



Urbanity and Gender: what displaces a walking body?

Sofia Rodrigues Boito¹

¹Universidade de São Paulo – USP, São Paulo/SP, Brazil

ABSTRACT – Urbanity and Gender: what displaces a walking body? – This article explores the relation between body and urban displacement from an intersectional feminist perspective. Based on recent studies on urbanity and gender – feminisms, art and public space – we will analyze modern and contemporary artistic practices in the city, considering the friction between gendered bodies and the city. The aim is to discuss the displacement that certain bodies establish when walking freely through the urban space.

Keywords: **Urban Practices. Gender Studies. Performance Art. Walk. Intersectional Feminism.**

RÉSUMÉ – Urbanité et genre: qu'est-ce qui déplace un corps qui marche? – Cet article s'interroge sur la relation entre corps et déplacement urbain sous une perspective féministe intersectionnelle. Basé sur des études récentes sur l'urbanité et le genre – féminismes, art et espace public – on analysera les pratiques artistiques modernes et contemporaines dans l'espace urbain, en prenant en considération les frictions entre les corps genrés et la ville. L'intention est de discuter le déplacement que certains corps établissent lorsqu'ils se promènent librement dans l'espace publique.

Mots-clés: **Pratiques Urbaines. Études de Genre. Performance Art. Marche. Féminisme Intersectionnel.**

RESUMO – Urbanidade e Gênero: o que desloca um corpo que caminha? – O presente artigo explora a relação entre corpo e deslocamento urbano desde uma perspectiva do feminismo intersectional. Com base em estudos recentes sobre urbanidade e gênero – feminismos, arte e espaço público –, serão analisadas práticas artísticas modernas e contemporâneas na urbe, considerando a fricção entre corpos genderizados e cidade. O intuito é discutir o deslocamento que certos corpos instauram ao caminhar livremente pelo espaço urbano.

Palavras-chave: **Práticas Urbanas. Estudos de Gênero. Performance Art. Caminhada. Feminismo Interseccional.**



Introduction

This article was born as an offshoot of the doctoral research I defended in 2018 (Boito, 2018), in which I investigated the relation between writing and urban displacement. Starting with Baudelaire and his *flanêrie* through the Paris transformed by Hausmann, passing through Breton in his surrealist wanderings, arriving at more contemporary and performative experimentations, I sought to relate the bodily experience of the artists and the textual characteristics present in their works. The aim was to reflect on the links between the bodily engagement of these practices and the nature of the texts that result from these actions.

However, after the research – or towards the end of it –, something jumped out at me, something obvious that yet, for a while, it seemed invisible to me. In the course of my work analyzing the practices of artists in the modern city, I contacted with only one type of bodily experience in the city: that of the body of the cisgender, heterosexual and white man. In other words, the body of the hegemonic subject, considered “neutral” by modern white Eurocentric epistemology. It became clear, then, that the *flanêrie* proposed by Baudelaire and surrealist wandering were practices that excluded certain bodies, or at least disregarded them.

The question I asked myself was to change the point of view from which I looked at practices in the city. If before I was interested in considering the bodily experiences/sensations experienced by the artists who moved around in the urban fabric, now I was interested in reflecting on the displacement that this body proposed to passers-by while walking through the city. Changing the perspective of observation, it becomes clear that only the bodies of white cisgender men could go unnoticed in European urban terrain during the periods in which Charles Baudelaire and André Breton were writing. As hegemonic bodies, for whom and by whom the city was planned, these artists could walk without concern, without creating displacements or provoking glances. Their presence in the city did not destabilize the apparent urban *equilibrium*.

Given this consideration, I searched for female authors who reflected on urban artistic practices from a gender perspective and noticed that this analysis is still recent. I therefore intend to contribute to this debate in this article. I will trace a path from modern urban experiences to contemporary

urban experiences from the point of view of intersectional feminism, with the aim of reflecting on the possibilities of bodily displacement as a displacement of meaning.

Below are some of the questions that guided me in writing this text: *which bodies can walk freely through the city?; how and where can a body walk?; what does a body perceive and how is it perceived?; what does a body enunciate?; can the movement of certain bodies displace meanings?*

Where we started from

In general, much is said about the connection between modern literature and cities. Numerous studies from different countries have analyzed the relations between writers from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century and the cities that surrounded them. In fact, under the pen of these artists, we see a poetic portrait of this new way of life and human interaction. A way of life that was born with the industrialization of the economy, recent technologies that transformed everyday life and brought people together in a restricted space – the birth of crowds. Baudelaire, the great poet and spokesman for modernity, argues that an important experience for the modern artist is to be in the city and enter the crowd “as in an enormous reservoir of electricity” (Baudelaire, 2010, p. 30). The idea of conceiving new stimuli as food and fuel for artistic creation and as fundamental elements for a new sensibility was not, however, exclusive to Baudelaire. On this subject, the French poet Paul Verlaine (2002, p. 991) says:

I am referring here only to modern physical man, as made by the refinements of an excessive civilization, modern man, with his sharp and vibrant senses, his painfully subtle spirit, his brain saturated by smoke, his blood burned by alcohol...

