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Walking West: a dérive along the “longest, wickedest street in America”

Abstract

Walking West centres on a dérive by the author along Denver’s Colfax Ave, the “longest , wickedest street in America”, with this paper an account of that dérive and its resulting artwork.

Walking West comprised walking the length of Colfax in a single continuous movement while drawing a line on the sidewalk, tracing the route with a GPS device, while a satellite photograph captured the entire length of the street in a single image during the performance. The project additionally involved an outdoor screening of a film documenting the performance on prairie lands near Denver, and a gallery exhibition of a large-scale print (33x2m) of the satellite photograph and a film of the event.

The very act of walking has become marginalized in many American cities, yet by walking we can experience the city itself, at a human pace, as a space of discovery and encounter. The symbolic act of walking Colfax acted both as a lens to focus discussion on the role of the street in the cultural, social and political life of Denver, and as psychogeographic exposition of the urban ambiance, whilst acknowledging the interlocking multi-scalar hybrid nature of digitally mediated urban space, from embodied street-level action to the technological assemblages of surveillance satellites.

Walking West is rooted in a Situationist understanding of the dérive as research method; a exposition of the city’s psychogeography. However, this was not a pure drift, as it set itself strict parameters that owe more to a tradition of durational performance art whilst maintaining an awareness of the psychogeographic contours of the street. The paper suggests this hybridity asserts the continued validity of the dérive as research method within artistic research, through reflecting on the practice of the walk, its art outcomes, and the future directions it suggests.

Keywords: Psychogeography, walking art, situationism, Denver Colorado, Colfax Avenue, dérive, GPS, Satellite photography,

Introduction

Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these "real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city."
Michel deCerteau On Footsteps (1984:97)

This paper discusses a 2014 art project *Walking West* comprising a dérive along the “longest, wickedest street in America”, Denver’s Colfax Avenue, and a series of related actions, artefacts and events.

Colfax Ave at 26 miles (42km) is the longest continuous (commercial) street in the USA, stretching from east to west Colfax bisects the Denver metropolitan area encompassing the gamut of city's social, economic and cultural life (Figure 1) It was, perhaps apocryphally, dubbed the "longest , wickedest street in America" by no less an authority than Playboy magazine.



Figure 1: Walking Colfax Avenue close to the starting point

As part of US Route 40, it was one of the original trans America east-west highways; less famous than Route 66 but in its day equivalent, playing its part in the lore of the American transcontinental road trip. In Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* the narrator Sal Paradise (a proxy for Kerouac) stays in an apartment on Colfax hitting the local bars on his way from New York to San Francisco. Today on Colfax the faded motels and 1950s neon signs evoke this heyday as the 'Gateway to the Rockies' when travellers stopped over before facing into the mountains to Utah and California. It is pure Americana, a straight road coming out of the plains toward the looming snow-capped mountains, complete with neon signs, motels and colourful locals. Today, Colfax is known for prostitution and strip clubs, crime and bad behaviour, dive bars and music venues; it's home to classic neon signs from the 1950s sited outside dilapidated cheap motels that rent rooms by the hour, serving as housing of last resort to Denver's more precarious citizens. East Colfax is home to Denver's migrant communities, to well-appointed trailer parks home to workers and their families struggling to get a foothold in the city's booming real estate market, while West Colfax is locked in a constant struggle of commercial regeneration. As a street, Colfax is a patchwork of neighbourhoods and districts, some of them lively and inviting others bleak and forbidding; Colfax is one of the few places in Denver that had an active street culture, something that this author as a displaced Dubliner, grew to appreciate.

Geographically it runs almost entirely straight east to west, coming out of the plains through the heart of the city and westward to the Rockies. Colfax is a street that defines Denver and its history for good and ill, it is entangled in any understanding of the city, its past, present and future and for the purpose of this project both a challenge and a site for excavation, a psychogeographic confluence where I would let myself be carried by the flows of the city.

The paper will include discussion of *Walking West* interspersed with vignettes from the experience of the walk introducing each section.

