

# Animating the City: Street Art, Blu and the Poetics of Visual Encounter

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## Abstract

Street artist Blu creates remarkable wall-painted animations, in which he depicts cartoon figures cavorting along, around and through actual urban surfaces. Through this activity, his film *Muto* (2008) pictures a fraught relationship between urban space and its dwellers. In some way, the film seems to epitomize contemporary thinking about urban space. Emphasizing the primarily visual and spectacular character of the modern city, such thinking casts it as a space where a totalizing gaze elides the embodied experience of the individual. Yet, in *Muto*, Blu deploys this visual aspect to conceive of the metropolis as a complex ballet of individual choreographies. Envisioning the city as paradox, *Muto* casts urban space as both highly spectacular and embodied multiplicity. As a work of animation, *Muto* also encodes this contradiction formally; even as it depicts the city as a capitalistic sphere of exhaustion, it imbues its morphing bodies with the capacity to redefine place. Connecting the shapeshifting bodies of its beings, the bodies of its spectators and the body of the artist, *Muto* invests urban space with a sense of plurality. Incarnating urban movement as inscription, and urban inscription as movement, his artistic practice recognizes how bodies shape the spaces in which they dwell.

## Keywords

animation, Blu, embodiment, encounter, graffiti, *Muto*, spectacle, street art, urban inscription, urban space

In the past decade, Italian street artist Blu has been creating remarkable wall-painted animations, in which he depicts animated figures romping along, around and through actual urban surfaces. Laboriously painted and photographed in urban space over existing graffiti, these large-scale murals are then knit together as animations onscreen. With his team, Blu uses house paint to create distinct images on urban walls, floors and ceilings, photographing each image to serve as a single frame of an animation. He then alters the static image, introducing the subtle visual shifts that will constitute

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animated motion, before photographing this repainted image as the following frame. He continues this iterative process, uniting these photographed images in the editing room to compose remarkable animations that traverse the cityscape.

In his wall-painted animation *Muto* (2008), continually morphing bodies surreally cavort along, over and through city walls. As these bizarre figures slither and vault across various dilapidated urban settings, the film pictures a fraught relationship between urban space and its denizens. On one hand, *Muto's* iconographic style and ambitious scale, urban setting and repetitive, metamorphic action seem to epitomize contemporary thinking about urban space. Such thinking emphasizes the primarily visual and spectacular character of the modern city, casting it as a space where a totalizing gaze elides the embodied experience of the individual. And yet, in *Muto*, Blu deploys this visual aspect to conceive a teeming embodied alternative to this sterile map of the metropolis, a complex ballet of individual choreographies. Envisioning the city as paradox, *Muto* casts urban space as both highly spectacular and embodied multiplicity.

As a work of animation, *Muto* encodes this contradiction formally. Even as it is itself a palimpsest of the city's cycle of consumption, reproduction, decay and temporal circularity, its form and technique allow it to interrogate urban space and reclaim it for play and potential. Creating a time adjacent to the legislated time of production, *Muto* stages urban life as a proliferation of bodies and individual encounters. Inhabiting the lost, seemingly dead spaces of the city, the movements of these animated creatures double the transgressive gestures of the artist as he inscribes public space. At once act and aesthetic, Blu's urban inscription infuses public space with a twinned sense of play. His uncanny critters populate an urban space doubled by virtual space; through his artistic method, Blu creates a spectacular prism reflecting multiple bodies, real and virtual. Connecting the shape-shifting bodies of its beings, the bodies of its spectators and the body of the artist, *Muto* invests urban space with a sense of somatic plurality. Incarnating urban movement as inscription, and urban inscription as movement, his artistic practice recognizes how bodies shape the spaces in which they dwell. In *Muto*, Blu's depiction of a multiplanar urban embodiment intimates a different kind of spatial epistemology, a creative means of inhabiting urban space and embodying urban identity.

### **Street art in the spectacular city**

Saturated by images, the contemporary city has been theorized as a site legislated by the eyes. Leading commentators on the city have described it as an essentially scopic spatial regime in which individual embodied experiences are sacrificed to the visual logic of production (Debord, 1983; Lefebvre, 1991; Virilio, 2004[1991]). This spectacular hegemony of the spatial brings people into order, channeling them into the legislated circuits of the city, routes that entice them to consume and to participate in the system of production. With the aerial view of the map as its emblem, the city so imagined is an ossified and stultifying place in which the movements of bodies are structured by spectacle. However, in his work Blu does not deny spectacle, instead recuperating it as an aesthetic tool for inscribing and re-imagining the city.

Painstakingly painted and photographed in urban space and assembled as film, *Muto* inhabits both public and virtual space. Here, the virtual bodies of animated beings do not merely overlay the city as backdrop; rather their movements, generated in the virtual space constituted onscreen, erupt from their encounters with the built environment. This eye-opening animation conceives of the city as both spectacle and process, exercising the subversive promise of both modes. Working under the pseudonym Blu, this street artist from Bologna has been active in the street art scene now for over a decade. Known for his large-scale murals that interact with the existing

architecture of urban space, Blu deploys spectacle against itself. Recognizing the imbrication of space and place and the centrality of the body to both, his work foregrounds urban wandering *as* inscription and vice versa.

Blu is renowned for creating work that responds to the specificities of urban space, whether political, historical or architectural. In his engagement with the built environment, his art practice attests to new ways of perceiving and inscribing the landscape. In *Muto*, a wall-painted animation that situates surreal animated figures in actual urban space, the city is central to the movement and development of its characters. As it opens, the short film flickers from darkness into light, revealing an unremarkable city street ranged by a daily mix of cars and bicycles. The camera shifts its gaze to a shabby brick wall flanked by trees and bins, scribbled with graffiti, settling on a white brick that will be the entry point of animated figures into the cityscape. Though created in Baden, Switzerland<sup>1</sup> and Buenos Aires, Argentina, few markers of these two cities adorn the short film; instead, much of *Muto* occurs in ragged, lost and liminal urban areas. Blu's oeuvre evinces a central concern with the status of the urban landscape, particularly with structures that have lost their gloss and entered the process of ruin. Many of his chosen surfaces wear their history baldly, walls riven with cracks and embellished with graffiti, metal staircases yielding to the inevitability of rust, trash and rubble strewn across the ground. In this way, Blu's project dovetails with the larger interests of much street art and graffiti, which often occupy these marginal spaces, and in so doing, signify the desire of such art to exist outside the commodity system (Creswell, 1996). In *Big Bang Big Boom* (2010), a wall-painted animation using evolution as its theme, Blu incorporates this debris into the activity of the animation itself. In this film, wads of rubbish and old paper are suddenly infused with anima, and bundles of wire gain brief life onscreen.

