

Picturing Diversions: The Work/Play of Walking on London Pavements

Jan van Duppen



All photographs:
Jan van Duppen.

Walking in London often involves an involuntary encounter with the message “improving the image of construction” attached to a building-site hoarding. Yet, these hoardings do not only confine the building works and ‘protect’ the public from potential hazards, they also divert the pedestrian’s path. One encounters a work-in-progress site, but work for whom? And who, in turn, has to process this work? This photo essay documents my journeys to work, and comments on the work of navigating the pavement as my walking rhythm was interrupted by roadworks, building works and waste products. It also introduces another sort of diversion, that of the notion of playfulness as one encounters the rich material world of the pavement. What follows is an auto-ethnographic account that presents a critical reading and re-reading of the pavement – an infrastructure that was introduced in London in the eighteenth century, and that signifies urban modernity and with it the constitution of “new versions of the public sphere” (Ogborn 2000: 176).



Throughout this paper, the text is interrupted by images, providing avenues of visual diversion for the reader; this interplay between text and image aims to reflect the contingencies and syncopation in the rhythms of my walks. I consider each individual image here as a ‘fragment’ of the city, and as a collection they help me to understand the city as a whole. This series is the product of looking down and around whilst I was walking in Camden, as I played the character of the police investigator who is “taking pictures of a crime scene from every angle” (Pile 2005: 9). It dissects the everyday infrastructures that were collapsing under my feet and depicts scenes so visible that they are rendered invisible by urban dwellers – as they try to cope with the affective intensities of urban life. The fragments of the city that I have been collecting are bound up with my everyday routine of commuting by foot to the British Library in London. This is a walk of about thirty to forty minutes, which cuts through the neighbourhood of Camden, along the canal and past large building sites.

Contradictory to the idea of ‘derive’, my walking practices were thus purposeful. I had to walk this route, and my perceptions and feelings of this trajectory are inflected by the writing-up period of my PhD thesis. Rather than an aimless wander, this was an instrumental endeavour. Yet, by making photos, I made the trip more enjoyable. It became a diversion from the mundane commute, forming a temporary escape from the ordeal of writing, as photography felt to me a more immediate, perhaps



initially less complicated, creative and productive process. Whilst I was walking, I was moving through a contradictory time-space in between labour and leisure, the slow rhythm of walking allowing for the “mental digestion” (van Duppen & Spierings 2013: 242) of an unproductive writing day, whereas I also found myself formulating new ideas and arguments for chapters to be written, thereby turning the commute into a productive time-space. By taking one or two photos along the way, I played with this contradictory space – as the act of taking a photograph enacted a pause in the commute, I was temporarily stepping out of the logic of heading straight home or



rushing into work, and instead engaged playfully with my immediate surroundings. The paradox is not lost on me, that by publishing this photo essay, I am turning these moments of diversion of the working day into products for my academic work.

These images are shot on disposable cameras. My use of this particular technology foregrounds the 'speed and flow' of walking and it helps me to comment on London's urban conditions. The disposable camera is a cheap, mobile, single-use machine with a 35mm film. In an era of smartphones and digital photography, I suggest that the disposable camera encourages a slowing down of the attention of the walker, as the limited nature of the film role disciplines the user not to endlessly take pictures.



Furthermore, this technology alludes to the figure of the amateur – the only affordance of this machine is choosing a frame by positioning one's body in relation to the subject, and then to push the release button. Point. And ... shoot. Thus, instead of fiddling with aperture and shutter speed to achieve the perfect image, the disposable camera produces a less mediated, more instant imagery. I suggest then that this technology is both fast in its operation and slow as it disciplines the photographer's attention, and requires a longer process of film development and print. Moreover, this photographic process allows for a temporary break from the digital work performed on online social media platforms, in which the free provision of user-made images is a key condition.



