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These Times Were Made for Walking

Dee Heddon, Morag Rose, Maggie O'Neill, Clare Qualmann, Harry Wilson, Matthew Law

Setting the Scene

It is Sunday, March 29, 2020. In the city of Glasgow, Dee is sitting at the kitchen table in her top floor apartment, drawing intently. She is six days into Scotland's first lockdown and is permitted to leave her home only for essential shopping, medical needs, or to exercise outside once a day—on her own, for an hour, and within her local vicinity. Dee longs to be elsewhere. Thinking of that elsewhere, she spends two-and-a-half hours mapping the route to there from memory, the same time it would take for her to walk it. Absorbed in the task set by artist Louise Ann Wilson for her project “Walks to Remember During a Pandemic,” she is grateful to be transported to her elsewhere.¹ She is also, she knows, relatively lucky. She can at least take a daily local walk. Which she does. By contrast, residents in Spain are only allowed outside to exercise their dogs.



Dee Heddon, sketch made for Louise Ann Wilson's “Walks to Remember During a Pandemic”, March 2020.

Walking's Popularity: Surveying and Extending the Data

In the context of the United Kingdom's (UK) lockdown restrictions, where exercise was one of the few legitimate reasons for going outside, it is unsurprising that walking found a new popularity during COVID-19.² A sample survey undertaken in Great Britain in April 2020 of nearly 2,000 adults reported that 55% of respondents were engaging in more walking for exercise than they had before restrictions were imposed.³ A more recent survey of 2,442 UK adults interviewed in March 2021 optimistically reported that “Walking (38%) comes top of the list of what people intend to do more of post-pandemic”.⁴

Surveys such as these, and many others, evidence an increase in walking during COVID-19 restrictions. But they don't tell us about why people walked, how they walked, or how they felt about walking. In the context of this exhibition, they also don't tell us whether and how people used creativity in connection with their walking activity—either to inspire themselves and others or to mitigate the boredom of daily repetition. To address this gap, in January 2021 we launched a research project to explore the more embodied aspects of walking.⁵ Struck by the generous work of artists like Louise Ann Wilson, we were also interested in investigating how artists employed walking in their practices during the pandemic.

We have conducted two online surveys: one exploring the UK public's experiences of walking during COVID-19 (March 2020–May 2021), the other exploring artists' use of walking over the same period. Our "Public Survey" received more than 1,200 anonymous responses. It helpfully supplements the data we have from other surveys, but is still not representative of the whole of the UK. Rather, it offers a rich snapshot of the experiences of those who completed it, the vast majority of whom were white, able-bodied, and employed. Further, people who voluntarily complete a survey about their experiences of walking tend to be those who have a positive relationship with it. The value of walking for a respondent's mental health was a recurrent theme that emerged in the responses. Walking provided a vital separation from one's home, which had become for many a space of work. It also provided a space from others and a time for self-care, an opportunity to work through problems, and a way to become energised and inspired.

We were particularly interested in using our survey to identify participation in creative walking activities. Our parameters for creative walking were broad and included following illuminated window or painted stone trails, geo-caching and Strava mapping, sound walks, and treasure hunts. More than half of the respondents reported an engagement with creative walking, with a significant majority of this group stating that they would or may continue with the practice after COVID-19. The affective and connective dimensions generated by these creative engagements are significant:

Walking for me was a way to connect to my community, which felt so important during this time. Just seeing other people walking felt reassuring. Seeing pictures people had painted on the pavement outside their house, or boxes of books for people to help themselves to, or pebbles people had painted for people to take, was really reassuring and inspiring.

I loved seeing the Christmas advent windows created on a number of different streets near here. It felt generous and warm, and gave a sense of community.

Encounters with creative interventions made by others engendered a sense of connection, potentially mitigating the negative impact of state-mandated physical distancing. These forms of communal yet distanced conviviality sat alongside more personal, resourceful activities that worked to encourage walking in limited conditions:

I am "walking to Warsaw" by adding all of my daily walk distances together. This gives incentive shape and feels like a kind of pilgrimage inside my head. I record the walking with a special art chart I devised. It's private and creative.

