Tatiana Trouvé
Desire Lines

The following text has been adapted from a lecture that Tatiana Trouvé gave on March 2 in New York about *Desire Lines*, her Public Art Fund commission currently on view at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York, until August 30, 2015.
My work has always been attentive to the particularities of a place, whether they are architectural or historical. With these interests and the presence of Central Park itself in mind, my research for Desire Lines led me to Robert Smithson’s article “Friedrich Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape,” published in the February 1973 issue of Antennae. Smithson wrote of visiting an exhibition about the construction and evolution of Central Park at the Whitney Museum in 1727. It is, he proposed that Olmstead framed the park from the concept of the picturesque garden by a more physical and temporal approach to landscaping, thus situating it in traditions both naturalist and industrial. Hereafter it is as an “earth sculpture.”

For Smithson, a park can no longer be considered as a “thing-in-itself” but rather as a process of ongoing relationships in a physical region. By virtue of this process, the park becomes a “thing-for-us”: a never-finished object, open to the unexpected and to “contradiction on all levels of human activity, be it political, social, or natural.” It is an object of nature—culture: a dynamic nervous system, an assemblage of different landscapes and different viewpoints to be approached in a pluralistic manner. If Central Park is an “earth sculpture” for Smithson, for it is also a project of modernity begun, as it was, in 1873. To venture into Central Park is to step into modern and American history, beginning with the names of the different gates, each named after a person, a group, or a trade that contributed to the founding of the United States—“Women’s Gate,” “Engineers’ Gate,” “Workers’ Gate,” and on and on.

But even more than the park as sculpture, imagine a sort of collage that would consist of superimposing one sculpture on another, of exhibiting one artwork on top of another. To avoid such surplus, I began a dialogue with both the history of Central Park and its physical reality. Thus, out of the project of the park my own project Desire Lines was born, consisting of establishing routes and trajectories based on the walkable roads and paths that crosswalk the park. These routes were each measured with rope and transferred to spools mounted on huge metal racks among which people can move freely. Each spool holds a different length of colored rope, from the shortest 18.8 meters, to the longest at 320 meters. In total, 921 spools comprise the measures of every path that a visitor can follow.

Consequently, I named each spool of rope: first with an identifying serial number, then a descriptive phrase about the route that it represents, and lastly with the title of a historical march or walk, artwork, writing, or song that I associate with this route, as follows: P001 From Pioneers’ Gate to the Locust Grove, Alden-Masten March 1860 P002 From East Drive near Fort Fish, over the cascade to somewhere near the Leach, Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes P003 From West 103rd Street to Stanger’s Gate, Taking a Shoe for a Walk P004 From West 108th Street to the Blockhouse, Gestina to Montgomery March And on...

Desire Lines thus offers visitors to Central Park the chance to take a path and follow in the footsteps of others, and to retrace a political and cultural history of walking from path to path. This history is like an atlas of the scale of Central Park—the reporter and its indexed spools—but it can also be performed, enacted, and walked through.

All the sources for the different titles associated with the routes and spools come from the period of modernity—from the late eighteenth century The Rerunlus of a Solitary Walker by Jean Jacques Rousseau to the most recent from this year. I could have widened the scope of my research still further—for example, the Middle Ages is filled with walkers and walks—but the temporality of Central Park itself provided me with a frame and limits. My personal taste or affinity for certain events or walks was also very important, as each title must function within the general economy of the piece, and each nomination must cohere within the conceived whole.

The first marches that chose were historical demonstrations: There are some I would have liked to participate in, but which I only know through stories or documents, and either, more recently, in which I was able to take part. All were important marches for justice, recognition, peace, or emancipation—and were, in large majority, animated by peaceful intentions, even if certain of them ended violently. The modern period is traversed by political demonstrations and marches as acts of community building, such as the Women’s Suffrage Parade (March 3, 1913), The Sail March (March 12, 1930), Gestina to Montgomery March (March 21, 1965), Bolo Mouse protest (February 28, 1989), and on.

There is also a rich and fascinating history of the relation between walking and the arts, especially in the twentieth century, with the birth of the historical avant garde. This is the moment at which walking could become an artistic act, where the practice of art could be reduced to such a simple act, whatever its specific motivation might be—a dirty or hard walk, an exercise prescribed by forms of instructions, militant or countercultural marches, or even fantastic or theatrical marches, such as parades. For example, I delved into the instructions devised by Fluxus artists, which propose walks as games, with constraints and rules that induce forms of attention and behavior inscribed within aesthetic and ethical frameworks, such as Yoko Ono’s City Piece (1961): Walk all over the city with an empty baby carriage. Winter 1961.

I gathered many projects by “walk artists,” such as Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, and Francis Alÿs, but also a great variety of projects that give rise to very diverse relations with the act of walking, from Maurizio Nannucci’s Stromav dealing in 1973 to Yoko Ono’s In the morning (1969), Bruce Nauman’s Stare Angle Walk (Becket Walk) (1981), and Glenn Matti’s Fishing (2000). I was also attentive to initiatives (in Grenoble) at the margins of art, such as the “wander lines” of Fernand Deligny, the great French pedagogue who invented magnificent cartographies of movement that mapped the ambulations of autistic children, or Philippe Petit, the tightrope walker, whose walk between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in 1974 is an indelible memory in the city’s history (Philippe Petit, World Trade Center Walk, 1974).

