



Davey Hubay: *Rue des Beaux-Arts*, 1999, silver gelatin print (18.5 in x 18.5 in).

Aux Coins des Rues

Davey Hubay



It seems impossible to me that one could have a completely ordinary temperament if one had been raised along the quais of Paris, across from the Louvre and the Tuileries, close to the Palais Mazarin, and facing the glorious river Seine that flows between the towers large and small and the spires of old Paris. There, from the rue Guénégaud to the rue du Bac, bookstores, antique shops, and print-sellers spread out a lavish display of the most beautiful forms of art and the most surprising tokens of the past. Every storefront, in its peculiar charm and amusing disorder, is a seduction for the eyes and mind. The passer-by who knows how to see always takes away from them some idea, like a bird flying away with a bit of straw for its nest. Because there are trees along with books, and women walking by, it is the most beautiful spot in the world.

—Anatole France, *Le Livre de mon ami* (1885)

In both kinds of streets one should exercise special care to keep the lowest part of the gutters clear, so that waters from rain and household use, as well as from washing the roadway, will flow easily into the sewer.

—Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, *Mémoires* (1893)

But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. To have pinpointed this new stage constitutes the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted: it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence.

—Walter Benjamin,
*The Work of Art in the Age
of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936)

Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these "real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city" (Charles Alexander). They are not localized, it is rather they that spatialize.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)

The concept is ridiculously simple: Roll up a little remnant of carpet, wrap it with string, and throw it in the gutter. Move the carpet to one side of the spigot and water will flow down the street in one direction, shift it to the other side of the outlet and the water will reverse flow, put it in front and water runs both ways. Not an especially profound subject for an "art" exhibit. I agree.

Don't expect to find a profound statement of high ambitions for this imagery because there is none. In fact, my project took shape in exactly the opposite way: not an initial grand idea to express but a small one that emerged gradually from an accumulation of material. A bit like the way one first discovers a *carrefour* within the city: Several streets intersect at odd angles to create an irregular space that belongs to all of them at once and none at all. Suddenly, you realize the space has a name of its own—*carrefour de Buci*—but a form completely defined by intersections. I think of *Coins de Rues* as just that kind of creation, simply a number of intersections that started to add up.

My love of Paris was the starting point, of course, and especially that part of the city known "officially" as the *quartier de la Monnaie*, so called because the French Mint is located along the riverfront. The neighborhood is special to me for all the reasons that Anatole France describes but also because it has long been associated with the visual arts: The *École des Beaux-Arts* has trained artists for almost two centuries; the Institut once housed the great names of French painting like David; Delacroix and Ingres lived nearby. Shops like *Sennelier*, where I buy my own supplies, may have served Cézanne and Degas on their way to the Louvre. I sense strongly the "thick" history of artists when walking these streets, even at night when the many galleries are shuttered and dark.

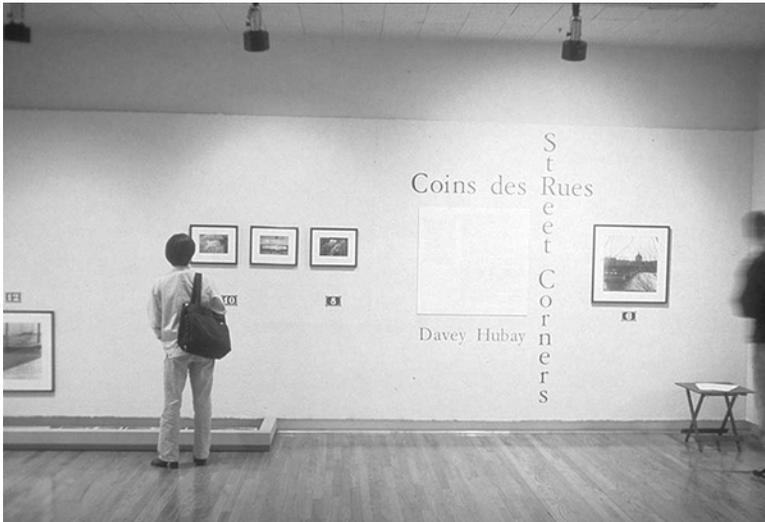
Baron Haussmann gave to Paris its many parks, its great boulevards, and its famous sewers, but he fared less well in this part of town. He wanted to extend the *rue de Rennes* all the way to the river, but how many of us would exchange the cobble-stoned place between *Saint-Germain-des-Près* and the *Café Deux-Magots*, or the wonderfully skewed *rue Bonaparte*, for a wide straight street? Buses and cars daily clog up the *rue de Seine*, and the *rue Mazarine* runs felicitously into a near dead end, but Haussmann's functionalism did not conquer the space. Where he did win, however, was in the gutter: Here, like almost everywhere in Paris, the streets are washed daily by running water that flows from spigots built into the curbing. And the little pieces of carpet used to control the flow are found on almost every corner. So the city's urban history—and my curiosity about those little carpets—became a part of my project.

