



HAL
open science

The performance value of the photographer's promenade: "Walking the High Line" by Joel Sternfeld

Danièle Méaux

► **To cite this version:**

Danièle Méaux. The performance value of the photographer's promenade: "Walking the High Line" by Joel Sternfeld. Authority and Displacement in the English-Speaking World - Exploring American Shores, 2015. hal-03356450

HAL Id: hal-03356450

<https://hal.science/hal-03356450>

Submitted on 28 Sep 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**The performance value of the photographer's promenade:
Walking the High Line by Joel Sternfeld**

At the beginning of the 20th century traffic on the heavily industrialized banks of the Hudson on the lower West side of Manhattan was completely saturated; pedestrians, horses, carts, cars and trucks shared the streets with freight trains which ran along tracks at street level to deliver to factories. Horsemen with red flags rode in front of the trains to try to prevent collisions. The number of accidents however was so high that 10th Avenue became known as "Death Avenue". An elevated track was planned as a solution. The construction began in 1930 and the first trains ran in 1934, weaving through building blocks to deliver the freight to the prospering warehouses and factories.

From the 1950's railroad freight began to lose out to road transport, and industrial activity went into decline. The last train to run on the tracks of the High Line was in 1980, carrying three railcars of frozen turkey. The disused line became a wasteland, taken over by weeds, abandoned to stray cats and to the birds and insects which flourished along its tracks. As early as 1979 the architect Steven Holl had proposed converting the elevated line into a walkway, lined with social housing blocks but also luxury apartment buildings, while associations of property owners bordering the High Line got together to call for its demolition. In the middle of the 1980's, Peter Obletz campaigned for the preservation of occasional rail transport and leisure activities. Its destruction however seemed inevitable; during the term of Rudolph Guiliani as Mayor, the city authorities planned for the total demolition of the line.

Local residents and ardent defenders of the site grouped together to found a non-profit association, "The Friends of the High Line", with the aim of saving the structure and turning it into a public facility. They suggested turning it into a suspended urban park, along the lines of the "Promenade plantée" (planted walk) which was opened in Paris in 1988 on the former Vincennes railway line. Joshua David and Robert Hammond, who were involved from the very start of the movement, relate the successive phases of patient lobbying work,

interspersed with legal actions and communication campaigns, in a work entitled *High Line. The Inside Story of New York City's Park in the Sky*¹, published in 2011.

It is in the context of this collective movement that a photographer - Joel Sternfeld - already well known for his colour work on landscapes, was asked to make a collection of photographs featuring the derelict line during different seasons of the year. Joel Sternfeld took his shots using a view camera between April 2000 and July 2001. Certain photos were published in the *New Yorker* with an article by Adam Gopnick. They were also exhibited and then assembled in an album entitled, *Walking the High Line*, published by Steidl in 2001². This photographic work by Joel Sternfeld played a significant role in the success of the defence campaign ran by "The Friends of the High Line". His work could be compared to that carried out by William Henry Jackson in 1870 in Yellowstone which contributed to the transformation of the site into a national park.

Bolstered by the significant mobilization of the inhabitants of the district and well known personalities from the world of arts and politics, the association obtained the support of the new Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, elected in 2001. A study demonstrated that converting the High Line could become very economically viable. In 2002, "The Friends of the High Line" proposed a large "competition of ideas" for the possible reconversion of the line. The competition didn't call for concrete realistic project ideas; it was just looking for ways of raising public awareness of all the future possibilities for the High Line. Hundreds of projects were exhibited at the Grand Central Station³ with certain of Joel Sternfeld's photos in very large format.

In 2004 the City gave its agreement to fund the conversion of the overhead line into a walkway. The project submitted by James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro was selected and the work started in 2006. The ballast and the tracks had to be taken up and re-laid, but the basic riveted steel structure was still in good condition, despite its fall into disuse. It was stripped, repaired and re-painted and all the draining systems re-placed. It was only afterwards that the alleyways, plantations, park benches and the lighting could be installed. The walkway differs from other urban parks in the way that it transects the city from above, but also because the new landscape was designed to reflect the photographic

¹ Joshua David, Robert Hammond, *High Line. The Inside Story of New York City's Park in the Sky*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2011.

² Joel Sternfeld, *Walking the High Line*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2001.

³ « Grand Central Terminal » is a railway station in Mahattan.

views taken by Joel Sternfeld. It preserves in part the charms of the wasteland and the different strata of existence and activity that the site has known. Numerous stairways, footbridges and elevators were erected to provide access for the public. At the junction of 10th Avenue and 17th Street a glass covered viewpoint looks over the road.

