

OF WALKING

**OCTOBER 18–
DECEMBER 20, 2013**

It is the movement as well as the sights going by that seems to make things happen in the mind, and this is what makes walking ambiguous and endlessly fertile: it is both means and end, travel and destination.

—Rebecca Solnit, [Wanderlust](#)

Walking is one of humankind's most basic acts, so practical and ordinary that it usually goes unconsidered. Yet beyond its everyday utility and purposefulness, walking often carries other pursuits along with it—meditative, spiritual, adventurous. People walk to relax, to exercise, to complete a pilgrimage. Some also walk to think. Many of history's great philosophers and writers recognized the benefits of ambulation. The Peripatetic School of philosophy in ancient Greece, for example, draws its name from the school's founder, Aristotle, who is believed to have been a "peripatetic" lecturer—he walked as he taught. Nishida Kitaro, the famous Japanese philosopher, practiced meditation on a daily walk, and his route is now the heavily visited Philosopher's Path in Kyoto. Immanuel Kant was famous for the extreme regularity of his walks in late eighteenth-century Königsberg. And Charles Dickens, Robert Frost, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Henry David Thoreau all wrote about walking.

As Rebecca Solnit has written in her book *Wanderlust*, "the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. . . . And so one aspect of the history of walking is the history of thinking made concrete—for the motions of the mind cannot be traced, but those of the feet can."¹ In art, the motions of the feet have been often traced through photography—sometimes by artists recording walkers, sometimes by artists walking as a purposeful part of their concept and process. Some artists even consider the act of walking their primary artwork, and use photography mainly as a means to document and trace their actions. Others use walking as a structure underpinning the act of recording a journey and its observations with a camera—these excursions frequently revealing the distinctly complementary, often fruitful, relationship between photography and the happenstance encounter.

LIENE BOSQUÉ AND NICOLE SEISLER | JIM CAMPBELL | ODETTE ENGLAND | HAMISH FULTON | SIMRYN GILL | SOHEI NISHINO | PAULIEN OLTHETEN | MoCP COLLECTION WORKS

Throughout the twentieth century, many photographers made work that hinged on these meetings as the city street became the backdrop for discoveries and observations of their surroundings and fellow urban dwellers. Photographers like Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, Alexander Slyusarev, and Garry Winogrand, to name just a few, documented daily life, exploiting the portability of the camera and the occasional social buffer it provided. These street-shooters harkened back to Charles Baudelaire's nineteenth-century conception of the flâneur as a modern gentleman who walks the city in order to experience it as a detached observer, whose "passion and [his] profession are to become one flesh with the crowd."² In 1977 Susan Sontag connected the idea of the flâneur to street photography by making an observation about the early twentieth-century advent of the hand-held camera and its consequences:

*The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world "picturesque."*³

The idea of the observant wanderer has also been explored by performance and conceptual artists who might not consider photography their primary medium, but use it to document their actions. Artists have made seminal works based on the act of walking—Richard Long, for example, wore a path in the landscape that he photographed and called *Line Made by Walking* (1967). Sophie Calle and Vito Acconci both infamously followed strangers with their cameras, adding an element of chance to the act of meandering discovery. Acconci put both walking and the act of taking pictures equally at the heart of *12 Steps* (1977), a performance in which he took twelve flash photographs of an audience sitting in a darkened theater as he walked across a stage. By presenting the printed strip of negatives as the final artwork, Acconci collapses process into product and creates an artwork that is incompatible with the traditional object-biased, medium-based history of fine art. He

also creates a work that imparts a sense of duration, as he records the cadence of his motion in a rhythmic set of images. Ultimately, the work reveals a desire to mine aesthetic value out of regular actions, like walking, harkening back to some of the ideas of John Dewey, who in his writings promoted "a conception of fine art that sets out from its connection with discovered qualities of ordinary experience."⁴

The exhibition *Of Walking* presents works by artists that explore the ordinary act of walking and the combined activities of thinking and discovering while walking—a confluence made concrete via the camera's lens and other means. Each of the artists probes the notion of place as they (sometimes with collaborators) experience and construct it through ambulation. Their works also explore the difference between a journey on foot and other sorts of travel, as they reveal the curiosities and joys of observation that can happen both far from home and just out the front door. In the process, they invite us to consider the unique opportunities walking engenders, including its ability to incite memories, plans, and images.