Modern cities, with their cafés, bars, cabarets, shops, crowds, opium houses, trains, were transforming modern senses and spirits, creating a new subjectivity and, therefore, new artistic elaborations. Here, however, we must ask ourselves: who could enjoy these stimuli? Or rather, who could freely open and surrender to these stimuli, as the poets suggest?

When Verlaine, in the passage quoted above, uses the term “modern man”, we can understand it in the patriarchal Eurocentric sense of the

white man as a “neutral” measure for all of humanity. But we can also question whether the characteristics mentioned by the poet – “blood burned by alcohol” or “brain saturated by smoke” – could be attributed to a 19th century woman. After all, what experiences were women exposed to in this period? Or what experiences did society expect them to have?

According to historian June Haner (2012, p. 46-48), in colonized Brazil, the ideal image of women was one that was restricted to the domestic environment:

A proverb of Portuguese origin, famous at the time, said that a virtuous woman only left the house on three occasions: to be baptized, to be married and to be buried. [...] The female universe was meant to be domestic. [...] The Catholic Church sought to restrict women’s activities to the private sphere. By discouraging female participation in the world of politics and work outside the home, the religious reinforced the existing hierarchy between men and women and the ideal of female seclusion.

As we know, the isolation of women in the private space of the home and the exclusion of their bodies from the public arena is the result of a historical process that has been going on for centuries and has shaped modern society. The birth of a new economic model, the capitalism, gave rise to a social model based on the nuclear family. As well as guaranteeing patriarchal power for the bourgeois father of the family – an absolute monarch within his own home – and the maintenance of private property within blood ties – for those who owned property –, this organization was also a guarantee to produce new individuals, in other words, the reproduction of the workforce needed to maintain capitalism.

In this context, significant changes took place within the family, which began to separate from the public sphere, acquiring its modern connotations as the main center for the reproduction of the workforce. As a complement to the market, an instrument for the privatization of social relations and, above all, for the propagation of capitalist discipline and patriarchal domination, the family also emerged during the period of primitive accumulation as the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women’s work (Federici, 2017, p. 193).

Even when they worked outside, women were paid less than men. Discouraged from looking for work, they saw marriage and starting a family as their last resort. Women’s bodies were thus fated to remain enclosed in

the private space of the home. As Silvia Federici (2017, p. 183-184) also observes:

[...] women had lost ground even in jobs they had traditionally held, such as brewing beer and childbirth. Proletarian women, in particular, found it difficult to get any job other than those with the lowest *status* [...] the assumption was gaining ground that women should not work outside the home and that they only had to take part in ‘production’ to help their husbands. It was even said that any work done by women in the home was ‘not work’ and had no value, even when it was market-oriented. [...] Marriage was seen as the true career for a woman, and the inability of women to survive on their own was taken for granted to such an extent that when a single woman tried to settle in a village, she was expelled, even if she earned a salary.

This conception of society, which divided the genders binarily and assigned them either public or private space, shaped a certain type of urban ideal that persists to this day, especially on the American continent. This involves the creation of secluded, isolated neighborhoods, intended only for housing, where women can *safely* and *quietly* take care of their families. This ideal of bourgeois life took the form of the so-called *suburbs* in the USA, while here in Brazil it materializes in the form of gated communities. Although this is the reality of a few of the elite, this ideal feeds the imagination of the majority, directly influencing the conception of urban space. On this subject, feminist thinker Leslie Kern comments in her book *Feminist City*:

The suburban lifestyle presupposed and required, to function properly, a heterosexual family nucleus with one adult working outside and the other inside the home. Large houses, isolated from traffic and other services, required the stay-at-home wife and mother to play the role of full-time domestic janitor, supervising the house and managing the needs of the breadwinner and the children. As feminist planner Sherilyn MacGregor puts it, this constructed form ‘created an enduring infrastructure for the [gender] division of labor, which presupposes the traditional heterosexual nuclear family. [...] this model has always been of a small number of families and has rarely represented the lives of Black and working-class women. However, the predominant residential landscape is designed with this ideal’ (Kern, 2021, p. 53).

Bearing this context in mind, it is not hard to imagine that the only justification for a “good-natured woman” to take to the streets is domestic chores – shopping for food, fabrics, washing clothes, taking her children to school, etc. – and even then, this urban incursion is often done in the com-



pany of another woman or her children. In this way, women's existence in the city is constituted as an extension of the domestic and private arena, as historians Raquel de Barros Miguel and Carmen Rial (2012, p. 162) remind us: "as those responsible for supplying the home with foodstuffs, clothes, fabrics and everyday objects, women would be quickly identified with shopping trips".

