

BENA JACKSON

Raking leaves from gravel

GUTTER JUNK

Text by Bronte Heron

I like to spend my weekends walking from my flat in suburban Wellington to the beach in Island Bay, following a long stretch of road to get there. It seems to go on and on, the wide asphalt and smooth concrete only giving way to more of itself, the footpath framed by cars zooming past and hedges hiding the houses behind them. This constancy is interrupted every so often by bus stops sheltering maps of the city and the wooden benches commuters use while they wait, or by sandwich boards propped outside the occasional cluster of cafes and bakeries, the day's specials handwritten in chalk or permanent marker. Orange-beaked seagulls peck at the trash overflowing from bins, rifling through takeaway boxes and plastic bags for stray leftovers.

The street lights form a rhythm as I pass them, their regular intervals breaking up the distance into more achievable sections. Over the span of a summer, I notice random objects tucked into the metal bands secured around some of the posts: a grubby plastic spoon; a purple handle from a tupperware lid; a blue surgical glove; countless broken pens. I never see anyone adding to them. They seem to just appear, the ruddy contents of the gutters transformed into strange bouquets adorning the street. Sometimes I take pictures of them, wanting to remember certain arrangements, saving them in the camera roll of my phone.

I often get in the way of other pedestrians and cyclists, especially in the CBD, where time compresses into thirty minute lunch breaks or the last minute dash for a departing bus. The city seems designed for such speed, with its long panels of glass and digitised billboards, cycling through images that we catch and digest as we pass from one door to the next. This smoothness, a term coined by the critic René Boer, transforms the city into a seamless "experience" that optimises efficiency, sanitisation, and surveillance.¹ Which is to say that the discomfort of spending any prolonged amount of time outside in a city space is intentional, designed to move us along to the next action, thought, or event.

To stay in one place for too long, or to use an urban environment for something other than its intended purpose, often means to cause a spectacle or to fumble some pre-ordained social script. I shared

a takeaway coffee with a friend on a bench in Midland Park once, a strange kind of transitional space between the bustling street and the tall office block my friend works in. We marvelled at how much disruption a single skateboarder could cause. They interrupted the flow of people descending a set of steps by grinding their board against the steel handrail before jumping elegantly back to the concrete and rolling away, visibly ruffling a woman in a crisp suit.

An alternative use of public space could similarly riff off the architecture we already have, experimenting with its newfound potential. The bollard, for example, separates the road from the footpath, offering us pedestrians an element of protection while we stoop to collect the junk from gutters to make something new with. Frank O'Hara, that flâneur of New York City, wrote his collection *Lunch Poems* about the walks he'd take during his work breaks:

*It's my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust.²*

I like to imagine Frank skipping down the MoMA steps and onto the street, weaving between pedestrians, dogs on leads, vendors selling newspapers and fruit, and piles of trash waiting to be collected by street cleaners. He walks over patchy pavement, worn in places and sealed with fresher cement. He passes an odd assortment of chairs outside storefronts, left there for business owners to sit and smoke or drink tea as they watch the day move around them. Music blares through the open windows of the apartments above, and laundry hangs on the DIY clothes lines strung between buildings.

There is an intimacy that comes with living in the city, of navigating our daily routines around everyone else's. Noise builds in layers of cars

honking and people yelling, of pigeons flapping and AC units whirring. Inside it all, small interventions are happening to make these spaces more comfortable. A discarded piece of wood can be used to extend a window ledge, turning it into a table to play cards at. A broken downpipe can be used as a planter to grow herbs in. Boer might call these instances of friction, the convergence of conventional and experimental use of urban space. They might also be thought of as examples of care: the effort of staying in a place designed to be bypassed, or fixing what would usually be thrown away.

What these interventions reveal is a city that behaves less like a finished surface and more as a palimpsest, written over again and again by use, neglect, care, and improvisation. Its layers refuse erasure, insisting on being read alongside the city's intended scripts. To notice them requires a different kind of ethic: one of attention rather than efficiency, of staying with what is handmade, mended, or repurposed, and recognising that objects carry the marks of prior hands and prior lives. In this sense, the city becomes a kind of collage, assembled not only by planners and developers but by those who linger, adapt, and make do. Walking slowly through it, stooping down, taking photographs, or gathering what has been discarded becomes a way of reading and contributing to this layered text – an acknowledgement that urban space is not seamless, but accumulated, provisional, and held together by everyday acts of care.

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¹ Boer, René. *Smooth City - Against Urban Perfection, Towards Collective Alternatives*. Valiz Publishers: Amsterdam, 2023.

² O'Hara, Frank. "A Step Away From Them", from *Lunch Poems*. City Lights: San Francisco, 1964.

