

Walking in Her Shoes: On Larissa Fassler's North American Works

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It is a gray November afternoon, and I am slowly walking a very specific route around the blocks next to Calgary's Historic City Hall and the Municipal Building. It's Sunday, so the city's downtown has emptied of office workers. They have retreated to the suburbs, and I feel out of place as one of the few pedestrians out on the streets.

I have come to retrace the steps that artist Larissa Fassler took during her time here, seeking a better understanding of how she came to represent these four city blocks in her 2016 work *CIVIC. CENTRE. I, II, III*. Fassler's large-scale, mixed-media paintings and drawings are grounded in walking, watching, and note-taking, as she spends extended periods of time observing and documenting "historically complicated and politically contradictory sites."¹ Her actions form the basis for the works she produces, and her notations and markings describe the lives of those inhabiting these spaces as well as her own experiences. By placing my body into the same site, I have the chance to observe these streets through her eyes and to (re)perform some of her gestures and trajectories.

Many of Fassler's works depict busy and transitory urban spaces such as train stations or public squares: Berlin's *Alexanderplatz* (2006), London's *Regent Street/Regent's Park* (2009), or Paris's *Gare du Nord* (2014–15). In these sites, the flux of people provides ample material for documenting how public space is used and articulated. But here in Calgary, I am mostly struck by the feelings of emptiness and unfamiliarity. Even though I used to live in this city, this route feels strange. Fassler's depiction of Calgary, Alberta in *CIVIC. CENTRE. I, II, III* and of Manchester, New Hampshire in *Manchester, NH, USA I* (2019–20)

broadens her focus beyond the plaza or the station to consider how planning and civic policy affect the wider landscape of urban public space. In this text, I focus on these two works to look closely at the artist's practice in relation to two North American cities, one a major center in western Canada and the other a smaller city in the north-eastern United States. Alongside my attempt to walk in Fassler's shoes and layer my own perspective onto the site, I am also interested in situating her practice in the context of other Canadian women artists who have similarly approached the subject of urban space. Like these artists, Fassler calls attention to how cities develop, grow, and are shaped as much by top-down planning as by the lives and experiences of those on the ground.

Fassler's process of walking and observing urban sites over long stretches of time inevitably calls to mind the figure of the *flâneur*, or more specifically, his female counterpart the *flâneuse*, that nineteenth-century urban walker who drifts aimlessly through the modern city.

¹ Diana Sherlock, "My Body is the City: Larissa Fassler's Feminist Psychogeography," *Canadian Art*, Spring 2016, 78.

Much of the writing about the *flâneuse* has centered on her (in)visibility or even impossibility.² As Janet Wolff describes, "the privilege of passing unnoticed in the city, particularly in the period in which the *flâneur* flourished . . . was not accorded to women, whose presence on the street would certainly be noticed."³ While this may have shifted somewhat in the present moment, contemporary women walkers, as well as those from other marginalized communities, are nevertheless subject to factors that affect their movement and life in the city. Before leaving the house, London artist Helen Scalway begins her performance of the contemporary *flâneuse* by deciding what to wear: "It is always tricky because there will be moments when I shall want to be invisible, moments when I will be invisible whether I want it or not, and moments when I might want to be, never conspicuous, but at least present."⁴ She goes on to observe how difficult it is for women to walk in "an obviously purposeless way . . . they are nearly always either carrying or pushing something,"⁵ using strollers or bags as a marker of productivity or intention to participate in the economic life of the city. Whether excluded from the practices of walking in the city due to separations between public and private spheres, class and income disparity, or restricted access to specific kinds of spaces, the figure of the *flâneuse* and the dialogue around her inevitably underline the fact that certain urban spaces and forms of action are less accessible for certain bodies.

Upon Fassler's arrival in Manchester, staff from the Currier Museum⁶ warned her against walking alone through certain parts of downtown due to the perceived dangers of drug-related crime. These concerns about who feels safe walking in the city also point to the ways that aspects of infrastructure

and upkeep, such as car-centered design or badly maintained sidewalks, can intersect with and reproduce social, economic, and racial inequalities. One can relate this to Calgary, a larger car-centric city that has a more developed public transit infrastructure but where walking remains the exception, as my strange walk around its civic center made clear. Fassler's engagements with downtown Manchester and Calgary underscore the challenges of the contemporary *flâneuse* within a particular North American context where the dominant car culture and stark divides between city core and suburbia make the presence of a lone walking or loitering female body that much more out of place. This in turn calls attention to how these cities may (or may not) make space for other bodies and poses larger questions about how a city might evoke civic pride or a sense of belonging. I am reminded here of performances by Montreal-based artist karen elaine spencer, who uses the durational practices of sitting and stillness to insert her body into the fabric of the city. Performances such as *loiterin'* (2003) and *sittin'* (2010) see the artist simply doing nothing, refusing to partake in the expected behaviors of productivity or consumerism as she "stands in the shoes of the marginalized, the homeless, the powerless, sharing their place and view."⁷

While both of the works I consider here are in North America, the two cities that are their subjects differ in, among other things, their respective sizes, their relationships to state and federal governments, the availability of publicly funded health care, taxation rates, their proximity to other large cities, and the industries that support them now and in the past. However, both *CIVIC. CENTRE.* and *Manchester, NH* bring to light some of the important contrasts that

2. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, "Introduction," *The invisible flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris*, eds. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1–17.

