

Jean-Christophe Norman

Resides and works in Besançon and Berlin

“Our times reject time, and strive to perpetually renew it. At least, they believe they do” [1]. In the margins of this general denial, of the collective illusion of the mastery of time—expressed daily through a thousand ruses—and of the constant acceleration of urban rhythms, Jean-Christophe Norman invests time with action, indefatigably inscribing its passage. The artist deploys thinking through action, thereby intending to abolish the distance separating time from what he produces in it.

Time writings, city crossings, video captures, all of Norman’s actions bear witness to lived experience or to an attempt at recording an ephemeral, transient moment. His work represent a task or an attitude that unfolds by infiltration rather than as an impression of the space, as instability rather than as trace. His is a practice which resembles that of the Situationist drift of the 1950s, but which reveals, above all, an acute consciousness of our relation to time-space in which the attempt to “inhabit” the present and the existential reflection are closely intertwined.

Writing time

Time writings, initiated in 1993, represent a conceptual approach: a method, a principle which varies according to a protocol or a defined space. Jean-Christophe Norman systematically records the passing time—the day, the month, the year, the hour, the minute, the second—on different supports filled to the saturation point: the sheet of a typewritten page, the surface of a canvas, a roof or a courtyard passed in a walk across the city. Time accumulates and becomes tangible matter, as well as sensible matter: its passing is being tirelessly inscribed into a duration or onto a determined surface (8 hours writing, the yard of Frac Lorraine, Metz, July 2006; Chalk on the rooftop, 600x600cm Regenbogenfabrik, Berlin, August 2006; Writing 24 hours, Frac Lorraine, Metz, December 8-9, 2006), as if to slowly give meaning and body to the writing, signify the presence of time to the world, its existence by means of this record. “My writing method ‘came’ to me at an intense existential moment when the question of language and its limits repeatedly imposed itself. It was important for me to say something using a nearly silent method, by way of writing that functions both visibly and as an effect of mass (and no longer only in the process). To render the passage of time visible and tactile, that's one of the main motives of my writing on these surfaces” [2]. Norman’s work resembles the transcriptions of time undertaken by Roman Opalka[3] in 1965, which demonstrate time’s irreversibility through a sequence of numbers painted indefatigably from 1 to ∞ , or the work of On Kawara[4] who has been recording and archiving time in real time since the 1960s, by painting dates associated with journal cutouts of the same day or by keeping a log using inscriptions which report the artist’s existence or activities. However, if the process and intentions are similar—the desire to bear empirical witness to the objective passage of time—Jean-Christophe Norman’s work can be distinguished by ever changing protocols (variations in the time-span and the location of his production), and the scarcity of traces. While the ink imprints on sheets of paper or canvases permanently transform the material, writing done in chalk on surfaces such as courtyards, roofs, pavement, etc., is destined to erase gradually, to inevitably disappear. Only photographic images of the finalized

writing, accompanied by a laconic description—“Residence Frac Lorraine Grand Est, six a.m. 400x500cm, the day, the month, the year, the hour, the minute, the second, chalk on the ground” testify to the performed action.

In the minimalist guise of writing and the descriptive distance of the enunciation, time is nevertheless infused with a dimension of effort and endurance. Although the artist does not appear—he remains out of sight—each piece speaks of an experience, a physical engagement, a hand-to-hand struggle with the surface, with the chosen territory... or with the keyboard, as in the project *Writing 24 hours*[5]. Departing from the principle of depersonalization, as demonstrated by his absence in the images of writing, Jean-Christophe Norman completed a typing marathon on the computer. Undertaken over a period of 24 hours in December 2006, at Frac Lorraine and partially in front of the public, *Writing 24 hours* is evocative of a perpetual race with time, of an action performed until utter exhaustion, until a loss of concentration set in. Over the course of the 80-some pages resulting from this action, errors and repetitions sneak in. They are not only signs of fatigue, in the face of an objective passage of time, but they also bear witness to time’s subjective perception and to the performative dimension.