Simryn Gill (Singaporean, b. 1959, lives in Australia) walks through her neighborhood of Marrickville, a suburb of Sydney, illuminating her experiences by honing in on random events and details with her camera. *May, 2006* is a large installation of over 800 silver gelatin images exhibited as thirty groups of photographs, each group representing one roll of film, each roll of film shot every day of the month while the artist walked. The month, May 2006, was also the expiration date of the film, so its light sensitivity was likely dissipating. Gill charts her perambulations in space and time, and her scenes of fences, cars, gutters, houses, trees, and people immerse us in the everyday. As a collection, the gray, pedestrian pictures portray the environment through both shallow depth-of-field and varying angles and impart a sense of abandonment, dreariness, and melancholy. As Gill traversed her immediate surroundings, she remained open to happenstance, and now speaks about her process of making the pictures as coming to



Vito Acconci, *12 Pictures (detail)*, 1969, gelatin silver prints, 5 x 31 5/16 inches
Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography

“understand the word ‘place’ as a verb rather than a noun . . . which exists in our doings: walking, talking, living.”⁵ By presenting place as unfixed and ever-changing, Gill takes us with her as she walks her hometown, but never allows us to fully settle on the real experience of the location she represents. In the final work the prints are installed in columns on the gallery walls, the serial grid discouraging any sense of mapping the actual cityscape. Artist John Coplans once wrote that “serial imagery changes the traditional concept of the autonomous work of art in that each individual image loses its aura and is of equal value to the rest; it becomes an element that only makes sense in relation to its neighbors.”⁶ Gill’s placement of the images next to each other makes them each equally important, and signals duration. It also sets up a tension between the casual, personal intimacy of the photographs with a more scientific, rigid reading, creating an artwork that challenges us to locate its essence in the tension between the transitive, dynamic nature of the artist’s process and the static materiality of the work’s final, installed form.



Sohei Nishino, *Diorama Map Tokyo*, 2004, Light jet print, 55 x 55 inches
© Sohei Nishino, courtesy of Michael Hoppen Contemporary, London

Also walking through the city, **Sohei Nishino** (Japanese, b. 1982) uses photographs to describe a trajectory without literally charting a route in his ongoing project *Diorama Maps* (2003–present). To make his maps, the artist walks around a chosen city, shooting in various locations with 35 mm film, and then arranges and pastes the hundreds of resulting black-and-white photographs into a composite view. The varying perspectives of the individual pictures and their swirling arrangement in the collage expands and contracts the cityscape, suggesting a path that might have taken its cues from the mid-century variation on the idea of the flâneur promoted by French theorist

and writer Guy Debord, who coined the term “*dérive*” (literally, “drifting”) to mean the unplanned tour through an urban landscape directed entirely by the feelings evoked by one’s surroundings. Through the dynamic presentation of his prints, Nishino overcomes the limited perspective of a stationary camera, and reflects the rhythm and unexpected detours of exploratory ambulation in his Cubist-style maps that suggest paths through not only the landscape but also the imagination.

In contrast to the urban views provided by Nishino and Gill, **Hamish Fulton** (British, b. 1946) walks through remote places of natural beauty, travels that he considers to be the primary manifestation of his artwork. In 1973, after completing a 1,022-mile walk, Fulton made the commitment to limit his art making to works resulting from his personal experience of individual walks. He now calls himself a “walking artist” and has said, “My artform is the short journey—made by walking in the landscape.”⁷ Fulton expresses the emotional and physical recollections of his walks, which last anywhere from one day to many weeks, through photographs, sculptures, writings, paintings, and drawings. Included in this exhibition are works made in Nepal, Scotland, Switzerland, and Japan, between 1998 and 2008. Unlike conceptual land artists like Richard Long or Robert Smithson, whose practices rely on the physical transformation of the land, Fulton does not manipulate the land in order to make his artwork, and prefers “to leave as few traces of [his] passing as possible.”⁸ Fulton’s work also illustrates how location often sets the tone of the walk, with his walks in nature focused on viewing the landscape and guided by the seasons. In contrast, walks through urban space can often prompt a defensive turn inward, a quest for the unexpected, or a studied observation of the other.

