



The

Sense

of

Movement

When Artists Travel

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this recommendation, he was in turn following the example set by Xavier de Maistre, who in 1794 published the celebrated *Journey Around My Room*—itself perhaps a response to Blaise Pascal's assertion that all the troubles of humanity came down to the difficulty men had in simply being happy to sit alone in their rooms.

But let's take leave of the philosophers and get back to the artists. Early in his career—in fact, before that career had even started, in the mid-fifties—Robert Irwin was traipsing purposelessly about Europe when he gradually found himself “pulling plugs,” as he put it: forsaking books, language, social relations. Arriving on the island of Ibiza, off the coast of Spain, a place where he had no contacts whatsoever, he found himself coming down “to the last plug, and it gets to be like a Zen thing of having no ego: it becomes scary, it's like maybe you're losing yourself. And boredom becomes extremely painful.... But when you have them all pulled out, a little period goes by, and then it's absolutely serene.” He thought about less and less, and presently found himself simply thinking about thinking—perceiving the way he perceived and marveling at that—thereby discovering the lodestar that would steer his art for the ensuing six decades, and to this day.

Radical self-limitation has frequently served as an incubator of new work for artists—think of Constable painting and painting the same few square miles, in contrast with Turner, who traveled everywhere in search of his manifold lights. In a funny variation on this business of artists who stay radically put, for a period early in his career, Ingres set himself down in Rome and passed the time by perpetrating a sequence of ever more astonishing pencil portraits of a succession of British aristocrats passing through, one after the next, on their own grand Continental tours (though it bears noting that for prosperous European artists among them, these grand tours—to Italy, France, Greece, and further afield—were a deep well of work that also falls squarely into the purview of the present book). By contrast, the nineteenth-century Japanese woodblock master Utagawa Hiroshige managed to create some of the most hauntingly evocative images of Naniwa (modern Osaka) and Omi provinces without ever having gone there.

Another example of a *stationary* artist who traveled without ever having left is Donald Evans, a young American holed up in an apartment in Holland from which he engendered an entire world of imaginary landscapes, all by way of editions of the stamps their post office services might have generated (see p. 166). Evans is still, likewise staying put yet embarking on

journeys of the mind, had recourse to elaborate pharmacological regimes to fuel their far-flung trips. The great early twentieth-century Polish writer and artist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, for example, used to record the specific chemical compounds he was riding while painting his portraits right there, alongside his signature (see p. 161).

The sense of movement may also be pursued via a different sort of radical limitation, this time in terms of task rather than place, by way of elaborate and arbitrary self-imposed *ordeals*. The undisputed queen of this aesthetic domain is Marina Abramović, starting out (following a full year spent in the most remote stretches of Australia's backcountry, walking about, dreaming, often entirely naked, in the company of a group of Aborigines) with her marathon early performances alongside her onetime colleague and companion, Ulay, although they were not always alongside each other exactly. In a legendary tribulation (see p. 79) the two contrived to slowly converge, walking, from opposite ends of the entire Great Wall of China. Though they were hardly alone when it comes to such supererogatory challenges. The Dutchman Guido van der Werve, grieving over the fact that Chopin's heart was buried in Warsaw while the rest of his body lay 1,703 kilometers away, in Paris, set about traversing the entire distance in triathlon style (running, swimming, biking), though in fact it was more like seven and a half Ironman Triathlons laid end to end. Somewhat more anticlically, the English artist Simon Faithfull, in 2008 (see p. 82), decided to negotiate the Greenwich meridian, obstacles be damned, starting with his emergence from out of the sea on the southern coast of Britain, across fences and hedgerows, through properties and houses (in one window, out the other), across streams and ponds and crisscrossing superhighways, until he descended into the North Sea, on the far other side of the Island.

Not all such self-imposed dictums prove quite as arduous. In 1970, about fifteen years following his season of self-exile on Ibiza, the aforementioned Irwin, having systematically distilled the act of painting down to virtual point zero, closed down his studio and announced that he would henceforth be “available in response,” going anywhere he was invited to talk to anyone about the marvels of perception. In this phase, he would only perpetrate artistic interventions in direct response to the specific conditions of any offered site.

If some artists thus impose limitations upon themselves, other less fortunate ones have limitations imposed upon them. This recurrent fact of history opens out onto entirely separate categories of



▲ Many artists indulge in travels in which the journey itself is the point, and the point can become the extremity of the ordeal. In 2012, the Dutchman Guido van der Werve undertook the equivalent of seven and a half consecutive Ironman Triathlons—running, biking, and swimming more than 1,700 miles between Warsaw and Paris—under some sort of thrall to Chopin.

20 creative journeys arising from the experience of *displacement*. Among these, for starters, is the ordeal of exile, a condition as old as Thucydides and Dante, though it has seemed especially pervasive across the past century (and alas, judging from recent headlines, right up to the current day).

My own grandfather, the prolific modernist composer Ernst Toch, was said to have invented rap music, as it were, in 1930, in Berlin, with his promulgation of the medium of the spoken chorus, beginning with his brief *Geographical Fugue* (“Trinidad, and the Big Mississippi and the town Honolulu, and the Lake Titicaca” and so forth). Three years later his own life transmogrified into a sort of extended geographical fugue (the latter word, it bears noting, stemming from the same Latin root as the word “refugee”) as he caromed from Florence to Paris to New York to Hollywood, shredding much of his once-vibrant career in the process.

Strange how, over the past several decades, the phenomena of cosmopolitanism and nationalist ethnic cleansings have existed in a sort of systolic relation: with nationalist upsurges provoking minority flight, and with the resultant refugees tending to gather in cosmopolitan centers whose very multifariousness thereupon provokes its own nationalist umbrage, sometimes Berlin in the thirties, Kampala in the seventies,

Belgrade in the nineties, Baghdad in the aughts, and all of Syria today) culminating in other nasty purifying ethnic paroxysms. Strange, too, how often the umbrage takes on a specifically aesthetic tinge: after all, before he was anything else, Hitler himself was an artist, a painter who knew how to paint a building that looked like a building, not like all that other degenerate avant-garde crap circulating about. I’ve seriously sometimes wondered whether Hitler hated Jews because he associated them with avant-garde trends, or hated the avant-garde because he associated them with Jews—at any rate, the Nazis went after the artists and intellectuals as such well before they began going after Gypsies and Jews and homosexuals as groups, which is one reason so many of the former were able to escape the worst of their depredations. The situation of extremity and exile often became a principal subject in the escaped artist’s new work (as in the case of Max Beckmann; see p. 97); in other instances, the circumstances of his or her life in the new cultural surround exercised profound influences on the exiled artist’s own ongoing production (the example of Mondrian springs buoyantly to mind; see p. 99); and in still other cases, the artist’s arrival in the new land exerted powerful cross-pollinating influences in the other direction. One thinks of Josef and Anni Albers carrying the torch of Bauhaus moder-