of the distance and connection between the street and the inside, and gives unity to the experience that the city is and to the subject to which the city gives rise.

Before discussing these four sets with a specific focus on one video of each one, it is to understand why New York is the city that provides them with their setting, or better, their material. It is not that Mikael Levin sees in it a model city or an exception. More than anything it is the city in which he has lived and worked for a long time, and this can mean at least two things. First, far from being a simple autobiographic experience, his attention to New York is the sign of his attention to the daily urban context and the part it plays in the development of the subject. The local context, a neighborhood or a crossing of streets and avenues, does not refer to itself as if it were the whole world or the limited territory of a tribe. It is spread, on the contrary, as an open enclave linked to other neighborhoods, other streets, other avenues. The links with other people nearby can be then the result of encounters, of events that, particular though they may be, form the plot of the History by acquiring a global meaning, because the city is today the common shape of the global itself. Second, this attention to the local context betrays the *flâneur*², «keen observer» that, according to Baudelaire, lives “in the number, in the undulating, in the movement, in the fugitive and infinite”.³ In both cases, Mikael Levin appeals, to plagiarize Freud, to a roaming look, able to capture and analyze a complex configuration of people, cars, and gestures captured at the moment, and capable of isolating details without losing sight of their relationship to the totality to which they belong. Such a look can also go in one direction and then go back to follow new paths, it can suspend the time to contemplate the light on the anonymous corner of a façade, and track down the absolute in the dissipation and contingency of the insignificant. Therefore, New York is no more than any other city, but precisely and only that one.

In the street: Walking City (1995-2008)

The city is, first, a crowd of passers-by and traffic noise, a confusion of bodies and faces, a mixture of glass, metal and cement that reflects the light or, on the contrary, absorbs it, an abundance of signs and signals. How can one find his way there? To keep in a state of passive contemplation of façades and men in order to escape from the movements of the streets would not be helpful to understand the urban experience. That is why Mikael Levin just proposes for a while to suspend the walking experience in order to see better, to mute the background noise in order to hear and make us hear the whisper of a most secret urban melody. In arranging pauses on specific urban configurations captured at a given time – people, cars, signs, buildings – he accounts for the inside movements of the city, its secret tendency, its fading order which dissolves as it is barely outlined. This tangled rhythm of movements and stops over fixed images and from them, gives its particular character to *Walking City*. It is neither a basic sequence of pictures nor a film, but a combination of both which corresponds to the experience of the city presented in the videos gathered in this exhibition. As it starts and ends on the traffic light “don’t walk”, *Walking City* signals the moments of pause needed to reveal the elements of a whole and their possible connections, to better locate oneself, without claiming to solve the mystery, if there is one, of this immense puzzle. Mikael Levin just wants to distinguish trends, to find a direction, as suggests towards the end of the video the sign “one way” – is it ironic, absurd, or helpful? – in the middle of a confusing street. For is there only one way in a city?

Approaching and going back, traveling through the same path in two opposite directions, grasping a detail and then relocating it in the whole to which it belongs: all these movements of the camera give it a coherence to what would be otherwise anecdotal or insignificant. Seeing, in the deepest meaning of the word, is understanding, that is connecting parts to a whole in a consistent way. There are numerous examples of such a process in the videos. For instance, the image of the deliverymen and their chariots is composed gradually. In same way the advertising for a brand of clothing unnoticed by passers-by who parallel-cross a series of pillars, and toward which the camera approaches and moves away, reveals unsuspected geometries in the game of watching, between the bystanders and the woman on the poster. On a pedestrian crossing, the movement of the camera from one side of the street to another in both directions shows the heads and bodies isolated but joined at the same time. The focus on backs, necks and hands betray states of mind and moods, and let us imagine the

² See Virginia Heckert, “*Walking City*: A Flâneur’s Haven or a Collector’s Cîte?”, http://www.mikaellevin.com/walking_city/Heckert.html

³ *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ch. 4 « Modernity », 1863.

thoughts, emotions, conditions and lives of people. Everything goes as if the more one watches these urban details, the more their organization by chance seems to correspond to a secret necessity, that does not exclude freedom. All the people in this video seem to follow paths directed towards an end, going where their lives lead them. However, these images reveal a world of possibilities, stories in process, events moving towards their unpredictable completion. In addition, the more one watches, the more the power of imagination can transform the city into a landscape. Rows of trucks in a narrow street are associated to canyons and mountains in the soundtrack by Meredith Monk. They are like the outdoor version of the store windows, where an order is still maintained, trivial but nonetheless preserved from the hubbub of the streets. These store-windows, reminiscent of the pictures of Paris by Atget, are like a landscape of things offered to the walker's contemplation, just like the flowers in buckets are the burst of nature on the sidewalks opening a space for poetry and daydreaming.

