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FIRE WALKER

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, GERHARD MARX

Edited by
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MA FIREWALKER AND MR TYPEWRITER-HEAD:
MAPS, MARX AND KENTRIDGE

Mark Gevisser

Scientists ... transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get us out into that dark sea.

—Rebecca Solnit¹

1

RECENTLY, in his Houghton studio, William Kentridge showed me a map of early Johannesburg he acquired about a decade ago. It folds out from a rather unassuming leatherbound folio with 'Plan of Johannesburg' written in gold on its front cover, into a meticulous and magnificent field of the imagination and confidence that drove the early settlement. The map is signed by one W. Tompkins, and dated 1890: it sets streets and plots and railway lines and parks, the armature of human settlement, into a landscape dominated by elegant conical structures, etched with delicate lines arranged in circles, representing the koppies of the Witwatersrand beneath which the new town was settled. The date is significant: the map was made only four years after urban settlement began, and yet such was the energy of the gold rush that the legend notes six churches, one synagogue, four banks, four theatres, four clubs, three hotels, six government buildings (including post office, police station, hospital and 'Government Entrepot') and around forty 'Other Notable Buildings.'

Still, there is no way that the map—which lays out a grand colonial town—could have been a representation of the chaotic four-year-old mining settlement that had sprung up along the Witwatersrand seam of gold ore. Rather, it is an act of will, a determination of what would be. As we looked at this early map of our hometown together, Kentridge and I chuckled at how differently we responded to it: he loved it for its foresight and accuracy, I for the very opposite. He was struck not just by its aesthetic beauty, but by how precise a blueprint it was for the

city that would come: the handsome inner-city grid arranged around civic squares between the goldmines to the south and the railway yards to the north; the residential suburbs to the east like shards of glass following the acute angles of pre-existing farms, Braamfontein spilling out along a valley down below the western ramparts of the Fort. Kentridge was correct when, speaking about the map in his acceptance of the Kyoto Prize in November 2010, he said that 'ninety percent of those lines ... and streets and divisions that were envisioned by the map-makers exist in the city today.' He described maps, beautifully, as 'drawings from above,' acts of visualisation that 'come out of ... clues and traces of what is present'; this particular one was 'a drawing of the empty veld, this empty piece of land on which the gold had been discovered,' onto which was 'projected through imagination a grid of streets, a place of parks, of banks, of libraries, of theatres, of hotels'

My reaction had more to do with narrative: I was compelled by the map's fantasy, or perhaps more accurately, by its drama. I found myself fixated on that ten percent that was plotted in precise, loving detail but that did not come to pass. These included Komisar's Square and Vrijheids Square in Braamfontein, the barest nod by the Randlords towards the Boer dispensation in which they lived; and Government Square, a civic expanse of somewhat Imperial pretensions in the middle of the city. And then there was the extension of the city southwards into fantastical residential suburbs (fantastical, insofar as they never came to pass) called Schweizer and Ingramsburg, Mewetville and Casey's. Why 'Casey's,' I want to know. And then, why *not*

1 R. Solnit. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006, p. 5.

‡ *Fold out Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs* Waterlow & Sons Limited, London Wall, London. Compiled and drawn by W. Tompkins, Johannesburg, September 1890

'Casey's'? Who were Ingram and Schweizer, and why, in the end, did the city's elite choose to settle on the ridges north of the city, leaving the Klipriviersberg in the south to Nongoloza's criminal gangs?

As I look at the map now, I find myself returning repeatedly to the empty white strip south of the old railway station, where the railyards and taxi ranks are now, as well as the Brickfields low-cost residential development and the Newtown Cultural Precinct with the Market Theatre at its centre. It is at the eastern edge of this expanse—originally Johannesburg's brickfields—that Kentridge and Marx have placed their sculpture, *Fire Walker*, at the descent of the Queen Elizabeth Bridge into the city. The bridge connects Braamfontein to the city, and has been joined more recently by the Nelson Mandela Bridge, which links the north to the cultural precinct. Neither, of course, was imagined by W. Tompkins and his masters, who only allowed one railway crossing, at Kaizer Street, renamed King George Street during World War I.

