January 29 – March 1, 2024
Mishkin Gallery

THE RIGHT
TO THE CITY
Public Space on Film
In curating this film series, I often returned to the word “belonging.” On the one hand, it is a term of ownership and property; on the other, an emotional sense of affinity. Who belongs in the city, and to whom does the city belong? A city’s public spaces—the topic forming the line of inquiry through this series—are where belonging is often most visibly played out. These spaces are also often a city’s most prolifically documented sites. In its ideal form, public space is a vision of the commons—a site of collective ownership and affinity. The reality is much more fraught. From the oxymoronic privately-owned public spaces that have proliferated around New York, to the ever-increasing policing and surveillance apparatuses deployed unevenly across the city’s population, and the hostile design that inhibits access and enjoyment on park benches and plazas, the question of belonging in urban environments—both in the sense of ownership and affinity—is pressing.

The Right to the City: Public Space on Film takes its title from a concept coined by philosopher Henri Lefebvre in 1968 and revisited by geographer (and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology & Geography at CUNY’s Graduate Center) David Harvey in his 2008 essay of the same name. Harvey charts the historical function of the city in capitalist accumulation of wealth, and in particular over the last 50 years, the remaking of cities globally in service of the wealthy and in detriment of the poor. Economic policies and urban planning decisions drove a deeper wedge into already-existing class and race fissures. Gentrification, an undercurrent in many of the films in this series, was another byproduct of these policy changes. Since the 1970s in American cities, but as Harvey notes, also in cities remade by financial capitalism across the globe, there has been a shift towards privatization and a disinvestment in the public sphere. Harvey prompts us to consider how the shape of the city, in particular the topography of public spaces, reflects our social values. He writes, “...the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of daily life we desire, what kinds of technologies we deem appropriate, what aesthetic values we hold.” In order to reimagine the shape of the city, we have to look inward. He continues, “The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire.”*

One way to begin to reimagine the city might be through the language of film. The city has been one of cinema’s richest subjects since the early days of the medium—Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand’s Manhatta (1921) and Walter Ruttman’s Berlin: Symphony of a City (1927) helped establish a tradition of experimental filmmaking in which the camera acted as an observational eye onto the city: glimpsing its inhabitants, probing its spatial logic, documenting new eras of urbanization. The genre has endured for a fundamental reason: in a city, there is much to see. Public life today is more documented than ever. People are ready with phones to record what they experience out in the world, whether that’s documenting an innocuous fleeting encounter, or witnessing and disseminating—often to great political effect, as we have seen in several cases over the past decade—a cruel act of police violence. All this watching and filming has changed the topography of public life. How can we parse this seemingly endless scroll of images? This series is, in part, a field guide for thinking through this vein of visual culture.

Organized into five different themes, this series’ take on public space is intentionally expansive. After all, the city looks and behaves differently to each of its inhabitants. In this series, we can see changing public spaces—streets, plazas, parks, and public institutions—as an impact of architectural changes, financial changes, and social changes. The way that space is designed, distributed, and inhabited is at once a result of policy, but also of people. We see the strains of privatization, forces of capitalism and real estate, but also the power of protest and direct action. The filmmakers show their subjects navigating the boundaries of public and private, utilizing the public as a site of negotiation, and using film as a media tool to contend with spatial dimension of urban belonging. Taken together, these films ask how to see the city, how to see ourselves in the city, and in the words of David Harvey, how to change ourselves by changing the city.

These films revolve around protests, uprisings, and collective action in the public sphere. In these films, people take to the streets as an act of political resistance: Morgan Quaintance’s *Letter from Tokyo* documents protests against local government corruption; Colectivo Los Ingrávidos’s *Parallax* visualizes a painful reckoning around state violence in Mexico. People also gather publicly in celebration—we witness a street fair, joyous scenes from a pride parade, and gatherings of artist collectives. Each of the films in this program contend with the contentious reality of policing (during both protests and celebrations)—but also offer, as the title of Margaret Rorison’s film suggests, documents of hope for how collective action can be a catalyst for long-lasting change.
The films in this program occupy the fissures of class and race divides in the city, particularly in regard to housing. The New York City of Charles Lane’s *Sidewalk Stories*, rendered silent and black and white, is an often cruel, and occasionally kind, companion to the protagonist, an unhoused artist surviving by drawing portraits for passersby on the streets. The London of Ayo Akingbade’s *Tower XYZ* is a colorful and vibrant landscape punctuated by large concrete social housing blocks. Amid backdrops of gentrification and inequality, these films speak not only to the social and political forces of disinvestment in housing, but importantly, to the multiplicity of lived experiences in the city.

