



## Obligatory Passage Point

by Linus Elmes, Jens Soneryd, Linda Soneryd, Milo Lavén, Elin Strand, Tove Lamm Strähle, Jo Rideout and Per Nyström.

### Foreword

The text “Obligatory Passage Point” was written because Elin Strand, Milo Lavén and I were invited to a satellite project, called “Istanbul Fragmented” during the 9:th Istanbul Biennial. The purpose of the project was to explore urban models and ideals. Istanbul Fragmented was both initiated and held at ITU, faculty of architecture. ([www.if2005.itu.edu.tr](http://www.if2005.itu.edu.tr))

Our contribution was an application for the human body, possible to carry on the back and containing several different measuring instruments. We were interested in registering two types of information, reactions within the body, such as heart rate, carbon monoxide in the breath or amount of oxygen in the blood and at the same time conditions of the surrounding environment.

Could decibel, lumen or humidity have any correlation to reactions within us when we are forced to encounter an urban landscape? The documentation of the project was a film, which we invited Per Nyström to edit, and a text, which we invited Jens and Linda Soneryd to write with the film as a starting point. We were now six people involved in the project and when we later on were invited by Silvio Selgado, a curator working for Weinö Aaltonen Museum of art in Turku ([www.wam.fi](http://www.wam.fi)) to participate in a exhibition called “Without Boundaries” we continued the process of expanding the numbers of participants in the project. Jo Rideout recorded a recital of the text, which became the voiceover in a new version of the film. Later we was asked to show the movie at “Good-TV” and for that purpose Tove Lamm re-edited the movie again, to a new format. We were now eight people involved and the project was constantly presented in new medias and contexts. Katja and Janna, have now asked us to publish the text at SQUID, how many people are now involved?

Linus Elmes

### Obligatory Passage Point\*

I

Point out a compass course and make an investigation. Make it a game. Investigate the relation between you as a citizen and the resistance of the city, when you are walking a straight line, following a pre-defined compass course. Investigate what obstacles your body will meet: the air friction; other bodies; ditches you are forced to go down into and up again as they pass your way.

What will happen is that you leave the world and yourself – the things you wanted to understand. Maybe you will understand something else, but hardly yourself. You have investigated something that is immobile, able to move only forwards and sideways. Every time we stop to experience things, with the ambition of understanding ourselves, we will instantly approach something other than ourselves.

II

There seems to have been a time when we really could trust ourselves, even if this was the only thing we could trust. A time when ‘I’ was the only thing I could be absolutely certain of. I could rest in the conviction that my own pain, just as love, lust, grief and joy, was real and not imagined. I could doubt many things, but not that.



I could have doubts about God, about the cats, and the stones. I could doubt the mountains, beaches, squirrels, pigs, and houses, but I could not doubt that I experienced their existence; that they were there for me. The only thing I could really trust was my own experience; my feeling of being me, and of having a hair in my mouth. This was enough, and it was all that I needed.

From this conviction I could start to reason about the world external to me and finally about God, who had invented and created everything; even if this final conclusion maybe wasn't that obvious. Yet, everything was fine. I had myself as an indubitable reference point, and I could be satisfied with that.

Today it is considerably harder to trust oneself. This probably has nothing to do with Freud or Nietzsche, let alone that both have done their best to reveal the huge gaps within human beings, gigantic football fields of experiences we cannot trust. No, it is probably totally different types of people that made us doubt ourselves.

Yet, "we have started to doubt" occurs as a doubtful formulation. Today we act as if there was never any such thing as an experience to be certain of. We have simply forgotten about how it was to not doubt. There isn't even an experience left to doubt.

I am peacefully asleep and awakened by the sound of construction activity at six o'clock in the morning and still feel uncertain if the noise is too loud. I feel a diffuse pressure on my chest and my heart is beating faster. Are the decibel levels exceeding the allowed limits? Is my blood pressure too high? When our experiences have lost their force, concepts like decibel, blood pressure and body mass index become tremendously urgent. They are now the only thing that gives us access to what really happens.

