

Ground Work: Desire Lines

At the North-East corner of Guy and Sainte Catherine, an eight-foot-tall letter “C” marks the center of Concordia University downtown campus, described by the institution as “a place where a dynamic urban energy is in unique balance with a lively, diverse community.”¹ The pathways created in the snow in order to bypass the “C” in the middle of the street corner attest to how truly dynamic this community is. This winter, a shortcut has been forged into the snow by students as they walk behind the structure to avoid the main sidewalk, crowded with tourists and local pedestrians crossing the downtown intersection. That “desire path” is an act of creative expression stemming from an urge to reach point B in a way that diverges from the sidewalk.

As notions of contemporary art move beyond the white cube gallery space and into the everyday, definitions of “the artwork” are expanding to incorporate different lived experiences. This shortcut through Concordia campus is reflective of the user’s interaction with this site, in relation to both natural factors and the institutional production of public space. Examining the everyday as a place for creative expression, these types of pathways can be viewed through a post-modernist lens as anti-institutional artworks: the ultimate act of collaborative inventiveness informed by societal function and motives.

The idea that something as mundane as walking can be a medium of artistic expression is not new: in 1967, artist Richard Long walked back and forth in a field until his path was carved into the terrain, which he photographed and titled *A Line Made by Walking*.² In the 1960s and 70s, post-minimalist works such as this one challenged modernist notions of art as a commodity and the importance of the institutional frame, by using natural elements and public settings which cannot be bought nor sold. Creating work explicitly outside the gallery questioned the permanence and site-specificity of the artwork.

A Line Made by Walking can be considered a “desire line”, a term coined by Gaston Bachelard who saw these kinds of makeshift paths as a form of drawing.³ Desire lines, unofficial pathways formed through repeated tread, appear all over the world when the user’s experience differs from the design of a space. Desire paths have intrigued geographers and urban planners as a form of user response to paths laid out by institutions. Writer Erika Luckert was fascinated by the grassy desire lines of Edmonton, and created a map of the paths that reveal “a social history, something that belongs to a larger population in the rare moments when that population converges.”⁴

A single path in the snow is not necessarily informative of a collective societal drive. Desire paths begin with one outlier, followed by a few venturesome walkers, and then are fully formed as

¹ “Quartier Concordia” *Concordia University*. URL: <https://www.concordia.ca/about/quartier-concordia.html>

² Ruth Burgon “Richard Long- A Line Made By Walking” *Tate*. URL: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/long-a-line-made-by-walking-ar00142>

³ Erika Luckert (2013) “Drawings We Have Lived: Mapping Desire Lines in Edmonton”. *Constellations* 4 (1). <https://doi.org/10.29173/cons18871>.

⁴ *Ibid*

many people choose to take this route. In order to take shape, the alternative path behind the “C” had to be favored by a group of pedestrians over the “official” sidewalk path around it. In this sense, the user speaks back to the institution with every footstep, and walking becomes both an individualized and democratic act.

French intellectual Michel De Certeau theorized urban spatial practices, exploring these kinds of individualizations of mass culture. He asserts that due to class ideologies, we have considered “producers” of culture to be authors, educators, and revolutionaries and situated this kind of authority figure in opposition to “consumers”. However, by challenging notions of cultural production we can discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists: in the everyday. De Certeau describes actions like walking, talking, and dwelling in urban landscapes as “the arts of doing”- the ordinary citizen’s creative resistance to the structures produced by institutions.⁵ In this sense, desire lines are a way for those relegated to consuming culture to respond to authoritative organizations by actively producing space, sometimes in disconnect with the meaning that was intended by city planners.

Those who “walk the city” in Montreal winter are a subgroup: walking in thirty-below conditions is less often for leisure, as De Certeau romantically describes it, and more often out of necessity for those who cannot afford a car or taxi ride. The desire lines that appear through the Montreal urban maze of snow and ice reveal an urge to reach one’s destination faster, to make it to work, to make it home. On Concordia campus, these paths are most often formed by students walking between buildings: just as people make the city, students give meaning to and produce the University campus by interacting with these spaces every day. The desire line that cuts shortcuts through the campus expresses the choices, motives, and memory of the student body. The snow both adds a temporal aspect to these paths and heightens their visibility.

In 2002, artist Francis Alÿs expanded his painting practice beyond the gallery space with the work *The Leak*, walking the Pinheiros district of São Paulo with a punctured can of paint that left a thin line of color to mark his path. Daniel Birnbaum examines the extended field of painting in urban space, and comments that in Alÿs’ work, “the activity of walking functions as a way of inscribing the body into social space, leaving an aesthetic trail.”⁶ If we take this notion of fine art departing from its medium and its location in the institution of the gallery to become integrated into sites of public space, and push the elements of geosocial networking, accessibility, and the mundane even further, desire paths can be considered contemporary art on view in the most far-reaching and populated exhibition space: the urban ground.

⁵ Michel De Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

⁶ Daniel Birnbaum “Where is Painting Now” in *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art Series* ed. Terry R. Myers (MIT Press: 2011) 155-160



View of desire line at Sainte Catherine and Guy Street, March 2019

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