The practice of women in public spaces was therefore restricted to consumption in the home. And if, on the one hand, this ideal of the bourgeois woman persisted as a yardstick for judging *the correct woman* in patriarchal society, on the other, we know that there were (and are) many women and people of dissident genders who cannot (or do not want to) fit into this model. Thus, the bodies of workers, unemployed women, widows, working class women and others never went unnoticed when practicing public space in another way. Somehow, the presence of these people on the streets challenged the prevailing patriarchal urban order, even if it was implicit. Not by chance, the figures that appear in the works of modern artists are prostitutes (known as public women), widows (who are no longer under male guardianship), the homeless (who have no family or home), etc. The bodies of people who did not fit into the normative heterosexual family model – who for a long time (not to say to this day) were marginalized, stereotyped and persecuted bodies – drew the attention of poets, novelists, painters or photographers. Their existence in the city shifted gazes and sparked the imagination of these men, who were somehow affected by these presences outside the heterosexual bourgeois standard. Examples of this are works such as the poem *A une mendiante rousse* (To a red-haired female beggar) by Charles Baudelaire, or the photograph *Fille publique faisant le quart* (Public woman starting her shift) by Eugène Atget, both dedicated to describing, representing, idealizing and even eroticizing these figures who escaped the logic of the traditional family. Women were thus told and portrayed in absentia. On this subject, Lélia Gonzalez observes that, like an infant, women have always been spoken of in the third person:

The concept of the infant is constituted from an analysis of the psychic formation of the child who, when spoken to by adults in the third person, is consequently excluded, ignored, placed as absent despite their presence [...]. In the same way, we women and non-whites have been 'spoken by', defined

and classified by a system of domination that infantilizes us (Gonzalez, 2020, p. 41).

Infantilized, women in patriarchal society are seen as people to be looked after. Unable to make autonomous decisions or take care of herself, she should always be protected and controlled by a man. If a woman is not accompanied by a male figure, she is challenging this prevailing moral order and taking the risk of being the domain of all. In this sense, it is not surprising that most of those who were accused and killed by the church for (alleged) witchcraft were old women and widows who were no longer under the male yoke (Chollet, 2018).

The absence of guardianship for people who performed the female gender thus captured the gaze and interest of modern artists. The urban presence of these bodies destabilized an implicit norm that was still being born and established – that only (white) men should feel free and safe in the city.

Modern walking

Based on the above analysis, it is interesting to reflect on two famous works by the Frenchmen Charles Baudelaire and André Breton: *A une passante* (To a passer-by) and *Nadja*, respectively. The poem *A une passante* is about a woman passing through the streets of Paris whom Baudelaire could not help but notice. The female presence of this solitary passer-by catches the poet's eye, standing out from the anonymous crowd. The woman, dressed in black (some speculate that she is a widow, because as well as being dressed in black, the woman is in mourning, *grand deuil*), then becomes the projection of a love story at first sight, never realized. The whole poem is built on this fortuitous, split-second encounter, in which he sees her, notices her majestic pain *douleur majestueuse* and observes her statue legs *jambes de statue*, projecting a blazing passion onto her. The figure is unaccompanied and enveloped in a grandiose aura, she lifts and swings the hem of her skirt – *Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet* – like someone who is at ease in her agile and noble body – *agile et noble*. There is no doubt here that her walk in the city captures Baudelaire's (1972) gaze and desire. She moves the poet's attention towards her, mobilizing erotic projections typical of the male gaze in patriarchal society, which can even feel comfortable lingering in contemplation of another body. Towards the end of the poem, for

a moment, the woman returns his gaze, and this makes him reborn, *renaître*. But who is this passer-by anyway? What is she, apart from having the legs of a statue? What does her gaze say to Baudelaire? Is it a look of complicity? Or a look of annoyance? We have no way of knowing.

As Janet Wolff (1989) observes in her text *The invisible flâneuse*, it is almost impossible to find any writings on women's experience in the public arena during this period (in fact, according to Wolff, we do not even have any literature on women's experience in the domestic environment). We are therefore subject to a construction of the imaginary by the male gaze. At this point, I agree with Wolff: it is not a question of belittling the work of these writers, but of making aware of the male – patriarchal – perspective that these works carry. We need to bear in mind, when reading and analyzing these writings, that the artistic experiences on the streets of modern cities were predominantly conducted by male artists and the presence of women in the city was narrated by them. We were spoken by in the third person, as Gonzalez (2020, p. 42) noted in a quote above. This “[...] suppresses our humanity precisely because it denies us the right to be subjects not only of our own discourse, but also of our own history”.

Thus, life in the cities – designed by men and for men – has been eternalized in the Western imagination by the male and patriarchal gaze.

Walter Benjamin, philosopher and writer on urban life, further crystallized the *flâneur* as an essential urban character in the modern city, and urban sociologists such as Georg Simmel located traits such as a ‘blasé attitude’ and the ability to be anonymous as inherent to the new urban psychology. It is not surprising that, given the perspectives of these writers, the *flâneur* has always been imagined as a man, not to mention one who is white and healthy (Kern, 2021, p. 41-42).

