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## CITY BEATS

LAURA BRUCE, RAINER GANAHL, DRYDEN GOODWIN, ALEXANDER HEIM,  
BEN JUDD, STEPHAN PASCHER, JEFF PREISS, AND ALEX VILLAR

Curated by Berit Fischer  
September 13 – November 15, 2009

Opening reception: Sunday, September 13, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

“Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.”  
— Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*

The modern city is characterized by its density, its aesthetic and architectural congestion; its varying levels of socio-economic diversity and its plethora of social and cultural contradictions. The urbanscape can best be understood as a site in which multiple spaces, temporalities and webs of relations are co-present, and in which local sites and subjects are tied into globalizing economic, social and political systems.

In his 1991 book *The Production of Space*, French sociologist and Neo-Marxist scholar Henri Lefebvre writes:

“(Social) space is a (social) product [...] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.”<sup>1</sup>

Urban space, (insomuch as it is a primary, representative space of a given society) must also be a social product, a complex social construction that is based on a shared system of cultural values and the social production of meanings that affect spatial practices and perceptions. According to Lefebvre, it is the very existence of society’s unique “space”, conferred by socially produced meanings, that is the basis for sociopolitical ideology such as capitalism. It is this abstract and bureaucratic space that produces, imposes and reinforces social homogeneity.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s, the term “Unitary Urbanism” was used by the radical Paris-based collective known as the Lettrist International (the French analogue of the American Beats) as a critique of current state of the purely functional approach to urban architectural design and life in the modern city in general. Unitary Urbanism considers the psycho-functional realities of urban environment and envisages it as a terrain of participatory games, and as an experience within the social space of the city. The term was then adopted by the Situationists, who defined urbanism as a technology of power, introducing the concept of “psychogeography.” Their dissatisfaction with the nature and design of the modern environment — and postwar conformity — created a desire for sociopolitical transformations that could lead to a more interesting everyday world. They called for the disintegration of structural

borders separating function and play, thereby allowing society to function in a more stimulating and explorative ambience.

Guy Debord notes that one of urbanism’s problems is for example the ensuring of the smooth circulation of motor vehicles, but that a future urbanism might also apply itself to less utilitarian projects that would give the greatest consideration to psychogeographical possibilities. He defined psychogeography as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”<sup>3</sup> A basic Situationist’s practice was the *dérive*, literally translated as a “drifting,” a quick passage through different settings with an awareness of the changing psychogeographical effects.

The artists in *City Beats* respond to the psychological and the geographical of the city, and point out the effect of being in certain places — both physical architecture as well as sociopolitical environments and structures. Similar to the playful/serious strategies of the Situationist’s psychogeography, the exhibition aims to stimulate a new and critical awareness of the urban everyday.

Jeff Preiss has a daily routine of filming cityscapes, attempting to describe the volume of the urbane with an image. He says that “the parallel of architectural cinematograph to the logic of cinematic narrative space, the trance-image space one apparently enters while watching a sequence of images” has been a thread through his work since the beginning.<sup>4</sup> *Scan Odyssey* is an elaboration on this line of thinking in which a scanning camera montages a promiscuous array of international metropolises. The scan is not about one specific place but about the transnational “urban”. Rather devoid of references to the personal and filmed from the vantage point of the street, the work utilizes a camera pivoting restlessly back and forth “scanning” the facades, the architectural settings that structure a city’s framework that holds society, culture and human experience within its grasp. An endless, looped mechanical sound that is interwoven with eerie ephemeral voices and at a rhythm of its own articulates the anonymous and complex atmosphere of a city to the point of claustrophobic information overload.

Stephan Pascher’s work is based on investigations of place, its concealed histories, its backdrop and the relationships that underlie contemporary human experience. “Each begins with an exploration of a particular locale,” says Pascher, “then an identification of some contradiction or complex set of relationships within or with respect to a more general situation.”<sup>5</sup> In *Untitled (Once Around the Block)*, a walk around the block of his studio in Manhattan becomes the particular locale. While filming himself, the camera pointed at the ground, he kicks a cigarette butt along the pavement with the aim of getting as far as possible with the same butt. The self-imposed conceptual rule of a rather uncomfortable “walk around the block” offers an alternative view on how to navigate a city and reflects on determined movement within it. *Untitled (Once Around the Block)* — in which chance turns the familiar into the unfamiliar and the expected into the unexpected — meditates the meaning of private, personal and public space, urban planning (e.g., divisions of space into gridded “blocks”) and mapping oneself in one’s immediate urban environment.

