

[]

The idea for this essay started in a different time. I had the pleasure of seeing Débora Delmar's installation at Matériel in a moment that already feels like years ago, when COVID-19 seemed a distant threat. The only indication that major societal change was looming was the insistent alert from my United Airlines app telling me about advanced screening measures in place for travelers from China. A week after I left Mexico, I traveled cross-country to Toronto and New York, a whirlwind trip that was both restorative and generative. I returned to San Francisco brimming with thoughts towards this essay, and in hindsight, blissfully unaware of how lucky I was not to come home sick. My privilege afforded me a level of movement that was comfortable and easy at the time, and is not even remotely possible now.

Divided into many small, closet-sized booths, the top floor of the Matériel Art Fair is a bursting mishmash of ideas. Upstart galleries from around the world take advantage of the low fair fees, and the result is chaotic and overwhelming at times, but largely fresh and full of the kind of uninhibited energy characteristic of the emerging art world. Along one of the long walls, however, is a booth that stands out at first for its barrier: a strong, metal gate that blocks the viewer from entering. Behind the locked gate, is a black and white poster tacked to the back wall, advertising a new home development, selling the neighborhood's views of Mexico City. This installation, *Property/Propiedad* (2020) by Delmar reflects on the idea that gated communities can be vectors of upward mobility, while also revealing that this fantasy is an illusion of freedom, as we entrap ourselves behind bars, and willingly disconnect ourselves from society.

Like *Property/Propiedad*, much of Delmar's work examines this kind of movement across society and engages barriers and other physical boundaries that impinge on the viewer or force a certain negotiation around objects. The works in this exhibition [], continue this discursive thread, but resonate differently in our current context. *Barrier* (2020) is a row of stacked cast-iron table bases that divides the gallery in two and imposes on the viewer's ability to circulate in the space. Removed from their original setting and purpose, the table bases become absurd in their lack of meaningful function. Convex security mirrors mounted at various locations on the walls of the gallery add a disquieting layer of surveillance: not only are we prevented from moving freely in the space, but panoptic awareness of this restriction is heightened by our reflection in these mirrors.

Delmar has a professed interest in what she calls "non-places": the architectural structures put in place in our capitalist society to control the flow of people and money. In her artistic practice, this manifests as a play with spaces like juice bars and coffee shops that adopt an anesthetized corporate aesthetic to lend a feeling of familiarity. Made comfortable in these recognizable surrounds, we are quicker to part with cash for lattes and green juice. In *Barrier*, her stacked row of table bases echoes a restaurant at the end of the day, its tables and chairs stacked by low-wage servers, in anticipation of the low-wage cleaning crew that will scrub the restaurant from top to bottom so that in the morning, those now-expectant tables can be filled once more with patrons. This Sisyphean labor, happening after hours in the quiet dark by thousands of low-wage earners across the country, means that capital can flow freely from one hand to the next.

Now this labor that was previously barely visible to us has been pushed even farther to the margins as those workers now face lonely hours filling Caviar orders or shopping nearly-empty grocery stores for Instacart — or worse yet, unemployment. Michel De Certeau, writing in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, describes individuals like these as “The ordinary practitioners of the city” who live “below the thresholds at which visibility begins. [...] These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen.”¹ For De Certeau, it is exactly this kind of movement—of the shopper perusing the empty store aisles, of the driver alone in their car delivering dinner—that brings “non-spaces” into existence: “A spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities and interdictions, then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities.”² By tuning into our own everyday navigation of the world through an active walking and noticing of our surroundings, De Certeau contends that we can reclaim our autonomy from the structures of politics and capitalism that oppress us.

With shelter in place orders still effective, we are not able to enunciate these possibilities in Delmar’s exhibition until (when? if?) the gallery reopens. But instead, I think we can take her work as a prompt to examine the movements we are able to make—walking down the streets in our neighborhood, picking up takeout, donning our masks in order to shop for groceries—with De Certeau in mind, as we open our eyes to what we previously overlooked. Systems held tenuously in place by a largely unseen labor force that allowed us to move through our capitalist society with ease are now irrelevant or obsolete. Those systems allowed me to travel effortlessly across the country and back, eat in restaurants, ride the subway, view art in galleries and museums, but what good are they now that my world has shrunk to what I can reach by foot or bike?

A few times a week around midday, I lace up my running shoes and head out the door for a quick run in my neighborhood. My route takes me around a reservoir covered in solar panels, I dodge people walking their dogs and run alongside fiery California poppies and Jerusalem sage blooms, then up a hill, past an empty high school, and back down the hill to my street. About two blocks from my house, on this last stretch of my run, growing out of a literal crack in the sidewalk near the curb is a riotous cluster of orange and red coneflowers. The route I take on this short run is not a path I normally follow in our neighborhood—it does not take me to the train or bus, to my son’s preschool or the grocery store—so I had never noticed these flowers until a few weeks ago, when this virus disrupted my usual exercise routine, and forced me to head outdoors. I run to escape the clouding anxiety of the moment, to rid myself of the unease of knowing a new world order is upon us while also not knowing what that order may be. But these persistent flowers snap me right back to the present every time I pass them: a reminder to be just as attuned to the invisible, or barely seen as that which is right in front of me.

– Danica Sachs

¹ Michel De Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 93.

² De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.