***Walking West* Project**

in the distance a cluster of white radar domes with the appearance of geodesic domes dot the horizon, silently two fighter jets ascend in tandem from the prairie in an almost vertical climb toward the sky with the sound arriving slowly in their wake, it happens so fast I wonder if I'd imagined it

Walking West, was a walking art performance work that centred on a *dérive* by the author along the entire length of Colfax, from the eastern plains toward the Rocky Mountains in the west. All 26 miles (42km); a marathon. *Walking West* comprised walking the length of Colfax in a single continuous movement, drawing a line on the sidewalk whilst tracing the route with a GPS device (Figure 2). A satellite photograph was commissioned to capture the entire length of the street during the performance, and the event was documented as it happened with video and still photography; including fixed point-of-view GoPro footage of the entire walk. In addition to the walking performance the project resulting in an outdoor guerrilla screening of a film documenting the walk on prairie lands near Denver, a Redline Gallery exhibition of a print of the satellite photograph of the entire street exhibited alongside almost nine hours of unedited footage from the GoPro, in addition to an artist's talk at Counterpath Gallery.

The *dérive*

there's the sound of gunfire in the distance, call and response sounds like the pop of a handgun with something larger and faster replying, perhaps the sound of a firing range, perhaps not, gunfire isn't unusual in Denver, I've learned to distinguish the different sounds

The walking technique of the *dérive* is most associated with the Situationist International (SI), an avant-garde group of artists and theorists active mostly active in France during the 1950s and 60s. (McGarrigle 2010) The *dérive* was a core technique of the SI which can be traced back to the Lettrists¹, the Surrealists and Dada. It was described as a "passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances", and later defined as a "technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances" involving "playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects", making it "thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll". (Debord, 1957) In Situationist praxis it was closely allied to the constructed situation which were built on the existing practices of the *dérive*, It was not intended as a reworking of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, the dispassionate and detached observer strolling the streets of Paris, but as a mode of active engagement with the city. (McGarrigle 2014) It was to be a research process uncovering the psychogeographic contours of the city as a social,

1 The Lettrist International, one of the groups along with The International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association which merged to form the SI. Guy Debord was originally a member of the Lettrists.

transformational event which would change the city, as part of larger program to transform the way cities are inhabited. Guy Debord acknowledged it as a rough experiment which foreshadowed the construction of situations. But whereas the *dérive* was a discrete self-contained event the intention was that constructed situations would be more pervasive, extending its playful creativity to all aspects of human relationships. (Debord, 1958)

