

## **Urban Body, Urban Story:** Walking Art as Practice, Politics and Poetic Perception

Miguel B Duarte / University of Minho / Lab2PT / WALC / TWB

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Urban walking, when understood as an artistic practice, reveals itself as a field of experience where body, city, memory, and politics intertwine in a continuous weave of meaning. The notion of the Urban Body is not merely a metaphor: it is a theoretical and practical proposition that positions the body as sensor, author, and witness of space. The walking body does not traverse a neutral backdrop; it co-produces the city by perceiving textures, rhythms, smells, noises, limits, and openings. This co-production transforms the city into a sensitive surface, an organism that responds, resists, and is modified by the passages and performances of the bodies that inhabit it. Understanding walking art therefore requires shifting the focus from the urban object to embodied experience, to the temporal sequence of the route, and to the multiplicity of voices that manifest in the act of walking.

To conceive of the city as a sensitive body is to recognise that urban space is woven from layers of perception: visible architectures, invisible infrastructures, sedimented memories, regimes of circulation, and devices of power that regulate who may occupy, cross, or remain. Walking art explores precisely this sensibility: it provokes shifts of attention, creates frictions between the habitual and the unexpected, and opens fissures through which normally unnoticed orders become visible. By transforming walking into an aesthetic practice, artists and participants produce kinetic narratives — stories that exist only in the sequence of steps — and at the same time generate sensory evidence that can be translated into maps, sound archives, accounts, and images. The city thus ceases to be merely a stage and becomes an interlocutor: it responds to the body that moves through it and returns meanings that, in turn, reconfigure the experience of walking.

The thinkers who nourish this reflection form a theoretical constellation that helps situate walking art. Michel de Certeau shifts authority from the plan to the tactic: walking is an act of writing, a form of pedestrian speech act that subverts institutional strategies. Lucius Burckhardt, with his strollology, insists on the learning of perception and the performativity of looking: landscape is culturally constructed, and the walk is a method for revealing that construction. Rebecca Solnit links walking to imagination and resistance, showing how walking can

reclaim time, create encounters, and restore forgotten memories. Francesco Careri transforms the route into an aesthetic work — the walkscape — and sees in walking a practice of urban intervention that produces micro-utopias. Tim Ingold and the collection *Ways of Walking* emphasise that walking is a bodily technique, culturally shaped and socially differentiated: to walk is to learn how to move in a world of lines, rhythms, and relations. Doreen Massey, in turn, offers the key to thinking about the social production of space: the city is the result of multiple trajectories and relations, and walking reveals how these trajectories intersect and overlap. Together, these authors allow us to conceive walking art as a practice that articulates aesthetics, ethics, and politics.

The poetic and mythical experience of space is one of the most powerful effects of walking art. By shifting attention to seemingly insignificant details — a threshold, a background sound, the texture of a wall — artistic walking reactivates layers of meaning that routine had dulled. The city can then be read as a palimpsest of myths and memories: every corner holds narratives, every façade carries traces of past lives, every noise evokes labour practices and social rhythms. Walking art explores this poetic dimension without necessarily romanticising it; it uses poetry as an instrument of critical perception, capable of revealing both beauty and everyday violence. The mythical dimension is not escapism: it is a way of reimagining what is possible, of opening the imagination to other forms of inhabiting and claiming space.

The role of the artist who proposes urban walks is complex and ambivalent. On one hand, there is the figure of the artist-author who creates rules, routes, prompts, and aesthetic frames that orient the experience; on the other, the Situationist tradition defended the abolition of authorship, the democratisation of creation, and the transformation of everyone into artists of everyday life. Contemporary walking art oscillates between these poles. When the artist assumes the role of guide and author, they can offer tools for reading and provoke shifts of attention that generate critical awareness; however, they risk reproducing hierarchies between creator and public. When the practice is radically participatory, with distributed authorship, it gains in democratisation but may lose the strength of the aesthetic frame that creates the critical distance necessary for reflection. Simone Hancox show that the politics of walking depends both on the artistic frame and on the reception by participants: the experience only becomes political if participants adopt a spectator-performer posture, interpreting and translating the experience into judgments and actions. The challenge for the artist is thus to design situations that allow co-authorship without diluting the critical potency of the frame — to create open structures that invite invention without imposing a single narrative.

The city changes like the body: it ages, becomes ill, recovers, scars, and is wounded by interventions and policies. This analogy is not merely rhetorical; it points to a dynamic understanding of the urban. Infrastructures, uses, memories, and affects transform over time, and walking is a privileged way of perceiving these transformations. The walking body registers change: it senses the increase in noise, the loss of trees, the replacement of local shops by chains, the presence of cameras, the alteration of flows. Walking art, by making this temporality perceptible, functions as a device of diagnosis and imagination: it diagnoses problems and imagines alternatives. The idea of *dérive*, both personal and collective, is central here. The personal *dérive* allows the individual to experience the city intensively, opening themselves to encounters and impressions that escape planning; the collective *dérive* transforms these impressions into shared narratives, plural maps, and actions that can claim change. The tension between the personal and the collective is productive: the personal brings singularity and sensitivity; the collective brings visibility and political translatability.

