

Walking is still honest*: about being and moving together
October 5–7, 2023, SODAS 2123, Vilnius

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Flâneuse
Women walking the city

In the asphalt city they are at home.¹

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I arrived in Berlin in 2008. When asked about my arrival, as is often the case among foreigners when introducing ourselves, I generally tell people that I never properly moved to Berlin, but rather that “I landed there and never left.” I spent my first years here looking for a more stable situation, with several phases during which I managed to stay financially afloat with part-time jobs as an arts writer, artist or gallery assistant, but I still had quite a lot of time to discover the city. Back in the day, Berlin still offered a profusion of wastelands scattered right in the center of the city. On those disused pieces of land, rubble and weeds would become the usual signature of the city landscape. These ‘ungraspable’ fields, remnants of the city’s partial destruction, the many historical landmarks and the virtual layers of history drawn across Berlin’s map, literally fascinated me. Karl Scheffler’s memorable assertion from 1910 was more than ever perfectly matching: something ‘unfinished’ was floating in the air

and the numerous construction sites seemed to open a constant range of possibilities for the future city to become.² Furthermore, the young metropolis was still very affordable. Creativity strongly marked its fabric and a laid-back vibe was noticeable in the streets. The main motto we said at the time in relation to Berlin was: “Come as you are.” Coming from a small city surrounded by rural areas, I felt quickly at home in this unfinished patchwork.

Thankfully, my limited German language skills prevented me from easily engaging in conversations with the people I encountered, allowing me to maintain a sense of anonymity and an eagerness to get to know every inch of the city. My curiosity as a young and trained curator acted on me like a spell, driving me to discover art museums and the flourishing gallery scene.

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During my long walks, generally leading me from one art space to another, I was struck by the difference between Berlin and the other cities I had lived in. Quickly, I started taking notes and capturing moments or people which had caught my attention. At first a genuine way to keep enjoying the memories of these moments, these notes became a more systematic approach to connect with the city. It developed into a method to preserve traces of its ‘alternative’ or ‘marginal’ aspects that were being threatened by the astonishingly rapid transformations implemented by its predatory real estate market and facilitated by pro-investment politics.

Soon, I started searching for texts that focused on the practice of walking—a practice I use to

solve problems with my writing. I dug in further by hunting textual materials on urban walking. Most of the texts I found referred to *flânerie*—the art of walking aimlessly in the city—through the figure of the *flâneur*, a canonical male streetwalker born “in the first half of the nineteenth century in the glass-and-steel covered passages of Paris.”³

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All the definitions of the *flâneur* and *flânerie* I came across captivated me for they echoed precisely the excitement I felt when exploring the city, observing its passersby and heading to any blind spot on its map. One of the strongest and most beautiful texts I found on *flânerie* and its relation to the urban context is an essay by French philosopher Jean-Christophe Bailly published in his book *La phrase urbaine*. The text encompasses many great passages depicting the “experience of the city.” I will quote just one passage in which Bailly portrays “the city of the *flâneur*, the city where one performs *flânerie*.” He also names this city “la ville buissonnière,” referring to the French expression “faire l’école buissonnière,” which designates the act of voluntarily missing school in order to enjoy *flânerie*:

It’s neither a list of remarkable moments, nor a list of secret corners built in advance. The city’s event, the event it is for itself every day, is not something the stroller encounters at a fixed time, or according to a pre-existing interpretive tool set. Instead, he brings himself into the space and time where the event shines. He wears nothing but reflections, sparkles and splinters. Between the *flâneur* and the fragment and clue, a discontinuous novel is written, with its breakdowns

and awakenings, its bifurcations and dead ends. The city where one performs *flânerie* is a web of infinite connections, of which the stroller is only the temporary subject.⁴

Despite the poetic quality of such texts as above, I found none of the narratives of *flânerie* seemed to be something I could personally relate to. They always remained at a certain theoretical distance, deprived of a sensitive varnish, referring to an outdated male figure of the *flâneur*. Somehow this didn’t resonate in my imagination.

In 2022, looking for more literary portraits of Berlin and books exploring its history, I started reading Kirsty Bell’s *The Undercurrents*⁵, a brilliant historical exploration of her neighborhood on the banks of the Landwehr Canal. On the first page of the book, I encountered a short endorsement by another author, which echoed the enthusiasm I felt reading Bell’s work. The blurb, elegantly phrased, was signed: “—Lauren Elkin, author of *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*.”