The idea of urban wandering was crystallized by Charles Baudelaire’s concept of the *flâneur*, the “idle man-about-town”



Stephan Pascher *Untitled (Once Around the Block)*, 2006 (video still)



**Laura Bruce** *New Day*, 2003 (video still)

who observed and commented on the urban scene, and who would connect personal and collective biographies and places in meaningful ways. The contemporary idea of the *flâneur* has become a referent for understanding and re-conceptualizing urban phenomena and modernity. Nowadays, it may concern itself less with the personal and more with the discourse created through recording the action itself.

Not only do the present artists/*flâneurs* traverse this complex system of the urbanscape, but they also encourage the viewers to engage as critical *flâneurs* themselves. Creating spatial and time dimensions, they translate and trans-code information from one format to another, examining the notions of territory and time, private and public, connection and disconnection, homogeneity, anonymity and speed in contemporary urban life.

Nicolas Bourriaud argues for a new term — the “Altermodern” — to identify art made in today’s global context. “The (contemporary) artist turns cultural nomad: what remains of the Baudelairean model of modernism is no doubt this *flânerie*, transformed into a technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> The basis for this understanding is an “altermodern” culture that is reconfigured to an age of globalization, implying the process of transformation of local or regional phenomena into global ones, in which the people and — futuristically thinking — eventually even the metropolises of the world themselves might be unified into a single, universal society. It is this altermodern city, globally interchangeable, that is the workplace for the artists in this exhibition.

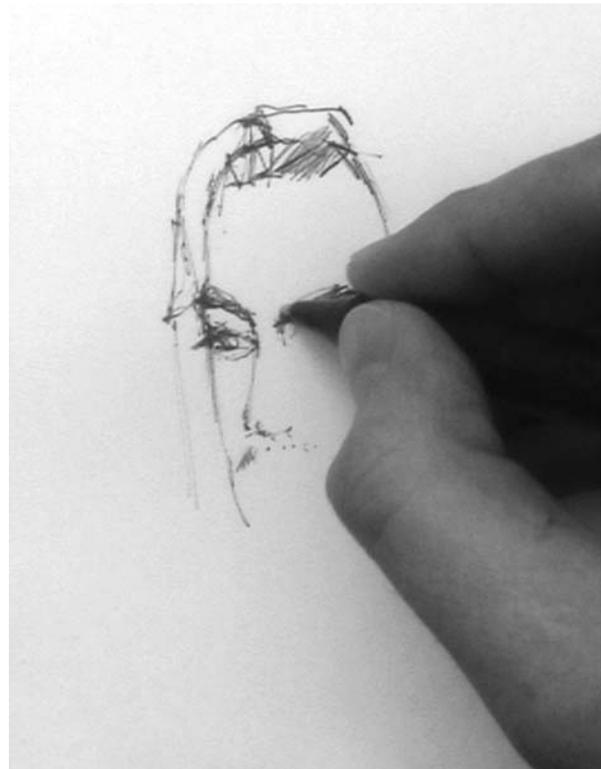
Artists like Laura Bruce, Ben Judd or Dryden Goodwin empathize with the anonymous city dweller, capturing and proffering a platform for their voices that express their genuinely intimate and public visions on the world, or daily processes to maneuver the complexity of the urbane mundane.

In **Laura Bruce’s** video *New Day*, a middle-aged woman, performed by the artist and in intense close-up to the camera, neurotically describes the course of her day. The unfolding narrative obsessively encompasses the minutiae of her considerations and decisions (what to do first — clean the apartment

or go shopping?) and the possible consequences of those decisions. The unrelenting monotony of her monologue reaches the point of claustrophobia and tedium. The video finds drama in everyday platitudes and banalities as invisible and overlooked aspects of everyday realities are portrayed in a new relationship between the borders of the ordinary, the exceptional and the absurd. The video recalls a journey into someone else’s mind, but also externalizes the daily routines and the otherwise unnoticed internal monologues of any random and anonymous city dweller.

**Dryden Goodwin** creates a particular experience between the intimate and anonymous. *Reveal* is an ephemeral encounter with a stranger. Contemplatively, the portrait of a young urbanite is revealed through a line-by-line drawing, not only disclosing the physical appearance of an inner-city youth but, during their accompanying conversation, also his thoughts, which in their own manner reflect on society and its conditions. The viewer is drawn into an intimate viewing and listening

process of looking at an unknown individual. Goodwin’s work is often “about the complexities of distance and degrees of connectedness between people...about traversing this space in



**Dryden Goodwin** *Reveal*, 2003 (video still)

a physical but also psychological sense.”<sup>7</sup> In *Reveal*, a brief look at intimacy in urban isolation is given, contemplating our pre-conceptions of people.

