

Upright is fine, but downright is where I am

Shannon Garden-Smith
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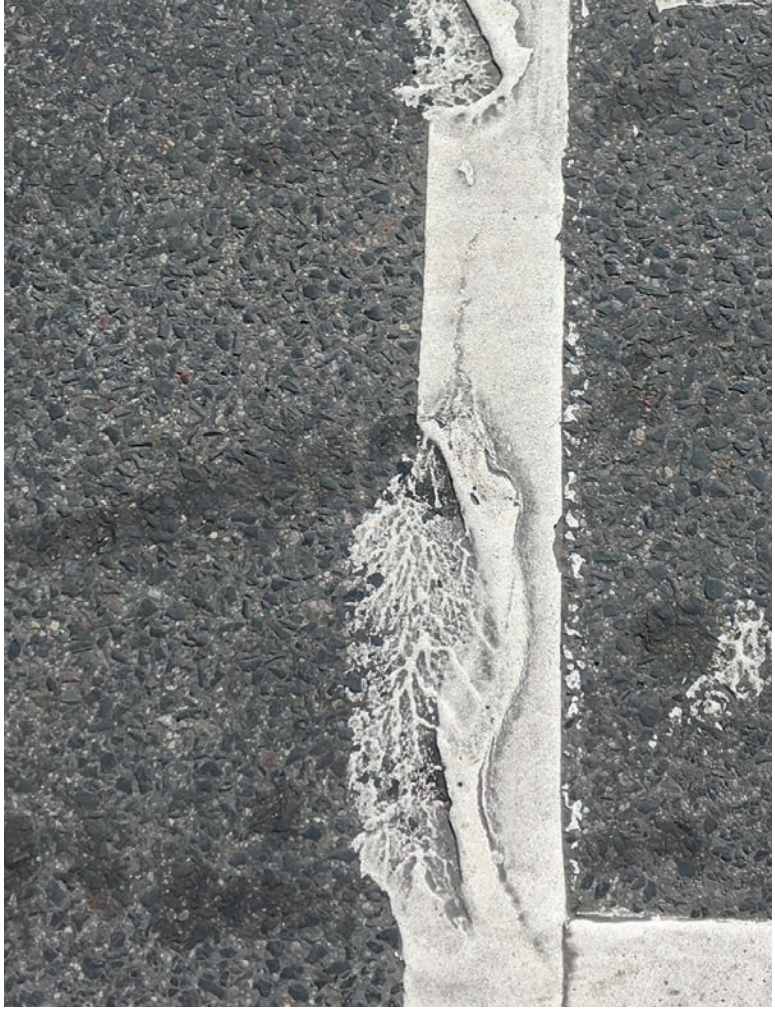