Were there fire-walking women in W. Tompkins's Johannesburg, stoking their braziers by the side of the railway, placing them on a wooden plank and lifting them onto their heads, carrying them down to the encampments to cook the miners' meat and mielies? These women, who walk through Johannesburg with fire on their heads are one of the last remaining traces of the pre-electric city, and the *Fire Walker* sculpture suggests a map—or at least the process of mapping—to me: the way the woman's silhouette is etched onto a series of steel panels representing torn sheets of paper; the way she sets off, determinedly westwards, to plot her path through the ever-growing, ever-changing city. W. Tompkins had plotted a little enclave of streets, to the south of the railway, exactly where *Fire Walker* stands now. He gave them particularly evocative names: 'Orderly Street,' 'Gentleman's Draai Street.' Just to their west, he planned a 'Swimming Bath,' along a south-flowing stream leading from the Braamfontein Ridge down into a dam at the Brickfields; today, this entirely submerged watercourse is traced

by the Nelson Mandela Bridge. About a mile or so further west of the stream and the swimming bath, just south of the railway station and with a cordon of open veld around them, are to be found two tiny little portions of six blocks each, allocated for the 'Coolie Location' and 'Kaffir Location' respectively. By 1896, Johannesburg would have over 50 000 European inhabitants, and as many black people; what is so compelling about this act of urban planning is not just the fact that apartheid was embedded into the development of Johannesburg from the very beginning, but that the city planners—the Randlords and their draftsmen—actually believed they could contain the labour force they would need to build their metropolis on the highveld into twelve little blocks beside the railway line. There you have, spatially, the folly of apartheid capitalism, and why it was destined to fail, even if it took a century to do so.

2

In recent years, William Kentridge has been making collages of maps and drawings that serve as the basis for an extraordinary series of huge tapestries (some as large as four metres square) created by Marguerite Stephens and her studio of weavers north of Johannesburg. While the technical prowess of Stephens and her weavers is awe-inspiring—their ability to thread intricate detail into the tapestries—the art of these works is in their relative imprecision: the way that the 'science' of cartography unthreads as roads, physical features and place-names are mapped into mohair. The texture of the wool creates the impression of motion: one senses a wind blowing across the tapestries as if across the blonde grass of the highveld around Stephens's studio, revealing the traces of human activity which might otherwise be concealed.

In his Kyoto speech, Kentridge spoke of the singular topography of Johannesburg and the way that it plotted inequality: the 'lush, leafy gardens of the suburbs, and the dry veld outside the city, where irrigation and privilege end.' He had grown up with a huge Tinus de Jongh landscape in his grandparents' home, and he felt 'cheated of landscape' in his highveld childhood.

'I wanted a landscape of forests, of trees, of brooks—but I had this dry veld beyond the green gardens of the city.' He resolved this for himself by starting to draw 'the terrain itself—partly as a way of taking revenge against its barrenness, its dryness. I found I was making drawings of mine dumps.' He contrasts the transience of these natural features—they would disappear when the gold price became high enough to warrant the sand being sifted and remined—with the enduring permanence of Mount Fuji or the Alps: 'A mountain is a fact. You can turn around, you can come back in ten years, the mountain will not have moved. The mountain itself, the idea of a mountain, of a piece of heavy earth, stands as a metaphor for understanding eternity. The opposite is true of our mine dumps, which in my childhood I had assumed were my hills.'

He writes about the congruence between his medium—charcoal—and the barren landscape: 'There is a way in which the dryness of the winter veld, when the sun is very harsh and the grass is bleached very white, or else is very black from the veld fires, corresponds to the tonal range of a white sheet of paper and charcoal ... There was a way in which the winter veldfires, in which the grass is burned to black stubble, made drawings of themselves.' In one of his earlier tapestries, *Office Love* (2001), Kentridge uses his beloved 1890 Tompkins map, 'burning' some charcoal veldfires of human activity across it: a Soho Ecksteinish man with a typewriter for a head advances in a westerly direction, his huge belly obscuring Schweizer and Ingramsburg, across the cartographical landscape of Johannesburg, towards a work-station that includes a swivel chair, a spindly desk and a grotesquely oversized rubber stamp and scissors.