In its preoccupation with the urban space it inhabits, Blu's work discloses a broader engagement between much street art and everyday life. The label 'street art', a term deployed with regularity, gestures toward the nature of the aesthetic project undertaken in recent incarnations. Much scholarship, and indeed, much of the urban inscription in question, reveals a deep awareness of the metropolitan setting in opposition to the museum (Dickens, 2008; Riggle, 2010; Visconti et al., 2010). Most concur that a displacement from the street to the museum would fundamentally alter an artwork's meaning.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the street can serve as more than surface; a work that somehow figures the street into its aesthetic register, even if it does not take place on the street, also inhabits the category. At minimum, the street must be essential to street art's significance and meaning (Riggle, 2010). The street, however, is both materially and ideologically instantiated: 'The doorways, windows, alley walls, dumpsters, sidewalks, signs, polls, crosswalks, subway cars, and tunnels – all have their own significance as *public, everyday* objects. These are shared spaces, ignored spaces, practical spaces, conflicted spaces, political spaces' (p. 249). To aesthetically engage such a realm, the corridors and alleys of the spectacular city, is to confront the very conditions of public, everyday life.

Though themselves problematic, the terms 'post-graffiti' and 'neo-graffiti' have emerged in the past decade as a corollary to 'street art', signaling some kind of qualitative and stylistic shift in modes of inscribing the city. Encompassing multiple forms of urban inscription like murals, poster-ing and sculpture that move beyond written text, these terms mark the spectacular nature of urban space. In his analysis of a street scene in flux, Tristan Manco, a graphic designer and street art commentator based in Bristol, unpacks these terms and argues that the 'street logo' is increasingly replacing the 'tag', once the essential component of graffiti writing. This general transition from typographic to iconographic modes of inscription is, he suggests, symptomatic of a broader transformation in the cityscape:



**Figure 1.** Blu's work inscribes the urban landscape with multiplicity and difference, claiming an extraordinary diversity of bodies and movements for the city. In this screenshot from *Muto*, a humanoid figure has journeyed its way across a wall only to meet a much larger being, to whom he offers his head. The larger creature consumes it, prompting a series of geometric transformations in its own body. These animated antics are situated in the grey heart of the city, evident in the rush of cars and pedestrians flickering past. The size, scale and content of this image disrupt the visual homogeneity of the city, creating a stark contrast that still abides by the spectacular nature of urban space. *Muto* (Blu, 2008). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

This is because such logos are simultaneously inspired by, and critical of, the growing visual spectacle of signage and advertising in the modern metropolis, thus making explicit how this new look is profoundly connected with wider changes in the urban landscape. (Dickens, 2008: 474)

Urban theorists have diagnosed these changes as a reorganization of lived space under spectacle, casting the modern city as a visually-determined spatial hegemony that erodes individual experience (Debord, 1983; Lefebvre, 1991). Spectacle is interwoven into the very fabric of everyday life, structuring the very geographical space in which urban dwellers live. Recognizing the city, and indeed, everyday life, as profoundly visual, such art suggests the duality of spectacle and its potential for subversion.

### **The city as process: Urban inscription, spectacle and encounter**

For Blu, spectacle becomes a parallel means of engaging with the built environment. As iconography, his art answers to the broad dictates of spectacular culture; yet, the extraordinary scale of his murals, canvassing grimy walls and buildings, challenges the visual homogeneity of the city (see Figure 1). Through his art practice, he instantiates urban space as contested, populated by messy difference. In his wall-painted animations, the city becomes a dynamic place, invested with new possibilities for moving through urban space. Indeed, in *Muto*, Blu materializes radical movement

in, under and over urban structures; at times large mural-style images lope along exterior walls and at others, smaller figures skitter around indoors. Through the laborious process of painting, photographing these images and editing the still frames together, Blu installs animated figures in the urban environment itself. At the same time, their location in marginal, ramshackle urban spaces, like much graffiti art, bespeaks a figurative reclamation of the lost city. Alienated from the human activity that flickers in and out of view, these bizarre creatures promise life seething under the everyday bustle of routine. Onscreen, these beings, some humanoid, some lumpen, some geometric, move freely across the cityscape, suggesting alternative perspectives on how we imagine and use the built environment.

In this sense, Blu's art is toying with existing notions of urban place. In *Muto*, Blu reinscribes urban space, permeating these metropolitan areas with a much less static sense of place. Although spectacle has structured the modern city in several ways, these built environments are populated by living, often contrary and sometimes unpredictable, beings, people of wildly divergent interests, occupations and social strata. As Blu's uncanny morphing creatures meander across, through and under the varied surfaces of the metropolis, they mirror this diverse spectrum of people. This peopled instability produces often conflicting accounts of urban place, some delineated by spectacular space and others by process. As Tim Creswell (1996: 47) argues:

The built environment materializes meanings – sets them in concrete and stone. In the process of making meaning material, these images become open to question and challenge. Social groups are capable of creating their own sense of place and contesting the constructs of others.

Though the meaning of space often merges with the meaning of place, geographers, architects and urban theorists generally define place as invested with a sense of identity and space as something more amorphous and abstract (Cresswell, 1996; Goheen, 1998; Tuan, 1977). As its dwellers come to know it and imbue it with value, undifferentiated space ripens into place. Ideological discourses also abet the work of placemaking, as Creswell (1996: 60) notes, it is, in part, through

ideological discourses that meaning is created, including the meaning of places. The question of who controls the discourse (the media, for instance) is an important one for geographers because it says something about who gets to participate in the construction and dissemination of meanings for places and thus places themselves.

Though the creatures in *Muto* only gain life onscreen, rather than in the geographical spaces occupied by living people, their activities undermine the dominant discourse of place and argue for the city as unfixed and indeterminate, conjured by embodied multiplicity. At the same time, their radical motion, gestures and transformations echo the physical interventions of the artist.