If the body of the white, heterosexual, cisgender man could walk around freely and go unnoticed, becoming just another passer-by on the street, the body that is not hegemonic ends up being the object of stares, provocations and even threats and physical touches. In this sense, the gesture of George Sand, a female author writing in the same period as Baudelaire, who wanted to wander around Paris, is extremely revealing. Sand ended up wearing men's clothing to experience walking freely through the French metropolis. Lauren Elkin (2016; 2019), an American scholar and journalist who researches the figure of the *flâneuse*, comments:

As she recalls in her autobiography, published in 1855, she found that her full skirts and dainty little shoes were no match for the Parisian mud and, similarly, held her back from going wherever she wanted to go, without attracting unwanted attention. ‘So I had made for myself a *redingote-guêrite* in heavy grey cloth, pants and vest to match’, Sand writes. ‘No one knew me, no one looked at me, no one found fault with me; I was an atom lost in that immense crowd’.

Performing the male gender, Sand finally finds the freedom she so longed to experience – and which was so common for her male peers. As a body, she now goes unnoticed and can finally wander. In fact, we can say that even today, in most urban areas of the world, walking quietly, without fear or harassment, is almost impossible. This privilege certainly belongs to the white male body, “[...] The woman who would walk through the city unimpeded, undisguised, is constantly reminded that she does not have the right to linger” (Elkin, 2019). Being noticed, looked at and approached is a habit for all people who do not have hegemonic bodies. Leslie Kern (2021, p. 23), who we quoted earlier in this article, writes that, even today:

[...] urban environments are structured to support patriarchal family forms, gender- segregated labor markets and traditional gender roles. And while we like to believe that society has evolved beyond the strict confines of things like gender roles, women and other marginalized groups continue to have their lives limited by the kinds of social norms that have been built into our societies.

In this sense, the solitary presence of a body that performs the female gender in the city, even today, seems to be understood by men as an invitation. In an article on this subject, anthropologist Nadja Monnet (2013, p. 226) recounts her experience while doing fieldwork in a public square in Barcelona:

Everything seems to be put in place so that unaccompanied women must apply for a ‘use permit’ for these places, a permit that takes the form of various justifications that they feel compelled to give to spend a moment in the square or to engage in a conversation with someone. [...] In fact, for the vast majority of male interlocutors, the solitary ethnologist that I was, working in this public space, was interpreted as synonymous with availability, of an ‘easy woman’, in search of adventure.

Given the above, it is perhaps no coincidence that André Breton's *Nadja* also begins, like Baudelaire's poem, with the writer's observation of a woman walking alone in the street.

Suddenly, even though she was about ten steps away from me, coming in the opposite direction, I see a poorly dressed girl who also sees me, or had seen me. She's walking with her head held high, unlike all the passers-by. She's so fragile that she barely touches the ground. Perhaps an imperceptible smile appears on her face (Breton, 2007, p. 65).

However, unlike Baudelaire, the surrealist not only observes the woman, but also questions her. Here, therefore, the girl's walk – with her head held high – not only mobilizes the author's gaze and desire, but also acts on his own bodily displacement. Breton (2007, p. 65), fascinated by the female figure walking alone and freely down the street, goes up to her: "I had never seen eyes like that. Without hesitating, I address the stranger, expecting the worst, as was to be expected". This woman, who later turns out to be someone who loves wandering around the city, fascinates him deeply. And so, the writer engages in a relationship with "his" passer-by. The relationship, however, is closely linked to the urban fabric. The meetings are always in public places, usually while walking. From the outset, *Nadja* is portrayed as someone on the verge of madness. Her freedom from men, the city and her own life, for Breton, somehow indicates this woman's propensity for insanity. Thus, the disaster of this relationship is due to *Nadja*'s lack of rationality, who embodies extreme freedom, this woman of "free genius", as the author himself describes her. Breton's perdition (2007, p. 97) comes from *Nadja*'s footsteps. "I also remember – and nothing at that moment could have been both more beautiful and more tragic –, I remember appearing to her black and cold, like a man struck dumb at the foot of the Sphinx". Sphinx – like the name of the hotel on Boulevard Magenta, around which the two wander, and where *Nadja* had stayed when she arrived in Paris. Here, too, we can see that the female figure will confuse/merge with the city. This woman, like the urban space, cannot be apprehended, found or defined. In her own words: "there, or over there [...] wherever I am, it is always like this" or "I'm not a findable one" (Breton, 2007, p. 70; 89).

Once again, I ask myself: what would this story be like if it were written by *Nadja*? Is she Breton's perdition? Or is he *Nadja*'s perdition? Why is this woman's wandering more enigmatic than the surrealist wandering pro-

posed by the (male) author? It is interesting to recognize, moreover, that throughout the story, the writer is astonished by the freedom with which the woman wanders the streets. If he can walk around the city like this, without causing any kind of astonishment, the fact that Nadja does so seems surprising to him.

The question that arises is how a body that performs the female gender is perceived by the hegemonic patriarchal gaze when alone in the city. Her loneliness, untutored, seems to somehow challenge the very logic of patriarchy. Without doing anything other than walking or staying in the city, this body enunciates something. It says, “I’m not afraid” (even if I am), or “I’m free”, or “I don’t need male control/protection”. According to Canadian Leslie Kern, this presence in the city is felt as a threat by patriarchal society. In her words:

A non-binary or gender-fluid woman or person who does not pursue specific standards of femininity is not there to please or appease heterosexual men. Therefore, they are a threat. They are out of place. They do not behave like property (Kern, 2021, p. 137).