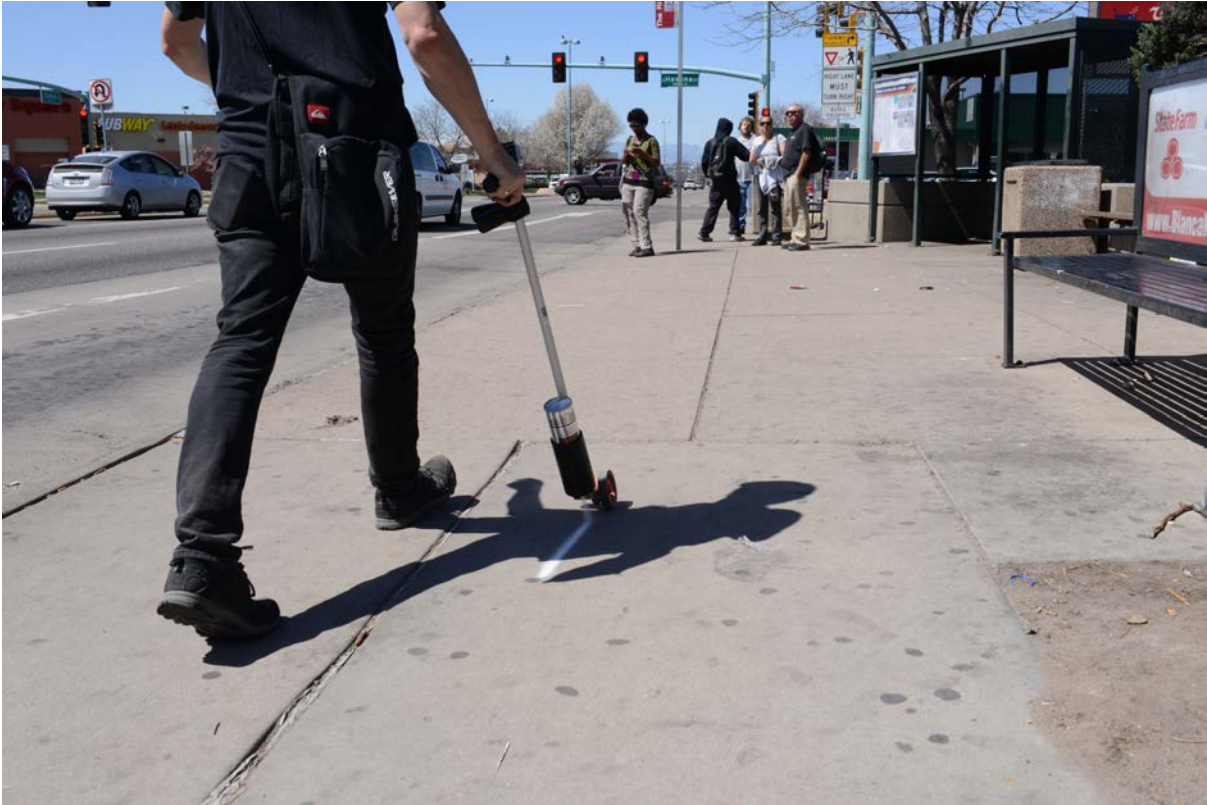


Figure 2: Walking East Colfax drawing a line

Walking West is rooted in this Situationist understanding of the *dérive* as research method; a psychogeographic exposition of the city of Denver as it traversed its best known, and most controversial street; moving from the eastern plains, through the heart of downtown, toward the west. However, this was not a pure drift following the ambiances of the street, as it set itself strict parameters that owe more to a tradition of durational performance art combined with a contemporary understanding of walking as artistic and ethnographic research method (Pink, Hubbard, O'Neill & Radley 2010) whilst maintaining an awareness of the psychogeographic contours of the street that are always already inscribed as traces in digital platforms. This paper suggests that this hybridity asserts the continued validity of the *dérive* as research method within an artistic research context and beyond. This is not to advocate for some type of neo-situationist nostalgic reinterpretation of the Situationist International but rather to interpret and apply these SI techniques in a new context that assures their continued validity. As Guy Debord said,

"avant-gardes have only one time, and the best thing that can happen to them is, in the full sense of the term, to have had their day. A historical project certainly cannot claim to preserve an eternal youth protected from blows".²

2 From Debord's film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* quoted in McDonough Rereading Debord, rereading the Situationists (1997)

Why Colfax

a lone cop is sitting in his cruiser in the parking lot under the Wolf's Motor Inn sign he's partially blocking the sidewalk facing the street ready to go. I can feel his stare from under his Oakley wrap arounds as I approach, I stop painting the line as I walk past him, I have permission but cops make me nervous

The project arose from a change in my personal situation. I had recently relocated from Dublin to Denver and was adjusting to a new country, in a city and region very unlike the coastal cities that had hitherto made up my experience of the US. The myths of the America West, freedom, the pioneer and wide-open spaces, still very much resonate in a new libertarian dispensation in Denver and Colorado – my university's sport teams were even known as the Pioneers. Walking has always been my go-to method of getting to know a new city in addition to playing an important role in my art practice with projects like *JoyceWalks* (2008) *WalkSpace* (2010) and *NAMALand* (2012) anchoring my research into locative media and the city and explored the continued validity of Situationist methods.

The street itself and its history had an attraction beyond its unique status as the longest street in the US. Colfax Avenue was named for Schuyler Colfax who served as 17th Vice President of the United States from 1869-73. Colfax, a prominent anti-slavery campaigner, had nonetheless come to political prominence through an association with the Know Nothing movement, a nativist anti-immigration populist party that opposed the influx of catholic Irish and German immigrants. He was later dropped from Ulysses S. Grant's re-election ticket after taking bribes as part of the Credit Mobilier Union Pacific Railroad fraud of 1867. He was co-author of the best-selling *Our New West* (1869), a travelogue to the newly colonised territories of the western United States which popularised Denver and Colorado, hence the street name. This complex history of Colfax had a particular resonance for a recent Irish immigrant to the US, still entangled in the often byzantine processes of US Citizen and Immigration Services, at a time of heightened xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment in the US, which differentiated between this so-called 'good immigration' from historically white European countries and current immigration patterns. The lessons of history clearly remained unlearned.

