

## **Perceiving and knowing**

Response to Barry Cole's "Walking and Looking", October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013, on crossing lines's November blog.

Christian v. Wissel.

On the morning of October 7th, at long last, the time had come: I received the first response to my article on Robert Smithson's and my own *operations of recognition* in urbanising landscapes since its publication about one year ago. Therefore, before responding to Barry Cole's valuable comments, I would like to thank him for his engaged and critical readership – this is where my heart beats higher: a vivid dialogue and well-informed dispute on a topic of shared interest; Barry Cole's remarks give me the welcome opportunity to clarify my points and to push them even further.

### What do monuments tell?

Both in my own writing and in Barry Cole's response, the object of research is the perception of urbanising landscapes. The question at heart is the following: What are we able to perceive of this or any landscape with which we come into relation? And, as it quickly becomes apparent, we can easily extend this question also to the reflection itself about such perception: What are we able to come to know about the world through our engagement with it in both its materiality and in any other form of interpretation like, in this case, an academic essay? Trying to find answers to these questions lies at the centre of *Operations of Recognitions*, both of my text and of the very operations themselves. And we also find them at the centre of Barry Cole's response, both in his doubts concerning the possibilities of 'walking and looking' – these are the words by which he refers to Smithson's poetic practice of perception – to be a form of research, and in his reading of my writing.

Cole writes that he has two difficulties with my claim about monuments "describ[ing] 'the world as it is known to those who dwell therein'". In his text he takes my writing to judgement, first, in regard to the fact that the monuments I see are random elements of the environment and, secondly, that they are nothing more than

my personal inventions, definitely not those of “the inhabitants of the neighbourhood”.

I have come across this critique many times since the very beginning of my engagement with walking methods as a form of social research. Walking, it is commonly complained, is (too) subjective and lacking the collection and analysis of robust data. Here my response: The above mentioned critique would be justified only if you take walking and looking as methods producing normative claims about any object of research; claims such as: landscape X is like this or that because I walked in it. Yet this is precisely not the case (and I do say so several times in my essay on operations of recognition). As Cole notices, the identification of a pile of tires as monument, as I did during my research walk in Mexico City, speaks about *my* interpretation of the landscape, not about anybody else’s interpretation. This is exactly the point (which, unfortunately, hasn’t reached my reader’s attention): the object of study is *not* this or that particular urbanising landscape (be it in Mexico or New York, today or 50 years ago) but the way *how* dwellers in an urbanising world come to engage with this –their– world with and through the senses. In other words: the aim has never been to describe any particular landscape in absolute terms but to describe how landscapes are made through individual perception.

Operations of recognition are nothing more, yet also nothing less, than *self*-experiments of landscape perception. The landscape that becomes apparent in my text, therefore, is the result of my own self-experiment of such perception. I do not make any claims of general truth regarding Smithson’s suburban New York and my peri-urban Mexico City. And I certainly do not make any claims about how any other dweller of these urbanising worlds see *their* landscapes by walking them. What I do write about is how I myself –a humble dweller of urbanising worlds, too, that I am– how I am perceiving the environment through my walking and how both Smithson’s and my own interpretations resonate with the literature and other accounts of urbanising form and life of each of our times.

Hence what operations of recognition are, and where I see their potential, is that they are modes of creating (self)consciousness about one’s own subjective engagement with the world; and that they find a language – that of monuments – to name and communicate this conscious subjectivity of perception. Barry Cole comes

to exactly this conclusion when he suggests his own definition of Smithson's understanding of monuments. He writes, "monuments – which appear to me to be things that stick out in the landscape and are noticed by the observer". Very right so, but what Cole does not acknowledge is that this is exactly the point I am aiming at, too; with the difference only that I go one step further analysing how these "things that stick out [...] and are noticed" are the elements by which I, as individual observer, come to know about my subjective world.

### Who's right is it to dwell and know?

There are some assumptions regarding the dwellers of urbanising landscapes that form another aspect of Barry Cole's critique of my writing. Cole distinguishes between the "incoming observer" and the "inhabitant of the neighbourhood". Yet he does not only distinguish between these two but places them in two opposed corners of the ring in order to have them fight about what true perception of the environment is. Here my counter questions: Why is the research not granted to have a perception of the environment too? Why is the inhabitant's perception truer than that of the incomer?