A significant number of respondents photographed their walks, documenting their environment and the changes that took place during the lockdowns. For many respondents, there was a new attentiveness to their local areas. Sharing documentation from their walks, often on social media, served as a way to connect and to inspire.

Daily photo from my "anchor place" in all weather to share with others—to connect and inspire others to get out.

The multi-sensorial capacities of walking were also foregrounded, bringing into focus entanglements of, or at least closer relations between, humans and the more-than-human:

I memorised “scent walks”—I would try to walk past gardens or through parks where I would encounter scented plants and trees—daphne, honeysuckle, roses, lime blossom, mimosa, etc.

Walked to observe wildlife and learn bird calls. I can now identify all common UK birds by their song, which I have learned entirely during the pandemic.

Pervading the survey answers is the paradoxical sense that curtailed and narrowed spaces fostered an enriched experience of the environment by encouraging a heightened attention to local details. Such a sentiment echoes Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman’s insight that “Walking is a way to become responsive to place; it activates modes of participation that are situated and relational”.⁶

People’s stories about walking during COVID-19 are generally positive, but some respondents admitted that they did not enjoy walking because it felt unsafe—for instance, spaces for walking may have seemed too crowded, too isolated, or not accessible for those who are disabled or mobility impaired. Some respondents also walked less because of anxiety, because they were ill, or “shielding” (staying at home because they were considered medically vulnerable). Walking is not a neutral practice conducted in neutral space. As O’Neill has written elsewhere, walking is an activity that is regulated and contained, shaped differentially across bodies by institutions, histories, and processes.⁷ Stacy Alaimo also reminds us that the body which walks is always situated in “networks of power”.⁸ The stories we share here are partial. While we can be confident in our knowledge that *more* people walked during COVID-19, not all people walked more, and walking was—and is—not equally accessible:

As a wheelchair user who loves walking, I feel frustrated by the lack of thought, information, and creative energy given to accessible walking activities.

We also know, at least anecdotally, that some people—some bodies—were more likely to be considered walking in the wrong way or in the wrong place.



Jim Young, *Pebble haiku*⁹

Walking Artists/Artists Walking

Complementing our “Public Survey” was our “Artists’ Survey,” in which more than 150 UK-based artists provided information on the types of artistic walking work they created, as well as the motivations behind it. Examples included creative and participatory workshops; public walks (remote, virtual, audio, in-person, indoors, and outdoors); artworks that recorded the experiences of living through COVID-19, often using the environment as signifier of moods and behaviours or as a temporal marker of time moving on; interventions into public spaces; and local handbooks/guidebooks/maps for others to use. Encompassing a variety of media—such as ceramics, graphic art, choreography, film, performance, and painting—these works variously documented, reflected, connected, and supported.¹⁰ In this sense, there is notable cross-over with the meanings ascribed to walking that were shared in the “Public Survey.”