It is interesting to note that the author uses the term “displaced” for these people who escape the patriarchal order in force. Here, this term is used as a negative adjective for these bodies that are on the margins of the hegemonic model – in other words, Kern interprets the situation from a patriarchal perspective. However, we can also think that the threat felt by the observer is itself a displacement of meaning. Someone who is normally at ease, dominating their position in the city and oppressing other existences, now feels threatened. It is in this sense that I have been asking myself – what displaces a walking body? I reflect a little on the example used by Judith Butler when distinguishing between the presence of a transvestite body on a stage or on a bus. Faced with the presence of this body in a public, everyday space, passers-by are confronted with the statement “I can perform any gender I want” in the field of reality. This statement, although muted, can, as Judith Butler (2018, p. 12) puts it:

[...] arouse fear, anger and even violence. [...] In theater it is possible to say, ‘this is just acting’, and thus to de-realize the act, that is, to completely separate acting from reality. With this distinction, the sense of what is real is reinforced in the face of this temporary challenge to our ontological assumptions about gender configurations; the various conventions that announce

that ‘this is just a play’ allow us to draw rigid lines between performance and life. In the street or on the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if performed, because there are simply no theatrical conventions delineating the purely imaginary character of the act; there is no presumption, in the street or on the bus, that the act is different from reality. The disturbing effect of the act derives from the absence of conventions that facilitate this demarcation.

What can be observed, therefore, is that in the case of a non-hegemonic corporeality, its presence in the city is noticed and judged in absentia, that is, without its deliberate intention. Their mere presence in the public arena challenges patriarchal society and makes visible some of the rules implicitly imposed by this social order.

To contribute to this reflection, I would like to recall an important walking action in the history of Brazilian art and performance. It is *Experiência N. 2*, by Flávio de Carvalho – an anthropophagic artist, strongly inspired by surrealism. In 1931, during an unpretentious walk through the center of São Paulo, during the *Corpus Christi* period, Carvalho came across a Catholic procession and a crowd of people accompanying or watching it. “Masses of people, their heads uncovered, watched the procession, enraptured, saturated with goodness and self-satisfaction. It seemed that everyone had reached the limit of heaven; some looked at the others satisfied, satiated” (Carvalho, 2001, p. 36). The artist then decided to try an experiment in which he would place “a reagent” – in Carvalho’s words – a destabilizer, in the middle of that homogeneous mass. Contrary to what Charles Baudelaire called “marrying the crowd” back in the 19th century, Flávio de Carvalho proposes “facing the crowd”. To do this, Carvalho puts a hat on his head and walks in the opposite direction to the procession – acts that were considered deeply disrespectful to religion. The population, annoyed, watched the scene angrily, but without reaction. Until one angry person shouts: “Lynch!”. The situation, then, got completely out of hand. From then on, it was the artist against everyone. Carvalho was forced to run, flee the crowd that was chasing him, hide in the attic of a bakery until the police arrived and calmed the masses.

The anthropophagic artist thus takes his action as a provocative act and literally faces the crowd head-on. For this act he is hated and persecuted. The *flâneur*’s observation was then replaced by an active experience. His movement, in the opposite direction to that of the religious masses, as well

as the accessory he puts on his head, the hat, gain meanings of disrespect for God under the gaze of these fervent *spectators*. His action was therefore intended to provoke the other's gaze upon him. As a hegemonic body, Flávio de Carvalho had to take on a deliberate action – going against the crowd – and symbolic elements – such as the hat – to make a statement. By clearly disrespecting the religious order, which organized the ceremony/choreography in the street, Carvalho articulates a discourse with his body, shifting the gazes and affections of the procession members along his walk.

Experiência N. 2 may help us make the purpose of this article clearer: a body can destabilize order, resist traditional values and thus displace meanings. This body would underline its presence in a political way, resisting and breaking with the usual choreography of the city and creating, in André Lepecki's words, a dissonant movement that shows, exposes and opens the cracks in the smooth terrain of apparently planned cities.

Politics, then, would be a choreographic operation to rupture the fantasy of public space as empty or free of accidents of terrain. Politics (as opposed to the politicking of politicians and their henchmen) would be an intervention in the flow of movement and its representations. Once again, we see that the issue must be dealt with as non- metaphorically as possible. As Rancière also tells us: 'Politics consists of transforming this space of walking, of circulation, into a space where a subject can appear'. This subject would be the political being, in other words, the one who is capable of exercising their (ever-present) power for dissent, which is also a fundamentally aesthetic exercise, not regimented by pre-given vectors of subjectification (Lepecki, 2011, p. 55).

In the case of Carvalho's action, the political being – to which Lepecki refers – is created intentionally. However, in the case of non-hegemonic bodies, it would not be necessary to take any explicit action; simply existing (and resisting) the patriarchal (racist and classist) gaze could be enough to cause displacement.

Contemporary walks

In this journey of mine, I finally come to contemporary experiences. I will outline a reflection based on three proposals for urban practices by women in different geographical locations, thinking about the possible displacements created by their walks. I will also consider here the difference

between the displacement (or lack of it) generated by the walking of a white woman's body and the walking of a Black woman's body in the racist patriarchal context in which we live.

