An Index of Walking
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Contrary to popular sentiment, it has been suggested that the act of photographing actually impairs rather than reinforces memory.1 This seeming paradox is the result of a perceptual disjuncture between our own vision and that of the camera. Instead of remembering more, it is believed that we recall the details of a photographed object or event with less accuracy. The photographic image then does not necessarily act as a catalyst for existent memories, but rather as its own autonomous form – a separate visual language freed from the confines of lived experience and prone to fragmentation and manufactured certainty. It is the ghost image that impersonates a memory, manifesting a feeling of authentic remembrance out of the fictional.

An Index of Walking is a yearlong photographic project that explores the enigmatic intersection of memory, place, geography, and perception. Taken along the same daily walk in my neighborhood, the photographs depict the commonplace objects and spaces that comprise what could be any typical suburban area. My walks have been a vehicle for exploration, contemplation, and looking; they have provided a structure in which to engage with the place in which I currently live. Georges Perec coined the term infra-ordinary to characterize the mundane features of everyday life – glass, concrete, utensils, our daily rhythms, the way we spend our time. He advocated for an anthropology of the banal, a method of sorts in which the habitual is scrutinized with intensity. Perec wrote, “We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?”

Time spent with the everyday spaces, objects, and rhythms of daily life reveals a wealth of information, most of which hides in plain sight. What is gleaned is often fragmentary and discrete; however, even the most ostensibly ordinary landscape is imprinted with so much – time, history, growth, decay, politics, and wonder. Caught somewhere between art and life, private and social experience, and repetition and chance, this project exists in the lineage of Happenings. Everyday I take the same walk and restrict myself to photographing one object or space which captivates me. These constraints delineate my route and process, but within these strictures lie opportunities for spontaneity, drifting, and subversion. Allan Kaprow describes the Happening as “[a] game, an adventure, a number of activities engaged in by participants for the sake of playing.” And while my walks are solitary in nature, this definition rings true. I leverage the experience of each walk over daily photographic output and allow play to subvert monotony. This experiential dimension has afforded me a deeper appreciation of the geographical nuances around me.

As Rebecca Solnit avows in her book Wanderlust: A History of Walking, “exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains.” It is this hybridized and indeterminate space, at once physical and mental, that interests me. This fascination derives from my own tenuous relationship to memory and place. Many of the homes, neighborhoods, and towns that I’ve lived in are unsettlingly absent from my consciousness. More often than not what remains is an abstracted still image, devoid of meaningful context. Sometimes, I realize that memories of disparate places have fused into one another, blurring the distinction
between separate locations. A composite memory of place is born – temporally and spatially incongruous, but nevertheless united.

These compound memories, when not unified by place, find continuity in shared emotional states or physical attributes. Analogous experiences, whether joyful, upsetting, comforting, or tedious, bond to one another somewhat inexplicably. Psychological correspondences always seem to prevail over geographical ones.

With An Index of Walking, I hope to speak about place as a series of discrete and fragmentary components, akin to a puzzle that is missing pieces. This is also how I archive and recall places in my mind – not as unified wholes, but as fractional and lacking continuity. It has become clear to me that this project is more than merely a durational exercise indexing a series of walks in my neighborhood; it is also a visual metaphor for my own idiosyncratic relationship to memory and place.

Much like the work itself, the installation takes a more splintered, associative, and poetic form. Images spread out across the wall, some almost touching the floor, others approaching the ceiling, and more situated at varying heights in between. Many are grouped formally; incongruous spaces bleed into one another; lines, shadows, and textures carry through and across images, unifying discordant spaces; a visual rhythm is created; the photographs form paths and splinter off one another in different directions. Viewers are called to move through the space with physicality, aligning their bodies and vision to the shifting contours of the installation, much as we do when we experience a landscape. Ultimately, viewers are left to read a map that is incomplete, to draw lines of connection, and to make associations based on their own personal relationships to memory and place. In this way, the installation embodies the journey through both corporeal and psychic space.

In her wonderful essay “On Keeping A Notebook,” Joan Didion writes, “the point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess.” This sentiment resonates deeply with me as I think about my current relationship with photography. When I began An Index of Walking, I envisioned the project as one rooted in recording, mapping, and descriptive representation. In reality, what I’ve created is an illusory portrait of a place over time, as much fiction as it is fact. It extends beyond the evidentiary impulse simply to catalog my surroundings. Ultimately, the work represents my desire to fabricate a space that is singularly my own and to liberate the photograph from the confines of factual depiction. If memory perpetually betrays those who call upon it, then initiating this project from a place of invention and abstraction may be a way of subverting the anxiety of forgetting.

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http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/12/04/0956797613504438.short?rss=1&am p%3bssource=mfr


Ben Alper

MFA Thesis Defense
April 21, 2014

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Single image from *All The Places I’ve Ever Lived* (Stonington, CT)
Untitled (Wooden Triangle), 2013 (from Terrain Vague)
Untitled (Inside/Outside), 2013 (from Terrain Vague)
Documentation of site (Durham, NC)
Documentation of site (Carrboro, NC)
Untitled (Monument), 2012 (from Terrain Vague)
Untitled (Remaining Floor Tiles), 2012 (from Terrain Vague)
Untitled (Cinder Block Traces), 2013 (from Terrain Vague)
Untitled (Wires), 2013 (from Terrain Vague)
John Divola, from Vandalism (1973 – 1975)
Jan Dibbets, *Perspective Correction - My Studio II, 3: Square with Cross on Floor*, 1969
Bernard Voita, both photographs *Untitled*, 1990
Untitled (Bent Wire), 2013 (from Terrain Vague)
4:25 pm, November 27, 2013
Latitude: 35N 54' 47"
Longitude: 79W 5' 8"
37°, 80% humidity
Map of the walk
7:40 pm, January 16, 2014
Latitude: 35N 54' 45"  Longitude: 79W 5' 12"
33°, 61% humidity
“Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains.”
4:51 pm, October 13, 2013
Latitude: 35N 54' 48"  Longitude: 79W 4' 56"
65°, 90% humidity
From left to right:
October 29, 2013, January 22, 2014
From left to right:
September 5, 2013, November 20, 2013
From left to right:
September 28, 2013, October 28, 2013
Clockwise from top left:
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Sand)*, 1993-94
Schematic for thesis exhibition, *An Index of Walking*
Left Wall
Schematic for thesis exhibition, *An Index of Walking*
Center Wall
Schematic for thesis exhibition, *An Index of Walking*
Right Wall
Installation shot, An Index of Walking
The John & June Alcott Gallery
February 17 – 21, 2014
Installation shot, An Index of Walking
The John & June Alcott Gallery
February 17 – 21, 2014
Installation shot, An Index of Walking
The John & June Alcott Gallery
February 17 – 21, 2014
Installation shot, An Index of Walking
The John & June Allcott Gallery
February 17 – 21, 2014
Screen shot of the website for An Index of Walking
Schematic for the installation of An Index of Walking
Ackland Art Museum
5:21 pm, December 21, 2013
Latitude: 35N 54' 41" Longitude: 79W 5' 0"
68°, 78% humidity