

## Open & Faster, or the kinaesthetic reappropriation of urban space

When the path extending from the cycling tunnel, running under the Maas river, and connecting the north and the south of Rotterdam, was closed off for renovation works for months, myriad informal paths appeared. The city's bike commuters had taken to making their own routes, intertwining paved passages that were still accessible with alternative tracks across sand, flattened grass and shrubbery. Each time users made a new pathway, a fence emerged to block it. Eventually, this tug-of-war between cyclists and officials came to an unspoken truce when a hand-written sign with the message "open & faster" pointed to an opening through the bushes further down the road. Used by many, day after day, it inscribed itself for the time being as the fastest route to the other side of the city.

How people move in urban spaces is a key reference point for Ilke Gers. Her work explores and bends the possibilities for movement and action afforded by an environment. The built environments we inhabit facilitate but also script our behaviour, as planners strive for what Michel De Certeau called a single 'clear text', with designated routes and predesigned patterns of use and mobility.<sup>1</sup> This equally applies to the distracting maze of shopping areas, the fluid flow of traffic, or the new conception of public space as a frictionless transition space. But everyday practitioners of designed environments don't necessarily follow such clear-cut scripts. They take short-cuts—to the other side of the road, the bus stop, the playground, the office, their homes—tracing a line, one step at a time, until there is an alternative trail as

self-evident as the official path. They take the liberty of detours—through shady roadside greenery, building sites, wastelands, abandoned railroad tracks—leaving firm or faint trails of possibility. Such trails, made over time by bikers' wheels or walkers' wishes, go by many names—desire paths, pirate paths, elephant trails, bootleg trails, free-will ways, paths that have made themselves. These paths have been described in naturalistic terms as a form of erosion caused by human traffic, as well as celebrated in activist terms as a form of resistance, a way for city dwellers to 'write back', challenging the upper hand of urban planners with their feet. Desire paths can count on obstruction, undercutting their use by restoring grass and bushes or planting barriers like the Maastunnel fence, nudging or forcing illicit wanderers back to the official script. Some urbanists and landscape architects have advocated embracing desire paths and re-configuring urban design around them. But more often, desire lines are simply left to be, until a trail disappears by itself, or its many followers make it a permanent part of the site's structure.

Gers draws on people's everyday reappropriation of their urban surroundings. She is captured by the ways our movements respond to the repertoire of possibilities (where one can go) and limitations (where movement is obstructed or inhibited) within a given space. Desire lines mark a specific type of behaviour in public space: they may spring from a wilful act ("don't tell me where to go!"), but often they are not deliberate or reflective. When we follow a desire line, our feet think for themselves; before we consciously consider ("yes, why not go here?") that the possibility of the situation may have already prompted our unreflective bodily intentionality into action. So, we pick up on the trace and add our steps. This makes desire lines a very different type of urban 'text'. A text made by multiple individuals, yet a text without an author. In De

Certeau's words, such walkers form unrecognised poems, in which each body is an element signed by many others. Together, they improvise a manifold story.

As an artist, Gers' background in both graphic design and professional tennis has equipped her with a particular gestural and bodily sensitivity for the rhythms and movement patterns of this manifold urban story—what Jane Jacobs poetically described as the intricate sidewalk ballet that unfolds in the city on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup> In both outdoor and indoor spaces, Gers translates her observations by drawing her own delicate lines across floors and pavements, responding to the architecture, the uses and rhythms of a space. Though her field research results in concepts and sketches, working on site on ground level is essential to her performative approach. In this respect, bird's eye impressions of her ground drawings are somewhat misleading. Like the desire lines in urban spaces, they are not sight lines but fragmented trajectories. Gers' ground drawings are not intended to render space readable like an overview map; they are about movement and physical negotiation, and they invite movement and physical negotiation in turn.

Drawing on floors or pavements with a chalk line marker, as Gers does, involves performative, embodied labour. It's about your moving body, your pace, the balance and direction you apply, in interaction with the specific properties of the environment, its possibilities and limitations, its surfaces, its levels of humidity, and the momentary positions taken up by others present. You can use the familiarity with the space which you acquired by spending time there in advance, you may remember the concepts or sketches you developed, but in the act of drawing, you mainly rely on proprioception, since you have to keep your eyes on the chalker as it makes its marks in the space. Perhaps, like the walker stepping on a desire path, at this moment you think with your feet.

Marked by Gers' interventions, an indoor space or public square presents itself to its users and audience with subtly shifted conditions of possibility. Her chalk lines—referencing both road markings and sports fields—are suggestive of signage, a set of rules, a field of action, but one that can't be read or deciphered at a glance or in one way. Its multiple story only emerges through improvised response, testing out, playfully drifting, alone or together, one step a time. As people engage with these spatial drawings, the delicate, powdery material will quickly carry the traces of footsteps. The invitation to respond to the altered affordances of the space, and the line plays' triggering of an intuitive desire and curiosity to explore, simultaneously prompt a slowing down, and a question of what care you take as you move through a communal space.

Gers' ground drawings may seem formal and abstract, but her interest in the intuitive movement of bodies through urban space has a particular resonance in the current Rotterdam context. Picking up speed once the 2008 Economic Crisis was over, project developers and city officials have continued to pursue the 1990s dream of Rotterdam as a second Manhattan with grand sweeping gestures, including forced eviction of entire communities. It's ironic that Manhattan was the very reference for the critique of De Certeau and Jacobs on top-down urban planning and its blind eye for the everyday desires and practices of the people down below. In this precarious context, Gers' performative attention to the everyday patterns that can be found and made on ground level, could be read as a modest exercise in learning to tune in to a place.

The publication you are currently holding, contains some of the sketchy notes Gers makes in preparation for her spatial interventions—in this case for TENT. Until recently, she would have kept

such drawings to herself, folding them to fit her coat or trouser pocket, as she goes about drawing her chalk lines to mark a space. In the process, they would often simply remain there, as they are never intended as a masterplan to be copied, but function rather as reminders of some of the possibilities that could be activated in a given setting. Perhaps they are best described as scores for improvisation. In their rhythmic formalism and abstraction, they are reminiscent of experimental musical notation, such as the quick graphic impressions of Stephen Vitiello or the elaborate scores of composer Cornelius Cardew (who, like Gers, had a background in graphic design). His *Treatise* is a visual play of abstract forms and shapes, which could be enjoyed as a graphic work on its own, or could freely be interpreted, without governing rules and instructions, by ensembles of both professional and nonprofessional musicians. Gers' printed drawings can be taken as that kind of invitation, a reminder to yourself: for recognizing and testing out the space for improvisational movement, and multiplying the possibilities within our urban environment, whenever you walk or cycle into the city.

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1. Michel De Certeau, 'Walking in the City', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Stephen Rendall (University of California Press, 1984), 91–110.
2. Jane Jacobs, 'Sidewalk Ballet', in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House, 1961), 50–54.