

Walking Mind

By Sarah Berkeley

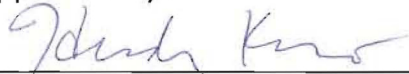
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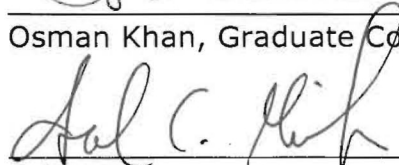
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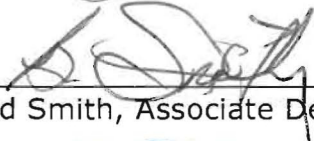
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Walking Mind

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Walking Mind Abstract

Walking Mind asks if it is possible for the body and mind to be in the same place at the same time. The exhibition looks at the overlap and intersections between body, mind and environment through photographic, video and audio re-presentation of walking meditation. Sarah Berkeley maintained an extensive walking meditation practice in order to become aware of the body/mind/environment connection and disconnection. She then documented her physical and mental experience using photography, video and audio texts, which she presents poetically in Walking Mind.

Keywords

Walking

Meditation

Photography

Video

Body

Mind

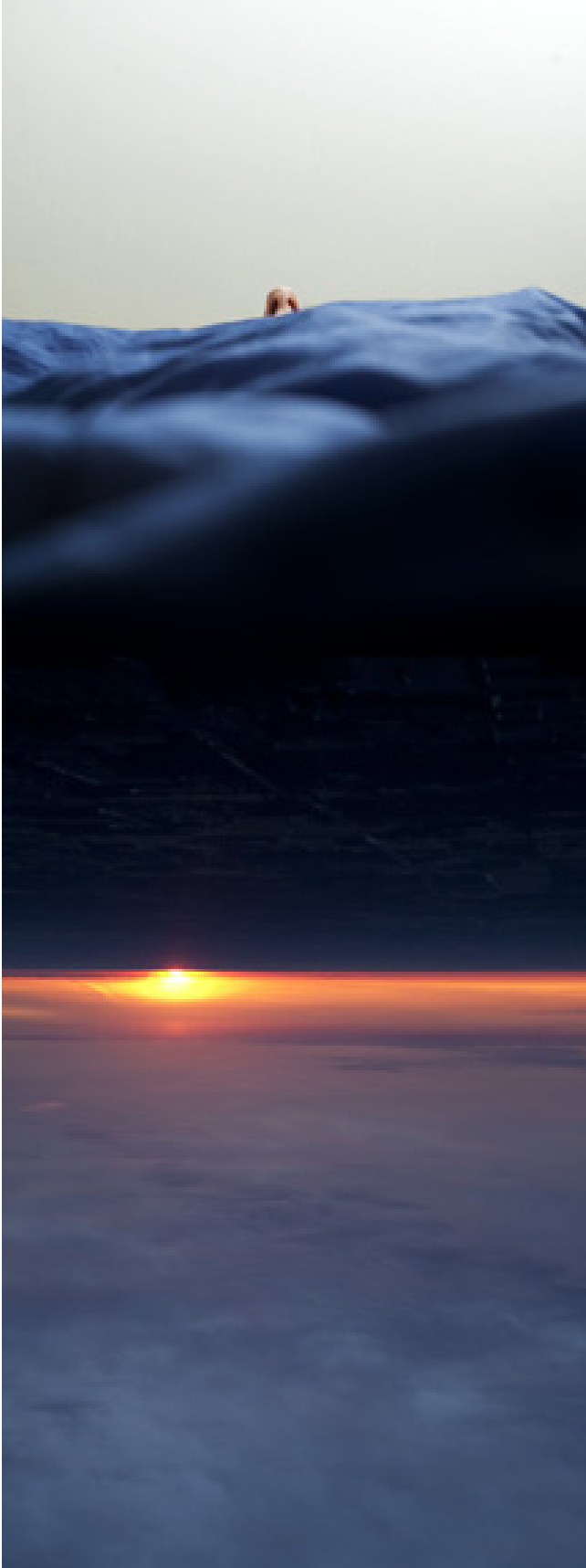
Sky

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Head in the Clouds I, 2011
photographic collage
24" x 60"

"The surprises, liberations, and clarifications of travel can sometimes be garnered by going around the block as well as going around the world, and walking travels both near and far. Or perhaps walking should be called movement, not travel..."

- Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*

"My counterstory seeks to induce an experience of the contemporary world - a world of inequity, racism, pollution, poverty, violence of all kinds - as also enchanted - not a tale of re-enchantment, but one that calls attention to magical sites already here. Not magical in the sense of a 'set of rituals for summoning up supernatural powers with a coherent cosmology,' but in the sense of cultural practices that mark 'the marvelous erupting amid the everyday.'"

- Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*

1. **The View from the Doorway: Overview of Thesis Exhibition**

Through the glass windows of the gallery, passersby and gallerygoers see three vibrant lightboxes leaning against the wall. Inside the gallery, the viewer stands in front of *Head in the Clouds*, human-scale light boxes that portray a nose floating above a colorful landscape, a strip of blackness, the deep blue of sky at sunset and the wooly texture of early morning clouds. Wrapping around the opposite side of the gallery and the back wall is



Head in the Clouds gallery view, 2011

Walking Sky, a series of 30 photographs of the sky that range in size from 24" x 36" to 2.5" x 3.5". Below each photograph a date is penciled on the wall. It becomes apparent that the photographs were taken sequentially and are presented in the order they were taken. Audio narratives that begin

with the same dates as the photographs float from sound domes through the gallery. In contrast to the serene sky photographs, across the gallery the words “I have to, I need to, I should...” repeat incessantly in the unsettling video, *I Have to Walk*. The ground shifts in and out of focus through the wide-angle lens. The foot seems strangely stiff and disembodied as it moves up and down with the camera. A heartbeat and the sound of leaves crunching underfoot become audible when the movement of the foot slows.

We all have had the experience of looking at the sky and feeling a sense of freedom, expansiveness or awe, if not recently, surely as a child. Gazing at the sky allows us to momentarily



Walking Sky, 2011, Work Gallery - Ann Arbor

transcend the limits of our lives. Practicalities, responsibilities, arguments and worries seem miniscule in comparison to the vastness of the sky. In walking, as in looking at the sky, we become aware of the connection between our bodies and the Earth (Solnit, *Wanderlust* 9). Most of us do not take time to look up and pause for a moment, as effortless as it is all over the world.

The audio in *Walking Sky* and the video, *I Have to Walk*, speak to the mental states that prohibit us from enjoying everyday awe-inspiring moments. We have access to the sky anytime, but we are usually wrapped up in our own thoughts or unquestioned routines. *Head in the Clouds* portrays an imaginative realm where the incessant thoughts have been superseded by a blissfully calm state. *Walking Mind* examines the possibility of rupturing routine thought patterns to be enchanted with what we see every day. At the same time, it

is a commentary on a struggle to arrive at this moment of wonder.

Hamish Fulton, an artist who resists the label of conceptual artist, preferring to be called a walking artist, describes his art practice as one that is intended to change him. With this approach, he has been making artwork for forty years in response to his walks, which range from climbing Mount Everest to taking a stroll around the block. In a similar approach to mine, he describes his artwork as, "... only art resulting from the experience of individual walks. A walk has a life of its own and does not need to be materialized into an artwork." (Fulton) Rather than recreating the walk or documenting the walk itself, his work, and mine, reflects the experience of walking. We use the art to process the experience of walking and to make it accessible to others.

2. **Signs Along the Path: MFA projects leading to thesis work**

I began walking around my Ann Arbor neighborhood in 2008. The first projects I made were about the ubiquitous lawns in this neighborhood.

My interest in everyday, mundane experiences became clear in *Paper Trail*, a piece in which I exhibit a collection of toilet paper as relics in a glass museum case. I was curious about the process of imbuing an object with memory - how an everyday object becomes symbolic. On the wall behind the museum case is a map of Berlin with pins marking the sites where the toilet paper was collected. Tacks dangle from strings attached to the pins in the map. The tacks and toilet paper relics are labeled with corresponding numbers. *Paper Trail* suggests that the objects we choose to imbue with value are random. For example, a shell on the beach has no inherent value beyond its use to the animal that lives in it, but the shell I brought back from Thailand is valuable to me. I could have attached my memories to any other object, therefore giving it value. Similar to Mark Dion's *Thames Dig*, in which he excavated discarded and lost items from the River Thames, then placed them in cases in a museum, *Paper Trail* humorously suggests that if random pieces of debris can be elevated to art, toilet paper



Paper Trail, 2008, Warren Robbins Gallery, maps, toilet paper, magnifying glass, pins, thumbtacks, string

can play a similar role.

