

The Walker

Gideon Lewis-Kraus traces
the transcontinental journeys of Brazilian
artist **Paulo Nazareth**

The history of the *flâneur* – the city wanderer – is more or less a series of justifications for doing nothing. The origin myth goes something like this: the rise of capitalism produced a cohort of rag-pickers on the margins; as history accelerated, they kept out of the way, strolling and noticing. Their idleness represented a resistance to mechanization, the records they took a testament to what was being extinguished. What’s never quite clear is whether these people felt left behind or simply refused to take part. They were as enthralled by what was going on around them – the frenzy, the change, the progress, the loss – as they were revolted by it. This ambivalence has allowed the *flâneur* to inhabit one of a number of affective and functional modes. Charles Baudelaire was astringent; his idleness was cast as resistance. W.G. Sebald, closer to our time, was mournful; his idleness, or rather the idleness of his narrators, was

interpreted as memorial. Either way, the value of the activity is understood to be encased in the product that’s left behind: the documentation. The *flâneur*, in that way, is just a traveller who lacks budget or ambition. The explorer or adventurer, when not conquering new territory, is satisfied that his or her travels will become travails: they will produce important bulletins. All of these represent variations on the alchemical process by which something that looks a lot like unproductive work (that is, something that looks a lot like nothing) is redeemed. The *flâneur* and the traveller do nothing, but they take nothing very seriously.

Paulo Nazareth turns all of this on its head. He does nothing and makes it into something by allowing it to remain pretty much nothing. What’s fun and interesting and novel about him is that he seems to experience none of the anxiety of the European *flâneur*. Despite constantly losing his travel

documents, he tends to look as though he’s having a good time. His documentary work does not present itself as the burden of its production but as an artefact of his ongoing gratitude. He doesn’t make videos to prove that his time is well spent; what they show is that he’s well aware that his time is invariably well spent. This is, of course, an illusion, as it always has to be. He may present himself as a kind of *faux naïf* but he’s anything but naïve. Nazareth understands that the whole gig of art – and he is always introducing his conceptual decrees by declaring: ‘Here is art’ – requires that these performances be framed: here, the documentation says, is the part that is art, here are the boundaries of a work, and now it can be appreciated as such. But the real conceit is that the frame is always in motion. His *Cadernos de Africa* (Africa Notebooks, 2013–ongoing) – records of his walks along old slave routes from Johannesburg to Lyon



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Cadernos de Africa (Africa
Notebooks), 2013 –
ongoing, detail of installation
view at ICA, London

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Untitled
2011, photographic print on
cotton paper, 67 × 90 cm

Courtesy
previous page & 1 the artist and
Mendes Wood, São Paulo •
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photograph: Mark Blower

— are always presented as inconclusive, as what he’s cobbled together thus far, as if his gallery put an exhibition date on the calendar and, at the last minute, he offhandedly sent them what he happened to have. The whole situation is deliberately depressurized.

One of the intended effects of Nazareth’s casual mode is the tension that is created when he is not taken at his word, when the detritus of his collections are not accepted at face value. They rarely are. We are always trying to make him more serious, more respectable, than he purports to be, and this seems to be a source of great pleasure for him. Critics like to say of Nazareth’s assemblages of bottles, labels and garbage that they may look random but are precisely organized, or that what might seem haphazard is far from gratuitous or chance-like. These observations, in their bid on his behalf for precision, are precisely wrong. His shows are, in fact, *full* of random and gratuitous elements; they comprise *exclusively* random and gratuitous elements. Part of his artwork is that he knows we’ll want to make him altogether fussier than he is.

