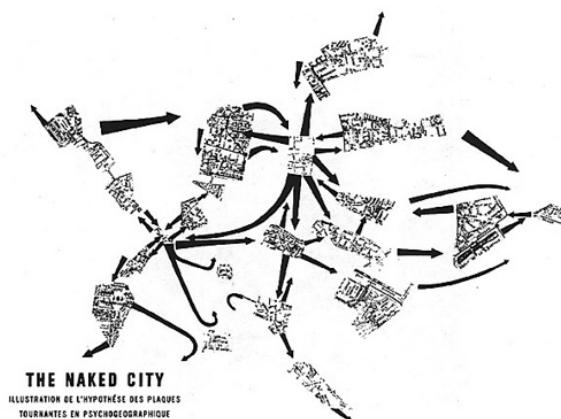


That Which Walks

Phil Smith (2021)



During the 'Walking's New Movements' conference in Plymouth in November 2019, I thought I detected a pattern among the presentations. Which was a surprise, for I had been struggling to find any shape to the walking arts movement. This had not always been so. In a 2008 paper 'The Contemporary Dérive', I was confident enough to trace a line of resistance against romanticist walking that included psychogeography,



Fluxus and occultism to contemporary artists working with land and performance.

In 2008 I had been present when remnants of the 1990s psychogeographical associations and younger artist-activists came together at the 'TRIP' Conference in Manchester.



If there were tensions there, they were meaningful.

One of the evident contradictions was the marginalisation of women. Six years later, I had no problem listing from memory a hundred women walking artists for my book 'On Walking'. That was an observable trend.



But along with expansion and diversification, there were negative developments. In 2016, I responded at book length to the accelerating hollowing out of public spaces, the war on subjectivity and the uncovering of spaces of violent privilege. There were problems in radical walking itself: nascent commercialisation, the subtle return to romanticism and the mis-identifying of modest localist events as somehow subversive. I was exercised by the impact of ‘new nature writing’, dragging radical walking into bucolic illusion.



The expansion of the walking arts movement that occurred in those early 2010s had come from a (still) largely unrecognised alliance of those driven by the politics of the *dérive* as a means to disrupt capitalist alienation, and artists and performers working in land art or live art; but the expansion quickly drew in people with different functional priorities – meditation, mental health, planning and design, adventuresome tour-guiding, presence, access and safety, nature walking, entrepreneurship, and so on.

As a model for responding to this rapid diversification, I advocated a ‘situational *dérive*’ that might re-unite explorative psychogeography with an interventionist disruption of the Spectacle. Indeed, my first ever conference paper was a critique of the division of the tactic of the *dérive* from the

situationist critique of the Spectacle. In 2016, however, I was already in retreat, trying to heal a rift within the *dérive* itself.



At the same time, I was arguing for *ludibria* on a large scale – deploying the ‘art of memory’ to re-encode existing architectures and landscapes so as to radically change their meanings without having to rebuild their structures. Neither suggestion had much effect. I increasingly advocated being quiet and watchful until the prevailing conditions and agencies changed; though I wasn’t very good at following my own advice.



So, it was surprising and exciting when at the 2019 Plymouth conference a partial consensus around the importance of embodiment and of giving attention to unhuman partners emerged. Compared to the other somewhat abstract or esoteric resources and forces I had previously hoped might empower a walking arts movement, those of our own bodies and of unhuman others seemed far more viable.

Since the conference – maybe because of the restrictions of the Covid pandemic – my optimism has been tempered.



I have returned to look again at my research from 2016 for my 'Walking's New Movement' book. In this, I had attempted a survey of accounts about and by UK radical walkers prior to 2008. I had been shocked at how superficial much of their actual walking was – the number of times the aged tactic of using the map of one city to navigate another was cited was disheartening; indeed, without the much-abused literary and occult psychogeographers, it was hard to find any development of ideas around radical walking that got much further than repeating Guy Debord's 'Theory of the Dérive' article of 1958.