Blu's aesthetic engagement with the built environment underwrites his transgressive conception of urban place, as he incarnates surprising ways to interact with these spaces. Blu's travels have taken him to a variety of international urban contexts; his work has appeared in such diverse locales as Serbia, Mexico, Brazil, Spain and the West Bank, among others.<sup>3</sup> Through his art practice, Blu constitutes these sites as conversational spaces, in which prevailing discourses of place can be contested. On several occasions, his art has taken up the political histories of these places in ways that undercut the neat homogeneity of sanctioned histories. Notable examples include a massive mural in Managua, Nicaragua (2005, with street artist Ericailcane) that represents worker protests on local banana plantations and in São Paulo, Brazil (2007) an image of venerated tourist attraction Christ the Redeemer nearly buried in a massive pile of firearms (blublu.org). The

latter image forces a representational crisis between the tidy touristic glory of the statue and urban violence, while the former, bananas morphing into guns, confronts the pastoral with corporate violence. In Bethlehem in 2007, Blu painted several large images on the wall separating the West Bank from Israel. One of these, painted onto a guard tower, depicts a figure poking cracks into the wall itself (blublu.org). Indeed, his work often interacts with existing architecture, such that his painted images and murals incorporate particular physical features in their designs. These strategies recall the interventions of Banksy, the famous anonymous artist whose work often engages the built environment in similar ways.<sup>4</sup>

Emergent from the encounter between living bodies and metropolitan spaces, Blu's art practice conceives of urban place as always in the making. Even as it invokes the visual principles of urban space, Blu's work reinscribes the cityscape as a site of play and potential. In *Muto* and other wall-painted animations, as his animated organisms range their urban environments, they incarnate a radical way of moving through the city. As buildings become canvasses and walls become avenues, *Muto* ruptures the notion of the static city, affirming instead a vision of the city as process. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift stress the centrality of encounter to this model of urbanism in *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, arguing that:

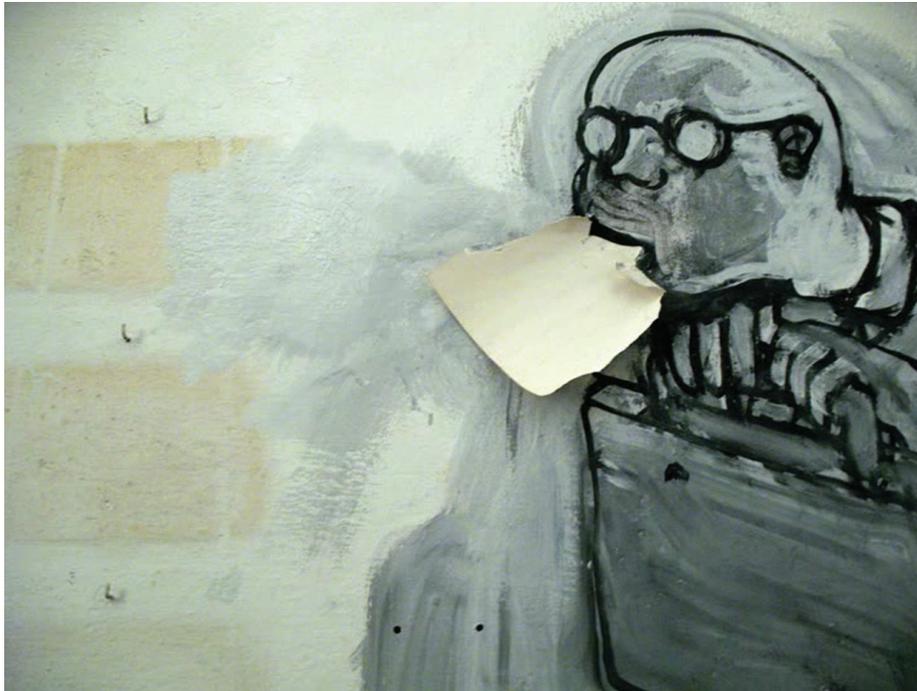
Encounter, and the reaction to it, is a formative element in the urban world. So places, for example, are best thought of not so much as enduring sites but as *moments of encounter*, not so much as 'presents,' fixed in space and time, but as variable events, twists and fluxes of interrelation (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 30).

Picturing the urban world as a dynamic entity, Blu celebrates the mutability of the individual encounter.

The newness of encounter, which opens the horizon of urban experience, sits at the heart of Blu's artistic process. In some of his murals, this encounter takes on political resonances, as in Managua, São Paulo and the West Bank, to mention but a few (blublu.org). In much of his oeuvre, this encounter precipitates the kind of architectural conversation evident in the West Bank mural, wherein he incorporates physical features into the image. Many of his wall-painted animations dramatize this encounter as one between architecture and animated figure; in *Muto*, morphing critters negotiate the three-dimensionality of the cityscape, rather than the merely flat surface of its walls. These mirror the artist's own negotiable encounter with architectural space, as he romantically expresses in an interview: 'Because in a sense each wall already tells the whole story, it's all there, I only happen upon it' (Zevin, 2007). Indeed, encounter takes on multiple valences in Blu's work, such that the sense of the city as process, rather than reified space, permeates his own artistic practice. Blu iconoclastically usurps urban space for his own art, incorporating its status as process into his own.

### **Remapping the city: Animated journeys and fugitive movement**

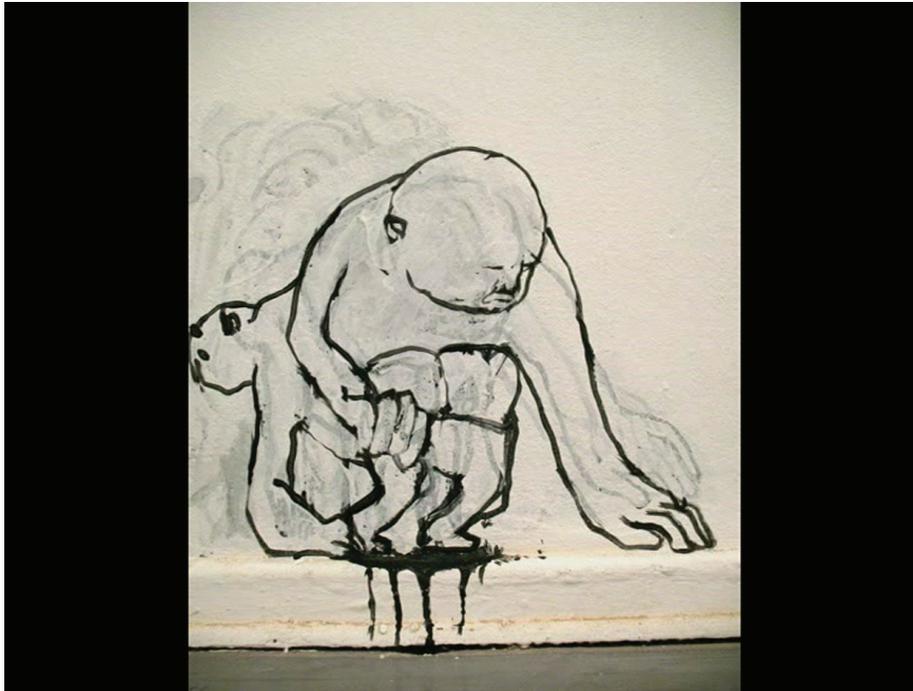
In *Muto*, the movement of animated bodies through urban space is the essential articulation of this encounter. Without a narrative edifice, *Muto* demonstrates its titular preoccupation with movement through transformation. In so doing, the animation articulates an irreverent paradigm of urban presence and encounter. As its transmuting creatures consume each other in relentlessly phagocytic blobs and whorls, each frame generally retains a central focus, such that it catalogs a compulsion forward on and through urban space. Nevertheless, this urban space preserves its own palpable sense of substance; animations duck under window frames, scatter debris and in one quirky moment, a sketched humanoid consumes some paper stuck to the wall with expert flicks of an