However, to think of the city as a constitutive experience also requires thinking its inner negation, that is the relation of the city to what the city is not, to what unmakes it from within it and that threatens people who inhabit it. This negative dimension can be seen, on the one hand, in the sky crossed by aircrafts, as an empty space of continuous movement, far from the clashing rhythm of the streets and their intersections where stories and history are played. The sky is, in other words, the antithesis of the city: nothing happens there, the sky is free from contingency and accidents, and travelers in aircrafts are provisionally condemned to minimal gestures, to a reduction of movements and basic functions. The inner negation produced by the city can be observed, on the other hand, in the homeless people lying on the ground. They only know the sidewalks, with no access to the other constitutive pole of the city experience, that of a home at a distance from the street. Both cases are illustrative of a reduced form of life, of a state similar to death. Of course, in the first case, it just provisional, as it will give rise to a redeployment of life in other urban areas. The second case, obviously the only tragic one as it is a direct threat to life, consist in the exclusion the city itself produces within its own walls, its lethal power that converts the street from a place of transition into an area where life ends.

As in *Pause*, the soundtrack plays an important part in *Walking City*. The music is reminiscent of that composed for silent movies. The voices mimicking sirens, car horns, and the mechanic ranting of street vendors («*three for one*»), give *Walking City* the likes of a spectacle watched from a distance, of a setting conducive to daydreaming proper to Baudelairean *flânerie*. This tone, which recalls the past, nevertheless, has nothing of nostalgia. It is rather the necessary distance, the non-modernity required to understand today's modernity.

The street seen through the window: Pause (2009)

The immersion into the street, even from the distance due to its representation in an image, is not the last word of the city experience as an experience of the self. It lacks in particular the perspective of an inner distance, of the first steps toward reflexivity. Such a distance is provided by the videos that show the city from the inside of an apartment, through a closed or opened window. The outside world, however, is never far away. It is only suggested by the changes in the external light in *Watch*. It is more present in the light we can see coming into the room in *Dia Chelsea 4th Floor*, and it is directly visible through the window in *Pause*, *Long View* or *Sidewalk* (this last video is to be distinguished from the previous two for the window itself is not visible). In all these videos, as they modify the aesthetic qualities of the landscape and the interior of the room, the variations of daylight from morning to evening, produce and signal the possible changes in the psychological personality of the observer and his gradual awareness of his links to and differences with the world around him. In the same one day, time becomes sensitive by the visible changes in space, as shadows and reflections are moving. As to space, it is emerging as the second basic dimension of urban experience through the light effects induced by the passage of time. Time must not be understood here as what it is in its common and physical representation as a line made of identical moments. It is rather to be seen as the feeling of duration experienced through the changes of light, an opposition well shown in *Watch* too. The same holds true for space, which must not be confused with the homogeneous and indifferent space of geometry. Both time and space are to be understood here as immanent dimensions of life, from which body gestures, emotions, thoughts and projects can appear and contribute to the elaboration of the self.

In a more straightforward way than in *Walking City*, such a look at the city from behind the window, focusing on nothing in particular, converts it into a landscape. Even when the eyes focus on objects

located just in front of the window inside the room, the outside background is still visible. The domestic and urban context contributes to the daily rhythm, as shown by those crystal vases reflecting the sunlight, by the silhouette of a passer-by in the street, by a helicopter or a plane crossing the sky, or by a car passing by. However, because of the distance and the closed window, these micro-events are subordinated to the most basic rhythm defined by the course of the sun. The cosmic rhythm and the inner rhythm are physically and symbolic united and separated, as expressed by the music by David Helaine, with its thud vibrations reminiscent of both the inner noise of the organic life and the pure physical noise like the crackling of natural waves. This acute awareness of the close and deep relation between here and there, between the outside and the inside, between the world and the self, is brought to a climax in those few moments of blindness when the sun shines directly on the window, making it appear and disappear in just a few seconds, and then reappear again as it fades in the sky. The subject becomes aware of himself in his separation and his union to the world, in the unity of an articulated duality that makes the opposition of contrary terms no more relevant. Such an experience is possible only by a suspension of time, as suggested by the title of this video, and by the rejection of the daily way of looking at the world without seeing it, focusing on particular things in the perspective of utility with no idea of what the whole could be and mean. In a more explicit way than in *Long View* and *Dia Chelsea 4th Floor*, *Pause* is illustrative of a sort of *epokhè*, of a suspension of judgment and ordinary apprehension of the world. This suspension is required if we are to grasp and feel what binds us to it the world and makes us different from him at the same time.