### III

The world is not a cafeteria, a bus stop, a forest, a cornfield or a birch. But yet we resemble each other, the birches and us, even if we are separated. Just like the human body, the birch can be measured in centimetres and inches. Yes, it can be weighed and calculated in innumerable ways. The birch is a city, a body of its own that sometimes collides with other bodies, like human bodies.

I am a city, a body of my own, a piece of nature, to observe and to measure. What there is, is myself, a city, with a back pack full of measuring instruments including a compass needle that can point out my course. I move in a pre-defined direction. When something inhibits me from following the course I start to move sideways, in order to resume my trajectory as soon as possible.

This is what I do: I am following the rules I initially set out for myself. At the same time the measuring instruments register the humidity, radiation, wind speed, temperature, magnetic fields, light condition, sound, pulse rate, blood pressure, respiration rate, exhaled carbon dioxide and amount of oxygen in the blood.. The measuring instruments make no distinction between me and the city. In this way I resemble the city as well as my direction.

### IV

What do we learn from this investigation? Does it teach us anything about the resistance of the city, or the relation between the human being and her environment? No. It teaches us about the conflict that arises when we approach ourselves as self-contained entities, without language, history and context.

At the same time the distinction between 'our own' experiences and what we can know through the use of technologies becomes diffuse. The self-contained entity that we call 'human' becomes entangled with other entities. They become a single unit, like the limbs on a body, like the tennis player becomes 'one' with the racket.

At first, as an amateur tennis player, the racket doesn't seem to do what I want it to do, it feels heavy. It never hits the ball. It doesn't seem to follow the movements of my arm. It is not co-ordinated with the movement of my eyes on the ball. The professional tennis player is 'one' with the racket; the racket is an extension of his arms.



I pull out a chair when I want to have a seat and the chair moves in the direction I pull it. The chair responds to my movements, it does what I want it to do. When I pull the chair and accidentally hit my toe with it, I cry out 'bloody chair' as if it was the chair that was jumping right at me, intentionally. When responding the way I want it to do, it is a unit, an extension of my body, when it inhibits my action, it seems separated, as a separate entity with potentially evil intentions, or with interests opposite to my own. The inhibition stops my movement. It makes me reflect, and it forces me to recognise a friction between myself and another entity, with a separate will, moving in another direction.

V

I walk following a straight line. Neither is my walk motivated by the goal I will reach in the end, nor is it a random stroll in which the cloud in the sky or the fashionable shoes in the shop window make me stop just because they fascinate me. Neither fascination for the unexpected nor the exhilaration over an expected and imagined forthcoming goal moves me. I follow a straight line, not because it takes me anywhere, but because it allows me to be exact.

Measuring techniques have a capacity for exactness, a capacity to move us in a straight line, extinguishing all inhibitions, everything that can make us stop. They make us move, but in an immobile fashion, straightforwardly, ignoring potential side routes and make us indifferent to the things that we pass on our way. It doesn't take us anywhere, the goal is unimportant.

I am standing in front of a wall. The wall is grey and it is made of concrete. I do not touch the wall. I do not feel its friction. I do not hit my knuckles on it until they bleed. I do not smell the odour from the dog that peed on the wall twenty minutes earlier. I register the wall and I reckon that I am forced to move sideways in order to keep the compass needle to the north.

I have started to interfere with my walk. I no longer follow the instruments, I do not any longer walk in the direction they point me, I force the instrument to point in a direction it wouldn't point without my will. I start to behave as a master and a slave of the instrument at the same time. I master it by making it follow my directions, I am enslaved by it by being indifferent to any other entity that I may come across during my walk.

Jens Soneryd and Linda Soneryd

\* The term Obligatory Passage Point was coined by the French sociologist Michel Callon