Continuing my daily walks and interest in In Spring 2009, I continued my daily walks and my interest in collecting mundane objects. I later elevated these objects to the level of art in a series of drawings called *Between*. Each drawing consisted of a maple tree seed (a samara) that I had collected on the walks around my neighborhood. I was fascinated by the way the samaras spiral delicately to the ground. In the drawings the samara is attached to a fine wire coming out of a 14"x17" piece of drawing paper covered with tracing paper. Cast shadows of the samaras interact with pencil drawings of the seeds and other shadows. The wires and samaras vibrate gently on the air currents in the gallery. The poem on page 8 accompanies the drawings.

These drawings were an attempt to crystallize a moment of overlooked ephemeral beauty that I observed on my daily walks. I wanted to preserve and relive the moment of the samara falling from the tree. Instead, I created new ephemerally beautiful objects by attaching the samaras to wires and placing them in a gallery. In this configuration they moved in a different way than when falling from the tree and created a new moment of wonder. *Between* references Paul Ramirez Jonas' piece, *Longer Day*, in which he drives West all day and films the sun as it sets in an attempt to prolong the sunset. He documents his attempts to extend a moment of beauty.



Longer Day, 1997, Paul Ramirez Jonas
Image source: <http://www.paulramirezjonas.com>

To understand this impulse, Elaine Scarry writes about the "inexhaustible pleasure" humans take in beauty and the almost instinctive reaction we have to replicate and therefore, preserve beauty (50). After creating these works and becoming familiar with Scarry's writing, I began to resist the urge to replicate beauty. I focused on walking, the process of collecting the samaras, as much as the objects I was collecting.

Around the same time, I began a meditation practice. I created a series of spiral installations with mosquito netting that ranged from 10' to 20' tall and 15' to 25' in diameter. The fabric was suspended from the ceiling on PVC piping. The floor was covered in sand and viewers were invited to walk through the spiral. It was a meditative path to nowhere. As one walked toward the center more and more layers of diaphanous fabric separated him or her from the outside world. Invariably, as people entered the spiral, they became quieter and more reflective. Spirals and labyrinths make the path from A to B as long as possible. It is the least efficient way to get there,

Between

*Neither a seed
nor a pod
nor a leaf,
the samara,
mode of transportation
for a seed.*

*Tethered
to a place
foreign and
obtuse to its purpose.*



*Samara would carry a seed
plant it and die.
But here
neither lives nor dies.*

*Serving no seed
samara dances
with images of self
Not moving, not still,
just here
for now.*

which raises the question, “where is there?” As one walks through the spiral, one becomes aware that the purpose of the installation is not to go from one place to another, but to be present to one’s current location. This idea of being present in the moment rather than focusing on a future destination is central to the Buddhist meditation philosophies I was learning about. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist teacher and monk, describes walking meditation in the following way:

Why rush? Our final destination will only be the graveyard. Why not walk in the direction of life, enjoying peace in each moment with every step? There is no need to struggle. Enjoy each step. We have already arrived (6).



Spiral I, 2008, Warren Robbins Gallery

3. Looking Down: Presentation and Analysis of I Have to Walk

I made several short videos with my point and shoot camera placed on my belly, pointing toward my face while I was reclining. I held my breath, to eliminate the movement of breathing so that the camera and would record only the movements of my heartbeat. I was attempting to make the heartbeat, an often-overlooked and vital function of the body visible. In an effort to challenge the use of the video camera as an external eye or separate character watching the subject of the video, I wanted my camera to be, in effect, an extension of my body and affected by my body’s movements. The visual composition of these videos led to the photographs for *Head in the Clouds*. I purchased a wearable High Definition video camera that is used by snowboarders, mountain bikers and other athletes to record their feats. The wearable camera is designed to be attached to helmets, skis and bicycles. Like Bruce Nauman’s pioneering use of the video camera as a tool for artists in his 1968 work, *Stamping in the Studio*, in which he turns the camera upside down, I challenge the wearable camera as a new artists’ tool. I humorously repurposed the video camera by attaching it to my body while I performed the unspectacular sport of walking. I experimented with positioning the camera in a variety of ways as an extension of my body. One of the visually interesting points of view I recorded was from strapping the camera to my