Walking as an artistic practice often provokes a state of emotional and critical alertness. By interrupting routines and imposing rules or prompts, walking art creates conditions for participants to perceive the environment with renewed intensity. This alertness is not merely nervous; it is an ethical attention that allows injustices, inequalities, and subtle violences to be recognised. Seen attentively, the city reveals spatial segregations, zones of insecurity, neglected infrastructures, and practices of exclusion. The emotions that emerge — surprise, discomfort, empathy, indignation — become motors for reflection and action. The need for transformation through art arises from this capacity to make the invisible visible: walking art does not promise technical solutions, but it creates conditions for communities to see, discuss, and demand.

The politics of walking is articulated with Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city: the right of all inhabitants to participate in the production of urban space, to enjoy common goods, and to decide on the transformations that affect them. Walking art can be a practice of claiming this right by producing narratives and evidence that contest official representations of space. Revealing structures of power and inequality is central: official maps often naturalise exclusions; walking art practices produce counter-maps, oral memories, and archives that expose who is made invisible and why. The opposition between the ordinary and the official becomes a key axis of dispute: the everyday lives of residents, their routines and memories, often contrast with the urbanistic and promotional images that legitimise gentrification and privatisation projects. Walking art brings these narratives into conflict, challenging dominant visions and proposing alternative readings.

Attention versus distraction is another crucial binary. The contemporary city is designed to capture attention — advertising, consumption, traffic, digital notifications — and to reduce the possibility of sustained attention. Walking art acts as an antidote: it re-educates attention, proposing exercises in listening, observation, and presence. At the same time, the practice is not necessarily anti-technological; many experiences incorporate digital media, audio guides, and geolocation to expand participation and archive experiences. The question is how these technologies are used: whether to intensify attention and reflection or to turn the experience into a consumable product. The creation of micro-utopias — temporary spaces of coexistence and imagination — is a practical response to this tension: small interventions, performative routes, and ephemeral encounters that show possibilities of using space beyond those foreseen by the market.

Contemporary trends in walking art point to a growing appreciation of collective participation and co-authorship. Projects that combine poetic prompts, sound archives, collaborative maps, and public events have proliferated, creating ecosystems of practices that feed one another. The emphasis on non-representational experience — that is, on sensory, affective, and performative effects that do not reduce to a final product — is a hallmark of these projects. Instead of producing a single art object, many initiatives generate trails, recordings, accounts, and encounters that remain as distributed traces. This dispersion is political: it avoids institutional capture and allows practices to be reactivated, remixed, and appropriated by diverse communities.

The social production of space, as Doreen Massey reminds us, is a relational and historical process: space is the result of multiple trajectories and relations that intersect. Walking art, by mapping personal and collective trajectories, helps make these relations visible. Narratives and storytelling are central instruments: to walk is to narrate, and to narrate is to perform. The stories that emerge from the routes — memories of work, accounts of migration, childhood recollections — are forms of knowledge that challenge statistics and plans. Performative narrative transforms walking into a political act: by telling, listening, and sharing, participants build a collective memory that can support claims and interventions.

Reading and writing the city are complementary practices. To read the city is to decipher signs, recognise historical layers, perceive power relations; to write the city is to act, mark, map, and propose. The kinetic narratives produced by walking art are events: encounters, performances, walks that happen in time and leave traces. These events generate imagined and concrete meanings that can be mapped in various ways — from hand-drawn analogue maps to digital cartographies combining GPS, audio, and images. Contemporary social cartography explores both getting lost as a strategy and the use of new media to

document and share experiences. Hand-drawn maps, QR codes, sound archives, and collaborative platforms expand the reach of practices without replacing the embodied experience of walking.

A gender-aware approach to walking art is essential. Studies and projects such as *Walking Women*, and interviews with artists on the move (Deirdre Heddon, Cathy Turner, among others), show that gender profoundly shapes the experience of space: women, trans, and non-binary people face distinct risks, routines, and forms of surveillance. Incorporating a gender perspective means designing routes that consider safety, visibility, differentiated times and rhythms, and that value narratives often silenced. It also means promoting practices that empower marginalised voices and transform walking into a tool of denunciation and collective care.

Walking art, in sum, is a hybrid practice: aesthetic, political, pedagogical, and community-based. It does not promise technical solutions to urban problems, but it offers ways of seeing, feeling, and narrating that can feed processes of transformation. By placing the body at the centre of inquiry, valuing sensory experience, and producing collective narratives, walking art contributes to a politics of space that claims the right to the city, challenges dominant visions, and creates micro-utopias of coexistence. For this potential to be realised, an ethics of co-authorship, inclusion, and translation is necessary: transforming ephemeral experiences into public, shareable, actionable artefacts; ensuring accessibility and diversity of voices; and preserving the productive tension between authorship and participation.

The city, seen through artistic walking, reveals itself as a living organism in constant mutation, where every passing body leaves a mark — visible or invisible — and every route is a writing that can be read, contested, and rewritten. Cultivating walking art practices is therefore cultivating the collective capacity to perceive, narrate, and transform space. It is affirming that the city is not merely a set of infrastructures but a fabric of relations, memories, and affects that deserves to be cared for, disputed, and reimagined. And it is, finally, recognising that the walking body is always a political body: sensitive, vulnerable, creative, and capable of claiming, step by step, the right to exist and to be heard in the common space.

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