From literature, poetry, and philosophy, I selected titles of novels, essays, and treatises, adventure stories, and poems—that attest to the fertile relations not only between writing and walking, and writing and thinking, but also between walking and existence itself. Rimbaud’s “Ma bête” (1889), André Breton’s “Les douze mois” (1923), and Baudelaire’s “Une promenade” (1865) are joined by philosophical essays on writing, such as Karl Gottlob Scholze’s “Die Zwanzigjährige der Kunstspäteren gewacht” (1802), Henry David Thoreau’s “On Walking” (1862), Guy Debord’s “Théorie de la dérive” (1966), and Honore de Balzac’s attempt to invent “Théorie de la démarche” (1833). I also gathered short stories and novels, such as Thomas Bernhard’s Gehen (1971), which revolves around the obsession daily walk of three inmates at a psychiatric hospital, and recounts what happens when one of them dies and the two others no longer know where to go or how to go—well, to go insane, but also to focus on the blues, the Anglo-American musical tradition that stems from it. Why the blues? In modernity, the blues not only adopt the rhythm of walking but also explore what wandering means. I started with Robert Johnson, following the path of two historically important titles, “Walking Blues,” and “Grey-Eyed Blues,” and pursued this path into the R&B artists of the 1960s, traversing songwriters such as Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. I also gave importance to the ballad, older but the blues and wider than the Anglo-American domain. Traces of this tradition can be found in many songs that evoke the city as a site of paramilitarism and the background for a sentimental history. Here, walking is no longer simply a physical act; it appears in the steps conjured by words, rhythms, and sometimes song titles that play upon the many idioms that refer to walking in all its senses. For example, “I Walk the Line” (Johnny Cash, 1969) means...
to respect a certain code of behavior rather than walking in a more literal sense, or “Take A Walk on the Wild Side” (Lou Reed, 1975), which refers to society on the margins. Finally, my research led me to three musical resources—that of the underground. Here it is possible to denounced a certain morality of walking (see in “They Walked In Line” Warnar [Joy Division, 1979]), an antifolkist song) or to focus on altered or delightful walks, and to make walking an assertion of a defiant style, once again introducing an ethical dimension.

Beyond their diversity, these different ways of walking in music and song—most often expressed in the first person—are mostly affirmations of subculture. They manifest a subject who talks of wandering, whether moral or sentimental, one who speaks for a collectivity of individuals, a margin, or a wholly other world. Then there is wandering in association with feelings: two songs by Fats Domino, “The Walking” (1957) and “Walking to New Orleans” (1960), are inverse images of one another in this emotional sense. The first and earlier of the two is a love song addressed to a woman who is momentarily gone but who will return. The second tells of a breakup with no hope for return, and marks the moment of departure when the (male) singer quits the woman he no longer loves. Both songs associate walking with high spirits, with new directions or renunciations, with getting a grip on oneself and heading home. In this respect, they echo the two motifs of wandering associated with the tradition of the New Orleans marching bands that, during funeral processions, switch from mournful to festive. Moreover, in “Walking to New Orleans,” renunciation has a double meaning, as 1960 was effectively the end of the life of rock ‘n’ roll, thus to return to New Orleans was to quit this era for the near. In the three years that separate these two songs and two walks, an entire spectrum of popular music history was written at vertiginous speed.

And to this endless list of cultural references, I invented a few titles of my own, as I was often to_drink. (An Unknown Walk?) Laissez perdu... (They are all dated 2015.)

Walking is sometimes an ordinary act or action, sometimes derisory, sometimes magnanimous. It is certainly one of the most common and banal of acts in that it is the most widely shared. We learn very early in our lives how to do it, how to walk more or less quickly, more or less in a straight line, more or less in stop. But walking is always an act, undertaken for different reasons, the motives for walking are as numerous as the trajectories that lead from one point to another. Consequently, this very simple action can become a particularly demanding exercise. Carefully considered the reasons for walking, along with the social bonds that it emerges from and moves toward, in order to determine which titles I would give to the 212 paths in the park.

Walking is the sole subject of the titles in Desire Lines because aesthetic practices call upon walking for its ability to explore or awaken the mind and the senses. Walking also allows one to situate oneself in the world as a citizen, and as an individual belonging to a community. These poetic and political dimensions of walking associate the awakening of the senses and the mind with an opening toward new realities. A great number of walkers and wanderers share the same attachment to the present, to the reading of the world, and to the construction of self. Thus it seems clear that my work contains the three dimensions of walking.

I describe Desire Lines as an “atlas” because it is neither a panorama nor an encyclopaedia. The choice of references that I have evolved makes no claim to be exhaustive or synthetic; rather, it is delineated by personal considerations and necessities determined by the project itself.

The atlas is inscribed on the public space of the park to invite the pedestrians of New York to walk once, or differently, in Central Park to “follow in the footsteps of another.” They can interpret my proposition in different ways: they might not read more than the long list of titles, the marches or walks evolved through the crossings, echoes, associations, and groupings that it suggests; they might perform a reading augmented by all the historical, cultural, and political references that the titles designate, thus projecting themselves into the history of walking; they might take an actual walk in the park that would perform, in a certain manner, the convoluted cultural and historical elements, perhaps by reading a poem on a book, listening to a piece of music, or regarding the document of a historical march or an artist’s walk. In any of these ways, the walker can “follow in the footsteps of another” thereby setting in motion the history of walking. History, then, is not behind us but present alongside us. And it is ours to pursue.