No one can photograph Paris, especially in black and white, without thinking of Atget's pictures of empty streets. His presence has certainly haunted me, all the more so because my pictures are not about people. What struck me in Walter Benjamin's comment and, to a degree, made it possible for me to work in Atget's shadow, were the re-

marks that certain kinds of photographs could be useful for “establishing evidence” and that having “exhibition value” need not be identical with the “ritual value” of so-called high art. In other words, Benjamin’s reading of Atget made me feel better about showing my pictures of gutter rugs in a gallery.

As it turns out, I’m not the first to have noticed these little carpets. I discovered almost by accident that Moholy-Nagy photographed them at least once, and I learned—

much to my chagrin—that the contemporary British photographer Steve McQueen recently exhibited photographs of them in London. This was enough to make me abandon the whole project, until I realized that what was emerging in my work was not a show about originality but about a certain kind of experience within the city. In this regard, the writings of Michel de Certeau have been a source of great support, for they helped me see that my project was not about documenting how the streets of



Paris are washed, nor about the abstract formal interest of gutter photographs, but about visualizing the traces of “everyday” history amidst the “thick” history I so admired in this quartier. It is clear that Coins de Rues is not about the Paris of tourists, although the paradox is that the quartier is one of

the city’s most intensely visited. Working with a somewhat bulky Mamiya 2-1/4 square camera, sometimes with a tripod, was sure to attract attention and comments: What surprised and encouraged me was the fact that so few people thought I was crazy.

Reading Certeau also made it clear that my gutter pictures must be viewed from above, the way they were first seen by me, if I was serious about working through an

alternative to the “ritual value” of high art. So, even though I don’t consider myself to be an “installation” artist, I found myself wondering how to show my pictures in an environment where viewers would be forced to lean over them and to feel their own bodies in the process, relative to an otherwise low-voltage subject. My solution was to exhibit many of them on the floor, in platforms that recall the shape and location of Parisian gutters (see photo).

Coins de Rues tries to suggest the repeated sameness of a simple daily task that becomes “naturalized” and part of one’s ordinary expectations. There is a genuine feeling of well-being that comes in the early hours of a summer morning in Paris, before the white noise of traffic takes over, when one hears the soft gurgling of water in the street, followed by the rhythmic swish-swish-swish of a broom. In that moment of recognizing a familiar sensation shaped by the past, history joins the present in a way that strikes me as both simple and profound.

Davey Hubay received her MFA in photography from San Jose State University in 2000. That spring, she was invited to Harare, Zimbabwe, to participate in the Harare International Festival of the Arts. At the National Gallery of Art in Harare, she installed “Galley Proofs,” a series of seemingly academic book jackets that constructed ironic biographies of overachieving career women by means of hyperbolic blurbs. She remains interested in the way visual images shift from truth to fiction, and this extends to her current projects that search for poetry within the abject materials of everyday life. She is presently taking photographs of urban renovation projects in which the scaffolding and netting of construction sites both hide the past and signal the future of spaces under renewal.