



## FEATURE

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## Larissa Fassler The Body and the City

*Since antiquity, philosophers and architects have imagined cities as human bodies, with arteries and veins through which pedestrians and traffic stream. Larissa Fassler on the other hand uses her own body as a measure to explore and map—or rebuild in huge models—places in cities like Berlin, London, or Paris. She did this in her work *Regent Street/Regent's Park* that is part of the Deutsche Bank Collection. The Canadian artist investigates how exemplary urban architectures determine our thinking, our movements, and our interactions. Lukas Feireiss followed Larissa Fassler around.*



Larissa Fassler. © Larissa Fassler



Larissa Fassler, Regent Street  
Regent's Park (Dickens thought it  
looked like a racetrack), detail,  
2009. Deutsche Bank Collection. ©

Kottbusser Tor, Alexanderplatz, Les Halles, Regent Street: these are only a few of the transhistoric interspaces in Berlin, Paris, and London that are the sites of Larissa Fassler's works. They are crime sites and simultaneously non-sites of modernism, built hallmarks of brutalistic urban planning patterns, nodal points in the urban network that have lost a relationship to a human measure. In her work, the artist, who was born in Canada and lives in Berlin, focuses on the least spectacular aspects of the city as they are experienced day for day by thousands of inhabitants. Her attention is focused on pedestrians' tunnels in subway stations, on streets, traffic routes, and sites that often don't work and become troubled neighborhoods or overly commercialized shopping districts. While Fassler uses seemingly conventional means of architectural representation, i.e. scaled-down models, maps, sketches, and floor plans to picture these sites, she has a completely different aim. Her concern is to show how the cityscape coins everyday perceptions and actions, and regulates our interactions and movements.

To understand her works like the 2009 *Regent Street/Regent's Park* (Dickens thought it looked like a racetrack) on display in Frankfurt's Deutsche Bank Towers, we need to turn to one of the most prominent pairs of analogy in the history of the western reception of cities—that of the city and the human body. Comparisons of this kind go far back to Greek antiquity. *Plato*, for example, compares the human body to a fortified city, and *Aristotle*, too, uses similar body



• Larissa Fassler, Regent Street Regent's Park (Dickens thought it looked like a racetrack), detail, 2009. Deutsche Bank Collection. © Larissa Fassler. Courtesy SEPTEMBER, Berlin



metaphors. The Roman architect and theoretician of architecture *Vitruvius* later developed anthropometric theories of proportion and metaphoric-figurative realizations of city layouts reminiscent of the human body. His theories flourished in Europe well into the Renaissance. Indeed, the body served as a model of ideal city planning well into modernism. Just think of *Le Corbusier*'s corporal urbanism in *Chandigarh*, India, or of the also explicitly corporeal design practices of the (at the time revolutionary) architecture collective *Coop Himmelb(l)au* at the end of the 1960s in Vienna. But these examples owe their physiological architectural and urban assignation not so much to precursors from ancient times. Rather, they are based more on the popularization of the analogy of the city as an organism that began in the 17th century, which in turn was based on the discovery of human blood circulation and the heart as the motor of the body. Modern society and especially the modern city as a conglomerate of arteries and veins, through which people stream like corpuscles!

The urban ensemble created by the British architect and city planner *John Nash* in the early 19th century for the Prince Regent and later *King George IV* in London between Regent Street, the prince's city residence, and the arcades of Regent's Park, since 2003 the site of the *Frieze Art Fair*, was designed with a concept of the city as an organic whole in mind. The park functions as the city's lungs. As the contemporary French city planner *Bruno Fortier* wrote with regard to parallel developments in Paris, the people wandering through the city's street-arteries should circulate around these enclosed parks and breathe their fresh air—just as blood is revitalized by the oxygen from the lungs. Beyond this analogy of a circulatory macrocosm and microcosm, this milestone project of urban planning also reflects the adaptation of the London cityscape to increasingly higher speeds of movement within the city.

As the American urban sociologist *Richard Sennett* observes in his influential study *Flesh and Stone: The Body And The City In Western Civilization*, the routing of the roads and streets circulating Regent's Park is exemplary of the transformation of urban space, which began in the 19th century, into a means for the end of pure movement. Simultaneously, the increased favoring of individual mobility in city planning works against large assemblies of people. While pedestrians, coaches, and later also cars can move faster through the streets, the plans prevent people from stopping, forming groups, or moving jointly in one direction. Although Regent's Park can be circled at great speed, it can only be entered through narrow gates, so that large groups cannot come in all at once—a form of control that was quite intentional at a time of beginning social unrest and workers' protests. This space, designed for acceleration, already seemed like a veritable racetrack to the Victorians: the English writer Charles Dickens describes Regent Street mockingly as such, and is quoted by both Sennett and Fassler in the subtitle of her work.

It is precisely this space of speed in the heart of London that Fassler decelerates in *Regent Street/Regent's Park* with meticulous devotion and investigative attention, and visualizes as the setting of her work. Like a tracker or scout, schooled in reading surfaces, she visualizes the thicket of signs, messages, codes, and scars on the skin of the current urban space in all its overabundance, randomness, and dereliction. The artist spends days walking around the environment of her study sites and, if possible, photographically documenting every sign, graffiti, fence, and barrier, which she then in a further step draws, scans, and mounts into street maps that she has duplicated true to scale. The German 19th century architect *Gottfried Semper* regarded built spaces as a third skin that surrounds the body after the actual skin and clothing. With Fassler, this skin becomes, in the maximum condensation of social claims and statements, a legible chronicle of current affairs and contemporary history.

In her reading and translation of urban spaces, and their transcription into cartographic representations, Fassler furthermore implements a fascinating extension of the relationship of the human body and the city. She uses her own bodily experience as the measure for spatial localization within the city. As previously in her works *Kotti* (2008) or *Hallesches Tor* (2005), it is her own body that, as it walks through the negotiated space, becomes the medium of knowledge and insight. It serves as an instrument for grasping the complexity of public space. Fassler develops her model-like reconstructions and cartographic works on the basis of her own individual body measurements. For example, the length of her steps, arms, or fingers become the point of departure for her highly subjective methods of measuring. At the same time, her own perceptions and the result of persistent, almost manic research are also integrated into the work. Frequently, she notes a wide variety of phenomena on her maps: the number of people crossing a bridge, the current weather, places where punks hang out or people urinate, or where street vendors sell their wares. Urban history is told through the bodily and sensual experience of the artist. The body of the city only takes form through the interplay with the body of the artist. In this sense, Fassler's works turn out to be explicitly topological. They are discussions of place in an emphatic and radical sense, devoted to an intensive reading of the illustrated body of the city—and they have the ability to read between the lines.

*Translation: Wilhelm Werthern*