In other words, after 2008, the walking movement seems to have been pretty much built from the ground up. No wonder, then, that it was hard to detect patterns. So few structures had been laid down in practice or reinforced by repetition or theorisation. Which may explain the plethora of disparate interests and motivations in radical walking, and why certain figures and groups stand out so powerfully from the churning of micro-initiatives –



Morag Rose and the Loiterers Resistance Movement, Clare Qualman and the Walking Artists Network, Dee Heddon and Misha Myers's Walking Library, Testament's 'Black Men Walking', the Fife Psychogeography Collective, the

Fourth World Congress of Psychogeography, Blake Morris and his championing networks and memory theatres, Monique Besten's solo walking...



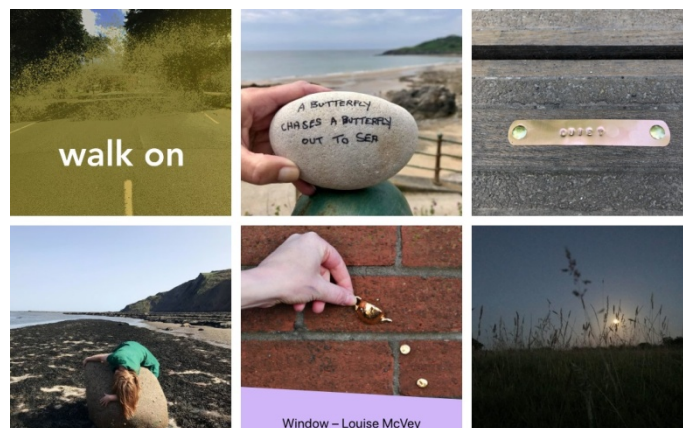
groups or individuals who have articulated or facilitated, through their organising, patterns of practice. However, documentation and communication across these and other activities was piecemeal, the sum of disparate practices was often bewildering in its range and fragmentation; and the one really major collective organisation, the Walking Artists Network – which for a few years of AHRC-funded research regularly brought walkers together for collective events



– eventually resolved itself into an open platform for exchanges of unfiltered information. The openness and variegated nature of the walking movement may be among its key virtues. Yet, despite – maybe because of – its hundreds of participants, many of them in academia, there are few serious theorisations of radical walking – Blake Morris’s ‘Walking Networks’, Sonia Overall’s work, Helen Billinghamurst and Morag Rose’s doctoral theses, and I’ve tried – but nothing has emerged in any way comparable to the influence of, say, Frederic Gros’s ‘A Philosophy of Walking’, Robert Macfarlane’s ‘The Old Ways’ or the many ‘new nature’ books reasserting the primacy of romanticism.

To get some sense of what effect this vacuum might have had on walking artists and activists, I reviewed the last two years of correspondence on the Walking Artists Network JISCMail site and the 80 plus walking arts projects, recently collected on the four WalkCreate online galleries. Rather than any sustained discussion of practices or theory, I found that the posts on the Walking Artists Network mostly promoted events or products; most common being audio walks, mapping, and walking for wellbeing and resilience, though all these subjects have tailed off recently. The mail is dominated by regular posts from producer-facilitator and entrepreneurial organisations like the Museum of Walking and walklistencreate who promote their events and online talks. The only posts that provoked any extended discussion were ones about walking and drawing, clothing and gait in a film of 1911 walkers in New York, and walking in and together with different bodies. The decolonialisation of walking was mentioned a number of times.

I got a very different picture when I reviewed the 80 plus walking arts projects in the WalkCreate galleries;



mostly work generated around Covid lockdowns by groups and individual walking artists. There were recurrent themes of a reclamation of subjectivity, of a common fragility and of a porosity of walkers in relation to their landscapes and unhuman others, which were often urban or edgelands rather than countryside. Almost entirely absent was any bucolic romanticism or recourse to psychogeography's hauntological concerns.

Now, it may be that my failure from 2008 onwards to identify and sustain any discernible and sustainable coherence for a 'movement' of radical walkers is because the components of the movement are incoherent. Or it may be that there just is no movement. And, shockingly (to me), that it maybe be this very lack of collectivism (and the relief from its obligations) that fuels the positivity of the WalkCreate Gallery. That what previously appeared as a coagulation of different tendencies and activities either never fully firmed up or did but then quickly broke apart. Whichever it was, in the vacuum, autonomy, subjectivity and individualism now seem to predominate; and while there continue to be many political and communal walking actions, there is no sign that – despite Blake Morris's theorisation of 'Walking Networks' – they are anywhere close to becoming a web with regular connections and communications.

