

“Some say the city is a loom.”
— Lisa Robertson, *26 Theses on Craft*

Walking in the city is never a neutral proposition. Everything we encounter shapes our experience of public space as surely as roads or street furniture. We, too, contribute our part to the ambiance; we make a street more open, or more closed, by our own behavior within it. Michel de Certeau describes this dynamic in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. There is no city before or apart from its inhabitants; no space that is not social. No social that is not forever made and remade moment to moment. The walker who is attuned to the city - the flâneur, the flâneuse - will pick up on all of this, will wonder about it, may even be inspired to create something to contribute to it: a piece of writing, a work of art.

I wrote, a few years back, that as an inveterate walker, reader, and writer, I see little concrete difference between these activities. We read a city as we do a book, and different streets tell us different stories - if we can attune ourselves to them. And the story a street tells me may not be the same as the one it tells you. The city is a vast private library we all share.

Too often we walk in the city with another project: to get where we're going. We turn our backs on the stone-bound stories piled up around us. You have to be alert in a particular kind of way for the pages to crack open a bit. For me, it's knowing something about the history of the streets I'm walking that can have this effect. But it can also be something added to the city, like, say, a temporary art installation.

I think that this impulse to peek into the stories of the city dwells at the heart of the Stadtprojektionen, the brainchild of the curators and art historians Anna Vetsch and Nina Keel which, once a year since 2016, projects images and films onto the walls of their hometown of St Gallen, transforming the walls of the city into photosensitive paper, the library into art gallery. This projection project has its etymological roots in the medieval Latin *proicere*, “thrown forth.” Cécile Hummel, an artist who took part in the 2019 edition, reminds us in her artist statement that “Painting came into existence because a human shadow was cast on a wall by firelight and traced with charcoal, according to the ancient writer Pliny.” A “projection,” she goes on, “is akin to this shadow image.”

Liberated from a fixed carrier medium, projection casts the visual subject onto any background as a fleeting luminous apparition. An apparition, a mirage, takes possession of a wall, a room, a house, virtually liquefying the surface and opening up new image spaces with sheer magical power.

And the surfaces of St Gallen become the canvas on which this spell is cast:

On the side of a building on a busy main road.
On the side of a cinema.
Amid a sea of closed and shuttered windows.
On a building, a photo of another building.

In the changing room of a bathhouse.

Here's two on the side of a Biedermeier-style house.

This one looks like a billboard.

On the gable of a low house against a cloudy night.

On the side of a building above a chain-link fence and a parking lot.

On the side of a modernist building, in counterweight to a low line of windows.

The trunk of a black and white tree bends and undulates on the white wall of a structure on a nondescript corner, otherwise lacking in organic form.

On the underside of the overhanging roof of a restaurant.

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You need a certain kind of space to receive a projection, a simple space. Too much ornamentation and you can't project onto it, the two will fight. You need the right kind of conversation between art and city. "Tension. Tension is important," Nina and Anna tell me. They spend months walking the city, hunting for walls with the right patina, or in the right location, which will be somewhere that accentuates the interplay of the different elements of the built world: different heights, textures, styles, forms. They prefer to work in neighborhoods they don't know intimately, so it's also a process of discovery for them. And then it's a question of thinking about the space, and art: what might work here? Who might want to make something here? What could happen in this place - what kinds of transformations or experiences might it cradle or spark? How could moving images help people who know these walls too well begin to see their town anew? This is a question of *curating public space*.

Some of the places take you by surprise in the midst of heavy traffic. Others are hidden, and need to be sought out. Like the film "The Fairest Heritage," projected by Uriel Orlow onto the side of a soap factory: you had to enter through a private backyard to see it. "The Fairest Heritage" is comprised of photographic footage celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the national botanical garden in Cape Town. Layered on top of the images of white people frolicking and white botanists examining flora, is the body of the Black actress Lindiwe Matshikiza, posing in such a way that she undermines the narrative of colonial celebration, making us wonder where the black bodies are in the photographs: present only as labourers. The factory itself stands in Dürrenmattstrasse, a street formerly known as Krugerstrasse, after Paul Kruger, president of South Africa from 1882-1902. Even in Switzerland, 12,000 kilometers away, this colonial history left a mark on St Gallen, which had to be washed away.

Public art has always had a direct relationship to history. For centuries it meant celebrating the imperial and martial exploits of great men (and, very rarely, great women). Stadtprojektionen is part of a recent movement to use public space to challenge this imperial history, tearing down monuments to a world we no longer want to commemorate.

Sometimes though it's not about tearing down, but about getting a new perspective on history with a contemporary piece of art. In *Doubt, Part 2: Literatur*, Selina

Grüter & Michèle Graf responded to the messages painted in Gothic font onto the walls of the bathhouses at the Three Ponds above the city. Pure on the outside, pure on the inside, the walls tell you. "Pure the speech, pure the meaning." No one knows who put them there. Grüter and Graf answered the moralizing tone of the bathhouse writer with more open-ended musings about literature: *"If literature was reading, could a mode written for spoken performance be said to be literature?"* or *"The process of the specialization of 'literature' to creative works was a major affirmative response, in the name of an essentially general human 'creativity', to the socially repressive and intellectually mechanical forms of a new social order. Language was reduced to the passing of 'rational' or 'informative' 'messages,' in the same way."*

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Nina and Anna chose St Gallen because it is a city they know well, but wanted to know better. Not knowing St Gallen personally, yet it seems to me to be the perfect place for this kind of project.