Drawing on Tim Ingold's understanding of perception, and to which I make countless references in my writing, I can put these questions in yet another way: why distinguishing between dwellers and dwellers of the world? Ingold's concept of the 'dwelling perspective', which is the reason for using the term in the first place, aims at describing a mode of being in the world in which the world is grown out of each perceiver's –any perceiver's– own relational engagement with it.<sup>1</sup> If we agree on the fact, that perception is subjective and that the object of study is subjective perception (of a particular landscape yet not of this or that particular landscape as such), then why are inhabitants 'better' dwellers that come to somehow 'more truthful' perceptions of the world than researchers who dwell, too, in the world?

Barry Cole's distinction points to a common, yet in my opinion misguided, understanding of knowledge production both in science and in all acquisition of

---

<sup>1</sup> In Ingold's words: "a perspective which situates the practitioner, right from the start, in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings." (2000, 5.). Ingold, develops this notion of 'dwelling' by drawing on Heidegger. See e.g. Heidegger 2001, 144ff.

knowledge as a whole. Coming to know about a landscape or, in this case, about its perception –or coming to know about anything in the world– is always an act of subjective creation. Again, this is exactly the point I am trying to make with my writing. And it is in regard to this point where I believe that Smithson and his land art practice have something to contribute to science –here to social science and urban studies– in as much as they raise awareness about the creation of knowledge and they suggest a language for addressing such creation that is particularly responsive in the context of urbanisation.

As early as 1929, the medical doctor and philosopher of science Ludwik Fleck has already stated that all knowing, be it in science or in any other aspect of life, is the product of its own reality.<sup>2</sup> “Knowing”, he writes, “is neither passive contemplation nor the acquisition of the one and only possible insight that one is given as a finished thing.” On the contrary, he continues, knowing “is an active, living process of continuous engagement, a shaping and being shaped, in short: creation”.<sup>3</sup> Why this long quote from a long passed time? Because it directs the focus precisely on this active creation that is any production of knowledge and of which I am convinced that it needs our attention – particularly so in the social sciences.

Here again, I am thankful to Barry Cole to point to these issues in my writing so to give me the opportunity to elaborate them further: Cole contends that “What is noteworthy to one passer by might be glanced over and ignored by another.” Yes, this is exactly so: what I identify as my monument might not be one for the next passer-by at all. To the contrary, he or she might pick something totally different to be noteworthy. The important point is that such ‘picking out of things we find noteworthy’ is at the heart of how we, all dwellers of the world, come to know about this world we are living in.

This seems an obvious statement, but when we look at it with caution, we can see that much of these elements of which we construct our image/idea of a landscape (or of any other ‘epistemic thing’ as Rheinberger as called it<sup>4</sup>) do often remain in the unconscious. Polanyi gives an example: we are able to recognize a face in million faces, but find it hard to describe this face’s details even though it is precisely in these

---

<sup>2</sup> Fleck 1929, 426.

<sup>3</sup> idem. 1929 own translation.

<sup>4</sup> Rheinberger 1997.

details that we are able to recognize it <sup>5</sup>. Here is where I see the potential for Robert Smithson's operations of recognition: they are a method to make these details out of which we grow our perception of the environment to come to the fore. His language of monuments allows the operator of such self-experiment to name the things that for him or her are the relevant elements through which he or she come to know about the environment while being engaged with it.

As Cole rightly suggests, such seeing of monuments is exactly what the photographer does with the camera: by means of manipulating the framing, focus and shutter speed, the photographer makes his or her subjective monuments of any given object of vision and we could thus frame Smithson's operations of recognition an act of taking pictures bodily-materially, through walking and looking (Smithson himself does so, as I have mentioned in my writing, when he refers to his photographic practice and to seeing the landscape as film stills). What I would like Barry Cole and others to acknowledge, however, is that this is always the case. Not only in photography do we make decisions about what we think is relevant for the discussion and what is ignored by us but, I would like to add, this is certainly also the case in science.