Kentridge has chopped up the Tompkins map in an interesting way: Mr Typewriter's head is placed right next to the dam along the stream where the Nelson Mandela Bridge now runs, and the city's largest body of water, the Wemmer Vlei, is brought northwards a few miles, to just below Market Square, making it and the dams that flow from it very much part of Johannesburg's urban topography. In his Kyoto

speech, Kentridge spoke about the way that water was associated with danger in the Johannesburg of his childhood: it floods the cavities made by mining, thus causing geological instability and is also collected into toxic slimes dams. But he also spoke of its function as a form of 'utopian blessing' in his drawings: 'you can draw a very dry landscape; then with a single line of blue, you transform it, you bless it with water.'

Does *Office Love* 'bless' Johannesburg with the illusion of a river running through it? Or does it, by bringing dangerous water closer to the city's centre, serve to highlight the dangers of the industry of Mr Typewriter-Head and his ilk? And why have the Coolie and Kaffir Locations disappeared from Kentridge's rendition of the Tompkins map? With this excision, and a lake and watercourse near the centre of town, is the artist suggesting Mr Typewriter-Head's yearning for a thoroughly European metropolis on the highveld? Kentridge was commissioned to make the tapestry for the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE), to hang in the lobby of its new headquarters in Sandton in 2001, and he has layered it with satiric ambivalence, and also reflexivity: the work-tools represented suggest both the industry of the making of the city, and his own industry, as an artist, chopping it up and reimagining it.

Marguerite Stephens speaks, with passion, about rendering Kentridge's map collages into tapestry: one of the things she loves most about it is the way the greyscale of cartography enable her to use undyed wool, and to choose mohair according to the shade of black, grey or white that the original map calls for. I imagine her visiting a Karoo farm and pointing to a particular animal: 'Yes! Get out the shears! Perfect for "Other Notable Buildings" in *Office Love*!' (In fact, she told me, she selected from already-shorn bales.) On Tompkins's map, most of these 'Notable Buildings' are ranged along Commissioner Street, the original official artery of the city; in *Office Love*, the strip is rendered in Merino grey, about halfway between Mr Typewriter-Head's neck and his desk, just above the lake that Kentridge has imagined for the



middle of the city. One of these buildings, we learn from the key on the Tompkins map, is the Johannesburg Exchange, built in 1887 on the corner of Commissioner and Simmonds Streets. Because of the city's boom, the exchange quickly outgrew this space, and moved to Hollard Street in 1903; in 1978, it moved again to Diagonal Street, just south of where *Fire Walker* stands today. Then in 2000, at the time *Office Love* was commissioned, it moved off the map, north to Sandton, a move that was part of the evacuation of downtown and a potent symbol of the atomisation of post-apartheid Johannesburg and capital's abandonment of the inner city at the moment when it finally became accessible to all. By choosing to use Tompkins's map in his commission for the JSE, Kentridge compels traders and visitors alike to consider the city they have evacuated—and the way their industry has made and transformed it.

Thus do *Fire Walker* and *Office Love* exist, in counterpoint, at opposite ends of the city, their relationship all the more striking because of their formal similarities. The protagonists of both artworks carry the tool of their trade upon their heads: a brazier in the former, a typewriter in the latter. Both Ma Firewalker and Mr Typewriter-Head are rendered in charcoal silhouette, and both have extended bellies: the former to connote his wealth through the greed of a paunch, and the latter to connote her poverty through her swaddling of rags. Finally, and most remarkably, both stride forward with exactly the same intent, the pressure on their respective front legs and the lift and angle of their back legs mirroring each other. Between them, the one at the centre of Johannesburg's commercial exchange in a slick Sandton lobby and the other at the centre of the city's commuter interchange downtown, they tell the story of city.

