

Kevin Roberts Article for L'Espresso October 2009

The 21st Century Flâneur

*"Yea I went with nothing
Nothing but the thought of you
I went wandering..."*
The Wanderer - U2 with Johnny Cash

As wandering the world goes, I'm up there. Work stretches me across 150 offices in 86 countries, and that's without clients, students, conferences and sports fixtures pulling me in all directions. In any year I touch down in 50+ cities. And between (or during!) appointments, I vanish into them.

I wasn't always a peregrine, but as a kid growing up in Lancaster in the UK, I thought myself a vagabond, an outlaw, a rebel. As Steve Jobs said: who wants to join the navy when you can be a pirate? I ran away from home about a dozen times between ages 7 and 11. And since my high school chased me away, I guess I was born for the high seas.

There's nothing like exploring a new city. The thrill of adventure, the excitement of discovery, your blood pumps and you feel alive. Around every corner, a world awaits. No doubt a flâneur feels some of this. A what? A flâneur!

Flâneur is a curious term, which is getting more coverage. It merits a bit of investigation because its creative stock is undervalued.

Emerging as a languid character from 19th century Paris, the flâneur is a strolling urban explorer with an eye for insight. The French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) saw a flâneur as a person who walks the city to experience it. I think of Bob Dylan, wandering off and getting picked up by the cops. To me, it's less the glossy travel magazines, and more Tyler Brûlé's

band of observers at Monocle sifting through obscurity.

It's American folk hero Woodie Guthrie all over.... "It's round the world I've traveled; it's round the world I've roamed; but I've yet to see an outlaw drive a family from its home."

Flâneurs are cultivated, super-sensory, empathetic and often affluent. They are switched on because they are switched off, with time to kill. These urbane characters have been strolling down through time, popping up and down in different guises. Voyeur, drifter, writer, artist, phantom, photographer, psycho-geographer, photo-blogger, even traceurs (Parkour exponents). Check out dance and media artist Bill Shannon flowing - yes flowing - through an urban jungle (and note his eye for a hat!)

http://www.saatchikevin.com/sisomo/TV_Ads_Viral_Video/Visas_Bill/

Flânerie is a bit like culture, difficult to pin down, as both subject and object are dynamic. The object - the city - is undergoing accelerated change. Over half of the world's people are city dwellers and this is rising, even as some older cities crumble like Babylon. At least 20 cities are now mega, with 10 million+ people.

As cities get bigger and shinier, some have said the Flâneur will disappear. Personally I can't see it, despite the best efforts of American culture and rational urban planners. Thanks to financial cycles, cities are innately regenerative. Good times squeeze the essential creative resources out of the centre of cities. Bad times open the cultural space, inviting flânerie into the back alleys of human endeavor.

Think New York in the 1970s. It had a gritty edge and you had a sense anything could happen if you stepped beyond the lights. As businesses folded and buildings were abandoned, art and enterprise popped up like magic mushrooms. Downtown, the Meat Packing District, the Bowery and SoHo exploded in a buzz of creativity. Today, cities are reinventing themselves into cultural communities within a city. You see it in Brooklyn, in Shoreditch in the UK, in the

Marais in Paris, in Grey Lynn in Auckland, and wherever community prevails.

I love meandering through cities, absorbing the mystery, sensuality and intimacy of each city. I explore physically and virtually. It's the local that interests me most, from local artists right through to the local football team. There are diamonds in this rough, priceless revelation in a mainstream that re-packages information and labels it as insight. I'd argue the flâneur is now more valuable than any research project.

It's true across art, music, food, design, psychology architecture, sport... all of it. When our whole life is on a schedule, we miss the hidden doors to better futures. So let heart and mind wander, and dare to dream.

The New York-based graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister takes a year sabbatical every seven years. He shuts down his studio, travels, working on new projects for fresh stimulus. He recently told the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference that after his year off, everything he designed over the next seven years came out of his thinking over that one year. I take a year off all the time, one Saturday in Grasmere at a time!!!

Enlightened companies are finally getting it, encouraging personal creative time to see what hatches, Google being the fashionable example. This October I spoke at the HSM World Business Forum at Radio City Hall in New York. Another speaker there Gary Hamel was on point with this question: how do you build a company where innovation is everyone's job? Science, too, is coming to the time-out party. Neuroscientists in North America studying brain waves have discovered that a wandering and upbeat mind (vs. a prepared mind) leads to bursts of insight. The storyteller Roald Dahl pulls all this together in this quote: "Those who don't believe in magic will never find it."

So, long may the journey of the flâneur continue and far may he travel. Today he is bridging ideas as diverse as creativity, mythology, meditation, urban planning, technology, surrealism and sustainability.

Here is my five-point starter kit for the 21st century flâneur:

1. **Plunge into chaos:** Go where your heart takes you, but too much structure and order sterilizes the art. It sucks out the life. Here are my 10 cities for unadulterated joyous flânerie:
 - a. New York (Street beat)
 - b. Rio (The exuberance of the body)
 - c. Paris (It's Paris!)
 - d. Barcelona (Viva Catalonia!)
 - e. Berlin (Renewal)
 - f. Buenos Aires (Tango lives)
 - g. Amsterdam (Flower power)
 - h. Rome (Believe!)
 - i. Manchester (See Tevez, Robinho and Adebayor)
 - j. Santa Fe (The Wild West)
2. **Feel the pulse:** For me there are five ways to get the rhythm of a city, to feel its meaning:
 - a. Read fiction set in that city – from any period.
 - b. Listen to the music on the street
 - c. Eat local food in local bars
 - d. Visit local art galleries
 - e. Watch the local soccer team
3. **Stay elevated:** The professional traveler faces the risk of becoming jaded. When you're drifting through the currents of humanity, and diving deep, you need to feel right. My secret to staying fresh is freedom within a framework. A framework of airlines I love, friends I miss and love, and a hotel I'm comfortable in. The freedom is getting out in search of the art, music and food I've read about.

4. **Take the right equipment:** Woody Hayes said luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity: Here's my equipment:

- An open mind
- A 'Flow' personality (positive tending on radical optimism)
- A waterproof chest and a bullet proof back (so if people throw bad stuff at you, it bounces off your front or runs off your back)
- The Amex Centurion Concierge system!!!

5. **Take the right tools:** Some things you need and some things you don't. It's up to you, but travel light. Here are my tools:

- I-pod
- Mobile phone
- Black outfit – shirt to boots
- Kindle
- Leather John Varvatos jacket
- Levis
- Adidas sneakers

Ralph Waldo Emerson is good here: "Few people know how to take a walk. The qualifications are endurance, plain clothes, old shoes, an eye for nature, good humor, vast curiosity, good speech, good silence and nothing too much."

*Kevin Roberts is CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi Lovemarks Company. His book Lovemarks: the future beyond brands has been published in 18 languages.
Websites: www.lovemarks.com; www.saatchikevin.com
Blog: krconnect.blogspot.com*