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Walking Women: Interviews with artists on the move

Deirdre (Dee) Heddon and Cathy Turner

First Steps

Writing of the limitations placed on women's walking, Rebecca Solnit comments that, 'Women from Jane Austen to Sylvia Plath have found other, narrower subjects for their art' (Solnit 2001: 245). Solnit does cite some exceptions – Virginia Woolf, Sophie Calle, Marina Abramovic, Mona Hatoum, Patricia Johanson, Ingrid Pollard. But the history of walking art woven through her book is inevitably dominated by the better-known names of male artists: Charles Baudelaire; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; William Wordsworth; Charles Dickens; André Breton; Louis Aragon; Guy Debord; Richard Long; Hamish Fulton. If there have always been some women who walked (and whose art reflected this), Solnit suggests that 'many more must have been silenced altogether' (2001: 245).

In Chapter 3 of her book, Autobiography and Performance (2008), Deirdre Heddon turned her attention to 'site-specific' performances which used sites familiar to the performers. Exploring the relationship between identity and place, she recognised both notions as contingent, in process, continuously becoming – and, as she argued, inter-dependent. She wrote that:

Places, like the bodies located in them, are embedded within and produced by historical, cultural and political vectors.

She then went on to admit that:

In planning this section, I realised that all of the performances I was familiar with, which featured walking in their execution, had been created by men (in addition to [Mike] Pearson and [Phil] Smith's work, Carl Lavery's Mourning Walk, Graeme Miller's Linked and Simon Whitehead's and Lone Twins' various walking projects came to mind). Of course, many women do make site-specific work. Nevertheless, I have struggled to locate many women who include walking practices in their *oeuvre*. (Heddon 2008: 112)

This struggle raised questions. Were there, in fact, many women artists, or did women avoid making walking art for various reasons? Why, if they did exist, was their work seemingly over-shadowed by that of male artists? Might an examination of such work prove revealing, pointing towards aspects of walking and walking art that have been unexplored, or suggesting new perspectives on prevalent assumptions about such walking?

One of the few women walking artists that Heddon could initially name was Cathy Turner, a member of site-based arts organisation Wrights & Sites (the other members are Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti and Phil Smith). In fact, Cathy had invited Dee to participate in a 'gender drift' in 2003, in which two groups, one of men and one of women, drifted through Exeter, following various instructions and reporting back at a joint meeting late in the evening. In a rather inconclusive report on the night's wanderings, Cathy suggested a range of other peripatetic methodologies for exploring the gendering of space and walking:

- reports on solitary drifts
- longer group drifts (all night)

- drifts that cross through a range of cityscapes (industrial, residential, clubland)
 - comparisons of notes made and maps drawn
- (Turner 2003)

Embarking on a joint research project to investigate the questions raised by Dee's observations, we decided to draw on this form of experiential walking as part of our methodology. Rather than making exploratory 'drifts', however, we chose to combine interviewing artists with accompanying them on chosen walks. We could simply have interviewed these women, inviting them to offer a narrative of their walking. However, as Tim Edensor suggests, such narratives 'cannot effectively capture the momentary impressions confronted, the peculiar evanescent atmospheres, the rhythms, immanent sensations and physical effects of walking.' Walking, he writes, 'is suffused with a kaleidoscope of intermingling thoughts, experiences and sensations, so that the character of the walk is constantly shifting' (Edensor 2008: 136-7). We chose to allow our interviews to be informed by this improvisatory and embodied experience, so that the walk might prompt diversions, tangents, circuits and uncertainties missed in the linear authority of the merely spoken account. Our fieldwork approach also allows us to attend to information from the sites walked through, things that drew our attention, that our walkers pointed out, surprising connections, disjunctions and juxtapositions. Each of the walks taken prompted a particular 'toponarrative' – a collaborative, partial story of place constructed by at least two walkers.