3

In *Office Love*, William Kentridge rearranges the map of Johannesburg. In *Foot Map* (2010), Gerhard Marx dismembers it. The artwork, inspired by *Fire Walker*, uses a process of 'drawing with maps' that Marx has been employing for many years, and applies it to

the ideas raised by the sculpture he made with Kentridge. Marx chops up maps and reconstitutes them to find his own routes—emotional and political—through the Witwatersrand, in a way that brings to mind the 'psychogeography' of Guy Debord's famous Situationist *Naked Map* of Paris. Marx has said that, as a child growing up in apartheid South Africa, he received 'a particular map to live by. I suppose as things happen and times change you start discrediting and editing parts of the map you were given. In fact, the first time I cut into a map, I felt a tremendous sense of blasphemy ... There is a lot to be said about this process of taking the map, which claims to be objective and true, and turning it into something intensely subjective.' He grew up in an Afrikaans family on the West Rand: 'I have always seen a map as something of a lost truth,' he told me, 'as symbolising a lost cohesion.'

Marx's technique is strikingly original: he 'scavenges line' from maps, creating drawings out of—most typically—the marks signifying roads on a street map. He is drawn, he has said, to the notion of 'lingering on a line': 'drawing creates time, the space for thinking or reminiscing, for losing your way. Similarly the line of a road on a map is a curious combination of familiarity (it is the space which is known and plotted) and the unknown. The road has to negotiate natural terrain, which gives a beautiful uncertain quality when used to draw with.'

In *Foot Map*, Marx has used lines from street maps—usually, but not exclusively, the red lines that mark main roads—to draw a pair of bare feet; feet belonging, one might imagine, to Ma Firewalker herself. He has used curves in roads (those 'negotiations of natural terrain') to describe, beautifully, the arcs of heels and toes, creating vivid anatomical detail by finding, for example, a stretch of road that winds along the side of a pan to represent the skin stretching and creasing over the ankle joint. As with the Kentridge/Stephens tapestries, however, the art lies somewhere beyond such meticulous precision: 'When cutting up the map,' Marx explains, 'every selected line is accompanied by a

‡ Facing page
William Kentridge,
Office Love, 2001,
tapestry, 344 x 456 cm.
Woven by the Stephens
Tapestry Studio,
Johannesburg

severed section of the surrounding terrain ... the original context of the road.'

Marx says he is insouciant to geography when he does this work; he is 'looking for a line. I don't usually *deliberately* include *specific* places. I'm more fascinated by the arbitrariness of territory that comes with line.' But in *Foot Map*, he seems to have taken up the scissors with particular intent. Firstly, the territory around the lines he has 'scavenged' describes the geography of the Johannesburg across which these naked feet have had to trudge to earn their living. Secondly, the lines have been cut in acute angles to represent splinters, or shards of glass; they prick at the bare feet they are simultaneously drawing, thus creating, with nothing more than themselves, an image of pain. The right second toe, for example, is drawn with an arc of red road that leads past the Durban Roodepoort Deep mine; Marx has cut the map into a shard that includes the industrial grey of the mine and the green of the mine's golf course, suggesting the labour these feet must endure. The use of main-road-red as the drawing material is particularly evocative, because of the colour's association with blood.

At one point, just above the right ankle, Marx disrupts his own convention of drawing with red main-road lines in a way that connects *Foot Map* directly to *Fire Walker*. Here, he draws the shin with a stretch of the red boundary line that separates Braamfontein from the City on modern maps; this allows him not only to include the Queen Elizabeth Bridge on his foot map, but also to have it actually cross the line of his drawing. By using this particular boundary line in this way, Marx has created both fracture and rupture: fracture, because the kink in the bone-yellow road as it crosses the bridge makes it seem broken; rupture, because this 'bone' crosses—and thus pierces—the line of the shin. Thus does Marx evoke the Queen Elizabeth Bridge and the *Fire Walker* sculpture as a border crossing, between the 'safe' northern suburbs—the land of Mr Typewriter-Head—and the edgy downtown, the home of Ma Firewalker. But Marx's uncharacteristic inclusion of place-name in his foot map ('Queen Elizabeth Bridge') pulls



Fire Walker and *Foot Map* together in another way too, by connecting the act of walking that motivates both works. *Fire Walker* is made of several planes that come together only from certain perspectives into the form of a woman with a brazier on her head—and Marx and Kentridge spent many hours walking around the site to decide which of these perspectives should be privileged. They eventually decided that the sculpture would come into focus for the pedestrian walking across the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, rather than the motorist. This was not only a political decision—to privilege the perspective of pedestrians over the car-owning few—but a conceptual one too. As Marx puts it, 'When you plan your journey through a city in a car, with a map, you're following a grid. You're subject to the intentions of the city planner.' When you walk, on the other hand, 'you're following your own intentions. It's more like weaving.'