Time is space

The dimension of physical engagement with time finds its extension in walks, and attains its full scope in a peregrination at the city level. A line then becomes a trajectory. The method does not change, yet a walk through a city, or a performance of lines which is neither *flânerie* nor a simple stroll, amplifies the notion of effort, fatigue and endurance. It exposes the body to the experience of urban space and enables the reinvestment of the dimensions at work in the city: verticality, horizontality, mobility. This results in an *infrathin* experience that leaves behind merely a few photographs, witnesses to the artist’s passage, to the horizontal survey of the city and to the trace as ephemeral as the act of its making (*Crossing Berlin*, Paris, 2005, Metz, 2006; *Line*, 1500m, chalk on asphalt, Besançon, 2005). The urban space is infused with a new temporal dimension: the frenetic rhythm of cities and activities that compose it are contrasted with the slowness of the act of writing, and with this fastidious journey through the streets. A way of taking “measure” of the city, of “‘slowing down the landscape’ and thus of directing things towards their possibilities of resonance” [6]. This other temporality make it possible for a new urban space to emerge... and to turn one’s gaze and attention to hitherto unnoticed aspects of the city by giving them a new density.

Cartographies of the sensible

This different experience of the city, this approach which is dislocated and sensible, finds its extension in the principles of analogy, superposition and evocation of urban other spaces as in the *Simultaneous Walk* executed with Marco Godinho in Lisbon and Berlin in 2006. Jean-Christophe Norman first traced the contours of Lisbon on a map of Berlin before performing the walk and meticulously reproducing it in the city streets. Two walks, performed in two geographically distinct urban contexts, are nevertheless united by this symbolic journey and the simultaneity of actions. An other, a new city, thus emerged in the process of deterritorialization / reterritorialization. These carefully planned walks evoke Francis Alÿs’s route (*The Leak*, São Paolo, 1995, Paris, 2003), for which the itinerary was determined by

streaking paint over the map, or the functional walks of Stillman, a character in Paul Auster's novel *Glass City*[7], who secretly traces the contours of letters and of a message in the course of his daily walks through New York City.

Norman's *Analogie/Analogia* pursues the experience of reterritorialization and the dislocated exploration of the urban universe. In the spring of 2007, the artist surveyed the city of Paris by scrupulously retracing the outlines of the city of Piotrków Trybunalski (where he was invited in 2006 as part of the festival *Interakcje*), which he had reproduced beforehand onto a geographical map. The Polish city gradually takes shape within the streets of Paris through the act of walking; this time, however, no line signals the passage. Audio- and video- recordings replace the chalk inscriptions. The same route is executed threefold, each one following different protocols: during the first pass, Jean-Christophe Norman films at the ground level; on the second, the lens is aimed exclusively at the sky; and on the third iteration he records the audio track. Three approaches to the city, three points of view dislocated with respect to the usual perspective on the city: the vertical axis—that of architecture, monuments, “tourist” or social identity of a city, consumption—disappears in favor of that which is normally neglected, even disdained. The “City” vanishes, withdraws from its context in order to give our imagination room to let itself be engulfed in the crisscrossing routes, to recreate the landscapes, or again to make invisible connections, establish correspondences between two distinct places, “to reactivate space and to reinvent the elsewhere or, more precisely, to reinvent the elsewhere in the here” [8].

Jean-Christophe Norman thus offers us another way of approaching the possibilities of city exploration: the physical space is replaced by a fragmentary panorama of the city, mingled with the sensory perception (the sounds of the city, the passage of time through the variations of the sky, the notion of mobility). Based on the exact and objective plotting of the map, and its faithful reproduction within the urban space, he composes an open psychogeography where rerouted information liberates the imagination.

Far from utilitarian or economic discourses, the city is endowed with a sensory dimension wherein the passage of time is inscribed on a human scale and becomes the possible theater of another reality. Temporalities dilate to the artist's own rhythm and itinerary: temporality determined by the displacement—that of a walk or of a bike ride (*Ride*, 2006, Berlin) or by a pause, to contemplate a non-event. Since 2005, video has constituted a method of sensory and fragmentary plotting of cities. According to Jean-Christophe Norman, it allows one to “stroll with a camera in order to hold still or to ‘slow down’ the ‘mobile’[9]”. Recorded in real time, without editing or cutting, the videos outline that other reality. It is a reality made of fragmented visions, of inverted perspectives, where the world is perceived only through the play of reflections and mirrors, as in a pool of water (*A quarter upside down*, 2006) or the reflection in a Plexiglas pane (*Sunny Underground*, 2006). This fractured world, made of collages, of superpositions, is subject to transformation and to the mobility of the urban environment (circulation, vibrations, the passing of a metro). It emerges in the form of vibrating surfaces which underscore the transitory aspect of urban architecture and landscape, the mobile reality of this universe. “What has been recorded here is a vision of a walker who has suddenly stopped in order to prolong his gaze to the point of making it elastic and endow it with extensible character[10]”.

