

Drawing the City

Two weeks before selecting Camden Passage as the site for this assignment, I arrived in London for the first time. Faced with a city of overwhelming scale and density, I began in a predictably mediated way: by searching “top 10 off-beat places in London.” Camden Passage appeared as a recommendation. The decision seemed arbitrary, yet it met some important conditions:

1. A place that was new for me, but still carried some familiarity: something that agreed with what I ‘thought’ London must look like.
2. Somewhere I could sit and observe, and sketch.

Sketching was the core of process. On my first sitting at Camden Passage, as I scrawled in my sketchbook, nervous and anxious in a new area, sketching in public felt strange and the deliberate effort felt confusing. In words of Georges Perec, “**You’d love to stroll about, to loaf, but you don’t dare;... You don’t even know what to look at,**” (Perec, 1997) The second time around, I referred to Patrick Keiller, who talks in his book *‘The View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes’* about the flâneur: an urban wanderer with a heightened awareness, while trying to uncover enigma of everyday life. I adopted this approach for my next sketching spree, and it became an act of ‘flânerie’, except it wasn’t quite as easy: Flânerie is slow, leisurely but in this age of ever-reducing public space, any investigation feels naturally intrusive. My ‘sketching-flânerie’ began as focused effort, as only the mind became an observer but the pen remained at work, but as I carried on for longer, the pen soon became the involuntary extension of the observing mind.

At this point, new questions arose: Camden Passage was already a geography constructed for a mediated gaze with its old-time charm, its visual being its selling point. How do I visually critique a space that already exists as an image? Keiller writes in Chapter 11, *Film as Spatial Critique* (Keiller, 2014) about the anthropological tendency to interpret new places through pre-existing references and analogies to others already known, and Camden Passage was exactly the ‘image’ of London for a newcomer or a tourist.

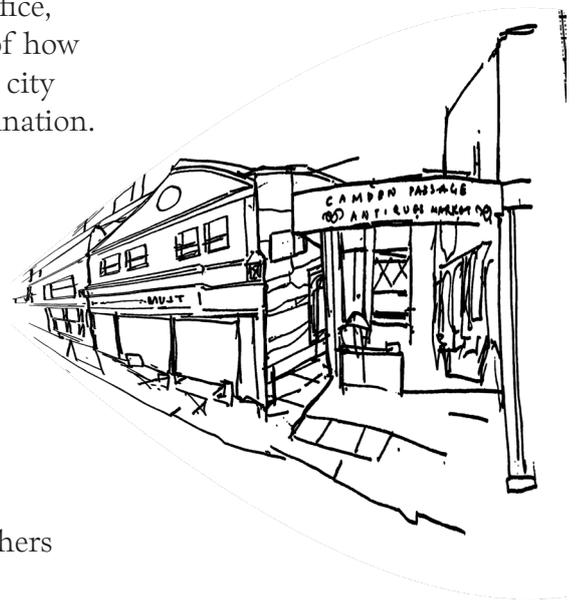
This began my critique in uncovering its true identity seated in the



layers that constructed it. Built in the 1800s and revived in the 1960s as a notable market, Camden Passage now situates itself at the intersection of digestible antiquity and curated modernity. To examine it, in one set of experiments, I used layers of transparency to evoke the unchanging, aged edifices (buildings and cobblestone) against its modern, transient decorations (new storefronts, seating and signage) and occupants to point out which parts of its legacy the space chooses to preserve. In another experiment, I focused on its inhabitants (customers, onlookers, stallholders), mapping visible and invisible semantics present in their belongings, personal effects and conversations that drive a social and class divide by design.

Metahaven's *Uncorporate Identity* helps to understand this. They discuss the contemporary state where the 'form of exchange becomes the substance of value'. In Camden Passage, value lies not (only) in the transactions and objects, but in the atmosphere and the invisible branding offered by its unchanged architecture and the undeclared labour of its high-spending consumers. Like *Sealand* (Metahaven, 2005), where fiction was legitimised through a passport so coveted that established nations would counterfeit it for ease of access, Camden Passage too sustains itself as a fiction, a visual construct powered by soft branding and quiet authority. Every passer-by points, admires and aspires.

For me, the illustrator-flâneuse, this space becomes both performance and refuge. Camden Passage offers an anachronistic urban fantasy, and sketching it is tracing the line between authenticity and artifice, participation and critique. Illustration becomes spatial enquiry of how design, taste, ideology all intertwines in the walls and surface of city that is new to experience yet perpetually exists in a shared imagination.



References:

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Perec, G. (1997) *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Translated by John Sturrock. London: Penguin Books.