Take, for example, his walks. In the Anglophone tradition, the aimlessness of walking is rooted out by the rules imposed: it is a manoeuvre in which the apparent nothingness of walking is transformed into the something of an art practice by its adherence to rigour. When an artist walks, *he or she has to walk the whole way*. For example, in 1973, after walking the entire distance from John O’Groats at the northern tip of the UK, down to Land’s End at the country’s southernmost point, artist Hamish Fulton ‘made the commitment to only make art resulting from the experience of individual walks’. In 1998, Richard Long walked in the opposite direction, from Cornwall to Scotland: 33 miles each day for 33 days (*A Line of 33 Stones* – *A Walk of 33 Days*). When Anglophone critics have written about Nazareth’s walks – most frequently his 2011 journey from Belo Horizonte to New York, where he



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Performance documentation,
two indigenous Kaiowá men,
a sofa and chair, installation view,
'The Encyclopedic Palace',
55th Venice Biennale, 2013

Courtesy
the artist and Mendes
Wood, São Paulo

washed the dust from his feet in the Hudson River before walking back again (*Noticias de America*, News from America, 2011–12) – they have emphasized that he walked the whole damn distance. In his own interviews, however, Nazareth seems totally unembarrassed to reveal that he sometimes took the bus. His flip-flops are ground to decrepit little kitchen sponges but he never advertises these works as self-denying, as ascetics would. In an earlier piece, he set out to walk from Belo Horizonte to Caracas but, instead, he happened to go to Brasília, and then he took the bus home. Things happen. He routinely misplaces vital documents (his passport, in one common instance) or produces the wrong ones (he can't cross one border because he left his Brazilian ID card at home) in a way that prefigures his relaxed relationship to documentation. Why did he set out to walk in the first place? It wasn't a protest against the speed of modern life; it wasn't a refusal to take part in the commerce of rapid mobility; it was just because it was the easiest thing to do: 'If I walk,' he told an interviewer once, 'I don't need a car.'

The documentation that does result is deliberately profuse. A piece Nazareth did in New Delhi in 2006 (*Important Public Notice*) saw him sit down in a crowded plaza and set out a sign that advertised he'd give a rupee to the person who correctly guessed his nationality. He was then filmed from above as the crowd flocked around him. But we can see, in the scrum, that members of the crowd are photographing him and he's also got a little digital camcorder with which he's videoing them. Those who feel it necessary to defend him against charges of randomness also think they have to make sure he's not exoticized, but this doesn't seem to be of much concern to him, either. He doesn't appear to regard exoticism as a bad thing, so long as it's widely distributed; the Indians in his videos

are as exotic to him as he is to them, as are the Guatemalans or Mexicans he meets on his way north from Belo Horizonte to New York. He does, of course, encounter racist and xenophobic attitudes along the way – on more than one occasion he's refused entry into a hotel or cafe, or treated with coarse suspicion – and these moments feel all the more indelible when they break up his goofier goings-on.

None of this is to say that Baudelaire or Sebald were serious in a way that Nazareth isn't; it's to say, rather, that he takes his wandering as a deadly serious form of comedy. Nazareth has been compared to the artists David Hammons and Félix González-Torres, but those comparisons, which seem right, nonetheless relegate his work to the comedies of ethnicity; one might equally plausibly compare him to the broad comedians of ephemera, such as Frances Alÿs, dragging his ice, or Giovanni Anselmo crushing his lettuce. The work, in the end, is work – after all, it is for sale, even if Nazareth donates the proceeds to indigenous charities – but it never takes itself so anxiously as work that it loses the character of fun. Most performances present themselves as work disguised as play; what Nazareth's does, ingeniously, is present itself as play disguised as work. ♦♦

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Paulo Nazareth is an artist who lives and works throughout the world. In 2014, he had solo exhibitions at Mendes Wood, São Paulo, Brazil; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK; and Galleria Franco Noero, Turin, Italy. His work was recently included in the exhibitions 'Here There (Huna Hunak)' at QM Gallery, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar, and 'Alimentario' at the Museu da Cidade, Pavilhão OCA, São Paulo.

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Cadernos de Africa (Africa Notebooks), 2013–ongoing, mixed media, dimensions variable, installation view at ICA, London

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Untitled (from the series 'Noticias de América', 'News from the Americas'), 2011–12, photographic print on cotton paper, 18 x 24 cm

Courtesy
2 the artist and Mendes Wood, São Paulo; photograph: Mark Blower • 3 the artist, Mendes Wood, São Paulo, Galleria Franco Noero, Turin, and Meyer Riegger, Berlin