**SPECIAL EVENT**
Thursday, February 8, 6–8 pm
Screening introduced by Professor Hilary Botein, Baruch College, CUNY
MEMORY AND MYTHOLOGY
February 13–16

Blending the personal with the spatial, these films offer meditations on how cities can be containers of memory and mythology. Onyeka Igwe’s *The Miracle on George Green* melds the history of collective land ownership in the UK with personal recollections of an early romance. WangShui’s *From Its Mouth Came a River of High-End Residential Appliances* moves from the integration of Feng Shui principles in Hong Kong’s luxury architecture to a reflection on the artist’s own queer identity. Claire Read and Nora DeLigter’s documentary *The Pedestrian* unfolds as a disillusioned protagonist embarks on a nine-day walk from Brooklyn to Montauk in an unconventional pursuit of clarity in a chaotic world, sparking humorous roadside confessions and probing conversations with Long Island characters along the way. The films present a way of looking at cities that is as much about an embodied and emotional experience as a physical landscape.

**Onyeka Igwe,** *The Miracle on George Green* (2022), 12 min

**WangShui,** *From Its Mouth Came a River of High-End Residential Appliances* (2018), 13 min

**Claire Read & Nora DeLigter,** *The Pedestrian* (2023), 19 min

**SPECIAL EVENT**
Wednesday, February 14, 6–8pm
Valentine’s Day screening with introduction by Pushti Vachhani.
Co-sponsored by Baruch College’s Graduate Arts Administration Network

These films contend with the ever-powerful real estate state, to borrow a term from urban geographer Samuel Stein. How do the forces of capital remake the city in their own image? Focusing on recent urban development in New York City—including the post-industrial transformation of Soho from artist lofts into luxury real estate, as narrated by Tony Cokes; the gratuitous demolition and reconstruction of a midtown office tower depicted by Dora Budor and Noah Barker; and John Wilson’s eye toward the drab, ubiquitous architecture synonymous with New York’s gentrifying outer-boroughs—these films consider the social, environmental, and cultural impacts of the financialization of the city.
THE WINDOW AS A FRAME ONTO THE CITY
February 26–March 1


Danielle Arbid, *Outside* (2020), 5 min

This program introduces the urban window as a frame. Observing (and filming) life on the street from inside the domestic interior, these films probe the interface between public and private. It is a common urban pastime to people-watch, witnessing strangers in fleeting encounters. With the camera’s gaze documenting unsuspecting subjects going about their lives—whether meandering through in a public square, as in Józef Robakowski’s *From My Window*, or caught in more dramatic moment of violence (as in the Times Square of Charlie Ahearn) or romance (as for Danielle Arbid’s unwitting protagonist)—these artists raise questions about the politics and ethics of voyeurism.

SPECIAL EVENT
Thursday, February 29, 6–8 pm
Screening followed by filmmaker Charlie Ahearn and artist Jane Dickson in conversation with Professor Amy Herzog, Queens College/Graduate Center, CUNY

Friday, March 1, 5–7 pm
Encounters Magazine presents Commons Zine Launch Party

Credits

EXHIBITION CURATOR
Alexandra Tell

MISHKIN GALLERY DIRECTOR AND CURATOR
Alaina Claire Feldman

MISHKIN GALLERY NAGELBERG FELLOWS
Pushti Vachhani and Tamae Vassell

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Olya Domoradova

INSTALLATION
Joseph Gannon and Chase Adams

COPYEDITOR
Nicolas Linnert

Acknowledgements

All the artists
Brett Kashmere
Sarah Watson
Amelia Hinojosa
Alana Frances Baer
Juliet Vincente
Leia Jospe
Estelle Grosso
Francisco Cordero-Ocegue
Erick Creegan
Brandon Bogle

This exhibition has been made possible by
Friends of the Mishkin Gallery and
the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences
at Baruch College (CUNY).