**Figure 2.** In this screenshot from *Muto*, a sketched figure in a suit, clutching his briefcase, flicks out a long painted tongue that seizes some paper tacked to the wall. He quickly gobbles the sheet, each mouthful crumpling it into smaller parts. As the animated creatures populating *Muto* move and interact with the three-dimensional objects of the built environment, they gain a dimensional verisimilitude that supports their spatial claims. *Muto* (Blu, 2008). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

animated tongue (see Figure 2). These walls are no mere screens, these animations gaining three-dimensional traction by dint of their motion. In one of Blu's earlier wall-painted animations, simply entitled *Walking* and designed to loop, a humanoid rendered in pure black paint strolls across a wall before shooting himself in the head. As his black hat falls to the floor, another creature claws his way out and resumes the passage. Other figures meet their ends in cartoon violence before a new one rapidly germinates from its body and continues its forward motion (see Figure 3). The simple momentum of this animation, registering a compulsion to move, foregrounds the significance of motion to Blu's project. In this drive, *Muto* recognizes the ways in which moving bodies define urban space. Indeed, geographical place is grounded in the activity of moving bodies, precipitating from the multiple daily choreographies of individuals in what David Seamon (1980: 163) calls 'place-ballet'. In his account, place is a dynamic and idiosyncratic entity emerging from the concert of moving people and their environments: Place-ballet 'is an environmental synergy in which human and material parts unintentionally foster a larger whole with its own special rhythm and character.' As Blu's morphing beings meander through their environments, *Muto* stages a kind of urban place-ballet.

Like Walter Benjamin's flâneur, a romantic figure who strolls the metropolis at his leisure, reading the text of the cityscape,<sup>5</sup> or the Situationist ideal of the peripatetic urban wanderer, in *Muto* walking in the city becomes an appeal to individual experience. As it pictures the act of wandering as a form of urban inscription, the animation's creaturely motion evinces its concern with the embodied experience of urban individuals. Similarly, the Situationists, a revolutionary group Guy Debord co-founded, aimed to return the body to the spatial hegemony of the metropolis. With their



**Figure 3.** In *Walking*, a series of animated wall-painted figures meet violent cartoon ends before new forms emerge from their dead bodies. In this screenshot, as the outlines of one body crumples, inky blood marking its demise, a new figure splits it open to materialize fully-formed. Shucking this drawn husk, this new figure continues the journey along the same trajectory, demonstrating the forward motion that animates the short film. *Walking*, Blu (2007). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

emphasis on ‘playful-constructive behavior’, the Situationists’ practice of the *dérive* reinstated the body as active agent within the urban landscape. An unplanned wandering through a landscape, usually urban, in which the meanderer subconsciously takes his or her directional cues from the environment’s contours, the *dérive*, translated into English as ‘drift’, marks the simple act of walking as seditious. Engaging the city at the street-level of the walking subject, the *dérive* challenges the official logic of the modern city by spurning its legislated routes and swift circuits. Through these explorations, urban roamers constructed new somatic and emotional maps of metropolitan areas. Though the *dérive* might suggest a hardly liberating automatism, it is rather a way of using the environment for one’s own ends.

Such wanderings jumble the neat organization of the spectacular city, for which the static image of the map is an emblem. In ‘Walking in the city’, Michel de Certeau (1988) contrasts urban planning’s totalizing gaze with the tactical agency of the walker, whose meandering body muddles the clarity of the legible city. Likening walking to poetic practice, he writes:

The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors). Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly alter it and make it the other’s blazon: in other words, it is like a peddler, carrying something surprising, transverse of attractive compared with the usual choice. (p. 101)

In de Certeau's account, bodies moving in urban space generate a somatic spectacle, fraying the tidy visual order of the city. His celebratory account of 'the long poem of walking' underscores the potential inherent in bodies to shape space. For the Situationists, the restoration of the dynamic body within the cityscape ideally invested wanderers with agency as performers; the 'situations' catalyzed the brief transformation of these urban terrains into occupied performance spaces in which routine could be confronted. A practice of inversion, the *dérive* aimed to transform spectators into embodied performers. Operating within the spectacular order of the city, these walkers, like those de Certeau describes, inscribed space with their very gestures and movements.

In *Muto*, Blu instantiates the *dérive* as spectacle, bestowing these animated beings with a locomotive agency. Like these wanderers, Blu's cartoon beasts, and indeed, the artist himself, reinscribe the spatial arteries of the city, overturning sanctioned routes as they skulk and scramble along walls and over window frames. At the same time, *Muto* juxtaposes the continuity of this radical movement with the stilted spurts of pedestrians flickering in and out of the scene. In this way, the animation privileges the alternative cartography traced by its cartoon figures over the habitual, legislated pathways taken by pedestrians, imbuing them with a vivid sense of urbanism.

Like a kind of animated parkour, an urban movement art in which runners use their bodies and surroundings to gracefully propel themselves through the built environment, *Muto* visually remaps the city, a topsy-turvy rendition of urban space that reclaims it for play and potential. These art practices claim radical views of urban space, transforming cities into playgrounds and obstacle courses. As walls become promenades and ledges stepping stones, these bodies draw kinetic energy from the environment. Indeed, rather than just walking, these animated figures hop, flip and slither, refusing the easy motion of designated pathways. Despite their renegade nature, however, these animated movements have a leisurely quality, in contrast with the teleological haste characteristic of the city. This exploratory, somewhat languid aspect in *Muto* highlights the sense of the journey itself.

Like the *dérive*, the wanderings in *Muto* appear unplanned, as its denizens meander through the cityscape, colliding with its detritus. As they encounter the three-dimensional elements of the built environment, they crawl under, vault over and shimmy across them, seeming to create their trajectories serendipitously (see Figure 4). These movements and transmutations seem organic and spontaneous, appearing to precipitate from the contact between new image and urban surface. And yet, this sensibility belies the extraordinary planning and control that go into their creation. Blu's painstaking artistic process, incorporating large-scale painting and ensuing infinitesimal changes, photography and video editing, coopts the dynamics of spectacle to produce this spontaneous sense of wandering. As animated beings lurch and slither through their multiplanar urban universe, they barrel through an urban space conceived as both spectacle and encounter.