Like Kentridge and Stephens's tapestries, Marx's map-drawings put subjective agency, human fallibility, back into the process of mapping. Looking at these works, I thought of Michel de Certeau's description of his ascent of New York City's (then) tallest building: 'To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and re-turn it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic.' The elevation transforms you into a God-like voyeur with little more than a 'fiction of knowledge.' So too when reading a map, whose marks 'only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed

‡ *Right*
Gerhard Marx,
Foot Map (detail)

‡ *Facing page*
Gerhard Marx,
Foot Map, 2010,
digital archival
print of collaged
fragments of
found maps
of greater
Johannesburg



by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by ... walking, wondering, or "window-shopping." Maps are amnesiac, de Certeau says, because they are unable to reflect the experience, even, of the cartographer who drew them in the first place, as he passed by the places he charts.

2 Michel de Certeau.
The Practice of Everyday Life. Trans. S. Rendall. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 93–4.

3 In Edmund White.
The Flaneur. London: Bloomsbury, 2008, p. 48.

4 Walter Benjamin.
Berlin Childhood Around 1900. Trans. H. Eiland. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006, p. 53.

The map thus becomes 'a relic' which disguises the process that made it possible in the first place: 'These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice.' Mapping renders action 'legible,' but in so doing, 'it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.'²

Foot Map, *Office Love* and *Fire Walker* all attempt, in their own ways, to resolve this dilemma. Ma Firewalker's presence, at the foot of the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, helps us remember all that maps require us to forget.

4
I write this from Paris, where I am living for a while, and where I walk in a very different way to both Ma Firewalker and Mr Typewriter-Head. Liberated from the watchful intent one needs to have on the streets of Johannesburg, my hometown, I am rediscovering the joys of passing by, of what is known in French as *flânerie*. I relate, particularly, to Walter Benjamin's articulation of perambulatory ambivalence: 'Just as waiting seems to be the true state of the motionless contemplative, so doubt seems to be that of the *flâneur*.' Which way to go? Where to linger? Which café to enter?: 'Like an ascetic animal he roams through unknown neighbourhoods until he collapses, totally exhausted, in the foreign, cold room that awaits him.'³

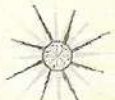
It was Benjamin who wrote, famously, that while not finding one's way around a city was a rather banal and irrelevant activity, actually losing oneself—as if in a forest—required serious practice.⁴ At home, and particularly when downtown, I have perfected the Joburg Walk: possessions wound tightly around one's midriff, elbows akimbo, head cocked slightly downwards, surveying the route ahead rather than the clouds and the buildings above, proceeding always with

intent, or the performance of it. When I wish to weave, or to linger, I do so clandestinely, with the intention of deceiving my fellow pedestrians as to my real designs, which are to have no designs.