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Published in 2016, the book by Franco-American author Lauren Elkin explores the paths taken by female streetwalkers, who have lived and strolled across Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London. At the crossroads of literary criticism, urban topography and memoir, the book elaborates upon Elkin’s own personal wanderings through these cities by interlacing her own experience with those of celebrated female figures, such as nineteenth-century novelist George Sand, war correspondent

1. This sentence is a variation on the verse “In the asphalt city I am at home” by Bertolt Brecht in *Poèmes* (1965): tome 1, Sermons domestiques, Extraits d’un manuel pour habitants des villes, Histoires de la Révolution

2. In his book *Berlin, ein Stadtschicksal* from 1910, which remains a crucial reference when approaching Berlin’s history, Karl Scheffler evokes Berlin as ‘a city condemned to forever become and never to be’.

3. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 3, Vintage, Penguin

4. Jean-Christophe Bailly (2013), *La phrase Urbaine*, Fiction et Cie, Seuil, p. 192

Translation of the author.

5. Kirsty Bell (2022). *The Undercurrents*, Fitzcarraldo Editions

Martha Gellhorn, artist Sophie Calle or filmmaker and artist Agnes Varda, to name only a few. Tracing the relationship between their urban explorations and their own creativity, the book examines what it meant for each of these women to walk in the city and how for some of them it played a role in the shaping of their own path in life and work.

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In the introduction to her book, Elkin explains she discovered the concept of *flânerie* when she was studying in Paris, back in the 1990s. Already a passionate streetwalker at the time, she recalls, “[...] I became a *flâneur* before I knew I was one, wandering the streets around my school, located as American universities in Paris must be, on the Left Bank.”⁶

When researching further on the figure of *flâneur*, she was confronted with its exclusively male gender. The female conjugation of the word itself seemed to be nonexistent in many dictionaries. Elkin ironically underlines a few results of her research: “The 1905 *littre* does make an allowance for “*flâneur, -euse*”. Qui *flâne*. But the *Dictionnaire Vivant de la Langue Française* defines it, believe it or not as a kind of lounge chair.”⁷

The figure of the *flâneur*, as mentioned earlier, dates back to the first half of the 19th century and is represented in an extensive body of work whose best-known texts include Honoré de Balzac,

Charles Baudelaire, Thomas De Quincey, Walter Benjamin and André Breton. This large collection of writings contributed to establishing a romantic canon of the stroller who wanders through the city aimlessly and without temporal contingency,⁸ observing its specificities. Detached from the crowd rather than a participant, the *flâneur* lets himself be immersed in the movements that surround him and is anchored in a contemplation which is almost a counterpoint to his direct environment. “The crowd is his domain” Baudelaire stated.⁹ The street is where he finds purpose and energy.

Additionally, Elkin explains that “in his more contemporary incarnations, [the *flâneur*] takes the form of the psychogeographer, charting and mapping the city with his feet, alive to the smallest shift in the psychic landscape, taking note of every bit of graffiti, every abandoned warehouse, every dog, every gum wrapper, and wringing them for meaning.”¹⁰

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Elkin defines the *flâneur* as: “a figure of masculine privilege and leisure, with time and money and no immediate responsibilities to claim his attention, the *flâneur* understands the city as a few of its inhabitants do, for he has memorized it with its feet. Every corner, alleyway and stairway has the ability to plunge him into *rêverie*.”¹¹ The factors of wealth and of freedom of time and movement emphasized by Elkin echo Rebecca Solnit’s “three prerequisites to going out into the world to walk

for pleasure”, except the latter entail a healthy body: “One must have free time, a place to go, and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints.”¹²

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In *Flâneuse*, Elkin underlines that most of the narratives which delineated the *flâneur* as a cultural phenomenon correspond to male perspectives: “[...] they’re all men; the cities they describe are those cities as experienced by men.”¹³ These perspectives take very little notice of the female presence on the streets and when they do it is often far from the active role attributed to *flâneurs*. As an ironic example, “Baudelaire’s mysterious and alluring *passante*, immortalized in his poem “To a (Female) Passer-by,” is generally thought to have been a woman of the night, but for him she is not even real, only his fantasy come to life [...]”¹⁴ Staying in the reference frame of the cities explored by Elkin, it goes without saying that for a long time the social standards under which women and men would appear in public weren’t the same. Not being permitted to go out without a chaperon, attracting unwanted attention whereas “it is crucial for the *flâneur* to be functionally invisible”¹⁵: many factors surely created more obstacles for women to be able to walk freely in the street, and still do. The markers of the urban landscapes themselves—be it street names or monuments—rarely highlighted women or conveyed the same symbolic importance when representing them.

