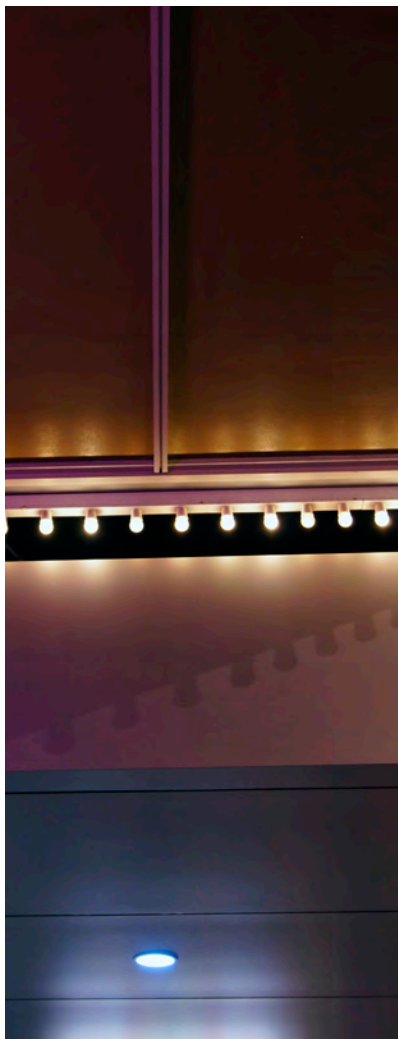


LOCAL COORDINATES



Molly Samsell's photographic series, *Local Coordinates*, records the artist's everyday encounters with urban architectural space. Behind an often abstract façade, these images offer a sustained investigation into how we interact with the urban spaces that structure so much of our daily lives. One approach to unlocking this work is to consider the development of the experience of city life, photography and artistic Modernism.

Prior to the twentieth century, the industrial revolution had led to massive growth in the size and density of cities. Urbanism, with its noisy, crowded streets had become the dominant way of life. The city, and the unique form of sociality and experience it engendered, was increasingly the subject of sociological analysis. Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, published in 1903, highlights the impact urban living had on the Modern psyche and social life.



This period also marked significant changes in the way in which the world was visually recorded and represented. Photography's development over the 19th century had meant that reality could be visually recorded with scientific accuracy. Kodak's popular Brownie cameras were released in 1900, enabling an increasing number of people to take part in this process. Until this time, painting and the other visual arts had been responsible for creating a visual record of people and events. However, this could now be achieved cheaply and quickly, by almost anyone. Art was now liberated from the need to faithfully depict reality.

One of the most significant artists of this period was Paul Cézanne, who analysed the role of geometry—cones, cubes and cylinders—in the depiction of three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface. Cézanne's technique would in-turn influence the work of Picasso and Braque, and what we now define as Cubism. The fractured, faceted forms depicted in their works were intended to describe how objects looked from multiple perspectives simultaneously—a complete representation. In addition to capturing the three-dimensional reality of their subjects, Cubism's fractured vision also communicated the chaos of the urban Modern experience. Italian Futurists would later use the techniques of cubism to communicate and celebrate the experience of urban Modernity.

In *Local Coordinates*, Molly Samsell draws on this genealogy. By adopting Modern formalist techniques, Samsell draws attention to aspects of contemporary urbanism. Taken as a whole, the series underlines the fragmentary nature of urban perception. Some of her images suggest stolen glimpses out the bus window, or the corner of a building glanced while waiting to cross the street. In both its visual language and the urban architectural forms and textures she records, Samsell's grammar is unmistakably Modern.

However, her reductive formalism stands in contrast to the fractured excess of the Cubo-Futurist picture plane. Modernism's characteristic dynamism is here replaced by quietness and stillness. Whereas earlier artists sought to break with realism in an attempt to represent the dynamic, chaotic totality of city life, the abstractedness of Samsell's images brings to light the impossibility of gaining a complete picture of urban life. Does this shift mark a critique of the Modernist project, of Modernism's belief in itself best illustrated in Futurist utopianism? Maybe. Is she critiquing the ideal of the Modern city? Perhaps.



Local Coordinates offers a new way of reading urban life. The worn, dated surfaces and neglected spaces recorded by Samsell suggest a counter-history to the dominant narrative of the city. Her images present an intimate knowledge of the local surroundings—recognized only by those who traverse these paths regularly—and hint at the dynamic, ever-changing cityscape. Samsell's abstractions document not only the spaces that she (and by implication we) encounter, but they also document, or trace the narrative of her embodied wanderings around Courtenay Place, camera in hand. In this way, Samsell can be seen as enacting the typically Modern figure of the flâneur. When writing on how people navigate culture and urban spaces, Michel De Certeau wrote of 'pedestrian speech acts,' declaring that the act of walking is to the city, what speaking is to language.

When read in this way, *Local Coordinates* transcribes and opens an expanded dialogue with urban space. The critique of Modernism is often grounded in the critique of its dominant narratives at the exclusion of all others. The story charted through Samsell's images provides a counter-history of urban space. And it is a record that more closely maps our experience of contemporary city life.



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