Hence, my point is that scientific knowledge production is never neutral. It is neither passive contemplation nor the acquisition of a given piece of understanding as Fleck has pointed out so long ago. It is an active creation of the researcher when set within the limits of her or his 'system of knowing' that comes along with particular 'thinking styles' and languages <sup>6</sup>. Participant observation, under which Cole subsumes Smithson's operations of recognition, is such a system of knowing and thinking style I would argue. Here my argument goes as follows: I deliberately introduce operations of recognition as distinct to participant observation in order to shift our understanding of the research engagement away from seemingly neutral 'observation' towards acknowledging the active creation that is always put in operation when engaging in any field of knowledge production. The ethnographer does not 'simply' observe a preexisting field into which he can immerse himself; and less so when he or she aims at participating in what is there to be observed. To the contrary, the field is always

---

<sup>5</sup> Polanyi 1985, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Fleck 1929.

constructed as Vered Amit as shown <sup>7</sup>. Here, I believe, Smithson's land art practice introduces the possibility to challenge existing thinking styles of ethnographic knowledge production and, as mentioned above, introduces the language of a poetic mode of seeing with the feet into the knowledge system of social urban studies.

### Where are all the people?

Last but not least, Barry Cole raises an argument about "the people" missing in Smithson's and my landscapes. This, too, is an often-encountered reaction to all other forms of doing social science than that of interviewing. In the context of this discussion with practicing photographers, let me answer it by asking a counter question: are Andreas Gursky's highly controlled images of deserted highway bridges, social housing or supermarkets not about people? Take his work *Paris Montparnasse*. <http://www.c4gallery.com/artist/database/andreas-gursky/gursky-paris-montparnasse-large-print.jpg> Does this image of a social housing front not tell us something about them and us living in the world even though no human figure can be seen in the image?

Here, I would argue that "the people" are very much present precisely in their absence. And they are present in multiple forms: as the people of whom this particular building talks about yet also in form of the photographer's imagination of how other people should see them (the building, people and themselves).

I am confident that most people would agree with me that an image of the personal belongings of a person could tell something about this person even though we don't see the owner in the picture. And again, I am not claiming that these objects would tell any ultimate truth about such person, but that they present traces of two aspects by which this person's life is aligned with our perception: through the material things this person has at hand and engages with while being in the world and through the very image that we, the outside yet never neutral observers, make of them. Photographs, as much as interviews, are modes of putting our own lives in relation with other people lives; and interviews, just like photographs, are not objective but highly dependent on what the researcher makes of them. As mentioned above, and

---

<sup>7</sup> Amit 2000.

drawing on Cole's own words, I argue that any interview too works "Just as the camera isolates a segment of the landscape, cutting off that bit from its relationship to that from which it came – a slight shift of angle, a step further on or back would produce a different picture with different edges, so the observer picks out what he or she thinks is relevant for discussion and ignores the rest."

The famous Mexican intellectual and chronicler of Mexico City, Carlos Monsiváis, has once asked about which would be the perfect picture to represent his home city; and answering this question to himself, he wrote, that it would surely have to be an image of the masses – in the metro, stuck in highway traffic or a panorama shot of the sea of houses flooding the city's horizon. Or, he continued, it should be an image of the highest possible abstraction which precisely through the absence of people would hint to their existence<sup>8</sup> This way, the urban ethnographer Katrin Wildner concludes, the image of a deserted place would become the starting point for contemplation and research on the condition of urbanity in Mexico City<sup>9</sup>. Why not starting on the highway right next to a pile of old tires to listen to this city's stories?