In **Ben Judd’s** work, certain marginalized communities in

society (e.g., trainspotters or Morris dancers) are the focal point, which he infiltrates as an undercover agent, with a genuine attempt to join them, yet remaining an observer. In *The Truth Will Set You Free*, Judd scrutinizes the speakers at London's famous Speakers Corner, a historic site of the freedom of speech and personal expression, buskers and "street-preachers" of London's high streets, all speaking their mind on soapboxes, with megaphones or through playing music. The single screen depicts several scenes: On the one hand, the speakers fervently express their beliefs about politics and religion while on the other hand, buskers and musicians express their supposed convictions in lyrics. Both scenarios reflect upon the public space in which the anonymous city dweller is given a voice, exploring the borders of public and private space, the represented and the genuine. In Judd's work these two states are interchangeable, as the heartfelt lyrics of the musicians are nothing but staged. In fact, key phrases of the street-preachers were re-contextualized while isolating and supplying them to actors and musicians to be performed again on stage or in public.

The element of performance in the exhibition runs through most of the works, with many of the artists acting as protagonist, the medium that wades through some self-imposed experience. The relation between time, place and body is linked to their immediate environment as the artists discover their own rhythm within the urban space. The works contemplate daily behaviors of individuals based on social habits or norms, suggesting the concept of "performativity" in Judith Butler's sense of the term. She argues that the concept of performativity is bound to the body, which is always dependent on its cultural form, bound to culturally specific perception and is to be defined with an understanding that subject, power, identity and discourse are interlaced.<sup>8</sup>

Alex Villar is interested in "power relationships...how the subject is shaped by these circumstances but also in how this subject may redirect this situation."<sup>9</sup> His works create a juxtaposition between his own physical body and conventional regulating systems. With absurd and minor performative interventions of seemingly irrational behaviors, he not only draws attention to functionless spaces and instrumental logic of a city's design, but also creates a critical awareness of our constructed physical and habitual homogeneity in our daily routines within the scope of the city. With a rhythmic succession of images, he visualizes in *Irrational Intervals* the codes of the smoking ban at workplaces while he is having his cigarette break, positioning his body into marginal, non-functional urban architectural pockets that are intrinsically un-administered spaces. Quietly, as if depleted of the busy flow of street life, the scene is repeated in various different architectural settings pinpointing the artificial uniformity and constitutive powers of urban design.

Rainer Ganahl instead operates within and reacts to the highly administered and grand places of the city — the street. For more than a decade has he been racing against the flow of the city on his bicycle. Holding not the handlebar, but rather a camera, he cycles against major cities' traffic regulations around the world. Ganahl is anything but suicidal; rather he

literally tries to create new ways of seeing the city. At a pace and rhythm of his own, he sets his own logic to transgress the mandatory rules of traffic that regulate our daily lives. His provocative performance, apparent in *Bicycling Broadway*, reflects not only on politics, the environment, urban planning and the relegated position of the individual in a highly



Ben Judd *The Truth Will Set You Free*, 2005 (video still)

governed world, but also acts as a critique on worldwide car culture. In his 1955 essay *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, Guy Debord noted that "the present abundance of private cars is nothing but the result of the constant propaganda by which capitalist production persuades the masses — and this case is one of its most astonishing successes — that the possession of a car is one of the privileges our society reserves for its privileged members."<sup>10</sup>

An important aspect of the exhibition is rhythm and its concerns with issues of change, repetition, identity, contrast and continuity. In his posthumous 1992 collection of essays *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre uses the space-and-time unifying concept of rhythm to flesh out the complexities of every-



Alex Villar *Irrational Intervals*, 2002 (video still)

day life, collective discipline and necessities of everyday work. The pulse and beat of a metropolis are pervaded by recurring and regulated patterns and repetitions of behaviors — habits and urban rituals meant to help negotiate daily urban life. The rhythmic elements of the works throughout the exhibition become an aspect of an analytical tool to explore the social, cultural and physical dimensions of the city, be it the sound of twitchy video camera, the pulse of bicycle pedals, the monotonic recap of a day, the rhythmic, chance-defined kicking of a cigarette butt or actual musical compositions. Prescriptive codes that define rhythms of our daily life, everyday order and flexibility correlate with micro-geographies in which the human body defines the social and biological rhythm.