In the town of St Gallen there were once weavers. As early as the eighth century, there is evidence of a canvas industry. By the seventeenth century it had developed to include linen, cotton, and muslin, and a hundred years later, embroidery had also become a major skill offered by St Gallen's textile workers. From the eighteenth to the early 20th century, most people in St Gallen were employed by the textile industry. But the First World War and the Great Depression decimated the industry, and soon there were unprecedented numbers of unemployment. The city had to reinvent itself, and the buildings that were constructed to support the textiles needed other uses. St Gallen learned to adapt.

When I think of a city built by weavers and embroiderers, I think of Anni Albers, who wrote in 1965's *On Weaving*:

Just as it is possible to go from any place to any other, so also, starting from a defined and specialized field, can one arrive at a realization of ever-extending relationships. Thus tangential subjects come into view. The thoughts, however, can, I believe, be traced back to the event of a thread.

Stadtprojektionen is the perfect project for a weaving city, and its curators are adept at working the loom, braiding together disparate ideas - the artist, the work, the site - according to their own vision of what, together, all three threads could become.

For most people in St Gallen, the weaving history of the city is quite an obvious subject. But also, perhaps, a painful one - a reminder of the city's faded glory, something like a trauma buried in the layers of history. Stadtprojektionen isn't trying to project a light onto it, but perhaps to coax out whatever is embedded in the surface of the city, dealing with history obliquely rather than head on. The stories are there, if you care to look for them. They just might not appear in the forms you'd expect them to take.

Cécile Hummel's piece, *Persian Textures* (2019), documents a trip she took along the Silk Road, through Iran, to cities like Isfahan, Teheran, or Shiraz. Her black and white photographs were shown on the Brandschutzwand (fire barrier) on the side of an art nouveau building, likely inhabited by middle-class textile workers, at the end of a 19th century iron bridge. The texture of weavers' St Gallen mingles with images of bas-reliefs on the sides of temples, beautiful scaly mosaics, and Persian textiles. Then, as I watched a video made of the film one night, there was a sound like the kind of screech and reverberation you wouldn't be surprised to hear in an art installation - art hum, I like to think of it - but then a train rounded the corner on the railway tracks below the iron bridge, and I realized it was just the real world breaking in, weaving Hummel's work into the tapestry of the everyday - or rather, the everynight.

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The surprising angles created by Stadtprojektionen offer another way of seeing, offering the community a chance to share in directed moments of intimacy. It is a collaborative project; local building owners and tenants "house" the projectors. Visitors experience not only the art but their own neighborhood in a new way; as one local commented, the projections "made me go to places I had never been to before, or where I had never stood still before." It also brought them into contact with neighbors they might otherwise never have encountered. As Hannes Schüpbach, a Swiss filmmaker who took part in the 2017 edition in the neighborhood of Linsebühl, Nina and Anna "bring forth a new sense of community – as a somnambulistic utopia." "Emanating from the projections," they write, "new narratives are formed: about the buildings, about the (ostensibly) familiar city." Instead of the static white wall of the gallery, the living textured walls of the city bring the artwork into the heart of people's lives. And the works themselves are be changed by this interaction, becoming part of its setting - the medium is *film* or *photography* but it is also *wall*, *city*, *walk*, *night*.

Stadtprojektionen gets people walking another way: taking another path than they might have, for instance, or changing the usual path. People passing quickly through on their way somewhere else - a meeting, or maybe even another projection - might get their vision caught on an image that isn't usually there. They might turn around to get a better glance. They might see something unexpected while stuck in slow-moving foot traffic. They might be completely lost. Or they might be stepping on someone else's property to get a glimpse of the film This is one of the goals of the project/ions: to make people aware of the way they move through the city.

A woman on foot in the city has to learn to read the street; and it is nighttime that poses the greatest threat to her ability to do so: a seemingly anodyne place by light of day can turn unreasonably menacing at night. Reading the street is another activity altogether. But what if this reading of the outside world could help us learn something about our interior selves? Alberto Manguel writes of the way his personal library is transformed at night, and the change this has on his perspective: "If the

library in the morning suggests an echo of the severe and reasonably wishful order of the world, the library at night seems to rejoice in the world's essential, joyful muddle" (14). I would submit that looking at art in the dark, outside, in the city, has a similarly furtive but joyful quality; that we are not our daytime selves at night, that different thoughts are made possible, the impossible seems within reach.

The nighttime setting makes the works spectacular, like ghost cinemas suspended in space. Or is it we who become ghosts, as Manguel writes? The art is the "real presence," and we exist only in relation to it, for the moment that we stop to look. Until we see that we are not alone, that the street is a library we are all moving through. The reassuring indexicality of a project like Schüpbach's "Spin," from *Stadtprojektionen II*, which catches his mother as she drifts across the screen.

The film was projected in the courtyard of a block edge development, the kind of apartment complex where people can regularly observe one another going about their daily lives inside their homes, especially at night. There is something reassuring in looking out and knowing that we are not alone - but what stories are we unknowingly looking in on? What can we ever know of the people we walk side by side with in the world, in the film that is everyday life? Schüpbach's film makes us aware of the "patchiness and uniqueness of our perception":

What we perceive are always moments. Individual units that, however, again and again also have an end and open up something new.

— Lauren Elkin