

# The Painter's Table & The Flâneuse

Sorry. [Cough]. Excuse me. [Cough again] Can I just squeeze past?

I am just trying to go over there... oh, are you not allowed to go that way?

Two pairs of hands deal out 4 rolls of toilet paper on to a cleaned kitchen top. They tear each sheet of paper off individually into a pile. One moves to hold a metal mixing bowl filled with water, while the other places the sheets into the liquid. They discuss the ingredients, improvising with measurements as to how much they need. It is 8.30am. The fan oven is warming up and their voices trickle over the mechanical whirr. Punctuating their conversation is their regular counting 1,2,3...22, 23, 24...[SLAM] the communal stair door slams shut interrupting them mid-flow. They look to each other to regain their rhythm.

Reaching into the bowl one squeezes the sodden paper into fist-sized clumps. Slowly the other takes over learning the technique; modelling the physical action. They smile at each other, exaggerating the gesture. The Kitchen is now warm and the two friends have taken off their jumpers to reveal t-shirt's bearing an image of the Glaswegian activist Mary Barbour. She set up the first family planning clinic in Glasgow and was instrumental in the Govan rent strikes, organising protests against evictions, agitating with clanging pots and pans. The t-shirt was given away free by Glasgow Council. Whilst the face on their t-shirt's are faded, it is possible to still make out the advertisement for the Govan public art commission, opening in 2015.

Their hands are now grappling with the paper dough, they break the lumps into smaller chunks and drop them into an old washing-up bowl placed by the sink. The sink is jammed with glasses, some dirty with morning orange juice, some dirty with paint residue. In the dish rack knives, forks and paint brushes stick out of the cutlery holder. Standing on toes, one opens the cupboard above and brings down a bag of flour and her electric mixer. Generously shaking flour into the bowl, the other adds linseed oil and PVA glue before whisking all the ingredients together. As they remove the electric mixer from the bowl their silence is interrupted by a radio traffic alert, the reporter describes an incident in which a painters' table is stopping traffic on the M8. The table had fallen off the back of a lorry and was causing havoc to the morning commuters. This disrupts their planned route to town so they decide to walk to Govan Subway and take the train from there. Leaving their prepared paper clay in clingfilm they pick up their rucksacks and a shoulder bag and exit the flat.

*Flâneuse 1: (crossing the road). I still can't get over how huge the new hospital is! It dwarfs the old dock buildings. (Gesturing with her hands).*

**Flâneuse 2: (adjusts shoulder bag). Yeah the new industry is care giving...and I mean industry. (She looks down to her scuffed shoe). It will be the new backdrop to Govan, replacing the red brick of the shipyards (touches the wall beside her).**

*Flâneuse 1: (smiling and nodding, looking down). Govan streets are so worn from the hoards of workers entering and exiting the shipyards. That image of the 'male' labourer is still very present here. I suppose now a new rhythm of shift, flexible, outsourced workers will start to bleed in and out of the dock gates?*

**Flâneuse 2: (pointing). Looks like they are transporting some new equipment to the hospital - see that Eddie Stobart lorry over there? (Gesturing again). Maybe they are bringing in a new ultrasound machine? You know ultrasound was invented for the shipyard? The pulse echo was used to check if there were any holes in the bottom of the ship. Now it returns here to check our internal integrity...(gesturing with eyes to her pregnant belly). The change in scale makes me feel a bit sick, probing something so large to then detect the smallest irregularity in my body. (Screwing face up).**

*Flâneuse 1: (smiling). You know I grew up here, right? (Scratches side of mouth). My mum was a single parent and moved here to be close to her relatives. It was so different growing up in the city...all the unofficial playgrounds of the backstreets. You basically went out to play in the bins (chuckle). It's funny how when observing the city space, the street is always privileged; those backyards, the open kitchen door, where the city seeps into the domestic space is never considered.*

**Flâneuse 2: (entering Elder Park frowning and nodding). Parks aren't as marginalised as the domestic in representations of the city, but they do become this liminal space between home and the**

