Lesson 1. Wandering Drawing
New York is an iconic city. It is globally popular, and globally recognized for its Empire State building, Times Square, and Brooklyn Bridge. But the New York we recognize in our local communities might appear different than the New York of cinema and internet iconography. And yet, these communities are just as distinct. However, sometimes during the day-to-day living, we can lose sight of what makes the place we call home interesting and unique. How often do we take the time to truly explore and document the blocks in our neighborhood?

To begin this lesson, pick a place in your neighborhood with interesting activity--perhaps a commercial strip or transportation hub, and take a walk with your sketchbook to document the neighborhood (using pencil, pen, or both). You may begin in one part of the neighborhood and meander a long course, or you could simply document the activity of several blocks.

Once you have your materials, head out into the street!

(The following examples are from a wandering drawing I created in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn in July 2021, and from various drawings I have done through my travels.)
Artist Inspirations:

The Situationists International was an avant-garde group that explored the idea of “psychogeography”--or how one feels in relation to place. They employed urban wandering in their various art practices. You can read more about them here:


Mark Bradford is an artist who incorporated the signs, symbols, textures, and materials from beauty salons in his Los Angeles neighborhood to create large-scale map-like artworks. In this article, he references how he focuses on the “details” of neighborhoods, and how taking walks, and “wandering” is a part of his art practice.

Begin by finding the first thing that catches your eye, and sketching it on a page in your sketchbook. You can use a pencil if you prefer to erase lines as you see fit, or choose pen if you want to reflect the immediacy of the moment and work quickly without paying attention to “mistakes.”
After drawing your first note, or image, move on to another location in your neighborhood, and draw the next thing that catches your eye.

Continue to do this: make a note of a scene, sign, image, symbol, etc. that you see on your walk, then move on to the next location--continuing to add to your drawing.
You can try different ways of composing your drawing. You could start with an image, and as you walk, connect each image to the previous one—as if the drawing is “growing,” as in the drawing on the left (a sketch from Brazil). Or you could choose to place each image in different parts of the page, and then “connect the dots” as you draw, like the image on the right (a sketch from Istanbul.)
These sketchbook drawings from Barcelona represent other ways you can chart your journey. You can refer to an actual map, like the drawing on the left which shows a map of where I had walked that afternoon, and add invented elements.

You could also choose to add color, like the drawing on the right.
As you begin to fill up your page, you can start to add invented elements, create patterns to connect different parts of your page, or switch from pencil to pen, as in the above drawings.

You may start drawing in the street, and choose to take a break at a cafe in your neighborhood, where you can continue to find images to add to the sketch. You do not have to create the entire drawing on the walk. You could create the outlines of the sketch on the street, like the drawing on the left, and then continue to fill in aspects of the drawing when you get home.
For this particular wandering drawing, I paid attention to composition, and built up my drawing thinking about how I wanted to balance the page with text, and how I wanted the arch of the traffic light to create movement on the page. I used patterns from clothing seen at shops in the stores on my walk, and invited patterns as well. When I got home, I spent time creating different values around the page--creating areas of dark value, and areas with gray-tones.

However, your finished drawing could be a simple line drawing with no added value or shading.
Here is an example of a student who made notes in a sketchbook, and then re-composed her wandering drawing as a pen and ink drawing.

We can see clues of where she might be in the city based on the signage. Take a moment to consider how she uses the arrows, and how she employs symbols from construction areas. Based on these clues, and the directional lines, what might she be telling us about she perceives walking through her neighborhood?
REFLECTIONS:

1. Did this practice of “wandering” and drawing in your neighborhood bring you new insights on where you live? By slowing down to draw, did you notice anything new you had not noticed before?

2. How is New York represented in your drawing in ways that are different than in popular culture (cinema, internet, movies)? Are there similarities?

3. Do you feel that you captured the energy or character of your neighborhood? If so--how? If not, what might you do differently to highlight what is unique about your neighborhood?