What is more, the disposable camera as a cultural object is most commonly associated with tourists documenting their trips, a technology used to divert from the everyday. In the Situationist International tradition of *detournement*, I have deployed this commodity towards another end. Instead of taking photos of beach holidays, I put the pavement, the everyday, into the frame. Thus, whilst maintaining the idea of being on a journey, the disposable camera records mundane scenes encountered on a daily commute, and thereby reconfigures our view of the street. In terms of circulation, movement and waste, the disposable camera seems also especially apt for capturing disposed objects on the pavement. My choice of technology could thus be read as a poetic gesture towards the temporalities of objects in a capitalist society – an object soon to be disposed records already disposed objects.

This set of images records multiple moments of diversion on my commute in the sense of being involuntary diverted from one's path due to building works, road works, broken pavement slabs and curbs or disposed trash. My walking rhythm was continuously interrupted by hoardings and fences, traffic signs and disposed mattresses. It sometimes felt as if I had landed involuntarily in a videogame in which one has to avoid all kinds of traps, jump through hoops and try not to trip over the banana peel. Notwithstanding London's infrastructures' privileging of car traffic, I found that it requires skill and considerable effort to navigate one's way around these hurdles.



Yet, I found that these encounters with the materialities of the pavement can also be captivating and ludic, a temporary distraction from the everyday. Whilst doing the work of navigating, there is also joy to be had in the reading of these fantastical scenes along the way. I want to recall here Walter Benjamin's observation that children

feel irresistibly drawn to the detritus created by building, gardening, house-work, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the material world turns to them and them alone. In putting such products to use they do not so much replicate the works of grown-ups as take materials of very different kinds and, through what they make with them in play, place them in new and very surprising relations to one another.

Benjamin (2009: 55)



This sense of being drawn to the waste products of the worlds of work is, I think, reflected in this photo essay. Furthermore, through photography I have isolated material constellations from the pavement and placed them into new and surprising relations to each other. Following this immersion in the material world, these images highlight the proliferation of traffic cones and signs, 'chapter 8 barriers' and Heras fencing on the pavement. Often, these modular objects warn and protect pedestrians from road and building works, but sometimes they actually seem to be 'lost' in space as it is no longer clear what their purpose is – signifiers set lose. At some point in the past, these modular objects were instrumental to the regulation and discipline of the flows of traffic; however, they frequently appear to have temporarily departed from their function. They do not signify anything in particular. It is as if the traffic cone is on a lunch break and the 'chapter 8 barrier' is having a little lie down, these modular objects spending their leisure time on the pavement. This alludes to the idea that "the accidental and continual juxtaposition of apparently unconnected things" on the pavement "produces a density of potential interpretation" (Rendell 1999: 107).

By picturing the multiple forms of diversions – from the laborious to the playful – I try to engage with ongoing debates on the social life of infrastructure in three ways. First, I attempt to partake in the project of developing "infrastructural literacies" to generate new urban imaginations (Mattern 2013) by interweaving a critical subjectivity as part of an everyday routine. Second, I suggest that by foregrounding the pavement's messiness these images appear to interrupt the glamorous and smooth urban futures depicted in computer-generated images on building site hoardings (Rose et al. 2016) and form a contrast to urban photography that strives to capture the "technical sublime" of large-scale infrastructural landscapes (Gandy 2011). Third, I attempt with this auto-ethnographic account to evoke the lived experience of inhabiting the splintered urban and highlight how infrastructures can deepen social inequalities by producing different affective intensities and speeds of travel for different people (Graham and Marvin 2001). These photos were made within a UK urban context which is shaped by the ongoing privatisation of public spaces (Minton 2009) and severely reduced local authority budgets for pavement maintenance and waste collection due to a decade of austerity politics (Crewe 2016). Through picturing diversions, I try to recall the sense of "the pavement as a space of public participation in the life of the city" and stress the importance of public ownership and maintenance of this mundane infrastructure, before we fall through the cracks that "are appearing beneath our feet" (Ogborn 2000: 177).



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