The walkway was opened to the public in 2009. While its function is essentially recreational, the conversion also acts as a rain-water collector; it provides shade, oxygen and a habitat for birds and insects. It brings a form of natural regeneration to New York City. “The Friends of the High Line” association has now been transformed into a conservation organisation for the urban park, taking care of its management and maintenance. The whole history of the High Line reveals the close and constant links between authority and transit.

1. The Power and decline of industry

The railroad, as exploited in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, enabled goods to be transported directly to warehouses and factories. A contemporary of the industrial revolution, rail was at the service of industry and trade. The High Line contributed to the economic development of the city, as shown and exalted for example in the short film *Manhatta* (directed by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand in 1921). At the same time this elevated line transecting the urban landscape was emblematic of the industrial power of the United States. Henri Lefebvre⁴ as one of the first to have revealed the way in which socio-economic activity structures and generates the organisation of space, which turns out to be less a result of natural factors than of ways of life and production. In return, the organisation of space is emblematic of the established powers.

Roadways and infrastructure devoted to locomotion always have a double role: functional and symbolic⁵. The major highways laid out in the 18th century in France reflect, for example, the power and capacity of the State to cover its entire territory right up to the borders, or to organize a hierarchy of urban centres; it signifies a hold on both the economic and the political elements of the country. Any engineering project presupposes the existence of a power capable of financing its construction. The High Line was, in this context, an illustration of the power of trade and production, at a time when industry was booming. The

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace*, Paris, Anthropos, 1974.

⁵ Marc Desportes, *Paysages en mouvement, Transport et perception de l'espace XVIII^e-XX^e siècles*, Paris, Gallimard, « Bibliothèque illustrée des histoires », 2005, pp. 15 à 42.

wasteland of the 1980's, just as the present day walkway, are monuments to an industrial prosperity belonging to a different era.

John B. Jackson, the geographer, puts forward a case for developing a new science: "hodology" from the Greek *hodos* meaning "way" (which we find for example in the word "method")⁶. He pleads for the establishment of a real typology of roadways: the major highways leading to the capital, the small roads following the uneven nature of more regional territories, byways, footpaths.... Featuring in this typology could be the urban railroads traversing industrialised zones, in the form of tracks entirely devoted to trade and industrial production.

The dereliction of the line in the 1980's stems from, and reflects, the changes in an economy moving towards other sources of profit. The abandoning of the railroad illustrated the decline of industrial power. Now it is the vegetation which takes over, as shown in Joel Sternfeld's photographs: the weeds and perennial plants invade the tracks and the ballast, with a seemingly abundant variety of plant species springing up. The viewpoint adopted by the photographer – that of a man who is walking – brings out the size and the strength of the plants. Sometimes there are even shrubs sprouting up between the tracks.

Joel Sternfeld's approach was to visit the site in the summer, autumn, winter, and then in spring, to highlight the plant life and its natural cycles. Obviously there is also fauna present in the midst of all this abundant flora, even if we don't see any sign in the images. In the countryside the seasonal variations are usually more perceptible than in the city, where they are in competition with, even masked by, other rhythms⁷. The demonstration of the changes in season combined with the variations of weather conditions and the transformation of the vegetation, reinforce the notion of a resurgence of the elements. After the halt of the rail traffic, it is nature which is exerting its authority.

2. The photogenic dimension of the wasteland captured by the photographic surveyor

The treatment of colours in the images of Joel Sternfeld is sumptuous and subtle. The golden hues of the grass at the end of the summer, the varied chromatic shades of the delicate spring flowers, juxtapose the colour of the rusted rails. The soft and cold light circulates

⁶ John B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986.

⁷ Thierry Paquot, *Un Philosophe en ville*, Paris, Infolio, 2011, pp. 117 à 132.

between the tangled plant stems, sometimes almost translucent, before the worn out brick facades. We can but note the photogenic character of the wasteland and its ruins. The vegetation which has taken over softens the contours of the angular shapes of the buildings. These landscape format views verge on the picturesque as defined by Gilpin⁸. They cultivate the notions of the incomplete, the rough and the rugged, the uneven. The photographs however refuse any semblance of anecdote, since they are completely free of any human presence. They reflect the transitory nature of the subject, of time going by, overturning established powers, passing prosperity and incessantly imposing new lifestyles, new ways of living.

