

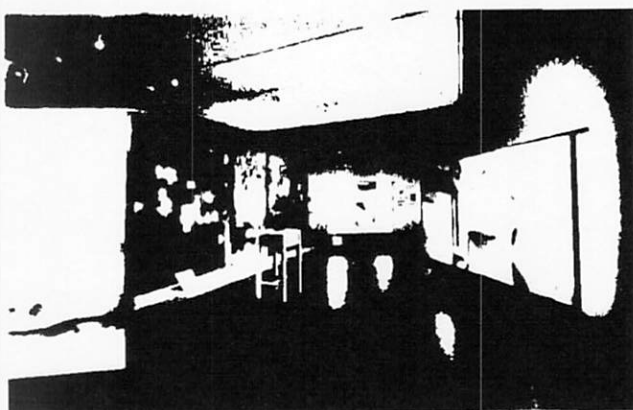
Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie

THE BARNES FOUNDATION
PHILADELPHIA
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The Barnes Foundation's *Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie* is the third version of this exhibition curated by Thom Collins, currently executive director and president of the Barnes Foundation. While executive director of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore, Collins oversaw the first version, *Crowd of the Person* (on view October 21, 2005–January 14, 2006). A second iteration took place at SUNY Purchase's Neuberger Museum of Art (*Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie*; January 20–April 13, 2008) where Collins was then director. All of the exhibitions are intrinsically alike, yet also show intriguing signs of reworking based on Collins's playing with the notion of flânerie in a manner that speaks to an impressive dedication to pondering it as a viable artistic practice re-emerging since the 1950s, and with a decisive vigor since the turn of the twenty-first century. The current exhibition benefits by its proximity to the Barnes's permanent collection (featuring so many works reflecting original flânerie), as well as through the commissioning of new works specific to the streets of Philadelphia. While I do not necessarily agree with Collins's definition of flânerie in all cases, I do commend his wrestling with the concept, all the more so because of his dedication to defining it through contemporary art. I appreciate how slippery the concept can be.

Flânerie's terminological shiftiness is nothing new. When one delves into the history of its coinage and usage throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, one grasps how elusive its definition is. A word describing a sauntering gait, flânerie's origin is French, and it is commonly understood to refer to Parisian activity. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, the word was widely employed beyond France, mainly in decisively modernizing cities. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, flânerie's connotation was negative, used to condemn undesirable urban idling. To be a flâneur was to be a loafer up to no good. Throughout the 1840s and '50s, widening sidewalks and covered shopping arcades made cities increasingly conducive to pleasant strolls, and flânerie came to imply leisure, not loitering. At this point, the term signified ambling for the purposes of enjoying urban newness, which by the 1860s meant busy boulevards lined with trees, sidewalks, gas jets, stores, and cafés, notably in Paris. The tarrying presence of flâneurs/flâneuses along these brand-new boulevards became a positive sign of modern life.

In his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life," poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire contributes a further dimension to flânerie's evolving definition by writing of the "artist-flâneur" as mobilized by urban spectacle, driven day and night to make art through the visual translation of sensually embodied experience of the dazzling effects of cityscapes and their diverting, teeming crowds. Artist-flâneurs' urban-based creative production conveyed heroics to Baudelaire, brave aesthetic action in the face of the modern city that he had called for in his Salon reviews for years. Yet by the time social theorist Walter Benjamin celebrated Baudelairean flânerie from a twentieth-century vantage