Walking West began with an embodied experience or knowledge of the street and the city; there is a particular sense one gets from a city or a district that is new to you, a sense that has a limited temporality before it becomes too familiar and enframed within patterns of habit and routine; it is not only the strangeness of the new but the frisson of the act of discovery, of uncovering, as the city and its patterns reveals itself to you. The Situationist *dérive* originated in their reading of sociologist's Paul-Henry Chombert De Lauwe's 1952 study of the movement of a student in Paris that resulted in his celebrated map of this student's movements over the course of a year that formed a triangle with school-music teacher-home as the apexes – in French the everyday of *métro-boulot-dodo*³. In the Situationist's reading this was indicative of an unnecessarily impoverished life and of the detrimental effects of routine and habit. Much of the programme of the Situationists was designed to re enchant the urban everyday with a focus on urban space; an effort that sought to, in the words of Situationist scholar Thomas McDonough, "to change the meaning of the city through changing the way it

was inhabited.” (1994) So it was in a minor way with *Walking West* and Colfax Ave, nobody walked Colfax, at least not the entire street, but it was there waiting to be walked, and the intent was through this artistic gesture to change its meaning by changing the way it was inhabited, and to highlight it as a place worthy of attention and consideration, through not only engaging the psychogeography of the street but in probing the validity of this method of research and practice in a place where it did not seem to have a natural home.

The Practice of *Walking West*

we're joined by local historian and musician Johnny B, who lives on Colfax and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of its history and culture, he recounts the story of how Elvis, after being deputised by the Denver police force, would patrol Colfax Ave in uniform pulling over motorists in his Lincoln Continental

The initial plan was simple. A performative walk of the full length of the street in a single movement, drawing a line on the sidewalk with a line marking device using chalk-based paint pre-approved by city authorities as safe for water table run-off. This was to be a solitary walk (Figure 3) but a convivial one, where anyone could walk with me for part of the route; I was accompanied by friends, colleagues, students and interested Denverites for most of the duration of the walk (Figure 3). As I reached the end of the street on West Colfax the sidewalk ran out and as I walked on the road's verge in the fading light I walked alone due to safety concerns.

The walk was from east to west, from the prairies of the east, following perhaps in the shadow of the colonising pioneers as they travelled west. The walk has a long tradition in contemporary art that in this context does not need to be rehearsed (Careri 2002; Evans 2013; Solnit 2000). It is important though to establish that this walk was composed of many parts that may not seem to fit well together that need elaboration. It was, and was not, a walk to reach a destination; for completion I needed to reach the designated end point to have achieved 'walking Colfax', but reaching this destination was always secondary to the journey. However, achieving what John Cage calls "purposeful purposelessness" (Chalmers 1999) was not; the walk as performance had set itself parameters and needed to operate within this epistemological framework. It was durational performance art, but not a performance that separated the artist from the audience in the headspace of the performance. It was, and needed to be, in-the-world, part of the everyday happenings on a street like Colfax – and I dare say not the most unusual thing that happened there on this particular day. It was contingently situated, responding to its own movement, rhythms and the changes in context immanent to the action – as for example changes in location, weather, happenings and incidents, architecture, street usage, and myriad other walking actions that take place in a street. It was both an action that drew a line and a performative drawing that marked the territory and the act of passing-by (Certeau: 1984:97)