**centre. I cross Elder Park every day. I always think of it having a relationship to the hospital now. (Looking back). I wonder if it becomes a space of convalescence, from an illness, from city life! (Switching bag to other hand). I suppose they were originally, 'constructed to rejuvenate the health of the city and to mask some of the conflicts of the city.'<sup>1</sup> Its parameters also seem to legitimise solitude, especially women on their own. (Obviously that changes at night though...). I was reading that Baudelaire discussed convalescence as a state in which we can develop, (gesturing with hands) 'brightly coloured impressions'<sup>2</sup>, when our bodies are open to the world in a new way. He was thinking about this in the context of the technological and industrial revolution. The implications these transformations had on lived experience and how we could take on these new encounters.**

*Flâneuse 1: (looking to each other). So a state of recovery aids sensitive observation and helps one to read the city's transformations? That somehow connects to my feeling at work, where the only legitimate excuse for me not to work or be productive is to become sick...(rolling eyes) then you are permitted to another way of existing (seeing the world) - even if that means one deeply limited by illness.*

**Flâneuse 2: (kicks a stone on the path). It ties to the feeling I have that I need to look purposeful outside the home. Walking can't be just a wandering activity. (Pulls down hat). I often think of the figure of the French flâneur. 'Central to the definition of flâneur is the aimlessness of strolling'<sup>3</sup> - but for women it feels like there is an impossibility of that aimlessness. I'm forced to defend my presence in public space. A bag or a pram is useful for this! (Shaking her shopping bag in emphasis. The bag splits and the contents fall to the floor).**

*Flâneuse 1: Quick I have a spare bag. (Crouching down to the floor). Shit, your bottle of ink is all over the side of your jacket...hang on, I've got some tissues with me. (Feeling in pocket). It's funny you say you need to look purposeful outside the home (spitting on the tissue and scrubbing at the ink)...I can't imagine you are purposeless in the home?! It is about what activities are permitted where and for whom. (Successfully removing the stain. Shoving the items into the spare carrier bag).*

**Flâneuse 2: Thank you (squeezing her hand). True, there is something about the bag though. (Grabbing the carrier as it is passed to her). You know there's an argument Elizabeth Fisher puts forward that the first tool, rather than the hammer or axe as usually historicised, was really the bag. Her 'Carrier Bag of Human Evolution'<sup>4</sup> vouches that the bag, the container; not a tool for killing; but a tool which could bring food back to the home to be stored and shared, is the forgotten beginning to the story of human evolution. (Eyes widening). It offers a totally new perspective on how 'we' (touching self) began.**

*Flâneuse 1: Right! (Laughing). And you know how you can discern the gender of inanimate objects? If they can carry something - (smoothes hands over protruding belly) - it's female!*

**Flâneuse 2: My friend's friend said that purgatory is the constant carrying of bags....does that mean women are in purgatory already then? (Laughing at her own joke).**

*Flâneuse 1: (leaning on the other). Sorry, I still can't see out my right eye very well. Makes me feel a little disorientated. (Rubbing eye). And Govan Cross Shopping Centre is always mad with all the commuters heading to the subway. Can I hold your arm?*

**Flâneuse 2: (slipping arm through hers). I was just getting irritated that women still need a prop to access the city with a similar approach to that of the flâneur. Anne Friedberg has written about shopping malls and Guiliiana Bruno has discussed the cinema, as spaces that gave, 'new opportunities for women in public.'<sup>5</sup> Also, Virginia Woolf in her essay, Street Haunting, used the excuse of buying a pencil to leave the home. (Coughing). I wonder how many people use the excuse of shopping to legitimise breaching the entrenched boundary between the private and public? I also often**

1- Kessler Marni. "Dusting the surface, or the bourgeoisie, the veil, and Hausmann's Paris" In *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris*. Edited by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough. (2006 Manchester University Press) 51

2 - Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, (1995 Phaidon Press) 8

3 - Wolff Janet "Gender and the Haunting of Cities (or, the retirement of the flâneur)" In *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* Edited by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough. (2006 Manchester University Press) 21

**think about the commercial encroachment on public space. Now it seems it is not only about carrying a bag to sanction your place in the public, but buying a coffee as well. (Lowering voice). It becomes another necessary tool for the 'female flâneuse' concealment. Women must conceal their flânerie under commercialism.**

Credit Card Salesman: Excuse me ladies, how are you two today?  
Quick question, is your credit score good, bad or average?