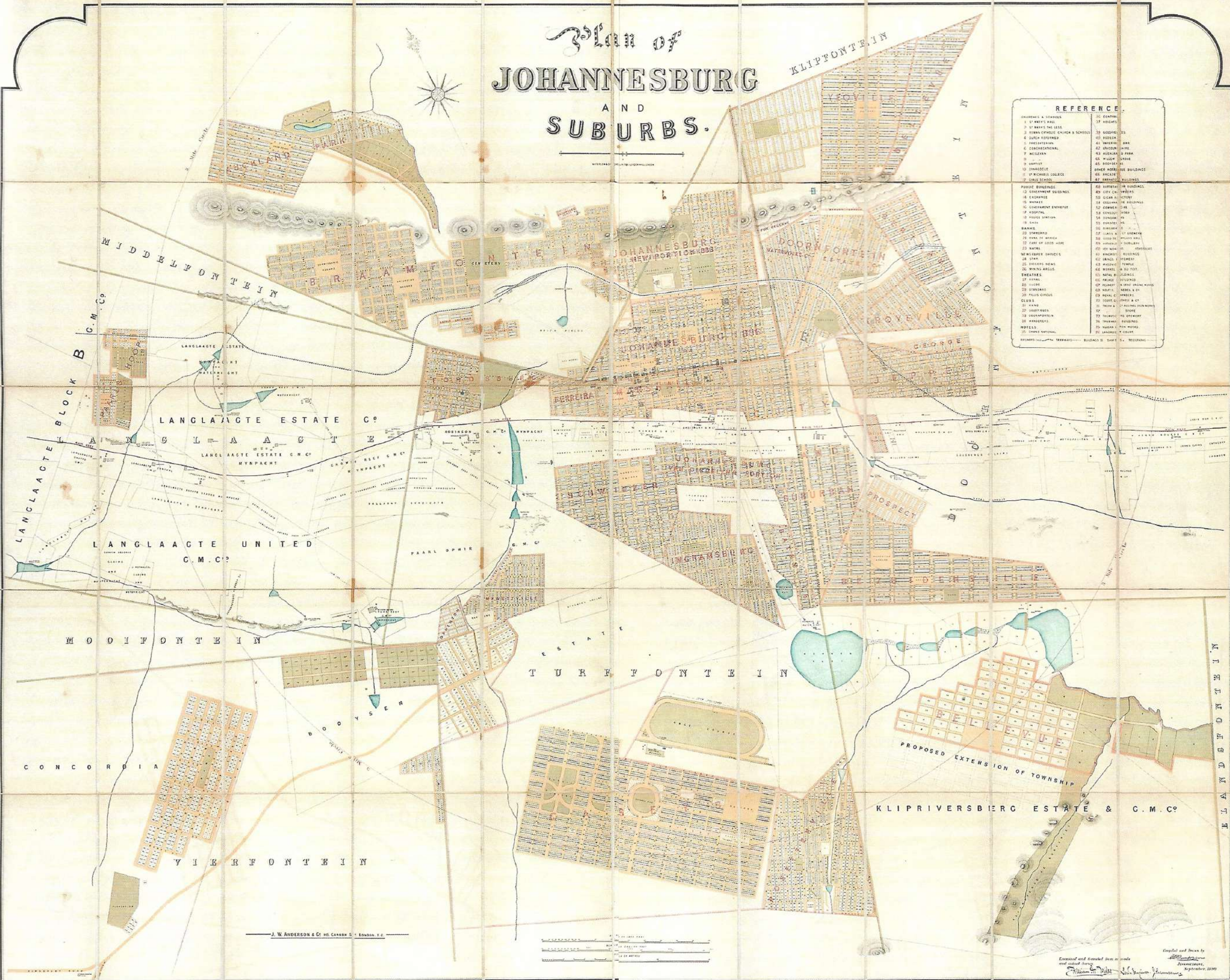
I am not, yet, devoted to Global Positioning, perhaps because I maintain those very twentieth-century anxieties about privacy and undetectability. I am wary, too, of becoming a cyber-*flâneur* who loses whole days meandering aimlessly across space and time without ever leaving his desk. Still, Google Maps has changed the way I experience Johannesburg and become essential to my journeys across my hometown: what a relief not to have to render myself vulnerable by pulling out the unwieldy *Witwatersrand Street Guide* on a dark corner in some god-forsaken new urban expanse to the north, in an attempt to find Bokmakierie Road in Eagle Canyon Extension 53. Now I type in some coordinates, print out the directions, and proceed with the intent and clarity of Ma Firewalker or Mr Typewriter-Head. How different this is from the way Gerhard Marx explored the city when he bunked his extra-mural classes at the Johannesburg College of Education as a little boy: 'Slowly, as a child, you build up reference points, as you discover Hillbrow, or the station, or Joubert Park, you form your own subjective map. And so I was very interested, with *Fire Walker*, to look at the foot as the vehicle we use to bring the different parts of the city together. It's a more phenomenological way of understanding the city.' In Paris, unlike in Johannesburg, I do not leave home without my little blue reliquary, the *Paris Pratique*, ingeniously designed with a double page per *arrondissement*. Whether I am on foot or on my bike, whether I know my destination or am indulging in aimless *flânerie*, I shuttle between the omniscient view of the map, which is my guide, and the subjective experience of being on the street. In so doing, I flip, as Marx puts it about the way he likes to walk, 'between the immediate view and the overall view. I zoom in and out. That was the process for making the sculpture and for viewing it, and it seems to be an apt metaphor for understanding how one walks the city, particularly a city that shifts as rapidly as Johannesburg does.'