I will begin my analysis with the work *Suite Vénitienne*, in which the French contemporary artist – white – Sophie Calle sets out to follow a stranger through the streets of Venice: it was a man she had followed for a few minutes through the streets of Paris and to whom she was introduced the same evening at a *vernissage*. At the *vernissage*, the man commented that he was going on a trip to Venice and the artist decided to follow him during his stay in the Italian city, trying to remain incognito. So, she gets on a train alone, stays next to the hotel where the man would be staying and begins a silent pursuit of the stranger. Calle's work consists of later presenting a set of photographs and texts that she produced during this pursuit. The artist therefore voluntarily throws herself into a real *espionage* situation, experiencing her physical/emotional reactions in a context of tension and suspense. The chase, here, as an experience, is the very substratum of the work. The lenses are more than her accomplices, they are an extension of her arms, it is through them that the artist acts – transforming the action of following someone into an action of espionage.

The camera/weapon does not kill, so the ominous metaphor seems to be just a bluff – like the male fantasy of having a gun, knife or tool between your legs. Even so, there is something predatory about the act of taking a photo. To photograph people is to violate them, to see them as they never see themselves, to have a knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed (Sontag, 2004, p. 25).

In *Suite Vénitienne*, the artist thus assumes the search and *voyeuristic* cruelty – characteristics of the classic figure of the male photographer – as the guiding principles of her action. In a reversal of *traditional* gender roles, Calle plays at following this man, becoming his shadow and experiencing another relationship of otherness. In this experience of persecutory drift, the artist embodies the figure of the classic detective, usually embodied by male figures. The one who follows the suspect through the streets of a city and camouflages himself among the passers-by.

Along with the crowd, a figure often appears in the game of hide-and-seek, of getting lost and found in the crowd: the detective, who in *The Man of the Crowds* would be the narrator of the short story, who has the old man he is

following as the target of his investigation. The idea of suppressing traces of individuals in the crowd is frequent; the search for anonymity, the classic image of *noir* movies, in which the criminal being pursued disappears, dissolves in the crowd (Jacques, 2012, p. 213).

If we start from the situationist perspective ¹ – which considers the game as another way of relating to the world –, by creating new alternatives for life itself, we can say that Calle engages in a playful process to invent new possibilities for relating to reality.

This game possibility, however, can only be realized because, like Baudelaire's *flâneur*, Calle can walk around Venice fearlessly and unnoticed. Her presence in the Italian city does not arouse suspicion or stares. The white woman passes by unscathed. Moreover, the artist can throw herself into this game without any worries, because she feels safe enough to abandon herself to the choices of the individual she is pursuing. In the embodied process of living, Calle wanders the streets of Venice in a continuous present, since, as it is a chase, she travels the city without knowing what will happen and/or where she is being taken. In a literally labyrinthine relationship, like Theseus following Ariadne's thread, her wandering through the Italian city is different from that of a tourist or a traditional photographer. She relates to the city without prior planning, without carrying a map or having objectives, throwing herself adrift² and experiencing the city in a unique way. It is clear, however, that this game created by Calle is only possible in an urban terrain where the artist does not fear for the integrity of her body. If she were following in the footsteps of a man in a city where she felt unsafe, where the paths took her to places where she felt her body was at risk, the experience would be different.

The success of Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* exemplifies how the color of *invisibility* in the racist society we live in is white. Calle can only *dissolve* in the streets and among the passers-by, confuse herself amid passers-by, turn the corner and cross the street without being noticed when her white middle-class body is seen as *belonging to* that territory. Would it therefore be possible to say that, finally, within this context, Calle – a white woman – can actually wander? To walk without displacing meanings or provoking glances? Was this possible because she was in the tourist center of a northern city?

In contrast to this example, the experience narrated by Denise Pereira Rachel in her article *As mulheres andam mal* is very revealing. In the text, Rachel (2018, p. 42) describes the process she developed with the Parabelo Collective, in a teaching context at CIEJA Emerlino Matarazzo – an education project for young people and adults who have not finished primary school –, in which she proposed “erratic classes”, which consisted of “the practice of urban wandering from a cartographic perspective”. Through the account of a specific day, in which she drifted with two students using a random rule based on the idea of the algorithm “first left, second right, second left”, Rachel highlights the impossibility of bodies that perform the female gender setting out on a carefree and unnoticed walk through the streets of São Paulo. She also shows us how fear and the notion of danger are altered when the body walking is black. After all, as Kern (2021, p. 155) observes, “just as patriarchy is enshrined in the urban environment, white supremacy is also the ground we walk on”. Just remember Frantz Fanon (2023), in his unavoidable book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, to understand how skin color defines the possibility, or impossibility, of going unnoticed in our racist society. In his book, Fanon acutely describes his experience of being observed and even objectified because of his Blackness.