Figure 3: Conversations en route

with a trace that can not, as philosopher Michel deCerteau holds, ever fully substitute for the practice of walking. Walking, he maintains (1984:98), is an appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian, a spatial acting out of place, an enunciative act that, as with language, manipulates the formal systems within which it operates to make meaning. As an artwork, alongside the time-based performance it comprised the line drawn, the photographic artefact of the gesture remotely captured in its entirety by a satellite 800km above, the digital trace of the GPS device talking to 6-8 satellites part of a multi-billion dollar constellation of satellites in orbit 20,000 km above, in addition to still images and videos capturing the walk itself. I emphasise the satellite component as indicative of the complex socio-technical assemblages that enable even what have come the most everyday of actions, while walking in the city we are walking through data as every action is always already inscribed in data. (Zuboff 2019) Duration, both of the walk and of the persistence of its trace, were important. The walk itself had a fixed duration and was finished leaving documentation, its trace, and the memory of the walk. The line was drawn with temporary paint that, depending on environmental conditions, could be washed away immediately in a rainstorm or still be evident many months later, it doesn't rain much in Colorado, while the digital trace of the GPS persists forever.

Documentation

I'm corralled in a concrete walkway alongside an interchange, the roar of traffic is deafening and fumes fill the air, a man sitting on his sleeping bag greets me, in a city-wide clampdown on rough sleepers this is the place of last resort, at the end of the walkway as I cross a slip road a panorama of the city opens up, down town on my right and to the left mile high stadium, home of the broncos

The entire walk was filmed point-of-view with a GoPro camera, the route traced with a GPS device, documented throughout with photography and film, a commissioned satellite photograph was taken of the entire length of the street during a nine hour window – the precise time of capture was not known but only that the photograph would capture my presence on Colfax. The event attracted some publicity from the media, Denver TV stations CBS Channel 9 and ABC Channel 7 sent camera crews to interview me as I walked with reports on the evening news, I was interviewed in advance for Colorado Public Radio and Denver's Westword Magazine and featured in the Denver Post. Walking Colfax, it turned out, was a spectacle worth noting, even if it was considered somewhat unusual.

Documentation similarly played a part in the work and its afterlife. The walking artist Richard Long describes documentation of his walks as a "distillation of experience, one which can never compete with that experience"⁴ while for Michel deCerteau these documents of experiences can only ever refer to the absence of what has passed but miss the act of passing itself (1984:97). So, it is with the contingent, phenomenological experience of walking. Nonetheless, documentation provides an account of an experience that must be considered as part of the walk itself, even through its absence in the case where there is none or, as in the case of Richard Long's 1969 work *A line Made by Walking* (Roelstraete 2010), very little. In *Walking West* I regard the work as comprising two parts: the walk itself as performance, and the re-presentation of that walk through film, photography, physical artefacts and live relational events that focus on the event itself. These components complement each other and establish the performative practice of the walk not as a work that is complete, but as a component of a larger discursive, research-focused event that seeks to generate knowledge centered on the act of walking Colfax, rather than as an autonomous art work. *Walking West* was a propositional work that is exploratory, dialogical, and open ended; the documentary artefacts provide accounts of the moment that, while they do not claim canonical status, persist beyond the duration of the walk.

Ancillary Events

pasternecks pawn shop - we buy guns and gold; Amigos muffler shop – custom jobs best prices; laplaza mexicana food; carriage motor inn; Dozen Roses \$8.99 - Bail Bonds; pisco sour lounge - drinking and dancing; sand and sage motel; saturdays nude dancing - all nude show open; Stonewall motel – no vacancies; good times - burgers and frozen custard; checks cashed payday loans; the irish snug; romantix adult boutique; toms diner - open 24 hours;

The walk itself took place on a single day but was accompanied by a number of additional events that formed part of the overall project. Two discursive events followed the walk, book-ended the extended project with reflections on the event itself and what might be learned from the experience. The first was the following day when I was invited to spoke about the event and showed preliminary footage from the video documentation at a public talk in Denver's Counterpath Gallery. The second, which took place at the end of the project when all other ancillary events had ended, was a presentation of the walk for the City of Denver Imagine 2020 Public Art Symposium in May 2015. This presentation emphasised the importance of art practice as engaged research method to expand thinking about the neighbourhoods in the city that were seen as problematic. It cautioned against seeing artworks as solutions that could autonomously 'fix' problems rather they should be seen as opening up space of dialogues, of

supplying alternative perspectives that are difficult to access through other means and opportunities of reflection that can expand thinking on the wicked problems of cities without being required to find a solution.