### **Spectacular bodies and aesthetics: Envisioning urban play and possibility**

In *Muto*, Blu conceives a transgressive embodiment that wields the capacity of animated bodies to interrogate space. As a work of animation, it allows its characters to slip between virtual and geographical spaces, their transmogrifying bodies inhabiting an alternative vision of the city. At the same time, it embraces the aesthetics of spectacle, inviting its spectators into this urban fantasy. As it opens, a flickering pan reveals the urban setting, widening the shot to encompass an anonymous street in Buenos Aires. Establishing the metropolitan scene, the camera's gaze closes in on a brick wall running parallel to the street. An animated white brick against a gritty backdrop of charred red is slowly pushed out of the wall, as curious fingers quickly follow it. These drawn digits are



**Figure 4.** This screenshot from *Muto* captures the strikingly acrobatic movement of Blu's animated creatures through the built environment. In a few quick motions, this strange, multi-limbed humanoid figure has crawled under an exterior wall, through a grimy tunnel, emerging within an interior space. Knocking aside some debris, the creature slithers as it easily scales the wall's vertical ridges and ledges. In this way, its movements visually and somatically remap the most prosaic urban spaces, inscribing them with new possibilities for movement. *Muto* (Blu, 2008). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

quickly accompanied by proliferating arms that culminate in the emergence of a creature bursting through the painted hole into a near palpable heap on the street. Defying the usual flat plane of animated screen, this animated being makes an immediate claim on urban space and the viewer's attention. Denying narrative flow as it writhes, wriggles, ingests and explodes through urban space, it evokes the nascent moments of animated film.

The projected ease with which Blu's animated critters slip into the geographical space of the city recalls the cross-dimensional dances of *Out of the Inkwell* (1918–1929), an animated series of the silent era produced by Max Fleischer. As a work of animation, *Out of the Inkwell* straddled two- and three-dimensional space, cheekily exercising the claims of supposedly flat, inert animated beings on the real world. Each episode opened with the animator creating Ko-Ko the clown anew, whether by drawing him or pouring him out of the inkwell onto a sheet of paper. A stubborn and rebellious clown, Ko-Ko would refuse to stay within the confines of the sheet, his antics often bringing him into the three-dimensional world, often in playful contest with his creator. And yet, this spatial fluidity went both ways and three dimensions sometimes yielded to two, when the animator might toss a real object into the picture plane. In what Donald Crafton (2013: 106) calls an 'existential leveling', when animated and human actors occupied the same screen space, animated figures like Ko-Ko expanded in dimension, able to inhabit the solid realities of their creators. This narrative exploration of space was doubled by the technique of rotoscoping, in which the gyrations of a very human Dave Fleischer in a clown suit modeled Ko-Ko's lifelike action. Framed within the context of the adversarial relationship between created and creator, Ko-Ko wrought palpable

effects on three-dimensional space. Sometimes he would return the gaze of spectator, as in the episode *Modeling* (1921), wherein he sketches out the visage of a man in the same room with his inked ice-skates. At other frequent moments, he would escape his sheet of paper, scampering down solid table legs, across floors and into trouble. At moments like these, his undulating body, worm-like and uncanny, prefigured the shimmying figures of *Muto* moving across the cityscape. Indeed, as they move across and interact with the actual urban surfaces of the city, the beings in *Muto* perform Koko's claims on reality. Inhabiting gritty metropolitan areas, their planar gestures and transformations forcefully interrogate three-dimensional urban space.<sup>6</sup>

Even as *Muto* reiterates the kind of spatial claims Ko-Ko's teleporting body made as he interacted with reality, it abets this exploration with a metamorphic energy. Though Blu's drawing surface is quite unlike the blank sheet or cel, his figures evoke the elastic bodies of other early animations. In *Muto*, Blu envisions an urban plasmatic, an animated salve constructed from the detritus of postindustrial life. From early animations such as Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* in 1911 to early Disney shorts of the 20s, animated bodies have led a riotous life of infinitely elastic contour. Squashed and stretched to silly proportions, these animated figures thumbed their drawn noses at gravity and the boundaries of form. While Ko-Ko achieved an uncannily realistic human movement through rotoscope, these rubbery bodies gained a profoundly unnatural motion, the very lines constituting their figures able to contort and mutate. In his writings on Disney, Sergei Eisenstein (1998) celebrated the anarchic energy of early Disney cartoons. Dubbing these animated bodies 'plasmatic', he saw them as an imaginative panacea to the grey regimentations of industrial existence. Imbued with hypertrophic anima, animated bodies staged 'a displacement, an upheaval, a unique protest against the metaphysical immobility of the once-and-forever given' (p. 33). An animated being 'behaves like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a "stable" form, but capable of assuming any form and which, skipping among the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence' (p. 21). Early in the animation, two octopus-like figures waddle over to each other before they join arms and merge, toppling over and growing a nose and face before its mouth opens and teeth fall from the face's perch on the vertical wall onto the ground (see Figure 5). The suddenly animate teeth, their roots become legs, gallop off in different directions, one racing up a wall while several scatter along other vectors. In this way, the figures in *Muto* are multiply mobile, navigating both virtual and geographical space like Ko-Ko the clown, but unbound by the formal limits of the human body. In the urban landscape, the liquidly plasmatic bodies wriggling through *Muto* audaciously posit a radical limitlessness in urban space.

Enfolding this bodily transcendence within the aesthetics of attraction, *Muto* also shares early animation's interest in the aesthetic potency of spectacle. In such animated shorts as Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* (1911) and Emile Cohl's *Fantasmagorie* (1908), plasmatic antics petition the spectator's gaze, appealing far less to narrative than to the dynamics of spectacle. In this sense, Scott Bukatman (2012: 116) describes these short animations as returns to the cinema of attractions. Negotiating the reciprocal gazes between animated performer and human spectator through the shapeshifting body, these two early graphic animated films fulfill the aesthetics of attraction. Demonstrating a disinterest in narrative continuity, both films bear the attraction's outward gaze, their movements complicit with spectacle's exhibitionism. Indeed, as in *Out of the Inkwell*, much of the attraction in McCay's and Cohl's work arrives from the marvel of the animator's ability to imbue life; whether through the recurring appearance of his hand, or in the framing stories onscreen that valorize him.<sup>7</sup> Though Blu remains invisible in *Muto*, as his figures move untrammelled through urban space, they conjure him. In his essay on the cinema of attractions, or early cinema, Tom Gunning (1990: 59) underscores the fundamentally exhibitionistic impulses of the attraction,



**Figure 5.** In this screenshot from *Muto*, two octopus-like figures approach each other from opposite sides of an urban gate, already multiply inscribed with graffiti. As these two cyclopean figures meet, they entangle their many arms, eventually uniting as one form, growing a nose and transforming into a face. Such mutations demonstrate the formal play of the urban plasmatic created in Blu's animation. At the same time, these plasmatic transformations have a generative force, propelling these figures onward. *Muto* (Blu, 2008). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

describing it as 'the direct address of the audience' such that its 'energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator'. Gunning derives his term from Sergei Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions' (1998[1924]), which disavows narrative structure in the interest of direct spectatorial stimulation. In Eisenstein's account, the attraction bears an aggressive force, designed to incite a visceral effect in its audience. For Eisenstein, an attraction finds its political resonance through the specific shocks produced in the spectator. Summoning the logic of the attraction, *Muto* asks its viewer to bear witness not only to the audacity of Blu's urban inscription, but to an alternatively imagined view of urban life.