Our first task was to ascertain whether the absence of prominent women in the field (literal and metaphorical) of walking art was due to the absence of women working in this way. In response to enquiries to mail-bases, we received a deluge of e-mails confirming that there were indeed many, many women walking artists both in the UK (the area of our search) and beyond. As a starting point, we interviewed ten artists: Elspeth Owen; two members of the trio, walk walk walk (Clare Qualmann and Gail Burton); Misha Myers; Tamara Ashley; Simone Kenyon; Ana Laura Lopez de la Torre; Emma Bush; Sorrel Muggridge; and Rachel Gomme. Though we had questions we wanted to explore further, about the gendering of walking art (see Heddon and Turner 2010), a large part of our concern was simply to make this walking more visible. Thus, although we tentatively begin to draw conclusions here, this essay focuses on the walking interviews themselves, the work of the artists and their discussion of their own work (the last a deliberate attempt to vary the voices heard in this field).

Walking and Talking

We begin by walking together, along the undercliff between Branscombe and Beer, in Devon.

We see blue sky and blue sea. We see yellow flowers. We see commemorative benches. We see a beach where an oil tanker was washed up. We see a signpost to 'The Great Seaside'.

As we walk, we partly discuss Cathy's work with Wrights & Sites, partly practice the shape of our interviews and partly mull over ideas connected to the gendering of space. Cathy chose this walk for the fact that it is 'just really beautiful'. She suggests that the 'leisure walk', chosen for aesthetic pleasure and convenience, is easily regarded as the antithesis of the psychogeographic ramble – too easy, too naive, too 'managed', too mapped. Need it be, however? Is it entirely without difficulty, complexity, risk or mystery? She raises

questions about the ways in which our experiences shape our assumptions about place, citing, for example, the highly managed forest environment where she enjoys taking her small daughter for walks, despite the doubts cast on this 'taming' of the forest space by artist colleagues. She recalls her attempt to 'drift' (with the baby) in a domestic space (filmed as simultaneously the other members of Wrights & Sites were filmed drifting through cities)ⁱ. Dee asks, 'So what did you find out when you did that?' Cathy answers, 'It was hard'. This answer, Dee points out, belies the supposed 'easiness' of the domestic. Cathy recollects the struggle of attempting to experience the house differently, dressed for hiking, wheeling the buggy upstairs, erecting a tent in the bathroom. The exercise had been intended as celebratory, but as Dee comments, it is impossible not to read the video as an ambiguous narrative, suggesting entrapment. And yet, set alongside the three films of the men, alone in cities where their right of way is often barred, the friction between the three spaces also offers a comment on their different limitations.

We do not want to assume that women's experience can automatically be mapped onto a concern with the domestic, or to make similarly essentialist assumptions about men's epic walking. However, Cathy's observations clearly reflect the ways in which personal experience (here, that of early motherhood) can inform perceptions of space and of its attendant degree of difficulty, complexity, risk and mystery.

We ponder on whether or how our investigation of other women walking artists might illuminate or clarify some of these ideas, whether and how they might be superseded by others.

Dee drifts through Peckham in London with Rachel Gomme, a dancer trained in the technique of Body Weather, a butoh inspired practice which raises awareness of and attends to the body's intersections with its environment.ⁱⁱ 'I haven't planned where we'll go', says Gomme when she meets Dee from the train station. Drifting is how she typically traverses her locale.

They see the bluest flecks of flowers on the pavement, like Yves Klein paint pigment. They see crumbling gravestones, hiding amidst the verdant green. They see the head of a plastic rose – and stop to pick it up.

Gomme, having worked with the artists Christine Quoiraud and Simon Whitehead, and sensing in their practice a deep engagement with the rural landscape, seeks strategies for a similarly embodied response to the urban fabric of London; a way to feel at home. Her practice, she explains, tends to focus on details, on 'things that aren't noticed or things that are very small but accumulate'.ⁱⁱⁱ The open horizontal view of the country is replaced in the city with a focused downward gaze, as 'your vision closes'. Throughout 2007, wherever she happened to be walking, she would pick flowers that had dropped to the ground. Her Found Flower Journal captures seasons and microclimates, each flower attached to a strip of paper that roughly matches the colour of the sky when she plucked it from the pavement.

