On the Art of Exploring a City

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On the Art of Exploring a City (2025) examines the relationship between the body, perception, and urban space through an autobiographical reflection on walking in the city. Using everyday movement through Berlin as a point of departure, it frames slow walking as a resistant practice that interrupts the logic of urban acceleration. Central to the text is the question of how pausing within the flow of the city can generate attention toward marginal, everyday phenomena. The narrative interweaves micro-level observations with an intergenerational memory, tracing the transformation of a child's refusal to slow down into an adult's reflective mode of perception. »Photographic seeing« is not treated as a technical act, but as a form of aesthetic and affective attention to the fleeting qualities of urban life. The text offers a theoretically informed, subjectively grounded perspective on urban perception practices situated between movement, memory, and visual thought.

We move through streets every day, pressing forward with an urgency that feels self-imposed yet strangely absolute. Always moving, always navigating—hurrying from A to B as though the next place might finally offer relief. The city rewards this haste with noise and friction: the jostling bodies, the sharp edge of stress, the dull weight of exhaustion. In larger cities like Berlin, this rhythm becomes a way of life, a relentless pace that leaves little room for reflection. As we speed through urban canyons, dodging each other's presence, we grow distant—not just from the streets and buildings around us, but from the selves we carry within.

I remember being ten years old, trailing my father during one of our family holidays. He had a habit of slowing down in places unfamiliar to us. »Walk slower,« he would say, »and you'll notice the beauty of things.« I didn't understand. I was restless, impatient to move on and see more. His advice, reasonable and true, sounded abstract, even ridiculous to a child eager to cram the world into fleeting moments. For years after, I kept rushing, though my reasons had shifted. It wasn't curiosity anymore; it was something else—a compulsion to arrive, to finish, to move on. I was no longer seeing; I was merely passing through. It wasn't until much later—at a random intersection in Berlin—that something in me faltered. Forced to stop by the red light and hemmed in by the flow of the city, I decided, almost without thinking, to take a breath. I looked around. A woman in a dress, its colors muted and graceful, stood across the street. Nearby, a man leaned against a corner shop, his entire outfit—down to the tablet in his hand—a study in lilac. A man walked two enormous dogs, their movements incongruously elegant. Smells drifted past: pizza, coffee, stale beer, cigarettes. The ordinary details of the street unfolded before me, not as obstacles but as offerings. The light changed, and I crossed, smiling faintly. What had just happened? Had the act of waiting, of doing nothing, opened some door?

As I continued walking, I noticed more: the interplay of shadow and light, the textures of walls, the angles where lines met unexpectedly. My father's long-forgotten advice came back to me, and with it, a faint ache. He had stopped saying it after a while, perhaps resigned to my inability to understand. Yet here I was, two decades later, stumbling upon the truth of his words. The city, when you let it, teaches you how to see. The stroll, once a fixture of Sundays, has largely disappeared. It was, after all, a way of connecting—with family, with oneself, with the rhythm of a world that once seemingly moved slower. Writers, artists, and photographers knew this; their work often emerged from the quiet attentiveness of wandering. Henri Cartier-Bresson comes to mind, his lens drawn to fleeting, unposed moments. Yet in a time when slowness is met with suspicion, strolling

has become an oddity. When people notice me walking slowly, phone in hand, they often stop and ask: What are you doing? Why here? Their questions, though tinged with unease, sometimes lead to warm exchanges. Occasionally, they lead to nothing. I've learned to welcome these moments. To pause at a red light is no longer just an act of compliance but an opportunity. The city, even in its most chaotic spaces, invites us to see. To slow down is to let the world seep in—to notice, to be changed by it. When I told my father about these small revelations, he smiled and said, »You see? That's what I was trying to tell you all along.« His words stayed with me, quiet but insistent, like the light catching on glass at just the right angle.

There is something about moving too quickly that feels violent, even if the violence is subtle, it is a violence we inflict upon ourselves. In a place like Berlin, speed becomes second nature, an unspoken rule. The streets are structured for efficiency, not intimacy; their lines and flows seem to mock the idea of pausing. Yet within this relentless pace lies the tension of absence: the absence of the present, the absence of attention. We hurry forward, but toward what? Most of the time, we don't even know. That day at the intersection felt like an interruption, but in retrospect, it was a gift. The waiting itself became a kind of seeing. Noticing the details—the lilac man, the woman in her dress, the mingling scents—was less about the objects themselves and more about the act of noticing. When I resumed my walk, the city unfolded differently. The way the sunlight hit a broken beer bottle and refracted into something momentarily beautiful. The way the cracks in the pavement formed patterns I had never thought to trace. These moments were small, fleeting, almost imperceptible, but they were also profound. I began to understand what my father had tried to teach me: that attention itself is a kind of love, and love—directed at the world, at the unnoticed—has the power to transform. These days, I walk slowly, more slowly than most people find comfortable. My pace unsettles some; I see it in their sideways glances. When they stop to ask what I'm doing, I explain in as few words as possible. »I'm looking,« I say. Most don't understand. A few do. Occasionally, these encounters lead to conversations or even a shared walk. More often, they lead to nothing. But that's okay. I don't walk to be understood; I walk to understand.

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