leg, just above the ankle with the lens pointing toward the ground. I found that the slower I walked the more in-focus footage I recorded. Walking at a normal pace created totally blurred imagery. To record *I Have to Walk*, I walked at a meditative pace with the camera strapped to my leg. Like Nauman, I use the camera to document my performance. While he exaggerated his movements for the camera, the way I position my camera distorts a habitual walking pattern. He relies on his performance create distortion, while I rely on a technological device.



***I Have to Walk* (video still), 2010**

The script for the video is derived from my internal monologue. As I am walking, I often think of all the other more “productive” things I should be doing. To create the script for *I Have to Walk*, I removed the specifics of my to-do list and recorded the phrases “I have to, I need to, I should”, which precede all of the items on the list. These phrases are synchronized with each footstep.

The video, *I Have to Walk*, addresses the idea that my drive to be productive is so ingrained that when I walk, I pass the time thinking about other ways I should be using the time. This pressure creates an internal struggle between what I am actually doing and what I am telling myself I should be doing. This video gives voice to this internal pressure. The rhythm of

this video is regimented and the action is forceful. The voice is insistent. Michel de Certeau references this restricted feeling when he describes its absence:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as a player or played. (de Certeau 92)

I Have to Walk shows moments of being, to use de Certeau's word, 'possessed' by the grid of the streets, the commitments and pressures of daily life. The distorted image created by the fish-eye lens of the camera reflects the skewed view of the world this video presents. The audio points out that the walker is so possessed by her own regimented thoughts, that she is unaware of the beauty around her. She is unable to detach from her structured thinking and look up at the sky. In the moments when the foot moves more slowly, the voice also quiets and the image comes into focus. This correlation suggests that slowing down is helpful in experiencing a moment of wonder. Rebecca Solnit describes this correlation in *Wanderlust*:

The rhythm of walking generated a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulated the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. (5)

4. Looking Up: Presentation and Analysis of Walking Sky

I began a rigorous meditation practice in an attempt to escape the stress of my current life, the incessant thoughts about difficulties of the past, as well as my worries and fantasies about the future. To borrow Rebecca Solnit's words, I began to "walk off my angst". After early morning seated meditation, prostrations, and chanting, I took a mindful walk every day along the same route for 30 days. While I walked, I attempted to notice as many details as possible. At the mid-point of the route, I took a photograph of the sky. Immediately when I got home, I wrote down everything I remembered from the walk – colors and shapes of leaves, people I encountered, my fantasies and sounds of the neighborhood. Gradually I assembled a collection of photographs and writings as raw materials for art-making. Later I selected the photographs and, with the help of a poet, I edited the writings to make them more concise. Then I recorded my voice reading the texts. Some of the texts are poems, while others are more prosaic. Two examples follow below.

October 18

*Feet on ground
in shoes, in socks
fuzzy purple
left by a friend and not returned.*

*Squishy soles caress cement
holes
fill with dark dirt
and seeds.*

*Leaves crisp
break with steps
red and ruffled pink
gold and crumbled beige.*

Blue infinite halo above.

*Red like just-kissed lips
Red like apples
Red like nothing but leaves
right now, right here.*



October 21

Yellow maple leaves fall.

Here two days ago a mother photographed her daughter posing in golden piles. I try to crystallize the floating leaves with a photograph, but am not quick enough.

I try to capture my mind too, but it is far away - hearing the deep vibrations of his voice, seeing his jaw that bulges and flattens as he speaks, touching his tender broad shoulders and contagious wide smile.

What will happen with him

or him

or him?

Maybe nothing.

Probably nothing.

Nothing.



The audio gives voice to my internal monologue, and it describes the landscape that exists under the sky that is shown in the photographs. The specific details of the audio are less important than the fact that they exist. These monologues offer viewers a way to understand my process in creating the sky photos. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the simultaneous, parallel paths of the body and mind.