Gomme admits to engaging more with the organic matter of the city than its constructed architecture. Undergrowth (2008), a sort of natural history walk around her local area, literally marked out, in washable green paint, the things that grew where they weren't supposed to be, or where you didn't expect them, or where you simply tended not to see them – plants in the road, roots of trees breaking through the pavement, 'weeds' in the

cracks of walls. Learning their names she swapped knowledge with locals who turned up to walk with her. She says they found flowers that belonged miles from Camberwell.

Gomme's walking borrows from her Body Weather technique, a sense of stillness in motion. The hypnotic rhythm of foot falling is threaded through Ravel (2008), where she knitted up a line of yarn as she walked through Camberwell, incorporating bits of found objects or things that people gave her. Six hours of walking, covering a distance of just over two miles, created a knit of 4½ feet x 6 inches. She collected not only objects but people, mostly women, mostly talking about knitting – their grans' knitting, their mums' knitting.

Cathy walks with Emma Bush in Harbertonford, the Devon village where she lives and has made her most recent work. The route that they walk is part of her Village Walk, created in 2008. Bush also indicates the field where she researched her performance lecture, Fields, in 2007.

They see bluebells and wild garlic, heavily scenting the air. They walk through heavy rain. They see abandoned greenhouses, where, Bush says, pansies still bloom.

This is a walk Bush has repeated many times. Repetition is something she finds interesting. Not striding out into the unknown but focusing in on the detail of the known: 'It's different layers of finding out about a place, different methods'. *Fields* was 'to do with observation, taking time to be still'. Every evening, Bush photographed the same line of houses, taking time to notice weather, wind direction, owls and buzzards. Nothing is too small or too familiar: she even considered a project where she would contemplate her garden wall.

She also stresses her timidity in talking to people, or walking strange routes. The research process for Village Walk was slow, extended over months and involved repeatedly walking the route with elders from the village and alone. The final walk links a series of the elders' autobiographical stories along the route. For instance, Annie Lind's story tells of a past life as a Samurai warrior: the audience enter a stranger's front room and then, more startlingly, are taken into the intimate yet distant, imagined space that she experiences in flashbacks. They ponder why or how this elderly woman might identify with the Samurai. This project's integrity, its careful methodology, its deliberation, its pushing of small boundaries, lead Cathy to see in the story a metaphor for the hidden steeliness that lies behind the fragility of this walking.

Dee walks and talks with two-thirds of walk walk walk, Gail Burton and Clare Qualmann (the third third, Serena Korda, is unavailable that day). They walk around the streets of East London, following everyday routes that now form the trio's Nightwalks.

They see steam rising from the cooling coals of a chestnut burner. They see the empty space where the old railway signal hut used to be perched. They see cranes and graffiti. They see graffiti and cranes. And the building where taxi drivers learn the A-to-Z of London streets.

walk walk walk practice what they call 'an archaeology of the familiar and the forgotten', organising public walks through their familiar places, places deemed marginal or overlooked. Such places, says Burton, are 'dirty, slightly broken, slightly derelict' but they provide 'space for the imagination' and are 'more receptive to possibilities'. walk walk walk's work performs a sharp retort to Guy Debord's dismissal of a student whose routines made a rigid triangle in Paris (Debord 2006 [1958]: 50). Debord was incredulous that the student did not move outside of those three points. Staging a sort of *anti-dérive*, walk walk walk plotted their daily routes to define their own triangle and 'rather than diverging', decided to 'explore the relationships within it', later inviting others to join them.

Between 20 and 50 people turn up for the free night time perambulations organised a couple of times a year. Collective walking enables access to places that become 'off limits' at certain times (most particularly for women). But the broader politics of freedom are writ large here. As Qualmann qualifies, 'We wanted to do something that didn't need any permissions, didn't need any money'. Walking is how you get around London when you have no money. Only recently, as the area experiences regeneration, have the walks – or the fire on which soup is heated and around which walkers gather – attracted outside attention. Their collection of different night walk route maps testifies to the redrawing of margins.

Changing the pattern, Dee takes Elspeth Owen on her almost-daily 45-minute detour to work (since Owen is passing through Glasgow on her way to the Scottish Highlands).

They see the sparkling glass of the Botanic Garden's Winter Palace. They see the bark of a London Plane tree, like a protective leather hide. Owen spots a tiny fishhook on the ground that Dee would have missed.