Elasticity or contraction: The city becomes a vast laboratory of visual experiments and research where time dilates or contracts according to subjective perceptions, sensations, and becomes “pure form of sensible intuition”[11]. *Different Times* (2003) describes a passage of

the elevated railway in Berlin, over the period of one night. The only images captured on the film are the moments of the metro's circulation, which punctuate the video. Dazzling, fleeting moments between the periods of waiting, the only vestiges of which are the repeated passages of the train, concentrated on 3'40. All that remains of that night of waiting and observation is the idea of flux, of mobility proper to the city. Nearly abstract, inaccessible, suspended against a black sky, the metro passes indefatigably before our eyes.

Writing, walking, video recording, whatever the chosen mode of action, Jean-Christophe Norman tries to capture something of the movement of time, of the city. Circulation, flux, flow... it is always a question of mobility, but of mobility appropriated by the artist, of a reality in which he attempts to interfere, "to 'climb on the run' (...) to become its ever-alert clandestine passenger" [12]. His absurd—in the existential sense of the term—, nomadic and absolute approach offers a form of resistance to society and to its logic of profitability, of rationalization of time and actions, to its growing acceleration. Working against the grain, Jean-Christophe Norman manipulates urban flow, directs his gaze on modest and ordinary things with acute consciousness of their finitude. His actions present themselves as markers of a time in the act and sound as so many traces of its passage... at once attempts to signify its presence to the world and a memento mori. Sartre's words seem to aptly describe Norman's approach: "Man is nothing but his project; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing but the totality of his acts, nothing but his life." [13] A life punctuated by immediate and intense experience of the real, by attention constantly given to what is outside the field of vision and to short-cut paths that he invites us to follow in his footsteps.

Hélène Guenin

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[1] Jean-Christophe Norman, <http://www.oquaidesarts.com/CV/CV-Norman-Vanity.htm>

[2] Interview with Jean-Christophe Norman, September, 2007.

[3] Since 1965, Roman Opalka has been working on a project entitled OPALKA 1965n/ & - ∞. On identically-sized canvases, the Details, the artist paints in white paint, on a grey background which becomes progressively lighter (he adds 1% more white to the ground with each "detail"), and a sequence of numbers following one another at regular increments, starting with "1", the sign of unity. Details are accompanied by audio recordings of his voice uttering in Polish the numbers he is painting, and by photographic self-portraits of the artist, always taken in identical conditions, which testify to the passage of time.

[4] In the 1960s On Kawara started the series I read (1966), I Went (1968), I got up (1968-1979) which objectively retraces his habits or enumerates the artist's encounters and places of residence. In 1966, he started the series Date paintings which is composed of dark monochrome paintings, each bearing an inscription in white capital letters of the date when it was completed. Each painting is preserved in a cardboard box containing a press clipping which indicates the place and the date of production and, year after year, documents the passage of time.

[5] The 76 pages which constitute Writing 24 hours are available on the internet: <http://collection.fraclorraine.org/files/norman/performance-ecrire%2024h.pdf>

The collected works which Norman produced as part of his residence at Frac Lorraine (May-December 2006) can be seen at <http://collection.fraclorraine.org/norman/show>

[6] Interview with Jean-Christophe Norman, September 2007.

[7] Paul Auster, City of Glass, New York Trilogy vol. 1, Sun and Moon Press, 1985.

- [8] Dominique Bacqué, *Histoires d'ailleurs, artistes et penseurs de l'itinérance*, 2006, éditions du regard.
- [9] Jean-Christophe Norman, à propos of *Sunny Underground*, August 2006. Video, color, sound. Artist's collection.
- [10] Idem.
- [11] Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 157.
- [12] Jean-Christophe Norman, à propos of *Sunny Underground*, August 2006. Video, color, sound. Artist's collection.
- [13] Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Gallimard, Folio, p. 57.