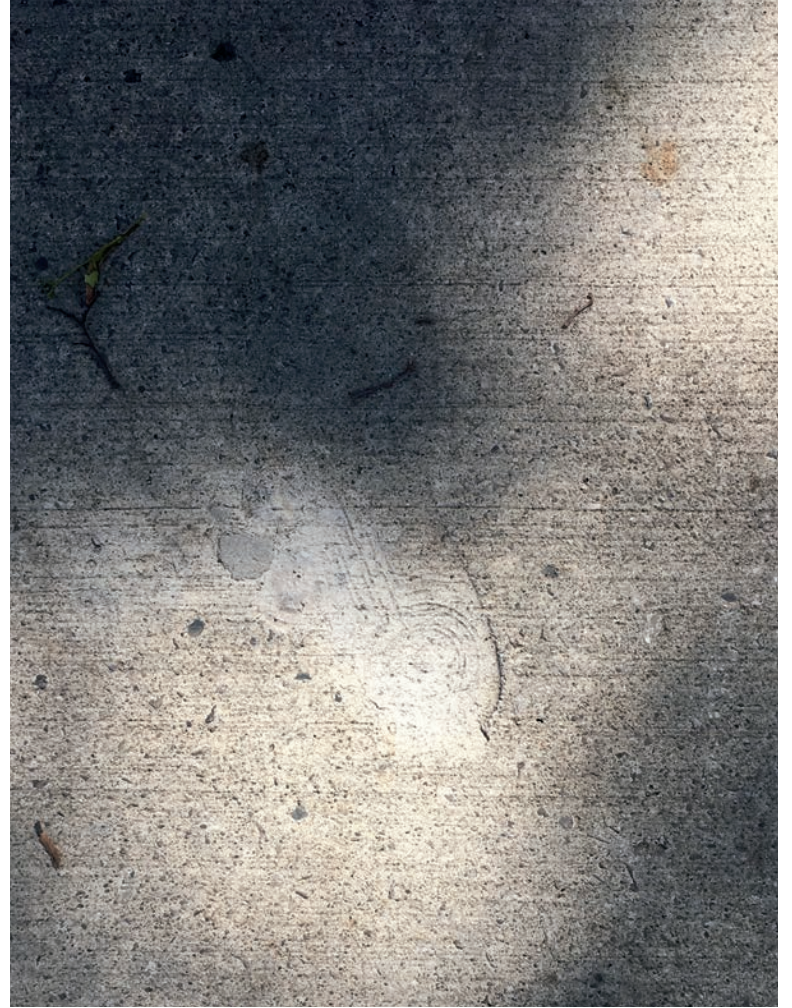














Acuity



Mountains of Meaning, pen on vellum, Stephane Gaulin-Brown, 2018.

Acumen, acuteness, and acuity all describe a similar type of ‘quickness’ or ‘sharpness’ while remaining distinct in their applications. Acuity, reserved for the sharpness of hearing, vision, and thought is a term I learned as a child.

“Congratulations, you have 20/20 visual acuity.”

I took pride in this fact as if I had done something to achieve it. Perhaps it had something to do with my father having terrible eyesight, and here was a shred of proof I wasn’t predestined to repeat all his mistakes. Of course, after years of obsessing over the screen I started to notice my eyes felt fatigued staring at the flat pixels that mediate so much of my day. I would like to think that over time I would’ve built a tolerance to this sort of thing, like a rock climber’s callused hands, but that isn’t the case.

Hyperopia, more often known as farsightedness, in combination with Computer Vision Syndrome was the optometrist’s diagnosis. She explained to me that the blue light of a backlit screen mimics the light from the sun, which throws off our circadian rhythm and causes the eye to strain. Her advice to alleviate some of the pain was simple:

“Every hour, let your eyes go to infinite.”

Caught up in the struggle to focus my eyes and my thoughts, this comment washed over me without much effect. However, slowly at first, the words began to marinate. Perhaps the connection between seeing and thinking, as structured by acuity, is more than syntax.

But first, an image:

A house.

A house with a shed roof.

A house with a shed roof and high ceilings.

A house with a shed roof and high ceilings, with an entire facade made of glass.

A house with a shed roof and high ceilings, with an entire facade made of glass that faces the ocean.

A house with a shed roof and high ceilings, with an entire facade made of glass that faces the ocean with a spot to stare.

This is the space I think about when I look out the window at work to *let my eyes go to infinite*. In these moments of optical rejuvenation I feel the significance of the optometrist's advice. Without coincidence, these are the times that my mind opens to a deeper way of thinking. The gap between perception and language can be vast, and a challenge to articulate, but it wasn't until I'd heard the optometrist's words that I was able to begin unlocking the connection between visual depth and depth of thought.

I need space to think.

I gaze out my office window and see downtown Toronto 21 floors from the ground. From here my eyes are able to wander farthest in one direction. I look west down Queen Street all the way to Parkdale where I see a sliver of the modernist apartment building I have lived in for four years. In the words of Michel de Certeau, "to be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp."¹ In darker moments, the city's grasp can feel like a swirling vortex of capital, expectation, and domination that limits my ability to create space to think, feel, touch, play, love, and live. The occasion to float above our anthropological plane is therefore a chance to hypothesize alternate ways of living, of being that exudes an intentionality towards the reciprocal relationship of acuity in sight and space.

The shift from the ground to the sky is a matter of perspective. The resulting breakthrough is made possible through the thousands of steps I've walked on Queen Street and the intimate interplay between body, vision, and the city. Isn't it interesting that when the light is just right, footsteps embedded in the sidewalk emerge into view? Likely a memorial to the accidental, these impressions also remind us to leap above our every-day vantage point with such force that we could crush concrete and break stone.

During the Renaissance, a period characterized by Humanist² zeal, two significant advancements solidified the connection between spatial and psychological perspectives. First, architecture as a professional field emerged out of the visual arts, and, second, the development of a precise mathematical system to illustrate perspective was adopted by painting. It would be wrong to see these as two parallel lines of progress. They are much more like strands of twine twisted into a rope. At the origin of such a breakthrough is Italian architect Leon Battista Alberti and his treatise on perspective titled *Della Pittura* (On Painting), published in 1450. *Della Pittura* was the first of three texts³ Alberti would publish on the intersection of art, architecture, and classical optics. Alberti, and many painters that would follow suit (most notably Leonardo da Vinci), used a central vanishing point on a mathematical grid in order to represent the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed.⁴ The aesthetics of such a turn rendered landscapes in a surreal, almost computer-generated, light. Here we see the ideology of the Renaissance materializing in the very spatial understanding of its art and architecture.