#### Operations of recognition as research?

Here, I would like to apologise for the many words it took me already to respond to Barry Cole's critique to my essay on Operations of Recognition. My excuse is that I did not want to miss this opportunity to clarify with great detail the reason behind, and thinking proposed by my piece of writing and the discussion it triggered. But still, and instead of a conclusion, here my response to the last open question, that is the one whether or not operations of recognition are a form of research. Cole suggests operations of recognition are not a valid form of research because they do not produce "data, that could be replicated by subsequent researchers" as well as that they are supposedly lacking a "strong theoretical base" and "a clear method of data collection." Here again, we find a common approach to research in which X and Y have to be fixed in order to be valid findings. But (this has been said before, too) it is not about the landscape as such but rather about the process of its making! This process cannot be fixed as it is intrinsically subjective and hence varies from person

---

<sup>8</sup> Monsiváis 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Wildner 2008.

to person; but it can of course be replicated if only Barry Cole would allow himself to step down from his expectation that findings have to be things but can rather be ways of doing. In addition – and this is even more important – I would like to invite Cole and all those that agree with him, to open themselves to the possibility that poetry and research do come together. Poetry, as in *poiesis*, together with all art, is a world-making act: creating “something, where before there was nothing”.<sup>10</sup> But isn’t this the case also with research? Data collection and the production of “findings”, too, are acts of world-making, of *poiesis*; and likewise is the making of subjective landscapes a poetic act. As Ingold expounds, perception (and exploratory perception as in walking) is an essential part of what he calls the “poetics of dwelling”. And drawing on this, Ingold describes the potential of art – here, Smithson’s land-art practice of site-seeing by walking – as a “probing more deeply into” the world “and discovering the significance that lies there”.<sup>11</sup> In other words, “walking and looking”, if enacted as creative and conscious modes of coming to know the world, are very much a form of research, of artistic research, even though this kind of research is one that conventional understandings of science, unfortunately, still rejects.

What I suggest, then, with my essay on Smithson’s technique of “seeing with the feet” (my words) or “walking and looking” (Cole’s words) is that the individual identification of monuments as the markers of a subjective landscape is a mode of making sense of any given environment that does find its correspondence in how ‘practitioners of space’<sup>12</sup> in general relate to the physical coordinates of their respective environments. My claim is that we all identify our personal monuments, our subjective markers of meaning in physical space by which we describe the landscape in which we are living our lives. Here, my text aims at providing a fresh entry point to further our understanding of ‘sensory modes of growing belonging’.

My aim is not to claim that walking and perceptual self-experiments are somehow better research methods than interviewing or participant observation – or

---

<sup>10</sup> Sennett 2009, 65–66.

<sup>11</sup> Ingold 2000, 11.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Urban/spatial practitioner’ is a term introduced by de Certeau referring to those that act in, and enact, space in the city. see de Certeau 1988, 93.: “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below’, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. [...] They walk - an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the tricks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.”



any of the well established research methods in the social sciences that Barry Cole might give preference – but that they are complementary and allow exploring different insights. Hence the outlook I gave in my essay: “Smithson’s technique of walking perception provides the opportunity to set out further research on how urban practitioners construct particular [...] notions of belonging when trying to make sense with the senses of the material constituents of their lifeworlds. [...] operations of recognition promise to unfold their full potential when employed alongside complementary research tools that highlight the social production of space. As a method to access the process of a visual-sensory making of the world from within personal experience, operations of recognition have to be extended toward research practices that allow evaluating other (urban) practitioners’ relational perceptions” (p. 179).

Christian von Wissel, Mexico City, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

## References:

- Amit, Vered. 2000. *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. London; New York: Routledge.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, [French original: 1980]. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fleck, Ludwik. 1929. Zur Krise Der ‘Wirklichkeit’. *Die Naturwissenschaften* 425–30.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2001. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, reprint [original 1971]. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Monsiváis, Carlos. 1995. *Los Rituales Del Caos*, 3rd ed. México, DF: Ediciones Era.
- Polanyi, Michaël. 1985. *Implizites Wissen*, English 1st: 1966. Suhrkamp.
- Rheinberger, Hans-Jörg. 1997. *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sennett, Richard. 2009. *The Craftsman*. London: Penguin.
- Wildner, Kathrin. 2008. Á La Mexicana - Mexico Stadt: Labor Für Ethnologische Stadtforschung. Pp. 325–36 in *Verhandlungssache Mexiko Stadt: Umkämpfte Räume, Stadtaneignung, Imaginarios Urbanos*, edited by Anne Becker, Olga Burkert, Anne Doose, Alexander Jachnow, and Marianna Poppitz. Berlin: b\_Books.