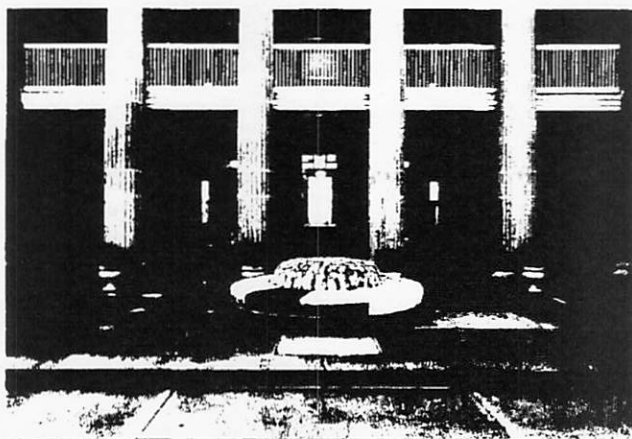
Installation view of *Don't Let Me Disappear* (2009–11) by Slater Bradley at the Barnes Foundation; courtesy the Barnes Foundation

point, he could not consider its practice credibly heroic. He was mostly pessimistic about flânerie's aesthetic yield for contemporary artists because he deemed urban life increasingly standardized by capitalism, thus restricting any truly creative wandering of streets. While bringing Baudelaire's ideas about the convergence of nineteenth-century flânerie, urbanization, and modern art to wide public awareness, Benjamin also declared that flânerie was made defunct by twentieth-century consumerism, so that its spontaneous, visceral reactions to the expanding urban environment were no longer really possible. Prescribed routes managed flânerie's wonder and shock out of existence.

In recent years, however, a distinct "Baudelairean turn" has reasserted itself as artists reclaim flânerie from Benjamin's conceptual clutches by reviving the reflexive pleasures of urban wandering as a vital part of being human. Once again, the aesthetic representation of the urban is accomplished through flesh-and-blood encounters in city streets, traversed slowly on foot, always with a certain stealth and usually from the perspective of crowd immersion. Once again, incarnate movement all around a city is deemed necessary to negotiate and characterize the radical transformation of today's globalizing cities. An embodied and experiential practice is once again so vital for recording urban life's temporal and sensorial array—what Baudelaire called the "ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent"¹—that it is often described as "neo-Baudelairean."² Much of the work in *Person of the Crowd* moves in the neo-Baudelairean realm.

I cite flânerie's history at length because Collins's exhibition title alludes to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd," first published in 1840, just as "flâneur" was shedding its negative connotations to assume an artist's mantle. Collins also makes a point in the Barnes's wall text of placing flânerie's origins squarely within Poe's tale about a man following another man roaming erratically through London's crowds and venues. The follower (the flâneur) recounts all he sees in fascinating minutiae throughout a night-long pursuit. From taverns to impoverished quarters that "teemed with desolation,"³ the flâneur tracks the man, providing forceful impressions of urban London in the process. Baudelaire translated "Man of the Crowd" and acknowledged the debt his artist-flâneur owed to Poe.

EXHIBITION REVIEW



Döppelgänger (2017) by Virgil Marti

This exhibition includes a number of "following pieces," reinforcing the connection to "Man of the Crowd." Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate description systems* (1974–75), and Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* (Venetian Suite) (1980) are all landmark photography/text suites, until now not necessarily quantified by flânerie. I would never have aligned these works with Poe's story without Collins's prompt, but I find the connection provocative now. Acconci follows his quarries unbeknownst to them throughout New York City for hours until they go into a private space. Rosler does not follow per se, but categorizes destitute denizens of New York's Bowery through their accumulated belongings and refuse in doorways, which she notes on neighborhood walks. Calle searches for days in the tangled streets of Venice to find someone she had casually met at a party, until she comes face-to-face with him in an utter anticlimax similar to the ending of the Poe story. These works all consist of photographs accompanied by notes/words/narratives that describe the urban followings in ways that recall the details of Poe's narrative. Acconci's and Calle's pieces have been included in all three of Collins's flânerie exhibitions and Rosler's in the last two. They function as "core pieces" in Collins's timely effort to establish a history for contemporary flânerie, significant predecessors for more recent work in the exhibition such as Daphne Fitzpatrick's *Broadway* (2005), a three-hour video documenting her six-day stroll along New York City's Broadway.