To look at the alluring *Ideal City* painting, currently on display at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, is to glimpse the psychospace of the Renaissance city. Floating without any solid attribution to an artist, the 15th century panoramic painting depicts a view of a city that doesn't *actually* exist. Background elements such as the Roman

colosseum and Constantine's triumphal arch stand next a building resembling the Baptistry in Florence, while a more modern (for the time) Medici palace-type building looms in the foreground. The result is the collage method. *Ideal City* strives to represent the spirit of the Renaissance city through an architectural mosaic of cultural signifiers while abandoning any attachment to the limitations of reality's status quo.



Returning to my seat in the air I become a voyeur to the spirit of my own city. As I gaze down I am dislodged from the limitations of my own perspective. From here it feels like I can peek over the hedges of a maze and see the emergent pattern the twists and turns combine to create.

The urban counterpart to the maze is the labyrinth: a circular maze without walls that uses a meandering path (usually painted or laid on the ground) to compel the wanderer to conflate physical space with mental space. Following the Humanism of the Renaissance, the 17th century Romantics reoriented their gaze towards nature and walking saw a shift from working-class transportation to cultural pastime. Here we see *acuity* materialize in the work of Rousseau and Wordsworth, who wrote the first texts on walking as a vehicle for philosophical thought were written. Wordsworth described his writing as not about walking but absolutely contingent on the time spent in the open landscape. The labyrinth transformed sublime walking expeditions into condensed concentric circles as a way to expedite the psycho-spatial effects of the journey. In *Wanderlust* (2001), Rebecca Solnit's history of walking, she describes that "it was breathtaking to realize that in the labyrinth, metaphors and meanings could be conveyed spatially."⁵ Solnit goes on to explore how the labyrinth represents narrative space physically. With a beginning and an end, the twisting linear path of the labyrinth mirrors the structure of a story, with each plot twist coming around the next corner, it "offers us the possibility of being real creatures in symbolic space."⁶

When I cannot physically ascend to change my perspective I take comfort in knowing there are 29 public labyrinths in Toronto (that I have mapped thus far). These labyrinths have become portals for acuity within the modern city that, despite few views to infinite, guide wandering souls in circles to create the necessary spatial depth. Toronto's labyrinths are almost exclusively located in proximity to churches or children's parks, which might suggest that the religious mind and the mind of a child are already sensitive to the nature of acuity. Although outside the scope of this essay, it would be worthwhile to hypothesize on the potential effects of constructing labyrinths in all manner of locations. Perhaps in front of Toronto's city hall, at Yonge and Dundas Square, or in the financial district. How might our culture change if the office building

I work in, at the corner of Bay and Queen, was razed to the ground and replaced with a labyrinth the size of a city block?

I recently visited one of my dearest friends, architect and artist Stephane Gaulin-Brown, at his home in Montreal. We were going through some of his recent drawings and paintings as I tried to explain my unformed thoughts on acuity. I described the image of a mountain top breaking through the clouds to try and illustrate my point. The sensation of this image is one of an epiphanous breakthrough that ushers in clarity of thought via the expansive view. Moreover, once above the clouds, one can see relationships between mountain tops that are otherwise inaccessible from the valley floor. As I struggled through this explanation Stephane matter of factly reached for a small drawing within a larger stack of papers on his desk. He showed me *Mountains of Meaning* (as seen on page 1) and explained his inspiration for the work was nearly identical to the sensation of acuity I described in my image. I was struck by such a connection between our own internal psycho-spaces. The sensation of this moment felt like Ezra Pound's description of Phanopoeia⁷ as a type of poetry that projects images in motion onto consciousness. It was in this moment that I became aware of the potential for acuity to be applied to both the individual and collective experience.

Understanding acuity has not only been a process of self-affirmation by understanding the particulars of my own process of creative and critical thinking; it is also a call to action. To understand the connection between seeing and thinking is to activate space in one's own terms. The handoff between these two modes of perception is reciprocal in that visual stimuli are coloured by the structure of our mental space which in turn influence our view of reality.

The house with a shed roof and high ceilings, with an entire facade made of glass that faces the ocean with a spot to stare is the in-between of acuity. It spans the indoors to outdoors, foreground to vanishing point, and psycho-space to real space. To *let your eyes go to infinite* is to embrace the possibility of constructing the world beyond the status quo.

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¹ de Certeau, Michel. *Walking in the City*. p. 157.

² Hu•man•ism: a cultural paradigm that privileges the importance of the human mind at the centre of society through the revival of Greek and Roman thought.

³ *De statua* (On Sculpture) and *De Re Aedificatoria* (On the Art of Building), 1443-1452.

⁴ de Certeau, Michel. *Walking in the City*. p. 158.

⁵ Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust*. p. 70.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. New Directions Publishing. p. 25.