The first presentation of *Walking Sky* was a book of the photographs and writings. The second iteration was a gallery installation over a 30-day period. I projected each sky image onto the floor of the gallery for 24 hours and projected several excerpted texts onto the wall behind for 5 minutes each.

Even though I took each sky photograph in the same place every day, each image is unique. As I paid attention to my thoughts and emotions I noticed that they, like the clouds, are impermanent and constantly changing. Some days my mind was clear and calm; others days it was full of memories, fantasies and worries. While I could not create my mindscape any more than I could control the skyscape, I could notice how I was feeling and what I was thinking. I then could choose which thoughts or emotions to engage with or let float by. I learned to pay attention to what is here rather than escape reality for some imagined, better place. I acknowledged the reality around me, even when it was unpleasant, then accepted my emotions about it. I felt a deeper sense of peace than when I ignored the unpleasant realities. The moments of peace are a way of thinking, seeing and being that



Clouds, Vik Muniz, 2005

(image source: <http://www.pbs.org>)

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transcends my habitual everyday approach

Many people have taken photographs, painted, written about and filmed the sky. Richard Misrach, Alfred Stieglitz, Iñigo Manglano Ovalle and Vik Muniz have all made photographic artwork of the sky. Misrach's work is rooted in fine art photography and makes environmental commentaries. Stieglitz created some of the first abstract art photographs by taking pictures of the sky. Manglano Ovalle's piece showing live video of the sky on both sides of the United States/Mexico border uses the sky to make a political statement. Vik Muniz draws whimsical clouds shapes with a plane and skywriting.

I paired the sky photographs with the audio recordings to re-present the act of walking, seeing one thing, but thinking about something else. Sometimes I take the bus to school, and when I arrive, I have no memory of the bus ride. My body was

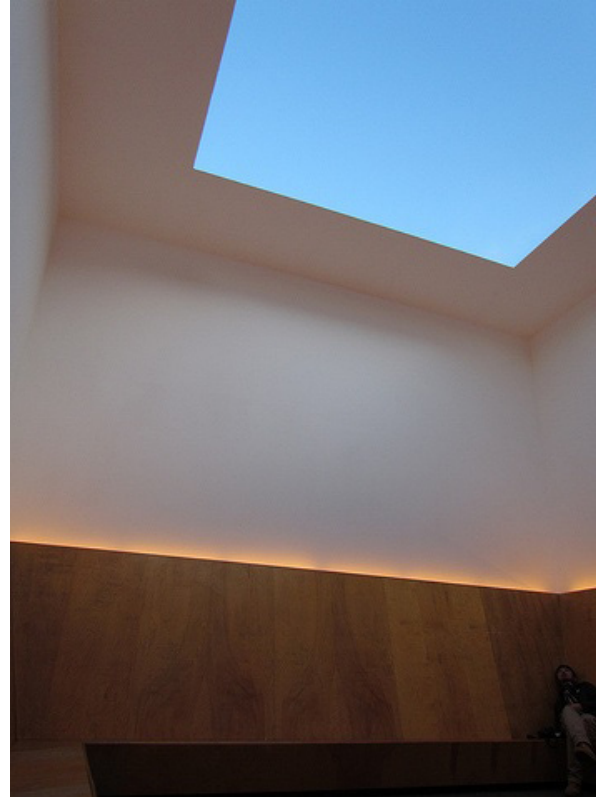
on the bus (so was my brain), but my attention was elsewhere. When I am not mindful of where I am in, I am not fully living that moment. The audio of *Walking Sky* refers to the constant stream of thoughts in my head as I went on these walks. The thoughts are interrupted by a brief moment of awareness as I look at the sky and take a photograph of it. In that enchanted moment, I am totally immersed in experience.

The varying sizes of the photographs allude to the amount of time I spent being aware of the sky. The smaller photographs represent the days I took a quick photograph and hurried home. The larger photographs represent the days I spent more time looking. The images are hung on the wall with plenty of space between them asking the viewer to journey through the gallery along their own path. The sky photographs represent blips of awareness in the midst of a thought-filled mind. The spacing of the images in the gallery reflects the pace of walking. *Walking Sky* references the impermanence of thoughts and clouds. I wrote the date of each photograph on the wall below it to show that this was how the sky looked on that particular day for that moment. Although the photographs are all from the same location, the passage of time makes them each unique. On Kawara's *Date Paintings* and postcard series, *I Got Up*, pinpoint his existence to a particular geographic location and time. My work performs a similar function but further alludes to the impermanence of everything on Earth by tying my existence to the sky, which is in constant flux.