Following the long-time highly valued vogue of representing wild nature, the trend today is to represent ruins and wastelands. The artist Lara Almarcegui, in 1999, proposed a tour of vacant and derelict plots in Amsterdam. Cyprien Gaillard, in his *Geographical Analogies* (2006-2009), also refers to ruins and abandoned spaces. These “species of space” appeal through the forms and tonalities which they propose, but also through the reflections and dreams which they are capable of inciting. They are presented as spaces in decay, attesting to the utopia of a by-gone age. The ruin of former constructions – which the thrust of nature gradually submerges – refers to the notion of “entropy”, one of Robert Smithson’s essential concepts; a disaffection which allows nature to take over again, like a catharsis breaking with the past to allow the emergence of a new beginning. Ruins, wasteland, abandoned plots – or in a rather different way the worksite – are allegories of a landscape in the making. This explains no doubt the attraction they exert today over a certain number of artists.

In the expression “vacant plots”, the word vacant comes from the Latin *vacuus* meaning empty, but it could also by homonymy, make us think of the word *wander*, coming from the Latin *vagari* meaning to wander or to stray; these vacant lots are in fact living spaces, left to hordes of stray cats and other various teeming animals, who quickly establish their territories, in the ethological meaning of the term. These ramblings now represent the symptom of a takeover by natural life (both fauna and flora). Authority and transit are once again in tandem.

⁸ William Gilpin, *Three essays : on picturesque beauty, on picturesque travel, on sketching landscape : to which is added a poem, on landscape painting*, London, Printed for R. Blamire, 1792

But the photographer taking these images of the site is also in transit. While the painter or the writer can compose in his studio or at his writing desk, the operator has no choice but to enter into the subject. The exercise of taking the shots is invariably linked with the action of moving⁹. The photographer, be he strolling about or exploring, a pilgrim or a casual walker, has to move to take his shots. Joel Sternfeld's wandering along the High Line proves to be delineated by the tracks of the elevated railroad. The series of long shots brought together in the book relates to walking in the direction of the railroad rather than to aimless wandering. The photographer's action seems to be closer to that of a surveyor than to that of a casual stroller, and the body itself becomes an instrument of measuring space.

Apart from the first view, the images presented in *Walking the High Line* are taken facing the track. The rails open up before the photographer (and the spectator) defining the direction of his movement. To the observer, the powerful lines of perspective form an invitation to move into the space. The views present a significant depth of field¹⁰. They encompass the stones and the rails which are in the foreground, near to the spot where the photographer must have stood, through to the horizon towards which he is moving. The operator's position determines the organisation of the visible space and his progress renews the aspect of the elevated railroad he is travelling along. The depth of each image relates to the time needed to move along by foot, and the succession of image sequences in the book point to the progress of his walk.

The present state of the derelict line makes it impossible to use any sort of vehicle. Moving along the line is thus by definition on foot. The walk – where the pace is suggested by the series of images – allows an immersion and a meticulous infusion. It presupposes a duration represented by the successive viewpoints, referring to the physical positions taken up by the operator, one after the other. This duration of the walk represented in the photographs intersects the cycle of seasons that transforms the appearance of the site. The colours change, the varying weather conditions allude to the seasonal changes, and to the iterative nature of the photographer's walks.

⁹ Danièle Méaux, *Voyages de photographes*, Saint-Étienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, CIEREC – Travaux 141, 2009.

¹⁰ One of the images diverges from this option, isolating a bush which is very focused in the foreground with a blurred background. This exception is surprising. Perhaps it represents a form of refusal to follow an absolute systematic perspective. The first image in the volume which shows horizontal rails, without penetrating a deep focus as with the other images, undoubtedly reflects the same approach.

The title, *Walking the High Line*, symbolises the importance of this itinerant dimension. The use of the gerundive signifies an on-going action, a process proclaiming its own value. The walk is like a form of occupation of the land, with a performative value. By walking along the High Line, Sternfeld makes, in the real sense of the term, the future promenade. The photographer's movement represents for the overhead railroad a return to its traffic dimension, albeit in a very different form. This time the progress is slow, silent and solitary. The photographer's walk is in part a pilgrimage since it retraces the route which was once that of the freight trains. It is also a reconsideration of the site, which is now subjected to aesthetic appreciation – as wished for by the “The Friends of the High Line”. The site has become more or less registered in the tradition of landscape. Francesco Careri uses the neologism “walkscapes¹¹” to suggest the revealing power of the walk in terms of landscape. As an experience of space, it is both “a perceptive act and a creative act¹²”. The walk on the High Line also offers an original viewpoint: very often it is the rear of buildings that can be seen, and a large panorama opens up on the city.... generating its own landscape.

