

Dog Walking Diaries: thoughts on a work in progress

Laura Kleger

Our elderly landlady shuffles out from her ground floor apartment almost every morning, her slippers making a loud scuffing noise that easily penetrates the flimsy windows of our upstairs apartment. The rear of the property is paved for parking, a miscellaneous urban space that witnesses late-night catfights, early morning crows, and the daily tending of our landlady. Some days she organizes the trash in its colored plastic bins; some days she hangs laundry or plucks it from the clothesline; once, she laboriously scraped a trowel against the pavement where a weed dared raise its fronds (an indescribable sensation to be woken from a deep sleep at 5:30 am from that noise). Her daily repetitions, like clockwork timed to the rising sun – is there a groove yet in the earth between her door and the back of the building?

I moved to Los Angeles in the fall of 2004 after spending most of my life in New York City. My new neighborhood is sectioned into commercial boulevards where cars routinely travel up to forty m.p.h. and residential streets where tidy Spanish-style or inexpensive modern-box architectures rise one to three stories. The sidewalks are flanked by year-round grass.

During my first winter, Southern California had its largest rainfall in one hundred years. Houses were sliding into oceans, cliffs were washing away; nature was acting the portent, but for what? Once the rains passed, the weather



became so similar that days became endless, slippery. The temperature and the light barely changed for weeks on end. I was working freelance from home. I had no daily routine other than the sun rising and setting, and walking our dog. Had I lived here for three months, or four? Was it Tuesday? Wasn't it just Tuesday? My sense of time became woefully distorted. To re-locate myself in time, to mark the days as they passed, I began photographing the neighborhood. I brought my camera along for my late afternoon dog walks, when the sunset announced itself down the long west-east boulevards and the birds strung themselves along the telephone wires to sing.

People don't walk much in Los Angeles, where distances between everyday destinations range from just-too-far-to-walk to tens of miles. Even beyond Los Angeles, the slow,

purposeless walking experienced on a proper dog walk (not a quick, to the curb walk) is virtually erased from modern life. According to the urbanites I have lived among, walking can be done to get from point A to point B or for exercise, both of which require maximum possible speed. A dog doesn't like that kind of walking; a dog likes to stick her nose under bushes, or peer around a corner, or stop and stare at a neighborhood cat lolling under a car. Walking the dog is meditative. It involves a lot of looking, without obvious purpose.

Many of the artists and poets associated with Romanticism looked at a similar kind of everyday landscape in order to locate the divine diffused throughout nature. Historian Hugh Honor describes how "in paintings of the least dramatic types of view, without any explicit literary or historical associations, early nineteenth-century artists made

their most decisive break with tradition.”¹ As the painter Constable wrote, “it is the business of the painter...to make something out of nothing, in attempting which he must almost of necessity become poetical.”² Thinking about the Romantics in our more secular present, it seemed that this contemplative impulse could still reveal (non-divine) meaning when trained on a quotidian landscape. I brought my smallest 35mm camera on the dog walks, suitable for quickly made pictures. I photographed what came across my path as my feet retraced increasingly familiar steps. I wasn't looking for anything, just at things. Optimism is inherent in this kind of looking – a belief that even in the most un-extraordinary, something worth noting will emerge if given the chance.

An iconic example of such photographic discovery within an everyday landscape is Robert Smithson's 1967 essay “The Monuments of Passaic,” a travelogue of sorts about a journey from Manhattan to Passaic, New Jersey. The core of Smithson's essay delineates his travels on foot through a ubiquitous, post-industrial, in-between terrain. He elevates distinctly un-monumental objects and spaces by declaring them otherwise, an almost celebratory gesture. Writing about a parking lot, he



states: “There was nothing interesting or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity; perhaps the ‘secrets of the universe’ are just as pedestrian – not to say dreary.”³ Through such statements Smithson reconfirms the Romantic's view of the landscape as vessel for the divine, positing that the transcendent may in fact be contained in the most anti-sensational everyday.

The specters of film and television weigh like a stone on the process of creating imagery in Los Angeles. Although much of the physical city is neither aesthetically extraordinary nor represented in popular culture, Los Angeles remains the spiritual core of popular visual media. These forms of entertainment promise deliverance from the daily mundane, and Los Angeles is the epicenter of this promise. Watching film and television, we seamlessly relocate from our bodily present to another time/place.⁴ Internet surfing has only increased our comfort with this

kind of mental transportation. In an era where we are accustomed to such out-of-ourselves experiences; in the heart of a culture that worships celebrities as real-life people we might one day become; I am creating a project rooted in almost abjectly corporeal, personal experience – walking the dog.

Although the form of the project is still taking shape, I have called it “Dog Walking Diaries” since beginning early in 2005. A diary records the mundane, the everyday. A diary is what I thought, what I did, whom I loved, what I wore, the color of the sky, the temperature that day. A diary records quickly, roughly. A diary is the ultimate subjective rendering of the world. In creating “Dog Walking Diaries” I remember that space and time are subjective, that place folds in on itself and that the experience of a neighborhood is accumulated out of repetitions with small changes. A diary fights the slow loss of everyday experience to time.

Will I form a groove in the earth, like our landlady, as I walk the streets of our neighborhood? Why do I turn right at this corner and not the next? Because my feet are accustomed to it, because the dog is straining in that direction at the end of the leash. Because perhaps our daily habits merely mark time until

our days are no more. If this is indeed the case, the dog walk in Los Angeles becomes a memento mori, each day so similar to the next, each step one foot in front of the other, each parted curtain or new flower or dented car another marker on the path until we discover Smithson’s “secrets of the universe.”



¹ Hugh Honor, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 67.

² Honor, *Romanticism*, p. 68.

³ Robert Smithson, “The Monuments of Passaic,” *Artforum* 7, no. 4 (December 1967), p. 51.

⁴ Victor Burgin, In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 158.