October 25th, *Walking Sky*, 2011, Work Gallery-Ann Arbor,, 2.5" x 3.5"

In James Turrell's work, *Meeting*, at P.S.1 in New York he puts a frame around the sky in the midst of an urban metropolis. The interior environment that frames *Meeting* is a quiet, sacred space in a museum full of energetic, contemporary art. Pew-like benches frame the room that is only open at sunset. Warm, recessed lights gradually become more intense as the sun sets. The seam between the interior environment and the exterior environment of the sky is invisible. The sky becomes an interior ceiling and the interior environment transcends its own gravity. De Certeau describes his experience at the top of a skyscraper that elevates him above the grid of the city, physically and mentally. Turrell does the opposite by pulling the transcendent nature of the sky into the built environment. Turrell has brought the sky into a scale that humans can comprehend. *Meeting* makes the sky accessible and places the intense natural light and color of the sky into the human-made environment. A plane glides by and the illusion is broken. The viewer becomes aware of scale again, and the sky briefly returns to its untouchable and distant state. When the plane flies out of the frame, the illusion is restored.

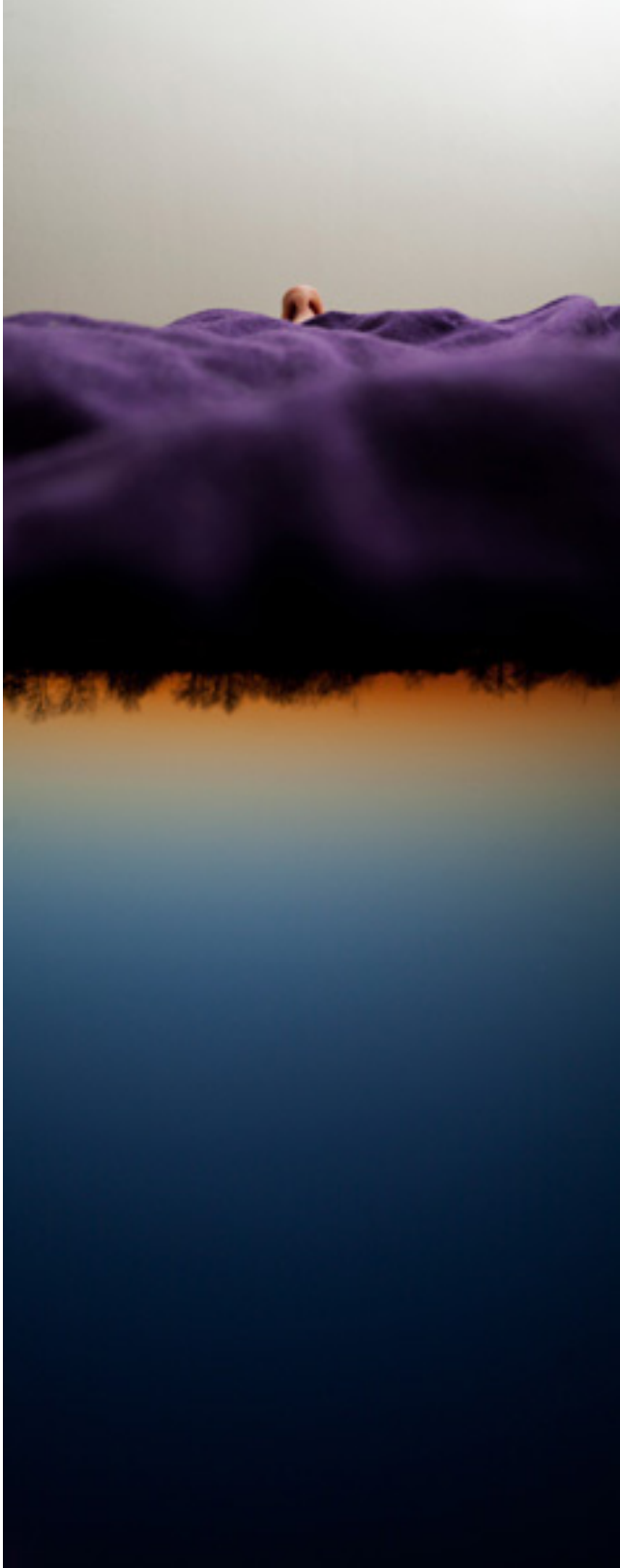


Meeting, James Turrell, 1986
(image: cc Kalevkevad)