Flâneuse 1: (with head lowered). But what about other props? Like the high vis vest? Or exercise clothing? They also permit you into so-called public space. But, the flâneur had the 'privilege of passing unnoticed in the city', left to explore it. I suppose we're thinking about props that give women that same entitlement?

**Flâneuse 2: (getting on the subway at Govan to St. George's Cross). Perfecting invisibility seems a red thread throughout women's history, (moving down the carriage to two seats), finding ways of going unnoticed in order to secretly carry out other activities, which include wandering! I suppose women are generally better performers in this case (lips pursed), we are often subverting our designated role, whether it is through different costumes which defend and defy our role, (gesturing with hands), constantly antagonising our historical and current controls. (She holds the handle as the train stops abruptly). In Paris, during Georges-Eugène Haussmann's redesign of the city, women were encouraged to the wear veils because it was so dusty. You often see this in impressionist paintings, like in Manet's painting, Concert in the Tuileries - you see the dots and grids of the veils that obscure their vision (drawing hands over face). The veil acted as an indicator of class. By wearing one you communicated that you were a woman who could afford to be healthy, to look after herself. It also had this doubling effect; it freed women to walk within the city unidentified, concealing her from unwanted attention; yet, simultaneously the veil interrupted her experience of the city.**

Flâneuse 1: (climbing the stairs out of St. George's Cross subway she slips over on her ankle). I hate high heels! Sorry - I only put them on today as I have a big meeting and need to be taken seriously. But talking about props that inhibit your interaction with the city! (Rubbing ankle). Don't worry I can carry on.

The two commuters stop while one sorts her shoe out. The other perches on a windowsill, weathered into a makeshift walker's rest. They cast their eyes into the shop behind them that has been converted into an artist studio. The window is covered with blue building gauze but they can make out activity behind. Inside two women are lent over a large table where a map of Glasgow is laid out, rather than the customary bird's eye view, this map appears distorted. Instead of reading the chart from above they crouch beside it and use their hands to feel the texture of the map, conversing at the same time. One then handles a metal object shaped into what looks like a building along the Clyde. They place it on top of the map. Their bodily gestures grow as their discussion thickens.

Flâneuse 1: Did you see that low table they were working on - perfectly gridded? (Clasping fingers and thumb together). It reminded me of the table Sol Le Witt made for Eva Hesse. His simple black grid design was to help her think about her sculptures in space. On the one hand it offered a support structure for her work, but on the other hand he also provided this strict code to which she had to fit her practice into.

**Flâneuse 2: (walking on). It reminds me of the Parisian veil again, Marni Kessler describes what I was saying earlier, how 'women's engagement with modern Paris was inscribed upon a grid which both empowered her, for she could be somewhat hidden, and occluded her vision.'<sup>7</sup> But I'm interested in the habit of doing something again and again; a practice; like your daily commute. (Switches bag to other hand). When Woolf was writing the essay, Street Haunting, the haunting in the title had no particular reference to ghosts or spirits, but to its second definition meaning 'frequenting'. I'm curious about the physical and embodied knowledge of habitual practices that whilst operating within an existing structure, find ways to play with it and create new sensitivities beyond its confines. The daily commuter starts to notice other architectures of the city that aren't those made in red brick and concrete.**

Flâneuse 1: Yeah, habits or inhabiting the city had made me think a lot about the city's maintenance. (Wipes nose with tissue). When so much change is occurring around you it is easy to overlook what keeps Glasgow City alive. My boyfriend used to work at the Art Store opposite GoMA and would frequently see the gallery steps being jet sprayed to get rid of dirt. The bottom of the columns look highly weathered in comparison to the rest of the building. Maintenance conversely speeds up the natural weathering of architecture across the city. (Flaring nostrils).

Their conversation is momentarily interrupted by a street café that has seemingly sprung up overnight in the middle of the pedestrian street, they walk around it, one goes on the left side, one to the right.