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Lauren Elkin wasn’t the first to point out the fact that the *flâneur* and the cultural production around him repeatedly left out women’s experiences. Scholars have long debated the existence of the *flâneuse*.¹⁶ However, Elkin’s approach is refreshing in the way it raises curiosity. Instead of trying to elaborate a counter canon to the male figure, which would restrict it to “a secondary figure and a female somehow managing to engage in a male occupation,”¹⁷ the author undertakes “to redefine the concept itself.”¹⁸ She revisits cultural history by retelling stories of female city strollers that had gone unnoticed or were just never considered in the spectrum of *flâneurie*. Her choice to braid together her own experience with those of creative women and their heroines gives the book a delightful personal quality. We follow her through significant phases of her life, from her strolls in Paris as a university student to her peregrinations in London and her wanderings in Venice observing the city in search of material for a book. We share her fondness for bookstalls by the Seine and Parisian cafés, but also witness her struggle to find her way in Tokyo. In all these moments, her connection to the place, the language and her own occupations in the city influence her perceptions and weave a mirroring description of the way we physically interact with the city.

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6. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 3, Vintage, Penguin
7. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 7, Vintage, Penguin
8. “I think one of the most subversive aspects of the *flâneur*, or *flâneuse*, or the idler / psychogeographer / whatever you want to call it, is to throw the clock away.” Nick Juravich: *A (Female) Walker in the City: An interview with Lauren Elkin*, The Gotham Center for New York City History, May 8, 2018
<https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/a-female-walker-in-the-city-an-interview-with-lauren-elkin>

9. Charles Baudelaire (1863): *The Painter of Modern Life*
10. Lauren Elkin: *Stepping out: the flâneuse claims the city for herself*, The Architectural review online, 22 March 2019
<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/stepping-out-the-flâneuse-claims-the-city-for-herself>
11. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 3, Vintage, Penguin
12. Rebecca Solnit (2001). *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, p.178, Penguin
13. Nick Juravich: *A (Female) Walker in the City: An interview with Lauren Elkin*, The Gotham Center for New York City

History, May 8, 2018
<https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/a-female-walker-in-the-city-an-interview-with-lauren-elkin>
14. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 9, Vintage, Penguin
15. Lauren Elkin quotes Luc Sante (2015). *The Other Paris*, New York: FSG, in Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 13, Vintage, Penguin
16. Among others, Elkin quotes in her book, the work of female scholars Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock, Deborah Parsons and

Rebecca Solnit
17. Darran Anderson: *Lauren Elkin: the woman who walked around cities*, The Irish time online, 15.12.2016
<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/lauren-elkin-the-woman-who-walked-around-cities-1.2907186>
18. To compensate the lack of definition of the word *flâneuse*, Elkin playfully invents her own: “*Flâneuse* [flan-ne-uh-ze], noun, from the French. Feminine form of *flâneur* [flan-ne-uh-er], an idler, a awdling observer, usually found in cities.”, Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 7, Vintage, Penguin

Through enchanting details, Elkin highlights the many elements of the street that arouse her curiosity. For instance, her excitement at seeing the cobblestones of Paris being revealed by roadworks. These cobblestones, which are generally covered with a protective layer of asphalt, were repeatedly dislodged by Parisians in recent centuries and used as projectiles against the authorities during riots. Like many other details, their unveiling addresses the way places remind us of events or revive personal memories. Embedded in these streets, which we pass through every day, are the memories of other parts of the city that have since undergone urban planning changes or remodeling.¹⁹

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Even though Elkin's book only explores the stories of a few women who inhabited the cities she lived in herself, her initial research gathered a much larger list of female idlers who inspired her.²⁰ Such a collection says a lot about the impermeability of the pre-existing canon. Through her protagonists, Elkin addresses the challenges faced by women who wanted to move freely in the city and draw inspiration for their work from these observations. She takes as an example French novelist George Sand, who left her husband and children to move to Paris in 1831. Finding her cumbersome skirts and dainty shoes to be no-match to walk at leisure in the streets of Paris, Sand didn't wait on the required police permit delivered on exceptions to woman to wear male clothing. Famously known for her flourishing love life and her transgression of social and genders norms, she partly addressed equality between men and women in her writings.