So, unlike the Venice that appears in the French artist’s work – a labyrinth where a great game is played –, the neighborhood of Ermelino Matarazzo, in São Paulo, appears as a distressing and infinite labyrinth in Rachel’s *erratic class*. The artist and her two students feel watched, or observed, by a middle-aged man who appears along the way, and, with a growing anxiety, they continue walking through the labyrinthine pathways until they come across a large avenue where they can relax. The fear that grips them the whole way would not allow them to plunge into a playful adrift like the one proposed by Sophie Calle.

In her writings, Rachel (2018, p. 47-48) observes:

In a class made up mostly of Black women, the perception of the act of walking around the neighborhood where they studied and some lived could raise suspicions about the decency of their habits and set precedents about their availability for sexual practices. In this way, the surroundings seemed to be made up of macho looks, coming not only from men, but also from women who activate the dynamics of maintaining patriarchal power, who observe and judge the conduct of bodies that perform the female gender in the urban space. Were they fulfilling their commitments? Were they dressed

appropriately? Were they accompanied? Were they acquaintances? And if they were, what were they doing on the street when they should have been studying? This last question was one of the most threatening for some of those women, who defied many barriers to return to their studies. Such questions could soon mean that anyone legitimized by the patriarchy to assume a posture of ownership over these women would be aware that at some point during the day *their* women had deviated from what was scheduled for their routines. In this way, the experience of those erratic classes demonstrated that, most of the time when we women went out into the streets without a certain destination, a certain place and at the right time, we could be under the most varied threats of fear (Rachel, 2018, p. 47-48).

It can be seen that the movements of these bodies through the neighborhood gave rise to judgmental looks and attitudes, precisely because they said, “I’m not going to a certain destination” or “I’m not following the route that is expected of me in this place, at this time”. The idea that these people move around the streets without an apparent purpose – to get to work, look after their children, consume, etc. – gives rise to an idea of *freedom* that is confused with sexual availability. In other words, the other inhabitants and passers-by get *lost* in the face of such *freedom* and can only attribute to them the meaning constructed by our colonial and racist history. “According to Brazilian anthropologist Lélia González, this process of reification of the body that performs the female gender is even more effective when it comes to Black women, due to our colonial past that insists on being present” (Rachel, 2018, p. 48).

In Rachel’s experience, we see not only the experience of the Black body that performs the female gender, but also the specificity of urban practice in the cities of the global South. In a violence imaginary – since the beginning of the colonization of this territory – the city often manifests itself as a threat: a threat of physical risk for black people who are killed daily by the state; a threat of sexual violence for women who are constantly approached, harassed and/or touched in public places and on public transport. Furthermore, in Brazil’s large metropolises, there is always the fear of being the victim of some random urban violence – muggings and robberies of all kinds. Francesco Careri (2013, p. 170), in his book dedicated to walking, comments:

In South America, walking means many fears: fear of the city, fear of public space, fear of breaking the rules, fear of appropriating space, fear of over-

coming often non-existent barriers and fear of other citizens, almost always perceived as potential enemies.

However, it is important to note that fear has always been a way of controlling the population. Although it is often based on empirical situations, fear also maps the city in a certain way, making it implicit where and when certain bodies can walk. Leslie Kern states that, throughout history, women have had their freedom in the city curtailed by the fear they felt about being alone on the streets. However, as she points out, these same women are often more at risk at home – being victims of gender-based violence and sexual violence within their own families – than in public spaces (Kern, 2021). In this sense, bodies that perform the female gender and allow themselves to wander in a South American urban context – as in the practice proposed by Denise Rachel – are, in fact, claiming their freedom to come and go, confronting the fear and control built up over centuries. These bodies thus leave a statement in the air: “I decide where and how I walk”. It is no coincidence that they shift gazes, bring out judgments and arouse disapproval.

Finally, I would like to meditate here on an artistic action I conducted on the occasion of the II Encontro Urbanidades (2nd Urbanities Meeting), organized by the Escola de Belas Artes de Salvador and the Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA) in 2018, entitled *Um dia (One Day)*. It was a proposal for a 9-hour solitary wander/action around Salvador, precisely so that I could put my body to the test in the city. The proposal consisted of wandering solitarily through the streets while reading a text I had written based on another wandering/action I had done solitarily in Paris. The idea was to experience in my own body the profound difference between walking through the streets of Salvador and walking through the streets of Paris – and the overlapping of these two experiences, through the act of reading in movement, would update the abyss between the bodily reality of these two cities. As I pointed out above, there is no denying that the execution of this action changes profoundly when moving around the globe, but despite the differences in experiencing each of these cities with my body – a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman’s body, it is important to specify –, what I would like to point out is that in Salvador the event organizers did not allow me to walk alone. All along the route, a young monitor accompanied me, walking at a distance, to guarantee a certain safety. The concern was

understandable, but it made evident the very issue I was dealing with: the right to the city for people who perform the female gender. Throughout the action, I was guarded by a man who, even from a distance, ensured my safety.

Here, we can see that my practice of walking and reading not only displaced the gazes and thoughts of passers-by, but also displaced another body – a body of the body of the event – which followed me like a shadow, like an inverted and cruel mirror of Calle’s experience on the streets of Venice. The action I proposed, therefore, did not take place in the way I had imagined. By accepting to be followed/persecuted by a male shadow, my action failed. But the failure of the performance reiterated the questions it raised – if my initial statement was “I’m going to put my solitary body on trial in the city”, I ended up having to agree to change it to “I can’t risk it alone, you see, no woman can”.