**Flâneuse 2: ...yeah the commute offers another doubling effect, it's necessary as it gets you to work, so you are being productive, but over time it equips you with time and space for a wandering mind. The flâneur of the mind! (Laughing at herself). I've been thinking about these small sculptures Gerrit Reitveld made during his commute. He'd get an architectural commission and then with whatever materials available on his journey he would quickly make models. (Momentarily checks phone). There is a really beautiful sculpture that looks like it has been made of spit and cardboard that was made on board a train. The commute becomes this space of exploration where things passing by the windows creep into your thoughts subconsciously. Reitveld's sculptures materialise the time and space he had available on that day, like some kind of diary.**

The commuters are forced to run to a nearby bus shelter as it suddenly starts to pour with rain. Huddling together their eyes graze the lit billboard. Unlike the usual Chanel advertisement here, this image is oblique. It is obscured by a gauze. Underneath, is an image of a woman dressed in a utilitarian mac, carrying a bag. Peeking out the bag is the book, *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner? A Story About Women and Economics* by Katrine Marçal. Text flows out of the model's mouth reading, 'There is no reference to what keeps the butcher happy in his work or who cooks his meals.' In silence they grin at each other, one too many connections forming in their minds. Their hands are now inside their pockets feeling the smooth surface of an old sweet wrapper. While they wait in silence they unconsciously feel and fold the paper into a perfect square surface. As they bring their hands out of their jacket the paper is drawn out too. The silver surface has worn the same colour as the bus stop roof. It is also the same colour as the railings close by and the miscellaneous features on the canal bridge ahead. It is battleship grey. They wait for a gap in the rain.

**Flâneuse 2: (they hop over a puddle, looking quickly to nip between the traffic). I've been thinking about whether my drawings are very different now I'm pregnant. When pregnant your bones and joints become looser to prepare you for the baby being delivered. (Nodding). I know, I can't quite believe it, but it has made me think whether it means my drawings somehow take on this physical change and become looser as well, not as controlled?**

Flâneuse 1: (their pace quickens as they near Glasgow Sculpture Studios). So women aren't only flexible performers but physically their structure can change too? (Biting lip).

**Flâneuse 2: (leaning over). What did you say? I can't hear you. (Gesturing to a Glasgow City Council worker, drawing near with a leaf blower).**

Flâneuse 1: (raising voice). I was just saying it's inspiring to think that a woman's body has the potential to overcome its original structuring.

**Flâneuse 2: (shouting loudly, cupping hands over mouth). Yes, it's from the progesterone levels which are really high during pregnancy. (Enthusiastically screaming), Just think of what else we are capable of!**

The leaf blower is too loud so they continue their conversation in gesture, amateurly comparing the flexibility of their wrists.

Entering the Glasgow Sculpture Studios they spot a book folded open revealing an article about Andrea Branzi's piece *Town Planning Interior*. It was an installation from 1978 that Branzi discusses as a series of architectural dramas. The piece has been a focus for discussion between the two commuters; mute environments which seek to activate urban scenes. They've been reflecting on the title which seeks to mesh together interior space and the perceived exterior site of town planning: the assumed wish to blur the policed boundaries of the private and public sphere and relationships to the city. Yet, within Branzi's installation the work still maintains a foreground and a backdrop. A divide to denote which activity can take place where. The foreground is the space of activation and attention and the backdrop, like the home behind the commuter, like the shipyard and now the hospital behind Govan, like the kitchen behind the paper clay modelling, go unnoticed, glossed over, unattended to. The erosion of this boundary, whether through the habitual practice of the commuter, the subversive observations of the window shopper or the flexible performance of the bag carrier, continues to insist on redefining women's role in city life, and the incapability of our current tools to capture our experiences of it.

4 - Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986)

5 - Wolff Janet "Gender and the Haunting of Cities (or, the retirement of the flâneur)" In *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* Edited by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough. (2006 Manchester University Press) 20

6 - Ibid. 19

7 - Kessler Marni. "Dusting the surface, or the bourgeoisie, the veil, and Hausmann's Paris" In *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* Edited by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough. (2006 Manchester University Press) 61