Seeing the city as a source of essential material and inspiration, Virginia Woolf extended her walking routine to London's streets.²¹ Elkin crosses Woolf's path in London's Bloomsbury area, where she moved in 1904, worked and idled. Contributing to her creative process and to the fragile balance of her life, pedestrianism often infused the plots of her works, such as "Mrs. Dalloway's internal life, for instance, unfolds as she strolls through London."²² Woolf's own diaries and letters also extensively express the freedom she found in walking alone through the city.

During her PhD, Elkin started writing a novel with a plot that takes place in Venice. Convinced that her writing process would benefit from concrete knowledge and experience, she spent one month there, aiming to take notes on the everyday life in the floating city. On a visit to the biennale, she enters the French Pavilion in which Sophie Calle's exhibition *Prenez soin de vous* is on view. This visit opens a window of time for Elkin into Calle's youth, at a phase of her life when she returned to Paris after several years of travelling. Undecided regarding the direction her life should take, feeling bored and disoriented, Calle starts following people in the streets. She photographs them without their knowledge, takes note of their movements, and eventually loses sight of them. One evening at a gallery opening, she is introduced to a man she has been following earlier that day. When he mentions he will be traveling to Venice, she decides to pursue him. Disguised with a wig, she follows the man through the labyrinthine streets and the crowds of tourists, documenting his every move like a private detective. Obediently, she accepts letting her route through Venice depend on him, and his decisions shape her experience of the city.

21. "Walking features in every type of Woolf's writing, and in many of the most important of her experiences. At various points in her life, it served as a health-giver, friendship-maker, memory and muse, and was key to the composition of a number of her most celebrated novels. It was both habitual and remarkable, an act of defiance and an act of submission. Nor did Woolf discriminate between the walks of wide-open spaces and remoteness, and the strolling of city pavements, but explored in her work the role

Each chapter of Elkin's book interlaces such a rich ensemble of references and *mises-en-abyeme* that it is difficult to refrain from quoting all of them. To stop wandering through all these gems of anecdotes and cultural facts feels as hard as it is for a *flâneuse* to pass a bifurcation or a backyard door without heading into it or trying to sneak in.

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Reading the experience of these inspirational women, who shared the same enthusiasm for urban exploration, seems like being bound to a sort of empowering intellectual sisterhood. As Elkin suggests, within their many narratives may lie the potential for a shift in perspective: "A female *flânerie* — a *flâneuserie* — not only changes the way we move through space, but intervenes in the organization of space itself."²³

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As I finish this text, I discover Rabastens, a small town perched atop a riverbank of the Tarn, in southern France. Following the narrow winding streets in search of a little shade in this far too hot late September, I think of the strictness of Berlin's 'Altbau' districts.²⁴ My memories of the stiffness of the big GDR streets and the coldness of the facades have faded, replaced by the liveliness of the reds and ochre tones of the brick facades of the Tarn. Yet it's the same curiosity to understand the life of people living there, the same impulse to delve into every nook and cranny of the city until I possess a mental map of it, that draws me to the streets.

played by all kinds of pedestrianism"; Kerri Andrews (2020): *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking*. p.158, London: Reaktion Books

22. Ibid

23. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 288, Vintage, Penguin

24. An 'Altbau' in German (literally "old building") designates a building that was constructed from the mid-19th century up to the 1940s.

I remember one of Elkin's assertions which enchanted me for how it associates literature and walking: "I walk because, somehow, it's like reading. You're privy to these lives and conversations that have nothing to do with yours, but you can eavesdrop."²⁵

Rabastens, September 2023

I would like to give thanks to Marie-Pierre Bonniol, to Shoufay Derz and Paul DD Smith for proofreading this text, to Wera Bet and Aouefa Amoussouvi for their feedback and dialogue, and to Emilie Beffara and Namer Golan for giving me a nice room on my own to finish this text.

19. There is a quote in Italo Calvino's *Invisible cities*, which echoes perfectly this idea: "Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves."

20. See footnote 27, p. 304: Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, Vintage, Penguin

25. Lauren Elkin (2016). *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, p. 21, Vintage, Penguin