3. In a 2010 keynote, Wolff updates and responds to her now-classic text "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity" as well as more recent writing on the *flâneuse*, such as D'Souza and McDonough's publication above. In it, Wolff elaborates on the role that age can play in how women are rendered (in)visible in the city. See Janet Wolff, "keynote: unmapped spaces—gender, generation and the city," *Feminist Review* 96, urban spaces, (2010): 6–19.

4. Helen Scalway, "The contemporary *flâneuse*," in *The invisible flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris*, eds. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 164.

5. *Ibid.*, 166.

6. Fassler was hosted as an artist-in-residence at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, NH during the summer of 2019, which resulted in the exhibition *Critical Cartography: Larissa Fassler in Manchester*. For more information, see <https://currier.org/exhibition/larissa-fassler/>.

7. Christine Redfern, "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes: the art of karen elaine spencer," in *More Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women*, eds. Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars (Montreal and Toronto: Artexte Editions and YYZ Books, 2016), 337. See also spencer's project *hey! mike hey!*, begun in 2012, which addresses police violence, homelessness, and income disparity through messages addressed to Mike Bloomberg, the 108th Mayor of New York City, <https://heymikehey.wordpress.com>.

mark the landscapes of their respective downtowns and arguably parallel those of other large North American cities. In these pivotal works, Fassler has widened her view to account for the larger systems at play in shaping urban space, bringing with her a desire not only to understand a sense of civic-ness or public-ness, both complex and problematic constructs, but also to expose the underlying structures and policies that shape the conditions in these places.⁸

CIVIC. CENTRE. comprises three canvases that each depict a four-block stretch of downtown Calgary. Created during a particularly dreary February, the vertically oriented triptych is rendered in a palette of muted grays and cool off-whites that reflect the gloomy winter weather. Calgary is the fourth largest city in Canada, with a population of approximately 1.3 million people; it is also well-known as the center of Alberta's oil and gas industry. Rapid cycles of petro-fueled economic growth and collapse have resulted in sprawling suburbs surrounding an increasing accumulation of imposing skyscrapers downtown. Despite the seemingly endless expansion, Fassler's 2016 visit took place during the most recent recession, and local arts writer Katherine Ylitalo links *CIVIC. CENTRE.*'s gray tones to the "economic slump, job loss, and vacant office space"⁹ affecting the city at that time. Here Fassler pays close attention to the on-the-ground realities of a city that has weathered drastically fluctuating economic conditions in the last two decades. Her careful observations of these four blocks reveal a diversity of users and inhabitants who have been subjected to the city's endless boom and bust cycles, and in turn the stark divide in how Calgary's citizens have benefitted (or not) from the prosperity that was supposed to follow.

Fassler's drawings often include a to-scale map or architectural rendering of her chosen terrain, and in *CIVIC. CENTRE.* each canvas begins with the outlines of the buildings that make up these four blocks: the Calgary Municipal Building and its large public plaza at the bottom, the former downtown branch of the public library, Bow Valley College north of that, and the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) women's shelter at the very top. Through her usual processes of walking, counting steps, noting conversations, and observing interactions and sounds, Fassler investigated this part of the city over the course of ten days and then used her observations to build up layers of voices, signage, and space to add texture and detail to the blocky shapes of the map. Clusters of notes in black pen accumulate at the entrances to buildings on the left and center canvases: snippets of overheard conversations reflect the contrasts between users of each space with discussions of disability insurance, soup kitchens, and struggles to pay the rent in the upper sections, and government-speak and corporate jargon at the entrance to the buildings at the bottom. These are interspersed with the artist's own highly personal observations and sensorial impressions, "(!) first man in a cowboy hat I have seen!", "smells of strong disinfectant."¹⁰ Tucked into the less-used corners and alleys, we find inappropriate or stealthy behavior: colleagues stepping out for a cigarette, a xenophobic comment about not hiring someone with a "weird accent." Through these notes and the almost frenetic sections of hatch marks in black pen, Fassler describes the contours of each building and the circulation of bodies that indicate how these spaces are used. This careful attention to the contours and sounds of the city asks us to consider what is immediately visible, but also what has been forgotten

⁸. Larissa Fassler, interview with the author, March 1, 2020.