It is the difference of perspective between, if you like, Ma Firewalker on the one hand, who maps the city subjectively as she weaves her way through it with fire on her head, and W. Tompkins, who plots it with such God's-eye confidence and foresight. But even Tompkins didn't know everything: he left his blank space in the middle of the city, buffering the Coolie and Kaffir Locations, around the stream that ran between the Braamfontein Ridge and the Brickfields Dam. So too are there blanks in *Office Love*, rendered in creamy, undyed Merino mohair; and in *Foot Map*, where Marx has been unable—or unwilling—to make his cartographical fragments overlap; and in *Fire Walker* itself, where the terra incognita is made part of the sculpture itself, and where a subtle shift of perspective brings the walking woman into focus and then, in an instant, renders her invisible once more. These are the blank spaces we fill with our singular, subjective journeys and the accounts we give of these, when we enter into a world that has been plotted for us but that we make our own every time we experience it or even simply imagine it. It is the territory beyond maps, the territory of art.

Plan of JOHANNESBURG AND SUBURBS.



REFERENCE.	
1 CHURCHES & TEMPLES	35 CENTRAL
2 ST. MARK'S HALL	37 RESIDENCES
3 ST. MARK'S THE LEE	38 GEORGETOWN
4 ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH & SCHOOLS	39 GEORGETOWN
5 DUTCH REFORMED	40 BEECHER
6 PRESBYTERIAN	41 WINDHOLM
7 CONGREGATIONAL	42 UNIONVILLE
8 MELBYAN	43 ADELPHI PARK
9 HARTLEY	44 WILLOW GROVE
10 DUNDEE	45 BEECHER
11 ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE	46 OTHER RESIDENCE BUILDINGS
12 LINDSAY COLLEGE	47 ARCADE
13 PUBLIC BUILDINGS	48 RESIDENCE BUILDINGS
14 GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS	49 CITY CHURCH
15 EXCHANGE	50 SUGAR FACTORY
16 MARKET	51 COLLINGWOOD BUILDINGS
17 GOVERNMENT ENTERTAINMENT	52 CORNER CAR
18 HOSPITAL	53 CONDUIT PIPE
19 POLICE STATION	54 JOHANNESBURG
20 BANKS	55 BEECHER
21 STAMPA	56 LINDSAY
22 BANK OF ENGLAND	57 LINDSAY
23 BANK OF SOUTH AFRICA	58 LINDSAY
24 NATAL	59 LINDSAY
25 NETHERLANDS OFFICES	60 LINDSAY
26 STAMPA	61 LINDSAY
27 DISCOUNT BANK	62 LINDSAY
28 WINDHOLM	63 LINDSAY
29 THEATRE	64 LINDSAY
30 HOTEL	65 LINDSAY
31 HOTEL	66 LINDSAY
32 HOTEL	67 LINDSAY
33 HOTEL	68 LINDSAY
34 HOTEL	69 LINDSAY
35 HOTEL	70 LINDSAY
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43 HOTEL	78 LINDSAY
44 HOTEL	79 LINDSAY
45 HOTEL	80 LINDSAY



J. W. ANDERSON & Co. No. 10, Cannon St. London, E.C.



Capital and Town by
J. W. Anderson & Co.
Johannesburg, September, 1900