Conducting the surveys and trying to write this paper has been, unexpectedly, very difficult; I have felt obliged to rethink many assumptions. Not just because I was wrong in the past, but maybe also because this is not that past.



The radical walking that attracted me around the millennium sprang from the anti-capitalism of post-war European activists who rejected the party disciplines of Stalinists and embraced a Marcusean liberation of subjectivity, eros, desire and exploration of irrational zones of consciousness, beyond the reach of mass media. Yet, despite its subjectivism, that project was always rooted in a belief in the potential agency of collectivities; it was in some way dependent on the power of classes that barely exist now. Even as 'spectres', as Derrida has it.



Perhaps significantly, the most successful entity in staving off the tendency to fragmentation is the Fourth World Congress of Psychogeography, a group closer than anyone to the situationist source. And yet, if the great materially-based economically-grounded collectivities have effectively gone, what meaning do the sub-sets of such collectivities, like the Fourth World Congress, or, indeed, a movement of radical walking artists, have?

In my 2016 book 'Walking's New Movement', I proposed that the best response to the threat of a return to individualistic romanticism was to out-romantic the romantics. For, if one attended closely to what contemporary romantic theorists like Frederic Gros were proposing, it was a rather lukewarm relationship with the unhuman; exciting maybe to desk-bound academics, but hardly a challenge to the mainstream Spectacle of the bucolic.



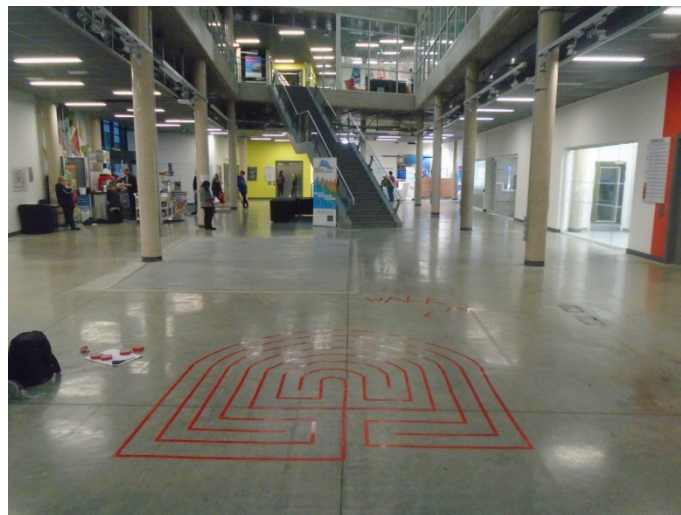
In contrast, the kinds of immersion practised by some radical walkers passed through a romantic fusion and came out the other side; so, perversely, is the most powerful path to emerge from our walking movement a subjective one?

Faced with the dissolution of the last remnants of European social democracy and sociability, digitization, lockdowns, the ubiquity of screens and loneliness, along with the triumph of neo-liberalism in the very moment of its falling apart, economically and philosophically, maybe it is time to stop worrying about a radical walking 'movement' as such, to stop trying to imagine or engineer social organisations of walking built on archaic material interests and spectral connections. And instead, in the face of neo-liberal capitalism's war on the individual, to work through the medium of an idolised and yet threatened individualism.

As with romanticism, then, maybe so with individualism? In the same way that some radical walkers have driven into romanticism and come through to

something beyond, is something similarly possible for individualism? Maybe, the terrains we need to explore next are not just the edgelands of the cities, but also the irrational edgelands of experiences, visions and desires.

And yet, of course, there is no “we” who needs. There is no “our” or “we” I can speak of, or for. Instead, maybe it’s better to ask: where do the webs of irrationality and threads of fantasy attach to unhuman matters – in subjective or mass forms – and can I attach myself too?