Figure 4: The Prairie Picture Show outdoor screening

The project involved two other major art events that were, in the first case, works in their own right that built on *Walking West*, and in the second a presentation of the work that, to invoke Richard Long, could attempt to distil the experience but would always miss the act of walking, the phenomenological experience of the street. The first was the *Prairie Picture Show* (Figure 4), a screening of a film documenting the walk which took place on prairie land east of Denver close to the starting point for the walk. The film was shown just after sunset on a large professional temporary outdoor screen with a high-powered sound system. The screening was a guerrilla event; guests signed up in advance and were only notified of the exact location forty minutes before the screening time, the screening was followed by questions and answers and informal conversation about the issues raised; the history and role of Colfax Ave in the city, and the broader issues of walking as public art. The audience consisted of a broad mix of the general public and those who had experienced the walk in different ways, as well as artists, professors and students from the local universities, as well as curators and art professionals. The event itself was, of course, a convivial social event with food, drink and company in a striking setting on a beautiful evening, emphasising the social aspects of walking art.

The second event was for the *Play Grounds* exhibition in Redline Gallery in Denver. I installed a large-scale, 33x2m print (Figure 5), of the commissioned satellite photograph showing the

entire length of Colfax Avenue during the walk, the photograph was exhibited alongside 8.5 hours of unedited footage of the walk captured by the GoPro camera attached to the line marking device. During the walk itself the satellite photograph was an element in the work that enframed the event; this was a performance to camera with the photograph a materialisation of the scopic regime of satellite photography, The print itself at 33m long was substantial, so long that it wound around multiple surfaces even in the cavernous space of the Redline Gallery placing the audience in the willing role of map readers, slowly working their way along the print to identify familiar places from an unfamiliar perspective, or trying to identify the walkers who were promised to be present in the image; a task it turned out that was not so simple. The video was as complete a record of the event that existed, albeit the difficulties of documenting an experience already mentioned, a relentless point of view perspective from a camera connected to the ground through the line marking device, its audio a deep rumble of the street picked up from the wheel's contact with the sidewalk rendering it deaf to conversations. The camera's unsteady vantage point placing the viewer in the scene in a engaged manner that was anything but seamless, and increasingly manifested the duration of the walk as the camera got shakier as the day progressed.



Figure 5: Satellite photograph in Redline Gallery

Conclusion: A Grand Gesture

This account of the walk has two purposes: the first to give an account of the event itself with all its component parts and to discuss its motivations and operation, the second to think about the practice of walking as method to ground a multi-faceted engagement with the city through the lens of one street. *Walking West* is a performance that follows from a simple instruction with absolute clarity, it is both a symbolic gesture that can be simply recounted as a story, and a *dérive* that avoids, as Guy Debord urged (1958), an over reliance on chance in seeking to encounter the psychogeographic contours of the street. From that simplicity and clarity of purpose, complexity follows. We are, through the walk, producing space (Lefebvre 1991); space that co-exists, juxtaposes, and interferes with myriad other space; material, technical, psychogeographic, relational. These processes of embodied engagement direct attention where it may not otherwise go, they attend to that which goes unnoticed, and they produce knowledge on what it is to be in the city. I have attempted to draw the connections between the action and its representation. This has touched on the entanglement of the city in technical assemblages and suggest that this is an area where further is needed to more completely unpack this dimension of walking in the city.

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Biography

Conor McGarrigle is an artist, researcher and educator working primarily with digital media. His practice is characterised by urban interventions mediated through digital technologies and data-driven explorations of networked social practices.

He is a faculty member at the Dublin School of Creative Arts, TU Dublin and a fellow at the Graduate School for Creative Arts and Media.

He has exhibited extensively internationally including the Venice Biennale, Fundació Miro Mallorca, the Saint-Étienne Biennale, Redline Gallery Denver, SIGGRAPH, FILE São Paulo, Art on the Net Tokyo, Seoul New Media, SITE Santa Fe as well as EVA International, Tulca, Green on Red, and the Science Gallery.