3. An urban stroll

The High line has been open to ramblers since 2009. The layout work undertaken differs from that of other urban parks with their clearly defined alleyways and carefully manicured plantations (the “promenade plantée” developed in Paris cannot compete in originality with that of New York). The singularity of the High Line lies in its elevated configuration which transects the city, in its generous views of the urban landscape; but also in the choices made for its design. The rail tracks have been left; the vegetation has not been boxed in; the wild aspect revealed by Joel Sternfeld's photographs has been preserved, even though park benches and wooden footpaths have been laid out for the ramblers. Exhibitions are organised in-situ. Industrial wastelands are today often converted to host artistic events. The dirty and noisy exploitation of the High Line for industrial production has been transformed into a clean and ecological leisure site, with superimposed cultural activities.

The freight train traffic has been replaced by that of pedestrians – New Yorkers or tourists – who can stroll along the elevated line. The discovery of the site and the surrounding city districts has been conditioned by pedestrian transit. The site is discovered through the temporality of the walk. And yet this voyage in space is also a voyage in time, since the lay-

¹¹ Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes. La marche comme pratique esthétique*, Paris, Jacqueline Chambon, 2013.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

out of the site has left intact the structure and the rail tracks, and the mess of vegetation, going back to the time when the line was derelict, alongside more recent installations. The space, as it is presented today, is a palimpsest of the successive states of the site, conserving its traces. The site is endowed with a memory which constitutes its identity. The past is revealed perpetually beneath the feet of the walkers; in this respect, the High Line, as it stands today, refers more or less to the landscapes of the 19th century, where the presence of follies related to a by-gone age; but these were fictive, whereas the remains of the railroad really did have other uses in the past.

While architects and urban planners of the modern period designed new installations which rejected the old times to shape *ex nihilo* man's activity, greater attention today is paid to the context and the place in terms of its historic dimension and identity. The trend is towards conservation and the combining of heterogeneous elements relating to different eras and various uses; to the preservation of a stratification, and an attention paid to symbols. The photographs of Joel Sternfeld have played a role in this regard: they created a memory of the different aspects of the wasteland over the seasons; they contributed to the "artialisation" *in visu* leading to a later "artialisation" *in situ*.

As is the case for freight transport or walking, transit is a form of occupation of urban space. The geographer, Michel Lussault, has shown the symbolic significance of space in terms of human rapports, and its role in the demonstration of power relations¹³. To illustrate this theory he recalled the historic act of Rosa Parks, when, in 1955, she sat in the section of the bus reserved for whites (the section for blacks was full). This defiant occupation of a space controlled by established power relations caused a scandal and led to collective action. For Michel Lussault, "the struggle for space" has overtaken the "class struggle"¹⁴ or in fact is a demonstration of it.

While railroad freight was an occupation of space which exemplified the reign of the industrialists and the power of a certain type of production, the elevated walkway relates to the authority exerted by well-off classes who live in the centres of big cities. It is in fact this social category which turns out to be the most inclined to favour or promote ecological, memorial, landscape or cultural issues. Reading the work of Joshua David and Robert Hammond enables us in addition to gauge to what extent the people who committed

¹³ Michel Lussault, *L'Homme spatial. La construction sociale de l'espace humain*, Paris, Seuil, 2007.

¹⁴ Michel Lussault, *De la lutte des classes à la lutte des places*, Paris, Grasset, 2009.

themselves to the preservation of the High Line were from the New York intelligentsia, from the worlds of art, culture and communication. It was the journalists, the writers and the art gallery owners who were the most numerous to react.

Transit and authority converge therefore once again, since walkways are always affirmations of power; not that of heavy industry, of bosses and traders, but of the comfortable well off classes living in the heart of large cities who today make sure that green spaces exist where it is possible to get some fresh air, and who are concerned about heritage conservation. The ways in which territories are occupied are changing. Towns and cities today stretch out into territorial belts, through the phenomenon of urban sprawl or the extension of commercial and trading zones. On the other hand, within the towns, disused pockets are appearing which attract architectural and urban planning projects¹⁵. Growing attention is being paid to the ecological lay-outs of cities with green spaces and parks. The opposition between town and country is not as clear cut as before¹⁶. The conversion of the High Line is symptomatic of economic change and the fluctuation of the balance of power within society.

Danièle Méaux
CIEREC – EA 3068

¹⁵ Stefano Boeri, *L'Antiville*, Paris, Manuella Éditions, 2013.

¹⁶ André Corboz, « Le territoire comme palimpseste », *Diogène* n° 121, janvier-mars 1983, pp. 14-35, repris in *Le Territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais*, Besançon, Éditions de l'imprimeur, 2001.