Trace and Intent is a two-part artwork. This text accompanies a video piece entitled *Trace*.

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Intent by Daniel Staincliffe

"Whenever and wherever, human existence leaves marks upon the land. These marks can be divided into two basic types: trace and intent. Trace is a record of man's efforts and actions without a conscious awareness of their imprint. This category includes such phenomena as dirt, grease spots, signs of use and wear, or the trampled grass of a footpath.
Intent is the mark of man's conscious attempt to intervene in the environment in some way."[i]

Marc Treib
Settings and Stray Paths

Intent, then, is no better defined than by the development of infrastructure. The roads, pavements, drains, sewers, pylons and buildings that humans have constructed to sustain large numbers of people in one place, constitute the city. Infrastructure is integral, definitive and inseparable from the concept of the city. City *is* infrastructure and infrastructure's omnipresence "leaves us largely unaware of the mechanisms of social organisation that surround and define it."[ii]

In our day-to-day lives, repeated journeys and commutes see each of us explore and alter the beaten paths we tread. The discovery of a ginnel, park entrance or more convenient bus service allows us to identify the quickest and most cost-efficient routes from and to, what city planners may refer to as, our origins and destinations.[iii]

This natural process of analysis and rationale cause us to cut the corners of paths and pavements. Where the planned and constructed infrastructure does not provide the quickest route from A to B, desire lines may form.

Desire line is a term used to describe a line forged from footfall, which often provides the quickest possible route to a desired location. This is usually the line of "least resistance".[iv]

A Line Made by Walking (1967) by Richard Long survives as a photograph documenting the artist's straight, repeatedly trodden line in a field.[v] It is a line with no conventional origin or destination. It is a conscious, meditated execution of an idea: a manifestation of intent: a trace of intent. It is a line along which trace and intent are curiously blurred, marking the earth's surface with a subtlety or temporariness of an animal's activity. And as an artwork it allows us to see the beauty in the lines made by daily, collective desire; bringing into sharp focus the highways, pollution and waste of humankind's daily intent.

Desire line is a term that implies physical evidence of a path. The routes we take may be desire routes or trajectories, journeys or navigations. But the desire *line* must be a physical incarnation of that idea. For example the worn line in the turf or the drawn line on a map; Long's *Ten Mile Walk* (1968) is one example of a line documenting a walk that avoids established infrastructural networks by employing a conceptual structure.[vi]

The erosion of turf by habitual individual time-cost analyses forms a line that encourages more traffic. Indeed, the management and restoration plan for New York's Central Park describes how desire lines were measured in order to identify the most demanded routes. With some being legitimized (as part of a circulation field study) as though a path cannot be a legitimate route without some recognition from the people in charge of the infrastructure.[vii] This is one example of a "mechanism of social organisation" that, Albert Pope argues, infrastructure promotes.[viii]

It frequently is the quickest route possible that I take. It's something I do automatically, when bound by commitments and promises I make to friends and acquaintances and I am aware of the happening of time. Again the relevance of the city in this exploration is highlighted. Urban living often condenses our time. Meetings, activities and deadlines are in abundance. Transportation and infrastructural networks are the nexuses where our demands on time and space meet.

However, often the quickest route is a pleasant one. The footpath that was once a train line that runs from my local village centre to a smaller centre (meeting of roads and routes) where I work is one example. This is an abandoned infrastructure – once designed and built precisely because it is a straight line between two popular origins and destinations. Now its banks are home to ecologies of flowers, shrubs and trees, insects, birds and mammals.

And shortcuts between paved paths allow for brief moments of interaction with the natural world. The softer, cushioned sensation of walking over earth and grass surely evokes innate feelings reminding us of our more natural relationship with the planet.

The definition offered by Rudolf Arnheim that "disorder is not the absence of all order but rather the clash of uncoordinated orders"[ix], correlates with the idea of the order of the planned city clashing with the order of the human who takes his most "cost-efficient" route and cuts the corners.[x]

So there is further beauty in the desire line: the clash of two orders. Both independently just, this clash provides us with a deeper truth. Nothing is controllable absolutely. Human activity never ceases to prove this rule. This fact is recognised in the art of Robert Smithson. Treib notes that his "artistic stance accepted that all systems of order, including nature itself, are affected by entropy; all systems decay and move toward stasis."[xi]

So all systems, structures and infrastructures morph and twist and are eroded over time. And so it is only in the short moment we recognise the desire line as having any significance. It is against the context of the village lanes or metropolis's highways that this trace of human activity captures our imagination. But when we stand back and we can see the relentless construction, erosion and destruction that persist at the macro scale, do we recognise any significance in the forming of the desire line? It is at the human scale that this clash of orders is perceivable. James Flint's exploration of our perception of chance in relation to casinos perfectly illustrates the importance of context:

> *"On the gaming floor chance blazes with the power of a firestorm, sucking up the oxygen and driving all before it. From the vantage point of the offices, however, it crackles with all the cosiness and reassurance of logs burning merrily in a grate."*[xii]

Matthew Tiessen observes that there are at least two different purposes for desire lines. The economical, corner-cutting commuter creates the first category: "*business*", whilst the wanderer is concerned with "*pleasure*".[xiii] The meandering, zigzagging desire line is formed by walkers who enjoy the process of treading new ground. Robert Finch theorises that this innate desire to explore highlights an "ingrained restlessness in the human race, a desire simply to see what may be there, with no specific destination or expectations". And he cites the tern's "dispersal behaviour" - where the young birds fly off in various directions, possibly to assess potential feeding sites - as a survival technique that may explain our own desire to stray from the path. [xiv]

Pleasure desire lines may be a conscious backlash at the omnipresence of urban infrastructure. They avoid the infrastructural capillaries of paved footpaths in order to experience a more natural environment.

Business desire lines refine the routes we transverse and in doing so, reinforce the rational, economical nature of the planned city. This rationality is a natural model of behaviour and is one that effects how we conform to and decide to build the infrastructure in the first place.

Maybe a distinction can be drawn between this rational corner-cutting behaviour and the irritation caused by irrational planning or forced deviation. The use of fences, walls, and planting sometimes force us to avoid the quickest route and stick to a deviating infrastructural course. To make the pedestrian stick to their footpaths, Central Park employed strategies such as creating mounding with vegetation at the edges of paths and obscuring views from paths that might cause deviation. Trees were also cut back to allow views of certain landmarks (such as bridges) further along the routes, encouraging compliance.[xv]

Humankind's cities and infrastructures – our intent – is the manifestation of human conceptual and rational thought, which drives the distinction between humankind and the 'natural' world. But humankind and nature may simply "occupy two points on the same scale".[xvi] We are natural beings. So perhaps our intent is just an indicator that points to our position on that scale. The most advanced scientific developments or deepest philosophical ponderings all exist as products of the natural world. Tiessen comments: "there is no culture, no history, no society, without the natural environment".[xvii]

Whenever and wherever they occur, the desire line – worn by footfall – is only of significance in the context of the concrete jungles we inhabit in our day-to-day lives. Viewed from the vantage point of the planning offices of infrastructural power, they are visible as evidence of collective trace, cutting through the overwhelming concrete mass of intent. Contrasted against the planned, researched cities in which we live and commute, we are able to see the beauty in our trace; the nature in our lives, that is both ever present and often unappreciated.

References

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