Paulien Oltheten (Dutch, b. 1982), for example, travels the world observing the patterns of behavior that people intuitively adopt as they walk through or exist in public spaces. In her practice she makes photographs and videos of people reenacting gestures or motions that she first witnesses and then asks them to replicate. In her multimedia installations, her negotiation of present and past, and of foreign and familiar, becomes apparent through photographs, texts, and videos that vivify the minute, unconscious activities and details that occur as we navigate our surroundings. With distinct acuity, she uncovers meaning in even the most mundane human routines and reveals the ways we encounter others at random and subtly shape their experience, as they, in turn, shape ours. The multifarious records in Oltheten’s archive continually shape and inform her practice; accordingly her work on view in this exhibition is in progress, initiated this year during her artist’s



Paulien Oltheten, *proximics (Ants)*, 2013, c-print, 21 x 31 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Fans Wetters, Amsterdam

residence at International Studio Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York and culled from her travels throughout the United States including the West Coast, Texas, and Utah.

Also working in performance, the artist duo **Liene Bosquê**

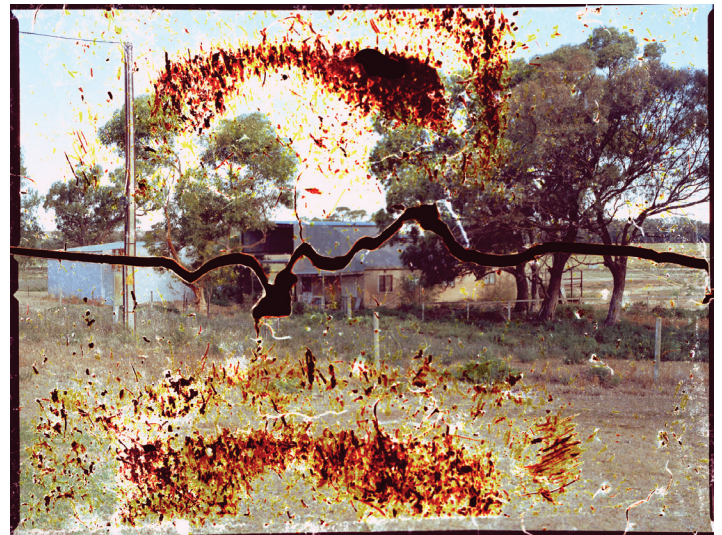
(Brazilian, b. 1980) and **Nicole Seisler**

(American/Dutch, b. 1982) orchestrate walks around various cities as they invite participants to make

physical impressions of the city in wet porcelain clay blocks. With “walking as a tool for art making, and creating tangible connections between people and place,”⁹ Bosquê and Seisler build collections of objects that reflect the relationship between individuals and the urban landscape, and how the architecture and distinct elements in one’s environment influence how people behave in a city. Like photographs, the clay acts as a conduit to heighten an individual’s observational capacities and conveys the sense of cataloguing one’s experience. Dissimilar to photographs, the clay directly imparts the sensation of touch and a physical connection to one’s surroundings. But like photographs, the resulting impressions become records of particular exchanges between people and places. Installed in the gallery, the (ultimately fired) porcelain objects serve as a map and archive of the character of each particular place as seen through the eyes and actions of their participants. Bosquê and Seisler place finished impressions in a sand table, so viewers can create a positive image of what has been recorded as a “negative” image in clay. Although each clay imprint is unique as an image, it resembles the photographic negative or file in its capacity to make the same impression over and over. It is also, like a photograph, indexical in nature, due to its physical connection to the real world. Indexicality is a term often used in conjunction with photography to describe the physical relationship between the object photographed and the resulting image. In their installation here, Bosquê and Seisler incorporate images from the Museum of Contemporary Photography’s permanent collection of people walking through urban spaces and encountering one another, all of them with architecture as the backdrop—a poetic selection that enlivens the idea of the walk and underscores indexicality.