Owen is a long distance, long duration walker, her work often providing a structure for the forging of new connections. In Looselink (2005) she hand-delivered messages in a chain sequence, following directions from one person to another. At no point did she know, in advance, where she would be walking to next. Grandmother's Footsteps (2009) marked her entrance into grandmother status and followed a similar sequence, with Owen delivering messages from grandparents to other first-time grandparents, crossing 15 counties in the process.

Whilst the direction and duration of these projects are determined by the people participating in them (all but the first 'link' are strangers to Owen), other projects are dictated by the calendar. Owen has performed two 'blue moon' works, Orbit (June 2007) and In the Dark (December 2009). Acknowledging the unusual phenomenon of a two-moon month, Owen remained outside for the entire moon cycle (28 days), irrespective of weather, and undertook nightly walks, issuing an open invitation for people to join her.

Owen, 71, only started walking in her 40s. Her first long walk (120 miles) was the historic march from Cardiff to Greenham Common which marked the founding of the Peace Camp, set up in protest at the presence of US nuclear weapons. In the mid-1980s, she completed her first solo walk, travelling 100 miles and reaching Greenham Common on Christmas Day. Though an adult, Owen recalls that her father was furious with her. It was partly this reaction, she admits, that encouraged her (rebellious) walking arts practice. Another motivator is her acute sense of fear when walking in unknown places – a fear that she acknowledges, confronts and overcomes with every walk completed. As she explains, all the bad things that she imagined might happen, but didn't, are placed beside all the good

things that did: 'somebody has probably done something fantastic for me, or shown me the way or taken me in, or I have heard nightingales'. The first time Owen slept on her own, outside, in just a bivouac, she awoke to the sight of a white stag: 'I think I know these things are there and I could enjoy them if I dared and so then I dare and there they are'.

Cathy circles Exeter with Misha Myers, walking the city wall. Myers is a performance artist and academic, who formerly studied anthropology and practiced dance. Born in the US, she now lives in Devon. Exeter's old walls designated the route of her work Yodel Rodeo in 2007.

They see the old wall, appearing and disappearing, now rising above them, now beneath their feet, occasionally obscured. They see a locked bandstand. They see new developments, new building work. They see the Watergate covered by scaffolding.

Myers tells Cathy that walking, as an art practice, came out of her interest in 'how people orient', an interest, she suggests, rooted in her own experience of displacement and 'my work with refugees and asylum seekers.'

Way from Home (from 2002) is a project which began with refugees in Plymouth, and which has since extended to other places. With this project, Myers offers a set of instructions for mapping a place that someone remembers as home, then walking it in another place, remembering it with a co-walker. She comments that the first instruction, 'make a mark...to represent what you call home' seems to assume that everyone has a clear idea of what and where 'home' might be. This isn't always the case. She recalls a homeless refugee, awaiting deportation, who could not identify home, who walked the shape of a question mark in the public library. She is not determined that people follow this set of instructions to the letter, she says, but more interested in how they interpret them, make them their own and use them to make a journey.

Myers describes Yodel Rodeo as being, in a way, 'my own Way from Home walk', as she sought to walk Mississippi around central Exeter. Initially, she envisaged walking alone through the night, but grew interested in inviting others into that imagined space. She therefore involved a group of line-dancers who accompanied her in a route around the walls that ring the city like a corral.

Although Yodel Rodeo was led by her, Way from Home and other works have tended to focus on triggering other people's creativity and involvement. In this kind of work, Myers says, 'The artist tends to disappear'.

Dee invites Sorrel Muggridge to join her on her almost-daily detour along the river Kelvin in Glasgow (Sorrel, too, is heading north to the Highlands). They see bridges. They see bridges. They see bridges. They hear an echo as they pass under. They jump when a jogger, in a canary yellow t-shirt, overtakes them.