⁹. Katherine Ylitalo, "Work of Art: *CIVIC. CENTRE.* by Larissa Fassler," *Avenue Magazine*, December 16, 2016, 122.

¹⁰. All text from Larissa Fassler's paintings is reproduced here verbatim including punctuation, capitalization, and any errors.

or concealed, especially the land itself and the impacts that cities and citizens can have on it. In a work that brings these questions to the fore, Mi'kmaq artist Ursula Johnson's *Ke'tapekiaq Ma'qimikew: The Land Sings* (2013–ongoing) is a series of collaborations that uses the Indigenous practice of "songlines" to sing and map paths across various cities. By tracing the specific topographies of each place, Johnson pays close attention to the physical features of the land, using these to develop and perform songs that function as an apology to the land for the harm caused to it as well as to Indigenous communities.

Manchester, NH (the first in a suite of four drawings) offers yet another vantage point, a long, horizontal view that hovers somewhere above the city's skyline, westward toward downtown. Rather than the top-down mapmaker's perspective or topographical survey, this view instead recalls the flyover of a drone or other technologically mediated and interactive online perspectives. Lacking the opportunity to walk the streets here, I instead use Google Maps to simulate the same view, pinching and dragging to try and once again situate myself in relation to Fassler's trajectories, zooming in and out until I float over the city at almost the same angle. Dropping down using Street View at various points, I perform a new kind of virtual *flânerie*: one made possible through technology, yet devoid of the sensorial experiences and details that are such an important part of Fassler's observations. Here my disembodied screen view allows me to peer across the same section of the city that she observed during her seven-week stay, and to see how it sits adjacent to the former mills that line the Merrimack River and a widening landscape of rolling green hills in the background.

With a population of just over 100,000, Manchester is the largest city in the area, a hub for surrounding smaller communities in the notoriously libertarian "Live Free or Die" state, and a once booming mill town that, like many post-industrial cities, underwent a period of decline in the 1960s. In recent years, despite efforts at revitalization, the city has been hit especially hard by the opioid crisis and overwhelmed by those flocking to the city to seek assistance.¹¹ Fassler's interpretation of the urban landscape in *Manchester, NH* is embellished with detailed observational notes, this time in blue pen linked to arrows and x's that situate specific conversations or actions. Bright yellow flags appear to pop up in various locations, with prices marking the cost of rent for individual units, recalling online maps used to conduct apartment searches and reinforcing the connection to a mediatized screen view. They also embed a specific set of economic data related to housing costs directly into the fabric of the city.

When I included *CIVIC. CENTRE.* in an installation of works from the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection in 2019, it hung alongside Eleanor Bond's *Elevated Living in a Community-Built Neighbourhood* (1998) and Shirley Wiitasalo's *Broken Building* (1992). Both of these paintings place the viewer in a very particular vantage point, calling attention not only to the urban landscape being depicted but also to the position from which we are looking. Bond's dizzyingly dense downtown is viewed from a bird's-eye perspective, perhaps from a tower or traffic helicopter, peering down and across the network of streets full of streaking movement anticipating Fassler's Google view of Manchester. Wiitasalo's watery palette shows an

¹¹. Katharine Q. Seelye, "How a 'Perfect Storm' in New Hampshire Has Fueled an Opioid Crisis," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/21/us/new-hampshire-opioids-epidemic.html>.

office tower distorted by the panes of glass through which it is viewed, panes that reflect the lighting panels overhead and conflate the interior and exterior spaces, not unlike the conflation of reflective surfaces and signage in *CIVIC. CENTRE.* Fassler's on-the-ground observations draw attention to the overlooked aspects of how cities are created and used, just as they resonate with and build upon the practices of other artists who use alternative approaches to mapping and reading urban space.

In *Manchester, NH*, Fassler's annotations once again use relatively neutral language to describe the downtown population: "2 people sitting on a small stone wall," "group of older teens," "Man wearing baseball hat covered in Marijuana leaves," "woman high bun, shaved back of head. Forehead down on desk, looking at the phone in her lap." Small tick marks count the number of people entering a church or tally people walking or biking. Others describe more complex interactions that speak to how (or which) people use the space: "woman who spent ages in library's 1 bathroom now sitting on library steps," "Although there are 2 benches in front of the library, there is also a sign that says no loitering! - confusing." Others document the voices of those who live there, such as a worker at the Center for New Americans at the YWCA who describes her frustration at hearing about the "great diversity" at Central High, while the city fails to recognize the lived realities of immigrants in the city. Occasionally, Fassler's voice and observations sneak in documenting repeated compliments on her haircut, difficulties in getting to the grocery store on foot, or observing that "there is no one here that does not seem homeless and/or suffering from substance-use disorder."