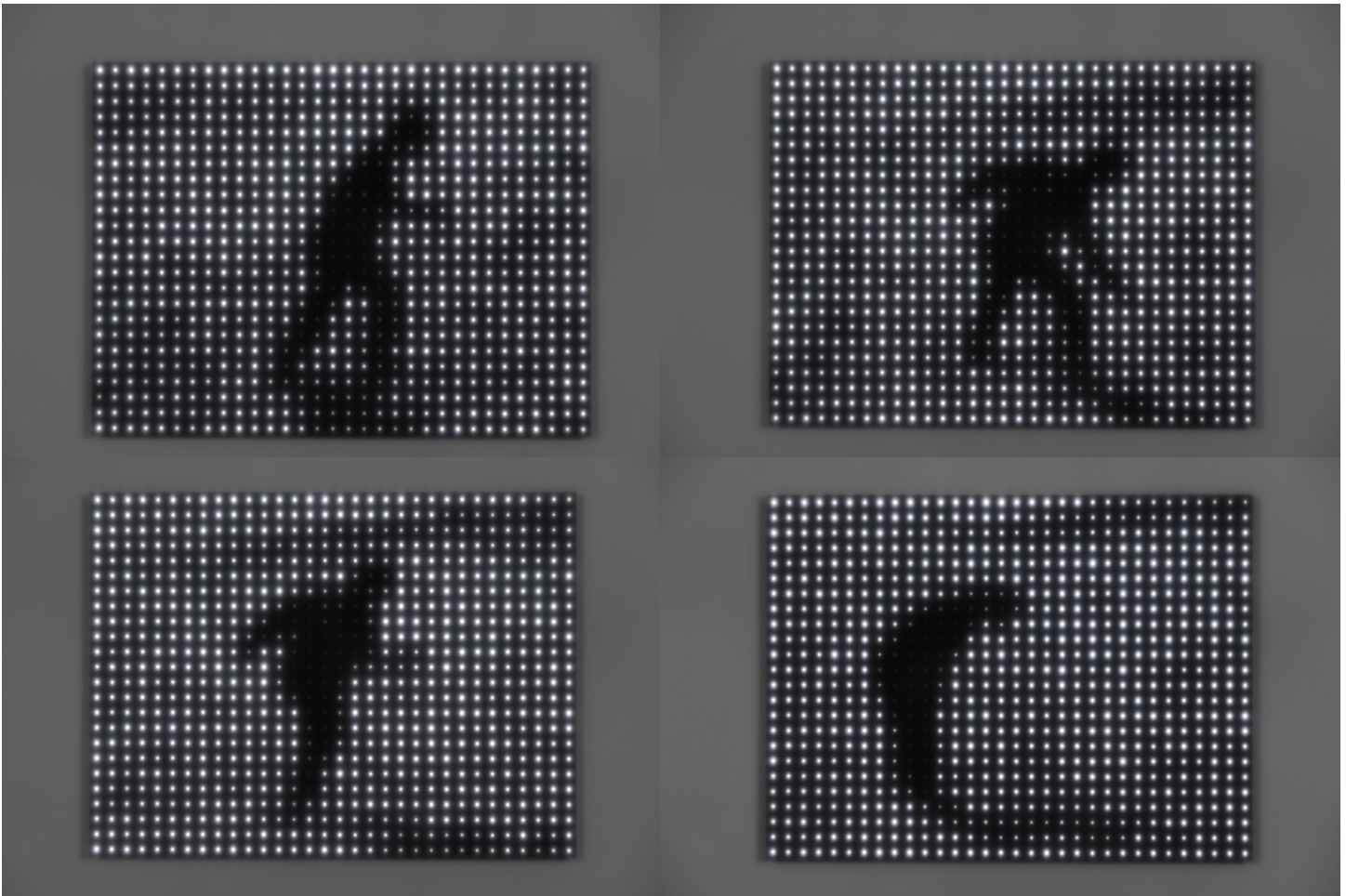
During the October 17, 2013 opening reception of *Of Walking*, Bosquê and Seisler led attendees on walks where they made impressions inspired by their surroundings as well as the MoCP collection images of walkers. The works participants created on these walks are included in the MoCP installation.