In this act of spectatorship, the viewers of *Muto* are drawn into an embodied engagement with the urban fever dream it pictures. The film capitalizes on the dynamics of filmic spectatorship to shore up the connection between the mutating bodies it depicts and those of its spectators. In *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), Vivian Sobchack challenges the notion that films are merely viewed objects; instead, she articulates the film experience as a dynamic, intersubjective and dialectic relationship between two lived-bodies, that of the spectator and that of the film. In the presence of the spectator, film achieves the status of viewing subject, incarnating a double embodiment of reversible vision that dialectically structures the film experience. Emphasizing the access vision grants to whole embodied experience, she writes:

Entailing two lived-bodies engaged in perception and its expression in the presence of each other, the film experience enables the potential communication of experience from one uniquely situated lived-body to another. It brings together in a common encounter two acts of vision and their respective

productions of signs and meaning, two differentiated viewing-views/moving images that meet but do not precisely merge. Two 'I's/eyes' converge in the visual activity of the film experience, each a historical and cultural existence and each visually and visibly intentionally directed toward the world 'on a bias' and with a differently invested interest in perceiving it and expressing its significance. (pp. 306–307)

Sobchack casts the film experience as a communicative encounter between two viewing subjects. Rather than disclosing mere information, this is a specular exchange of experience. According to the dynamics of the filmic encounter as Sobchack describes them, as *Muto*'s creatures radically move through the urban environment, they communicate Blu's particular vision of urban embodiment as lived bodily experience. Sobchack argues that 'my entire bodily existence is implicated in my vision' (p. 78); in *Muto*, Blu makes an appeal to the embodied eye of its spectator, an invitation to see and experience the city through its eyes. As they slither, burrow and propagate within their multiplanar urban landscape, Blu's plasmatic denizens, animated Morlocks, exhibit their unruly movements to the animation's spectators. At the same time, the camera generates a matched sense of embodiment, moving the eye of the spectator in pursuit of this shapeshifting journey. In this way, Blu has commandeered the ostensibly passive dynamics of spectatorship, taking spectators through his revised vision of the urban landscape. This is spectacle as visual pedagogy; it reminds us that multitudes frolic under the sheer surfaces of the everyday. It also reveals the force of spectacle, the 'primal power of the attraction' for both oppressive and subversive ends (Gunning, 1990: 61). *Muto* fosters a new way of seeing the city while performing a temporal exemption from the dull false rhythms of urban life.

The spectacular time created in *Muto* offers a brief alternative to the clock time of the city. The film's opening moments lay out the setting of the street, but time seems caught in fast-forward. Cars race in and out of blinking staccato frames, out of synch with the primary rhythm of the animation. To the ghosts of vehicles passing by, *Muto* was only ever a static image, or perhaps only a white wall, a vaguely sketched figure or simply a crew painting. To its spectators, *Muto* is a world layered over the world known to the apparitions of pedestrians blinking through the now-animated space. The spectacle inhabits the 'smack of the instant, the flicker of presence and absence' (Gunning, 1996[1993]: 83); in this spectacular instant, *Muto* heralds a world beyond the constructed temporality of urban life. In his account of spectacle's profound structuring force, Debord (1983: 158) tracks the substitution of cyclical time by the unified irreversible time of production, and its disguise, pseudo-cyclical time, 'the false consciousness of time'. Urban life runs by the metronome of production, rather than the natural rhythms of the seasons, of day darkening into night. Depicting the diegetic time of a day, beginning in the morning and closing in the evening, *Muto* imagines an alternative urban existence, a day given over to play and wandering. *Muto* exists in multiple temporal planes; most significantly, however, the pseudo-cyclical time of spectacular life, so manifest in the flickers of cars and human bodies, is subsumed by the spectacular primacy of the live cartoon image. Constructing a uniquely synchronic and diachronic time in the animation, *Muto* stages a temporal exemption from the cycle of daily routine.

### **An urban carnival: Abjection and transformation**

In *Muto*, the aesthetics of spectacle frame another mode of bodily transgression, adding an element of abjection to the plasmatic. Like much of Blu's oeuvre, a consumptive violence dances in concert with the wall-painted animation's playfulness. Though the bodies inhabiting *Muto* might be described as an urban plasmatic, their transformations are usually the result of some kind of



**Figure 6.** In *Muto*, movement is imbricated with the grotesque; its animated bodies often gain life and motility from the grotesque demise of a previous incarnation. This image captures this dynamic, as one figure, itself born from the gaping interior of another, pulls open a door in its midsection to release yet another. As the new body lurches onward in its journey, the prior one falls still, as if its anima has passed on to the other. Emerging from other bodies through processes of destruction or consumption, the film figures an element of abjection into its depiction of an urban plasmatic. *Muto* (Blu, 2008). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

grotesque destruction. Consumption, excretion, implosion: a head unzips so another body may emerge, a figure opens a door from within another's chest and crawls out, multiple scenes of bodies swallowing other bodies populate the film, a flurry of ants erupts from one figure's mouth to annihilate another (see Figure 6). These abased figures evoke both attraction and repulsion, a doubled response characteristic of abjection. These signifiers of the abject, vomit, feces, blood and other effluvia, as well as the corpse, though rendered with comic levity, conjure a kind of rupture in urban space. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva (1982: 4) interprets such horror as symptoms of social breakdown: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.' The abject arrives in reaction to the potential loss in distinction between subject and object, self and other, life and death. Animated beings, inhabiting an uncanny realm between life and death, neither corpse nor living body, are then profoundly abject figures; their oft violent transformations under Blu's direction foreground this liminal status. Yet in *Muto*, this liminality abets other categorical breaches, as these creatures straddle both geographical urban space and projected virtual space. In *Muto*, then, the abject indexes the transgression of a spectacular spatial order.