Final considerations

Throughout this text I have taken a walk through the streets of history, making it clear how the bodies that perform the female gender have been restricted by patriarchal society and have not been able to enjoy the urban space with freedom. This social control, albeit implicit, has shaped the way these bodies move around the city and prevented them from feeling free to walk anywhere, at any time or wearing any clothes. In this sense, I proposed here that we consider the fearless and unimpeded walks of people who escape the hegemony of the white, cisgender and heterosexual male body to be ways of displacing the usual patriarchal thinking, imposing a statement that challenges the logic of our macho society. “I can walk alone”; “I’m also free to move around the city”; “I can be here”. In a way, this idea I have sketched dialogues with anthropologist Rita Segato’s concept of “expressive crime” (2005). Based on her research with men imprisoned for sexual crimes in a penitentiary in Brasília, Segato (2005) proposes understanding sexual violence not as the result of an individual pathology, but as an expression of statements made by our macho society. The author argues that the individual who perpetrates this type of crime is communicating a discourse to the victim, as well as a discourse to their peers: a vertical discourse that expresses power, superiority and control over the subjugated woman and a horizontal discourse that expresses belonging to the

male world. In this sense, we can conclude that, within a system of oppression, both acts of violence and acts of resistance are ways of expressing messages. And both can be read and interpreted, as in any language.

Thus, another question that could move us and help us draw a conclusion – albeit a provisional one – is the following: when an utterance ceases to be individual and becomes collectivized, does it have more potential to create resistance and transformations? What happens when these statements go beyond the individual body, going into the collective body?

In *The Feminist City*, Kern recalls how important friendship is for people who perform the female gender. It is these relations that allow bodies to strengthen themselves in appropriating a space that had not been granted/allowed to them. One body protects and encourages the other. Together we walk where we would never walk alone. In this sense, the proposal by Indian artist Mallika Taneja, *Caminhada Noturna: mulheres em marcha à meia-noite*, which was part of the MIT SP – Mostra Internacional de Teatro de São Paulo 2020 –, is noteworthy. In it, Taneja composes a collective of people who perform the female gender to wander the streets of the city from midnight onwards. The action is a significant gesture, especially for an artist coming from India – where the rates of rape and violence against women in the urban space are frightening. Her performance thus raises this question about walking/displacement: what displaces a collective body that walks? What can a body-multitude created by all those who have been oppressed for centuries do? On this subject, political scientist Veronica Gago, reflecting on the feminist strikes that took place in Argentina, says that the alliance between several singular bodies creates an unprecedented force capable of releasing “[...] a howl of a herd. Of a warlike disposition. A conjuration of pain. A very old and very new cry, connected to a way of breathing” (Gago, 2020, p. 34).

From this perspective, we can conclude that politicizing and reinforcing our collective existence in the urban context can be a powerful way of highlighting our constant exclusion from this space, displacing the meanings projected onto our bodies and re-choreographing the habitual use we are forced – and obliged – to make of the city. After all, if one of these bodies is afraid to linger, for example, in a square, alone, the alliance between hundreds of people can allow us to linger. To walk without fear. To constitute a collective corporeality, based on the encounter of bodies that cross



each other, affect each other, share desires, mobilize and move/affect. This is not about homogenizing the individual experience that each body has of the oppressions it has suffered, erasing the differences, but about taking on these singularities and joining forces in the fight against a white heterosexual cisgender patriarchal structure. In this way, by walking and breathing together, we can perhaps not only displace meanings, but also establish new realities.

Notes

- ¹ Situationism is an urban way of thinking created by a group of French artists and thinkers, gathered around Guy Debord, who wanted to develop ideas addressed by the Surrealists and, in addition, go beyond artistic issues to reach the sphere of everyday life. Situationist practice has been defined as follows, according to Paola Berenstein Jacques (2012, p. 211): “referring to the theory or practical activity of a construction of situations’. Individual ‘who is dedicated to constructing situations’; constructed situation ‘moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a play of events’”.
- ² “Among the various situationist procedures, drifting is presented as a technique of rapid passage through varied environments. The concept of drifting is inextricably linked to the recognition of psycho-geographical effects and the affirmation of a playful-constructive behavior, which makes it absolutely opposed to the traditional notions of travel and strolling” (Debord *as cited in* Jacques, 2012, p. 213).

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Sofia Rodrigues Boito is an actress, performer, playwright and researcher. She holds a PhD and a master's degree in Performing Arts from the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), where she was also a substitute teacher. She conducted one year of her doctoral research at the Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3). Interested in performative processes and non-hegemonic practices, she tries to establish an embodied theoretical-practical investigation. She is currently a member of the artistic collective Palabreria, the editorial board of Sala Preta magazine and the feminist artists' *Room to Bloom* (European Alternatives).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8904-2746>

E-mail: sofiaboito@gmail.com

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