

URBAN
STROLLING

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Wandering, Wondering
Courtney Coombs' *Urban Strolling*
Lisa Bryan-Brown

We are taught to think of time as a resource, that we can manage and sort into useful allotments. We are taught to determine the value(s) of our actions, and how to categorise the various forms of value attributed and action performed. We are taught to articulate an ends, and seek a means. We are taught to reduce the complexity and infinite possibility of daily life to a workable cost / benefit analysis.

We aren't taught these notions explicitly, but are socialised into them from a young age. We internalise them, and have them affirmed by our daily experiences as participants in a capitalist economy. Operating at both a micro and macro level, they are part and parcel of the wider system that judges achievement and rewards progress. They are a psychological tool in the overarching process whereby control of the many is enacted by the few - that insidious many-faced enemy, the patriarchy.

What if we unlearned these notions? What if the assumptions they are based on are wrong? Can we replace them, and with what? What are the strategies for doing so?

Courtney Coombs is working on unlearning. I'm sure she'd recommend it, if you asked her. Without unlearning, the radical shift in understanding necessary to underpin the reimagining of fundamental structures will continually encounter obstacles in the form of prior 'knowledge'. A new system cannot be conceived using the language and rules of an old one.

The task of unlearning is complex and vast, and the works presented in Coombs' *Urban Strolling* mark the beginning of her engagement with these ideas. Created during her month long residency on the small Spanish island of Cadiz, her video *Walking is not a Sport* proposes the action of walking as both a strategy of and metaphor for the process of unlearning. With no particular destination and no determined route, Coombs video trails her on a stroll through the town. Unhurriedly, she moves throughout the lanes and squares shared by pedestrians, cyclists and motorists alike.

A pointedly simple work, Coombs found this sort of walking to be analogous to the process of unlearning. Leaving the known behind and always moving forward, though towards what is unanticipated. Opening oneself up to the experience of the walk, soaking in the sights and sounds without motive or intention, being present. This is the approach to knowledge that forms the basis of unlearning.

Within her artistic practice, Coombs has always sought to strip away anything superfluous, and present the idea in its most concise and articulate form. Her audio work *Urban Strolling* is just that - simply the sound of footsteps walking, the work is sublimely minimal. By presenting only the sound, Coombs isolates the action of walking and emphasises the body as the vehicle for the action. Entirely self-driven and directed, walking becomes pure agency, each step at once vulnerable and defiant in the face of the unknown.

To challenge complexity with simplicity is an unlearning strategy. To embrace the whole from a part is an unlearning strategy. To allow for contradiction is an unlearning strategy. To search with no conceptions of what for is an unlearning strategy. Coombs moves forward, unlearning.



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