Inside the rooms: Wave (2008)

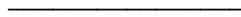
The videos that focus on the inside generally present clear and naked rooms, of a monastic bareness favorable to reflection. As in the previous videos, the variations of daylight still define the time and space experienced, but the look now confronts a confined and poor space, favorable for a greater degree of reflexivity. For how to inhabit such a space, how to live in such a bareness without being present to oneself? As there are no furniture or objects to be considered here, the only thing that remains to do is to look for oneself. The void of these room is not the pure void of physics but a relative vacuum where matter is present in the form of few objects, themselves basic and regular in their form as in their function – a chair in *Wave*, thumbtacks in *Inside Looking In* – and small accidents that catch the look and serve as a reflexive support to the awareness by the self of his own finitude – the roughness of the paint, minor irregularities of a windowsill. In *Inside Looking In* as in *Watch* and *Bricks Out the Window*, the corners of the rooms stop the eyes and delimit a place in itself, a place where the self can appear precisely because of the limitation of the space. The videos of this group therefore replay in the inside of the rooms a similar differentiation between the self and the world to that presented in the previous ensemble, where the subject was looking at the street. The important difference is not that he is now more able to acknowledge his relation to and difference with the outside world, but that he is given an area he can appropriate for his own development.

Inspired by *Wavelength*, a video by Michael Snow, *Wave* recalls this similarity and this difference, but the picture focused on at the end of this video gives evidence of a new step in the development of the self. One can see a building on a dock next to a canal or river, or perhaps the sea, with the vanishing point at the middle of the picture. The objective is gradually approaching this central point and reveals the border between land and water as real but impossible to locate. Such a focus does not mean that the apartment is synonymous to confinement and that the subject seeks an imaginary escape in the picture that stands before him. It highlights two things. First, it is only inside the room that it is possible to access the representation of the ambivalence of the border between the outside world and the world inside the closed buildings, just as the windows bind and separate the subject and the street. On the other hand, it helps the subject to consider the infinite, in the sense that this limit is constantly actualized in the representation the subject can have of it. *Wave* makes the transition between the closed world, based on the direct and reciprocal relation between the inside and the outside presented in *Pause*, to the infinite universe of that same connection internalized through the power of representation.

Surface of reflection: Replica (2011)

Mikael Levin has designed *Replica* as the counterpart of *Pause*. While *Pause* brings the observation of the exterior spectacle behind the window, with few focuses on the interior space as a foreground, *Replica* reverses the importance of the two areas by placing in the foreground a black marble table surrounded by four chairs and reflecting the sky and the light that enters through three windows. The outside world is still directly perceptible but much more discreet. For instance, a bird makes a brief

appearance behind the window in the right, and the muffled noises of the street can be heard. The central marble surface plays the main part in this video as its darkness reflects the daylight, and its stillness welcomes the clouds passing through the sky. In *Replica*, the fixed picture of *Wave* and its fascinating central limit in which the subject was likely to lose himself, is replaced by a surface that, despite the conjunction of opposites it operates, does not completely disappear behind its reflecting power. As a matter of fact, the back of the chairs can still be observed at the border of the images every time the video focuses on the surface of the table. The reflexivity needed for the experience of the self achieves here its most accomplished point. After the direct experience of the street in *Walking City*, after the distance and connection between the self and the street presented in *Pause*, after the return to the self and the access to the infinite internalized by means of the picture in *Wave*, *Replica* reintroduces a distance, tenuous but necessary, with the representation of separation and connection between the inside and the outside, between the self and the world. The images contribute to the development of the self only if one knows that they are nothing but images.



This is just a possible path between these videos, which exhausts neither their depth nor their surface.

Translation from the French by Rosa Garay, graduate student of the Translation Department of the University of Puerto Rico.