In **Alexander Heim's** video *Recycling Bottles*, "it is like witnessing an accidental piece of music, which was never written or intended."<sup>11</sup> Heim's work observes and captures a moment of little intrinsic value in quotidian life. In this video, recyclables are carried to the disposal container. Seemingly accidental, a camera pointing towards the sky is placed inside a box filled with the glass bottles that are being carried to the container. Rhythmic noises of the rattling bottles accompany the route. His works are often like videographic found objects that generate awareness for our all-embracing visual and aural environment, addressing the little things that seem to have a life of their own. Heim "creates an arena in which everyday detritus sits alongside elements of



**Rainer Ganahl** *Bicycling Broadway (Part I)*, 2006 (video still)



**Alexander Heim** *Untitled (Recycling Bottles)*, 2003 (video still)

public, framework and content. While interrogating the ways our daily actions are conditioned and controlled, *City Beats* creates a temporal look at urban space and the human condition within it. □

— *Berit Fischer*  
2009

## NOTES

1. Lefebvre, Henri *The Production of Space*, Blackwell 1991, p. 26.
2. Lefebvre, Henri *The Production of Space*, <http://www.notbored.org/space.html>, last accessed 1. July, 2009.
3. Debord, Guy *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, 1955, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/Sl/en/display/2>, last accessed 13.May, 2009.
4. Email conversation with the artist, June 2006.
5. Stephan Pascher, Public Lecture - about own work, <http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:QqFgUThK23UJ:www.djk.nu/aktiviteter/filer-aktiviteter/StephanPascherArtistStatement2009.pdf+stephan+pascher&cd=13&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=de&client=firefox-a>, last accessed 13. June 2009.
6. Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Altermodern*, Tate Triennial, 2009. The Altermodern emphasizes in particular that multiculturalism and identity are overtaken and that in this globalized state of culture, the artists respond to the new globalized perception while traversing the global trans-national culture. The artist becomes 'homo viator', the prototype of the contemporary traveler.
7. Interview with Sarah Elson, *Art World* Feb/March 2009, p. 92.
8. See Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 1997.
9. Interview with Alex Villar by Stella d'Ailly and Aldy Milliken, *iaspis*, August, 2007, [http://www.scribd.com/full/3197671?access\\_key=key-11cpaucjpkfa1mqf8o1o](http://www.scribd.com/full/3197671?access_key=key-11cpaucjpkfa1mqf8o1o), last accessed 13. June, 2009.
10. Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/Sl/en/display/2>, last accessed 26 May 2009.
11. Artist statement.
12. *Nought to Sixty*, Issue 2/June programme, 2008, p.4.

## BIOGRAPHY

Berit Fischer has been an independent curator for contemporary art since 1999. Previously based in New York and London, she currently lives and works in Berlin, Germany. She is one of the co-founding curators of The Brewster Project (2001) and has curated shows in the U.S.A. including the Brooklyn Waterfront Outdoor Sculpture exhibition at the Fulton Ferry Park, D.U.M.B.O Arts Festival, and Cuchifritos, and internationally at *Intrude 366* at Zendai MoMA, Shanghai (China) and the *Standpoint Gallery* (London, UK) among many others. She was awarded a residency at Delfina Studio Trust (London, UK) and participated at the European Course for Contemporary Art Curators (Milan, Italy) with visiting professor Charles Esche. Additionally, Ms. Fischer has worked since 2006 for the arts journal *Aterall* (London, UK).

## CHECKLIST

### LAURA BRUCE

*NEW DAY*, 2003  
Video  
10 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### RAINER GANAHL

*BICYCLING BROADWAY  
(PART I)*, 2006  
Video  
60 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### DRYDEN GOODWIN

*REVEAL*, 2003  
Video  
15 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### ALEXANDER HEIM

*UNTITLED (RECYCLING  
BOTTLES)*, 2003  
Video  
7:38 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### BEN JUDD

*THE TRUTH WILL SET  
YOU FREE*, 2005  
Video  
11 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### STEPHAN PASCHER

*UNTITLED (ONCE  
AROUND THE BLOCK)*,  
2006  
Video  
17:03 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### JEFF PREISS

*SCAN ODYSSEY*,  
1997-2005  
Video  
44:59 minutes, sound  
Courtesy the artist

### ALEX VILLAR

*IRRATIONAL INTERVALS*,  
2002  
Video  
7:56 minutes, silent  
Courtesy the artist

Cover: **Jeff Preiss**, *Scan Odyssey*, 1997-2005 (video stills)

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