Indeed, one can label almost every video in the exhibition as a "following piece" in that it cinematically tracks a subject through an urban place. Slater Bradley's *Don't Let Me Disappear* (2009–2011) follows a muttering figure who wanders anxiously through Manhattan's crowded streets. I find the "following piece" analogy less useful when the artist is recording their own, often very conspicuous, performance amid a gaping urban crowd. Kimsooja's *A Beggar Woman—Cairo* (2001) operates just this side of the neo-Baudelairean since she is recording herself from behind, so that the tradition of the flâneur's surreptitious observational technique appears to be preserved. I think that it is very important not to lose sight of one of original nineteenth-century flânerie's signature traits, the reportorial power of anonymity, which Collins seems to underscore by

highlighting Poe. Kimsooja's piece is also one of the few works in the exhibition that expands flânerie on the world city stage, something that is essential in making a good case for the contemporary.

Collins's projection backward from Baudelaire to Poe—such kindred spirits—rather than forward to Benjamin, who disembodied the flâneur into mere trope, asserts neo-Baudelaireanism's currency and bears further investigation. An exhibition catalog essay (actually any catalog at all) developing Poe as more originator than precursor would be welcome scholarship regarding flânerie's renaissance. In the meantime, Collins is to be applauded for magnifying the neo-Baudelairean through this reference. The exhibition is also praiseworthy for its significant inclusion of the flâneuse. Though still not a possible free-ranging figure on every street in today's world, the flâneuse is given virtually equal footing in this exhibition. Plus, she is not just only of recent vintage: flâneuses' work in this exhibition dates from the beginning to the end of its story—from around 1950 to the present. As a contemporary review, *Person* includes the gamut of time-based media, so appropriate for art deriving from the act of moving through space. Baudelaire, after all, was only able to enlist a kaleidoscope and then only in analogy for the multifaceted effect of a city crowd. And while Baudelaire's essays and prose-poems based on his Parisian navigations brought his urban immersion to exhilarating life, they were nevertheless once removed. Throughout the exhibition, actual presence/movement in the city is captured by photography, film, and video to the extent that one no longer thinks of flânerie as just a preliminary practice leading to artmaking, but as the art itself.

Flânerie must always be credited for introducing the notion that dynamic cities spawn art that involves moving around a built environment, but it cannot stand in for urban art in general, especially in this era of "mobility turns." I think it is important that flânerie maintains its integrity as a particular kind of urban mobility among an ever-widening spectrum of urban mobilities, all of which may be fruitful for artmaking. The flâneur/flâneuse is a peripatetic artist as voyeur at the heart of a crowd, preserving his or her incognito to allow for an observational practice that is both aesthetic and analytic. Most of the works specially commissioned for this exhibition are live-performative spectacles that take place on Philadelphia streets, but they are not flânerie. Perhaps they may incite flânerie from their audience, but that is unpredictable. Virgil Marti's commissioned work, *Döppelgänger* (2017), is a wonderful exception. With fabric he bought on a South Philadelphia flân, Marti has created a furniture pouf that will travel to various locations throughout the city, both indoor and outdoor. By arranging for the pouf's travel thus, Marti has, as Baudelaire recommends, "set up house in the heart of the multitude."⁴ *Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie* is not solely about flânerie, but has it at its core.

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NOTES 1. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life: and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (Oxford: Phaidon, 1970), 13. 2. For a discussion of the neo-Baudelairean, see Kathryn Kramer, "Flânerie's Art and Measure of the Urbanizing Global," *Visual Resources: International Journal of Documentation* 30, no. 4 (2014), 336–53. 3. Edgar Allan Poe, "Man of the Crowd," *Edgar Allan Poe: Tales, Sketches and Selected Criticism*, <http://roads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/POE/manofcrowd.html>. 4. Baudelaire, *Painter*, 9.

Kramer, Kathryn. "Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie." *Afterimage*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2017, pp. 23-24.