Somatic transcendence in counterpoint with bodily defilement, abjection in animation might then dovetail with the metaphysical desires of the plasmatic. In *Muto*, this violence is at once destructive and generative. One reading returns us to animated violence as pedagogical mode, a means of imploding spectatorial expectation. Discussing the hypertrophic violence manifest in

much Japanese manga, Christian McCrea (2008: 23) writes: 'The bursting of animated bodies causes narratives and spaces to become multitudinous, for tensions to release and for the internal world of the viewer to be given fresh license.' Articulated this way, the 'dimensional excess' of cartoon violence supports the phenomenological aims of the plasmatic (p. 10). In *Muto*, and perhaps other animations that express an abject plasmatic, bodies that devour, defecate, excrete and explode signify new spatial possibilities.

In this respect, its lineage stretches back to the Middle Ages, recalling the riotous and transgressive bodies of carnival. In his classic study of folk culture and carnival, *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984: 435) associates the grotesque body with a carnivalesque space of transformation, through which 'the old dying world gives birth to the new one'. In Bakhtin's account, carnival was a time of folk resistance to the official culture, embodied by its embrace of proscribed and indecorous. This time is associated with the lower bodily functions, in opposition to 'the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development (p. 25). The obscene and the profane were valorized not simply to invert medieval standards of propriety, but to appeal to the generative energy of the lower body. Through its destructive aspect, degradation led to rebirth. Moreover, Bakhtin envisioned this mode of degradation as 'a bodily and popular corrective to individual idealistic and spiritual pretense' so endemic to the ruling classes (p. 22). Carnival laughter and degradation thus firmly situated agency in the body, rather than in the nebulously defined spirit. In this sense, Bakhtin's analysis prefigures the bodily challenge to the prevailing spatial order of spectacle posed by *Muto's* grotesque figures. Critics of spectacular society decry its tendency to sacrifice the body in service of the eyes, engendering a visually determined hygiene that echoes the sanitized image of the medieval 'finished, completed man'. The spewing bodies of *Muto* participate in an abject cycle of rebirth, their very locomotion emergent from degradation and destruction. In its celebration of the abject, its irreverent depiction of orifices that randomly open, consume and excrete, *Muto* exercises the monstrous promise of carnival in urban space. In so doing, it expands the meaning of the plasmatic, imbuing its formal play with a grotesque dimension. Such an extension could encompass other animated films, affording a means of reading violence, abjection and monstrosity as protest 'against the metaphysical immobility of the once-and-forever given' (Eisenstein, 1998: 33).

Another reading exposes spectacle's duality; though *Muto* is in one sense a celebration of bodies in urban space, in another it gestures towards the breakdown of the urban body. These urban bodies gain life through a cycle of consumption, an idea sliding easily into the metaphorical space of capitalism. Coupled with the urban detritus that ornaments much of the animation, the worn graffiti, scattered rubbish and construction debris, *Muto* imagines bodies and objects as swallowed up and spat out by the system of spectacular capital. As they recede into the cityscape, new bodies rise to take their place, shucking old skin and paint onto the scrap heap of the metropolis. Either way, the body is both subject and object, its movements cataloguing a fraught relationship with urban space.

### **Bodies and residues: Artistic process and its remainder**

Blu's artistic method interpolates his own body into this urban encounter, marking *Muto* as a spectacular prism reflecting both virtual and real bodies. In this way, the unique domain of the artwork occupies geographical urban space, lived phenomenological space and the virtual space of the animation, conflating these to produce a polysemic spatial practice. Blu's wall-painted animations inhabit these diverse spaces at once, such that any acts or movements performed in one resonates in the others. The parkour-like antics of *Muto's* animated denizens arrive from the movements and

gestures of the artist in the city, even as their animated wanderings transform urban space onscreen. At the same time, despite occupying the visual margins of *Muto*, the everyday throng of people and vehicles mark the film with their flickering presence, affording urban space the capacity to generate its own effects in the virtual life of the screen. United onscreen, these varied bodies shore up the discursive work of placemaking performed in *Muto*.

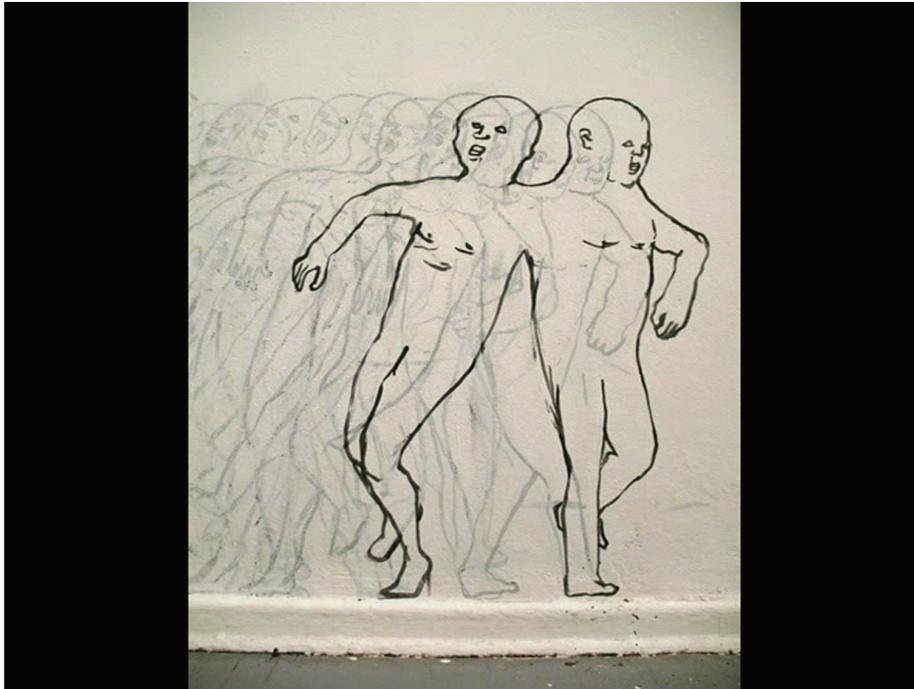
Utilizing an unusual animation technique, in which the artist makes small changes to the same surface, thus leaving the history of its creation as onscreen residue, *Muto* finds continuities with William Kentridge's charcoal animations, such as *Monument* (1990), *Felix in Exile* (1994), *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) and *Tide Table* (2003), among others. Rather than the meticulous preplanning that precedes much animation, encounter is central to both of these works, adding a somatic dimension to the practice. In both, the movement of the artist's body is imbricated with the process of creation. In "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projections", Rosalind Krauss (2000) studies Kentridge's animated work *Monument*, which grapples with the legacy of apartheid in his native South Africa. An animation in an unstable, unconventional sense, *Monument* precipitates from the collision between Kentridge and his slowly mutating drawing. Kentridge's process prefigures Blu's method in producing *Muto*: Kentridge walks back and forth between the drawing and a camera in his studio, making infinitesimal changes to the drawing before retreating to the camera to record these modifications, eventually knitting the series of subtle transformations together to make *Monument*. Working without a predetermined plot or visual trajectory in mind, Kentridge's process, which he describes as 'the rather dumb physical activity of stalking the drawing', inhabits a tension between automatism and improvisation, or what Kentridge calls 'fortuna' (Christov-Bakargiev, 1998: 93).