Odette England’s (Australian, b. 1975) project *Thrice Upon a Time* also works with the physical imprint. In 1989, when England was fourteen, her parents were forced to sell her childhood home, a dairy stud farm in Australia, due to falling milk prices. Twenty-two years later, in 2010, England returned to the property with her parents, and gave them color negatives she had previously taken of places on the farm where her parents had photographed her as a child. She asked them to affix the negatives to the soles of their shoes and meander through the homestead. As they walked throughout the farm, the negatives became torn, damaged, and imprinted with dirt and debris. England then took the fragile negatives and printed pictures from them. As she poetically describes, the project is “a movement of reclamation and transcription. Since I cannot work the land with my hands, I work it through the lens, and allow it to work the lens, too, in a sense, through the tread of my parents.”¹⁰ England makes work inflected with the notion



Odette England, *Dad #4 (Left Foot)*, 2012, pigment print, 31.3 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Klompching Gallery, New York

of the Australian “walkabout,” in common usage meaning the Aboriginal custom of a person leaving their daily routine and setting off alone and into the wilderness on foot on a spiritual quest. Here, England directs her parents in her own version of the walkabout, where a ritualistic journey provides battered, yet beautiful, physical evidence that suggests a sacred and emotional attachment to place.



Jim Campbell, *Motion and Rest*, 2002, Custom electronics, 768 LEDs, 29 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Best known as an electronics artist and widely considered a leading pioneer of new media, **Jim Campbell** (American, b. 1956) explores psychological relationships among time, movement, memory, and technology in multimedia works. *Motion and Rest* (2002) depicts a person in stride reduced to single pixels of light. Campbell draws on his training as a mathematician and engineer, as well as on the inspiration of Eadweard Muybridge's nineteenth-century stop-motion photographs when creating this work. Feeding footage of a lone, silhouetted walking figure through a panel of hundreds of tiny, white light-emitting diodes (LEDs), Campbell updates Muybridge's approach. Unlike the photographs by Muybridge and most others, the figure is defined not by the light reflecting off it, but rather as a negative image where the space surrounding the figure emits light. He also chooses a subject with an obvious physical impairment; the man hobbles as he walks. Similarly, Campbell's *Fundamental Interval (Commuters)* (2010) uses photography and LED lights to abstract people walking through Grand Central Station in New York. A translucent still photograph of commuters in motion is laid on top of the LEDs, which when

activated create shadow-like figures who appear to traverse the space and weave between the people in the photograph. This mesmerizing light sculpture crystalizes information recorded photographically to the point that only the commuters' gaits remain intelligible, and only the movement, no other element of their appearance, remains expressively meaningful. Ultimately, Campbell's work illustrates how little information is needed to impart a sense of ambulation and character, as he lets us fill in the gaps of information and ascribe our own narrative to his work.

Walks of different types—biographical, political, social, conceptual—have fueled many artworks, inviting reconsideration of the most mundane of acts, among other things. John Dewey once wrote, "The essence of the art object lies in the dynamic activity through which it is created and perceived."¹¹ Applying Dewey's observation to photography, the essence of many pictures, regardless of when made, can be located, at least in part, in the act of taking steps.

Karen Irvine, Curator and Associate Director

Endnotes

- 1 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 6.
- 2 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964).
- 3 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 51.
- 4 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1934), p. 11.
- 5 Simryn Gill, quoted by Michael Fitzgerald, "Against Blankness: The Inhabiting Spaces of Simryn Gill," *ArtAsiaPacific*, March/April 2013, artasisapacific.com.
- 6 John Coplans, *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum and The New York Graphic Society, 1968), p. 11.
- 7 Hamish Fulton, *One Hundred Walks*, exh. cat. (The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1991), p. 9.
- 8 Hamish Fulton, *Walking Journey* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), p. 16.
- 9 Liene Bosquê and Nicole Seisler, citysouvenirs.wordpress.com.
- 10 Odette England, odetteengland.com.
- 11 Dewey, p. 48.