Jo Delafons, *Walk Boxes*¹¹

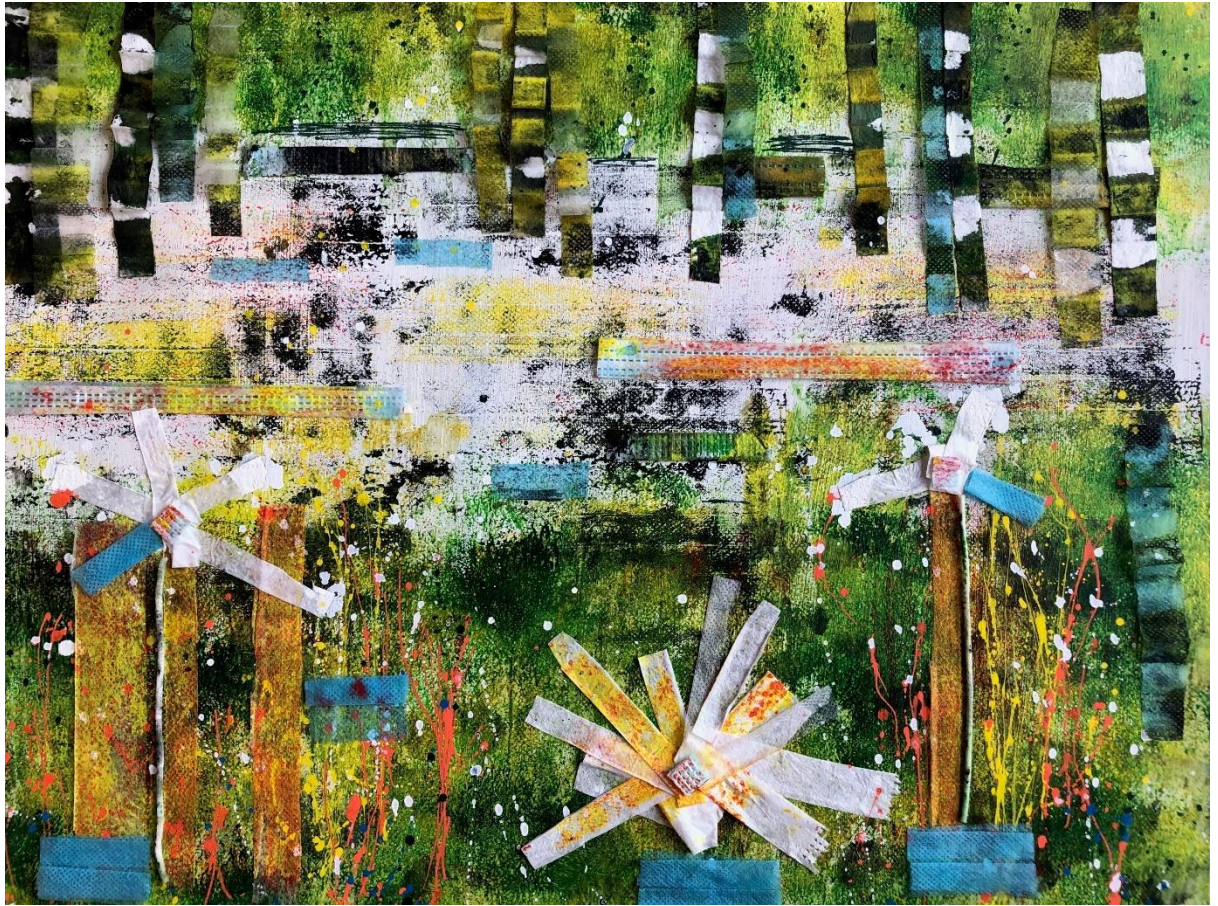
My walks became extremely precious during lockdown and led to a whole new series of work. I’ve now made 44 walk boxes to date. They were a reaction to, and comment on, the containment of freedom. The repeated rigid cube shape echoes our houses,

empty calendar days and the uniform, predictability of lockdown—so different from the thrill and wonder of being outdoors, walking in nature. Each box is nearly 10cm square and attempts to capture the essence of a particular walk in an abstract way, often incorporating materials I collected on that walk.

While most respondents had used walking in their artistic practice before COVID-19, 17% turned to walking for the first time. For some, it seemed to emerge organically out of their new daily practice of walking, rather than being a conscious choice at the outset of the lockdown. For others, the embrace of walking was a pragmatic and resourceful response to the new restrictions, offering an obvious way to continue to make work, with some artists adapting previously planned work into a walking form. Others were drawn to walking to stay safe (as it allowed them to avoid public transport) or to mitigate anxiety and isolation—both their own and others'. The majority of those artists who used walking in their practices for the first time during the pandemic stated an intention to keep using it.

For artists familiar with walking as a key material in the making of work, the context of COVID-19 prompted them to explore ways in which their work could continue safely. For those artists for whom walking with a group was a sustained practice before COVID-19, the social distancing restrictions prompted them to turn to social media platforms to connect with people in shared time but separate space. Sonia Overall's *Distance Drift* project was launched at ten a.m. Greenwich mean time on the first Sunday of April 2020 and has taken place every Sunday since. Overall posts walking prompts and scores on Twitter, and participants post their responses using the hashtag #DistanceDrift, generating a dialogic exchange. Other artists also explored ways to continue artistic collaborations that were disrupted by the restrictions, with many commenting on the shift to working in and focusing deeply on their local environments. Sheila MacNeill captures the productive imbrications of walking, place, and art:

Walking became a really central part of life during lockdown, particularly during the first phase of lockdown. It was almost the only thing to do. As I took my daily walks, I become increasingly aware and intrigued by my immediate local environment, which became a focus for my work.