To some degree, Blu's process of artistic encounter with urban space mirrors Kentridge's with the artwork, both emerging from the clash of artist and representational space. And yet, the sheer scale of the street art that constitutes the frames of *Muto* frustrates an easy mapping of Kentridge's process onto Blu's. *Muto* spans towering walls, deep gutters and other hard-to-reach places, and part of its attraction resides in knowing the monumental physical labor that fuelled its production. These artistic gestures loom large, requiring of the artist and his supporting team the kind of physical activity and dexterity undertaken by his animated figures. Unlike some of Blu's other wall-painted animations, such as *Combo* (2009), a work done in collaboration with David Ellis and which foregrounds the laboring bodies of the painting team, the artist's body in *Muto* is invisible. In this way, however, his creative gestures, including the act of painting as well as the climbing and clambering required to reach these spaces, register in the animated bodies of *Muto*. Krauss (2000: 21) describes how Kentridge's process unifies the movement within *Monument* with the back-and-forth movement of the artist's body:

It occurs at a deeper level of representation in which the hesitations in the continuity of the movement seem the registration within the film's visual field of Kentridge's body 'stalking the drawing,' of his own movement both tracking and slowing that of the image.

For Blu, however, this process inhabits the street rather than the studio; in this way, he adds a dimension of urban spatiality that doubles the salience of the encounter. His own body engages the terms of spectacularity alongside those of his plasmatic creatures.

Blu's animation technique in *Muto*, like Kentridge's charcoal-on-paper animations and other works like Caroline Leaf's oil-on-glass *The Street* (1976), sums a series of minute changes to a static surface. For Kentridge, the same overworked piece of paper remains an artifact of his process at its end, while Leaf's work captures a history of metamorphosis on a single sheet of glass. This



**Figure 7.** Blu's animation technique leaves a visible remainder on the drawing surface. In this screenshot from *Walking*, this grotesque figure leaves the outlines of its Siamese body in its wake. These contoured trails trace the history of the passage, serving as both erasure and reminder. *Walking* (Blu, 2007). Screen grab from Blu's *Sketch Note-Book* (ARTSH.IT, 2010) DVD.

technique, as the image morphs and changes while the surface remains the same, leaves a historic remainder of images past, a drawn trail shimmering at the edges of prior change (see Figure 7). In *Muto*, this process attends the movement of animated bodies across urban space, shunting and stretching these trails along their paths. Leaving a greyish trail of white paint in their wake, the critters of *Muto* render the history of their passage, staining all the urban territory their animated appendages have explored. Aesthetically, these residues underscore the status of these figures as drawn or painted, recalling the very act of drawing that brought them into being. Coupling these figures to the hands that produced them, these trails mark the work's political investment, recalling the dissident act of inscribing public space. These echoes of the creative gesture serve as both erasure and reminder of the work's past, articulating the fleeting temporality of urban wandering and inscription. At the same time, as reminder, these ghosted contours commemorate the history of the journey, infusing the animated figure and the history of its movement with its own materiality and solidity.

## Conclusion

The proliferating bodies that collude to produce a work like *Muto* introduce a sense of somatic plurality into urban space. These urban denizens leave a historic swath of paint behind them as they move through space and time. This murky trail conjures a palimpsest that encodes the contradictions of urbanism, in which new is irretrievably bound with old. Animated beings, both abject and playful, find their movement rooted in the artist's encounter with space, undermining the legibility and clarity of total sight. At the same time, through the intersubjective dynamics of spectatorship,

the film implicates the bodies of its spectators in this spatial encounter. In this way, *Muto* sketches out the messy, multiple rhythms of the different bodies that reside in our cities. Arjun Appadurai (1986: 5) writes that ‘it is through things in motion that we may understand their material and social contexts.’ If this is so, then the frothing creaturely motion that animates *Muto* illuminates the plurality of our spectacular streets, tendering a playful new way of spatial knowing. Recognizing that moving bodies shape space, *Muto* reinscribes the body within the city as both wanderer and spectacular subject, blurring the distinction between inscription and exploration. Blu’s work reminds us that urban inscription is at once an act and an aesthetic, and that it is necessary to engage our urban environments in all the ways available to us.

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## Notes

1. Part of the animation was made during the Fantoche Animation Festival in Baden, Switzerland, in 2007.
2. In *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, Tim Creswell (1996: 55) parses this move in early graffiti as a means of defusing its political power, or subverting the subversive: ‘It is a reaction that seeks to insert graffiti into its “proper place” and rob it of its denaturalizing power.’
3. Blu’s public works and films are catalogued and can be viewed on his website, [blublu.org](http://blublu.org)
4. Banksy has also painted murals on the West Bank wall that reckon with the political and architectural implications of the wall. These images include objects like ladders, windows and balloons that, like Blu’s own West Bank mural, foreground the restricted freedoms Palestinians face. This engagement with the political, historical and architectural resonances of a particular space are hallmarks of both Blu’s and Banksy’s work, though their styles vary quite significantly.
5. Unlike the wanderings of Blu’s cartoonish figures, or those of the Situationists, Benjamin’s flâneur was essentially interested in observing the city, cultivating a leisurely aesthetic sensibility of modern urbanity. Though he was very much in the trenches of the city and its crowds, the flâneur was largely a spectator.
6. Other types of animated film, such as the object animation prevalent in the work of the Quay Brothers, offer resources for thinking about the role of inanimate objects in Blu’s work, and the interaction of animated figure and urban detritus. However, the role of such animated objects is less important in *Muto* than in some of his other work (*Big Bang Big Boom* is notable in this regard). Rather, I see the encounter of varied bodies and their urban environments in *Muto* as more salient.
7. The presence of the animator looms large in these early animations. In *Fantasmagorie*, the animator’s hand appears regularly, positioning the uncanny moving figures as drawn marionettes of a kind. In *Little Nemo*, the animated section is framed within the context of a gentlemen’s wager, with McCay taking bets on whether he’ll be able to make his drawn figures move. Similarly, the contest between animator and animated drives much of the action in *Out of the Inkwell*, as Ko-Ko the clown perpetually treats his animator as an adversary. In all these, the animator takes on the role of showman, the miraculous puppetry he performs fuelling the spectacle of the whole show.

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### Author biography

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