In both works, Fassler adds detailed reproductions of official signage, snippets of the language that each city uses to speak to itself. In *CIVIC. CENTRE.*, translucent gray letters rendered in soft pencil marks float in a space that is neither the flatness of the official map nor the street-level notes. These include signage related to the buildings ("YWCA: When women thrive, our communities thrive"), instructions for proper comportment (handwashing techniques and no trespassing signs), slogans (Humanity Rises), and statistics about Calgary's homeless populations. They disappear in the second and third panels, replaced instead with rectangular white forms that recall the reflection of light off of the shiny windowed surfaces of buildings. Here Fassler builds the formal connection of the vertical canvases to the shapes of skyscrapers that make up the city's central core, another surface that the City uses to represent itself.

In *Manchester, NH*, blocks of darker pencil lettering describe the function and mandates of various buildings (churches, shelters, cafés), as well as the all-too-familiar No Loitering/Private Property signs. Interspersed with these are statistics about homelessness and poverty, graphs describing the impacts of the opioid crisis, analysis of education systems and inequality, and a cluster of posters from Trump supporters/protesters during a rally at the local arena. Anchoring all of this information are swatches of hatched red and yellow pencil crayon marks that carpet the ground of the drawing. This additional layer adds a sense of movement and instability as the marks recede toward the horizon, drawing the eye into the space of the work. These color-coded sections provide yet another layer of information, with red representing crime statistics and yellow designating the ubiquitous

parking lots; erased and empty sections delineate spaces where she didn't feel comfortable walking alone. Fassler has revealed that while she was initially inspired by the red brick that features in much of the architecture downtown, in the end, she came to think of these marks and their color as a kind of "bruising."

When *CIVIC. CENTRE.* was exhibited in Calgary at the Esker Foundation in 2016, it was shown alongside a series of four sculptures, each representing one of the four blocks in the painting. Constructed of cardboard and Styrofoam and resembling architectural models, certain sections were colored red to indicate government buildings. Like the crime statistics in *Manchester, NH*, the use of color in these sculptures gives form to statistical information while also marking out the many unseen forces and decisions that shape a city—in the case of Calgary, the presumed seat of power, and in Manchester, a data set that reflects a reality separate from the more optimistic language of revitalization and livability rankings. Both the use of color and the layering of text and signage in these works speak to the diverse and often contradictory experiences of being in these cities. In trying to understand how public space operates and where a sense of civic-ness resides, Fassler's accumulated layers of information speak to tensions between the official and unofficial records, representations and reality. In one striking example,

she notes an underused parking lot in Manchester that receives a "Walk Score" of ninety-four even though it was one of the places she didn't feel safe visiting. Toronto-based Camille Turner's *Heritage Walking Tour* (2011) also looks at unofficial or under-acknowledged histories: dressed as her beauty-pageant-winning alter ego Miss Canadiana, she led a tour of the hidden Black histories of Toronto's Grange Park neighborhood. Turner's use of satire and costume once again calls attention to the acceptable roles and behaviors for participating in urban public life and performances of civic pride, referencing celebrity appearances, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, all while troubling stereotypes and assumptions about Canadian national identity.¹²

Like Fassler, the artists I've included here use strategies of mapping, walking, and storytelling to bring to light the overlooked bodies, histories, and power structures of specific cities. Together these practices ask us to consider urban space from multiple vantage points and represent an ongoing project of depicting cities and our experiences of them with a critical eye and sense of careful observation. In *CIVIC. CENTRE.* and *Manchester, NH*, we encounter overlapping communities of white-collar workers and homeless populations; spaces of commerce and government side-by-side with social service organizations; the impacts of economic growth when times are good and the devastating consequences of the inevitable

¹² Sheila Petty "'All That Is Canadian': Identity and Belonging in the Video and Performance Artwork of Camille Turner," in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, ed. Heather Davis (Montreal and Winnipeg: McGill-Queen's University Press and Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, 2017), 172–173.

downturns; the optimistic language of revitalization when there is a flood of cash, and the conversations about how to survive when that money dries up; the people who profit from these cycles and the ones who get left behind; the data used to represent what is happening and the lived reality.

Fassler overlays these multiple perspectives to make their relationship to one another overt, and to insist that it is possible to look more closely and understand the people and policies shaping the urban environment more deeply. I too have tried to enact this kind of observation as I layer my perspectives as well as those of other artists onto these sites.¹³

Fassler's engagement with these two North American cities invites us all to continue this project, and I imagine walking alongside a crowd of artists, moving through the city, rewriting the rules around who belongs in these spaces and how we come to read them. ■■■

¹³ There are, of course, many other artists who use walking as a part of their practice. Pohanna Pyne Feinberg's project *Walking With* (<https://www.walkingwith.ca/about>) gathers several other projects by Canadian women artists.