Sheila MacNeill, *Masking the Canal*¹²

For many, being restricted to the local turned out to be liberatory and creative—though they also recognized the privilege inherent in transforming limitation into opportunity. As Helen Boden comments,

I feel gratitude for the year-long opportunity to be able to do more of what nourishes my creativity, to engage in greater detail with the very local over an extended period—and aware of the privileges I enjoy, that many don't, that have made this so.

A significant number of artists also reported that the context of COVID-19 resulted in them slowing down and thinking differently about the scale and reach of their work. As with the “Public Survey,” such responses reveal and illuminate contemporary stresses and dissatisfactions. As a “field of experience,” walking affords embodied ways of knowing and interpreting our worlds.¹³ Many artists report a desire to retain some of what they feel they have gained, while others aspire to continue exploring new modes of engagement, including hybrid forms of encounter that operate between the digital and the in-person. Emerging from our research is not just a better understanding of how people experienced walking during COVID-19, or the creative activities people engaged with while walking—artists and public alike—but a deeper recognition and appreciation of walking as method of enquiry, discovery, resistance, survival, and revival. In Qualmann’s words, walking can shift the ground beneath our feet.¹⁴ The pressing task going forward is to mobilise our knowledge of walking towards its deterritorialization, insisting on an equity of pedestrian mobility, *a just walking*.

¹ Louise Ann Wilson, “Walks to Remember During a Pandemic,”

<https://www.louiseannwilson.com/work/walks-to-remember-during-a-pandemic-with-memory-i-was-there>

² The increase in walking activity during COVID-19 is culturally and geographically specific. Countries where outdoor exercise was not permitted would obviously not register such an increase. Similarly, though, in places where walking is not already practiced as a health or leisure activity, it is unlikely that there was any significant increase in walking activity.

³ YouGov, “Should parks remain open during Covid-19?”, April 30, 2020, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/articles-reports/2020/04/30/should-parks-remain-open-during-covid-19>.

⁴ Ipsos Mori, “A year of life under lockdown: how it went and what people will miss,” <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/year-life-under-lockdown-how-it-went-and-what-people-will-miss>.

⁵ “Walking Publics/Walking Arts: walking, wellbeing and community during COVID-19” is a research project led by Dee Heddon, Maggie O’Neill, Clare Qualmann, Morag Rose and Harry Wilson and funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council. For further information see www.walkcreate.org. Taking our cue from Rose, our use of the term walking is inclusive of “sticks, wheels, orthotics and other enabling technologies” (Morag Rose, “Access Denied? Walking Art and Disabled People”, in: Helen Billingham/Clare Hind/Phil Smith (ed.), *Walking Bodies: Papers, Provocations, Actions from Walking’s New Movements, the Conference*, Axminster, UK 2020, pp. 225–234, p. 230). We are also interested in expanded notions of walking, for example walking as a journey of the imagination, as in Dee’s remembered walk, done indoors and on paper but still felt.

⁶ Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab*, London 2018, p. 4.

⁷ Maggie O’Neill and Brian Roberts, *Walking Methods: Research on the Move*, London 2019, p. 3; p.8.

⁸ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, Bloomington, IN 2010, p.3.

⁹ See <https://jimyoung14.blogspot.com/search?q=Pebble>.

¹⁰ For examples of the work created by UK-based artists during COVID-19, please visit our #WalkCreate Digital Gallery at www.walkcreate.org.

¹¹ See Instagram [jo_delafons](https://www.instagram.com/jo_delafons).

¹² See <https://howsheilasees.co.uk/>.

¹³ Maggie O’Neill and Brian Roberts, *Walking Methods: Research on the Move*, London: Routledge, 2019, p. 3.

¹⁴ Clare Qualmann, respondent, “Walking Research-Creation As Radical Relatedness.” Online lecture delivered by Stephanie Springgay for Livingmaps, June 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs7IH3SnvTk>.