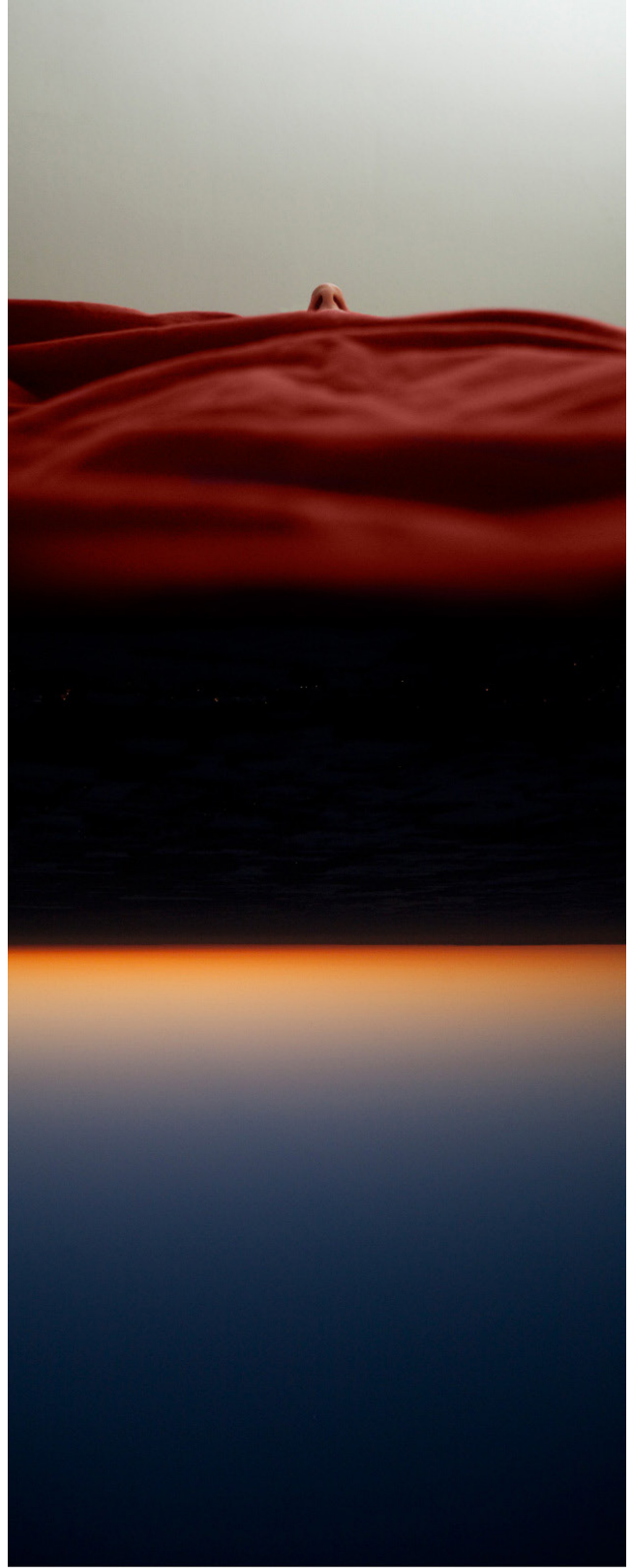
When I point my camera toward the sky and look through the lens, I feel my body bridge the Earth and sky, as I do when I am in *Meeting*. In *Walking Sky*, I do not recreate the experience of being in the park looking at the sky the way Turrell does. Instead, I comment on the struggle and, at times, failure to achieve a moment of enchantment in the midst of every day experience. Like Ramirez-Jonas' *Longer Day*, *Walking Sky* documents my attempts to elongate a moment of beauty.