Muggridge has been devising walking projects with Laura Nanni for the past five years. She explains that they tend to walk together in shared time rather than in shared space since she has been most often in Nottingham, while Nanni is in Toronto. Spinning the idea of the long-distance walk, their projects utilise the space between them as if 'mashing up'

geographies, engaging the streets of one city as the streets of another. Further Afield, a piece created for the Arts and Humanities Research Council 'Landscape and Environment programme Living Landscapes conference (Aberystwyth University, June, 2019), invited participants 'to take a walk with someone else across the ocean', offering a 'chance, for a while, to be in two places at once.' Those walking in Aberystwyth talked over the phone with a co-participant in Montreal, exchanging details of one place to re-imagine and navigate the terrain of another. Separated by thousands of miles, the experience nevertheless provided the co-ordinates for collaboration, exchange and connection.

Another piece, The Climb, similarly works with the distance in-between as Muggridge and Nanni attempt to climb the height that would allow them to see each other across the horizon (699 km). This height is measured using an everyday scale – the step. Though durational (and perhaps never ending), the intention, Muggridge explains, is neither to endure nor conquer space, but to make tangible the impossibility of the scale at which they are working, 'emphasizing the scale of space versus the scale of us and letting it be, letting yourself feel liberated rather than challenged by it.' 'It doesn't matter what the scale is', she reassures Dee, 'don't think you have to conquer the Pennine Way or the West Highland Way to be a walker'.

Cathy meets Ana-Laura Lopez de la Torre outside St. Hugh's church in Southwark. They walk the London streets.

They see mushrooms and the holes they have forced in the concrete. They see Polish vagrants eat the mushrooms. They see a long line of illegal immigrants queuing to sign up at a reporting centre.

Torre explains that her walking grew out of an interest in public space. For her, she says, walking is not about leisure, not about a romantic connection with nature. Rather it is connected with poverty. She remembers the stories told by her grandmother, who once lived in north west Spain, among inaccessible villages around a bay – stories that are sometimes about convivial walking, but sometimes about sorrow and hardship. Torre says, 'Those stories make my thinking about what walking is about...I'm not very romantic about walking... For me, it's a bit more political.'

A week earlier, Cathy visited an exhibition Torre held in a flat on the Tabard Estate, just next to today's starting point. This exhibition recorded walks Torre had held with people from the housing estate, with a local historian and with other interested locals. She says, 'I very rarely lead...It's about drifting and finding your way.' She is interested in an equal valuation of the mythical alongside more factual, historical or scientific material. 'Once a communal knowledge about something is created, art has the possibility of working it through and leaving it in lots of different forms and ways'.

She comments that she can prompt people to re-evaluate what they have taken for granted: 'It's not about creating anything new. I don't think my work creates anything new.'

Throughout the walk, Torre is constantly pointing out the incongruities in the city spaces, the oddities, the ways in which the street is controlled and organised, or where control has disintegrated: 'Maybe walking in the countryside, you have a different kind of conversation', she says.

When building works force them to walk around the back of another estate, they see that someone has used its grass verges to create a tiny allotment. 'That's lovely', says Torre. 'This is what makes my day'.

Dee joins dancers Tamara Ashley and Simone Kenyon, in Llanddewi Brefi in Wales (a setting in BBC Television comedy programme Little Britain). They climb the hill behind Kenyon's house, a route she sometimes runs.

They see a friendly black lamb amidst a flock of white. They see a disused quarry, reclaimed by the grass. They see a view of the Welsh valley, from high up on the hillside.

In 2007, Ashley and Kenyon walked the long-distance footpath, the Pennine Way together. As Kenyon says, they were interested in 'how to locate dance through walking' and for the 270 miles they tried to pay attention to how their (dancers') bodies engaged with and responded to the terrain: 'the pressure of your knees after 200 miles, the changing textures that are underneath your feet'. The inevitable stress on the body compels a heightened awareness. Even the weight of the rucksack played its role, grounding them as they walked, attenuating their 'centre of gravity'. Ashley recollects that her spine became elongated and very, very strong.