In 1957 a 12-year-old viewer of *Omnibus*, a TV show about science for kids, wrote in requesting an episode about the sky. In response, Rachel Carson was hired to write the episode, "Something about the Sky". Even in 1957 she lamented the lack of attention given to the sky:

For most of us who live in cities and towns, awareness of clouds has perhaps grown dim. If we think of them at all, we see them only as a beautiful backdrop for a rural scene or an ominous reminder to carry an umbrella today.



Head in the Clouds II, 2011
photographic collage
24" x 60"



Head in the Clouds III, 2011
photographic collage
24" x 60"

Since then, we have become increasingly connected to machines and spend more time than ever indoors. We move from being inside one box to another - from house to car to office or school to car to gym to car to home (Wanderlust 253). Many elementary schools do not offer recess. The need to intentionally engage with the outdoors is greater than ever. Our lives are seemingly disconnected from the natural environment although we rely on it for our existence – air, water, heat, minerals, and food. As we live lives that are removed from the source of our energy, it is easy to overlook our dependence on the Earth, the atmosphere and the sun. *Walking Sky* elevates the mundane experience of walking on the Earth and looking at the sky to a sacred event. To quote Solnit:

To consider earth holy is to connect the lowest and most material to the most high and ethereal, to close the breach between matter and spirit. It subversively suggests that the whole world might potentially be holy and that the sacred can be underfoot rather than above. ("Wanderlust" 49)



October 7, *Walking Sky*, 2011, photograph, 16" x 20"

5. **Rising Above: Presentation and Analysis of Head in the Clouds**

To create the Head in the Clouds, the lightbox series, I flew in a small airplane with the sole purpose of taking photographs of the sky. We flew at sunrise and sunset. There was no earthly destination for these flights. The flight began and ended in the same location. The intention was simply to be in the sky. Similar to walking meditation, this flying experience was about being aware of the present moment, not about transporting our bodies from one place to another. The images are aerial views of the sky that are intended to be portraits of those places in the sky. I paired the aerial photos with photographs of my nose from a reclined position.

Flying in an airplane, like being on top of a tall building as de Certeau describes, offers a sense of freedom. It provides a new perspective on the world. The people and places that constitute our lives are far away. Houses, cars and roads look tiny. Individual people are invisible and the problems or ideas they embody are even smaller. The moment when the airplane rises from the Earth, we transcend all of the weighty issues that bind our lives to the Earth. Because of the human scale of the light boxes skyscape becomes a body. Conversely, the body becomes a landscape because the recognizable body feature, the nose, is a small part of these global images. The juxtaposition of a view of the body from the ground and a view of the sky from the sky suggests that we can transcend our difficulties even while on Earth. These works attempt to convey a sense of peacefulness and perspective. Rather than being confined to the downward, rhythmic, limited view shown in I Have to Walk, Head in the Clouds offers an open, global vantage point.

Rachel Carson poetically describes the shift in perspective that happens when one looks at the sky and why the sky is essential. "We too live on the floor of an ocean - a vast atmospheric sea the surrounds our planet. The atmosphere is dense enough to support life only in the lower-most layers." She continues describing the sense of awe and mystery that exists when gazing at the sky, "The air ocean, like the sea, is full of mysteries. When the answer is found in the far depths of the sky it will be written in the clouds."

6. Looking Back: Conclusion

The Work Gallery is in a pedestrian area, therefore, *Walking Mind* is a segment of each viewer's longer walk that begins before entering the gallery. The exhibition reflects the act of walking. This includes moments of stillness and mental noise that are integral to everyone's walk. The exhibition begins with *Walking Sky*, a series of photographs and audio narratives, which shows the ebb and flow of thoughts and mindful awareness. Continuing around the gallery, viewers encounter the video, *I Have to Walk*, which emphasizes the intensity of self-restricting thoughts and their ability to pull one away from the beauty of the present moment. The lightboxes, *Head in the Clouds*, conclude the exhibition with photographs that imagine a state where inner peace has superseded the tumultuous inner state presented in the other works.

As a whole, *Walking Mind* offers the viewer time and space to reflect on her current walk as well as the lifelong, parallel journeys of body and mind. When the viewer leaves the gallery and she continues her own walk.



October 19, *Walking Sky*, 2011, photograph, 16" x 20"

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