Walking as a duo, they 'partnered' the land too: 'The peat is very difficult to walk on and limestone offers a kind of spring support that really affects your bio-mechanics and the way that the weight transfers through your body', says Ashley. Improvising off the land and each other, they remained sensitive to the possibilities of exchange, to shifts in atmosphere and mood (both of the landscape and their relationship). Notably, the largest tensions between the pair were experienced during the most difficult sections. The Pennine Way functioned 'like a score' though, with the path providing what Kenyon describes as a 'base line' that 'pulls you' and 'holds you in place'. No matter how bad things seemed to be, they realised (and appreciated) that they simply had to get up each day and get back on the trail.

Though spending most of their time with each other, they also curated six artistic interventions along the route. Ashley explains that the invited artists 'could come in and change what was happening and give us feedback in a kind of artistic way'. In the context of the long-distance and long-duration, these meetings became 'magnified' and served to extend the duet, the dialogue and exchange; as did the encounters the pair had with other walkers completing the Way, a lot of whom shared their stories of the path. One walker even left signs on the ground for them. Dee recognises 'contact improvisation' as an appropriately generative description through which to consider this responsive, open practice.

Getting our bearings

Though we only walked with a relatively small number of the women who contacted us, the richness of this field is already evident. These ten women worked as solo artists, duos, and groups; they ranged in ages from 20s to 70s; some were mothers and some weren't; they were from Britain or had emigrated here; they lived in the city and in the country; they made short, long, urban and rural walks; they walked alone and they solicited company. Some loved walking as children, some hated it. While all had heard of flâneurs and the

Situationists, and many cited Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Janet Cardiff, few seemed overly concerned with or committed to staying within the well-tramped fields. Each had her own agenda and different motivation. The diversity of the practice and the women who make it usefully prevents us from falling into easy essentialisms of 'gender'. Nevertheless, each of these women did recognise that she walked as a woman; though what that means is as variable as the women walking.

We do not then, seek or propose a singular conceptualisation of women walking. However, by walking and talking to these women we aim to rethink – or add – to the theories that relate to aesthetic walking practices. These interviews give us starting points for further investigation and inform a more extended analysis than can be offered in the space available here (see Heddon and Turner 2010). Our small sample has already prompted us to consider questions of scale, of the monumental and the miniature, and the cultural values attached to one rather than the other. But this work also invites us to problematise such binaries, for in the detailed work of many of these walkers – their dogged attention to their local(e) – the seemingly miniature becomes gigantic. Doreen Massey's work also resonates here (Massey 1994), the local and global intertwined; in Devon, elderly villager Annie Lind crosses histories and continents to connect with her Japanese warrior (former) self. We reconsider, too, the local and epic, since our long-distance walkers work with both scales simultaneously; Owen travels vast distances to hand deliver personal messages.

The work also prompts us to consider walking as a convivial or communal activity, over-writing the still powerful historical figure of the solo walker (Rousseau, Thoreau, Wordsworth, Baudelaire...). Owen's solitary walks place the act of connection at their centre, Muggridge and Nanni manage to connect people (strangers) across the gap of thousands of miles. Gomme, meanwhile, knits together people and place, gathering them both as she walks her local streets. Myers and Lopez de la Torre both see their work as being that of someone facilitating on behalf of various communities, where the artist does not necessarily 'lead' or inscribe the work with their presence. One suggests that the artist 'disappears' while the other disavows creating anything new.

This work also encourages us to reconsider the concept of 'adventure'. Certainly, there is plenty of explicit adventure in much of this work (the crossing of the Pennine Way, the night time walks), and it is vitally important that we acknowledge and make it visible here. But as with notions of 'scale', adventure can be rescaled too, depending on your perspective. To work in one's back yard is to take huge risks, while to walk the Pennine Way, as Simone Kenyon reminds us, is simply to take one step after another.

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ⁱ These videos were presented in split-screen format as a backdrop for Wrights & Sites' performance lecture *Simultaneous Drift: 4 walks, 4 routes, 4 screens* (2006), Performed at the Arnolfini, Bristol, as part of Situations' *Material City* programme, October 11 2006. See <http://www.mis-guide.com/ws/documents/situations.html> <accessed Jan 6 2009>.

ⁱⁱ Body Weather was first developed by butoh dancer Min Tanaka and his Mai-Juku Performance Company in Japan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quotations from artists used throughout this article are taken from transcriptions of our recorded, peripatetic interviews.