If the material forces and social relations of solely human kinds no longer provide the grounds for collective structures, maybe wild imagination and unhuman mysteries can?

A powerful message from the Plymouth conference – affirmed by the works on the WalkCreate site – is that any such subjectivism will be embodied. There is no need for Gnostic transcendence. So, while there might be a turn inwards,



there is at the same time a turn outwards, through the body to the unhuman others of the path; the rocks and stags and paving slabs and rivers.

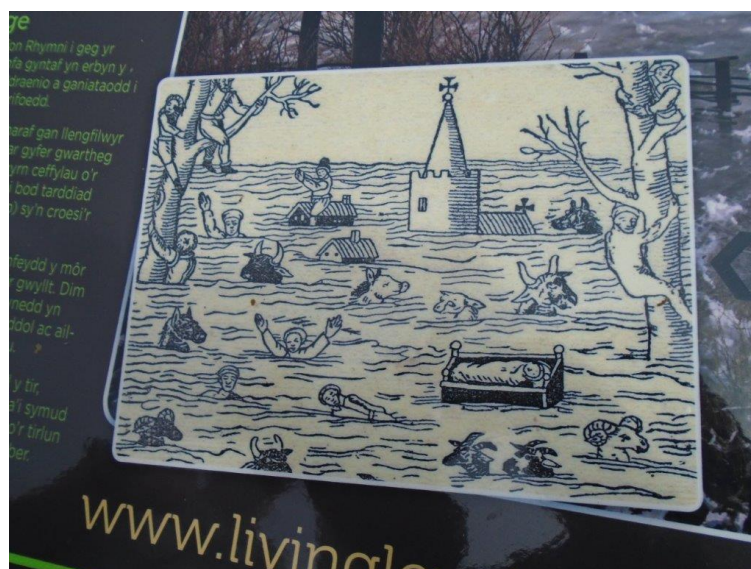


Both by direct physical encounters, and attending to; but also by the subjective telling of these our others. By the mystery tales of them. And I am not talking about convincing myself that I'm wandering about in Narnia or Mordor, but attending to stories that are still a common currency – evidenced by work such as Sam George's analysis of the return of 'Old Stinker', the Hull werewolf –



stories in common circulation that carry information about trans-corporeality, about the passage of materials between unhuman and human agents.

Attending where these stories become, as my colleague Helen Billinghurst has named it, “the organising principle of a place”.



There are no immediately obvious prospects for this; just the doing and the finding out. And in the telling maybe a finding out. But only by walking out with the hedgerows and birdsong tangles, to the wounded deer, white goods trash in the sward and arsenic spoil heaps by the river are the stories likely to uncurl.



By giving up on the idea of a movement I have now forfeited what right I might have had to address what anyone else should be doing. I remember when, after 2008, there were small groups of walkers that it seemed might coalesce around a more general collective project of some emergent kind. But that didn't happen. Now even the very idea of it seems ridiculous. So, instead, my address is to my relations to deer, wolves, grass verges, suburban valleys, buzzards preying on pheasant poults and the tales of the head of Bran the Blessed Raven in a Cardiff suburb and the werewolves under the bramble patch by St John.

I once read a piece by two radical US walkers who wanted to point out how the Situationist *dérive* was more appropriate to ancient Paris than the modern USA where, in their words, "even east coast buildings are rarely more than a hundred years old" (Craig & Wilding 2005, 11); that's a kind of colonial chronology I want to free myself from, for which I require a change of scale; making alliances with mutations that emerge very slowly.

To grasp the shifting scale, I want to stand back from the white Western upper and middle class realisation that a way of life is under threat, partly because stories of apocalypse are always about something else, and mostly because this is not new; global majority populations have suffered the same ending of their way of life hundreds and hundreds of times already.



As I walk through former industrial landscapes – from which the silver was extracted to mint the coins that raised the fleets to colonise and enslave – there have been many mini-apocalypses here... but I see the clump of heather growing on the 150 year old arsenic spoil, I meet the young fallow stag in the car park, I can't detect much clear meaning yet, but I sense a shift in walking arts, and want to push it further for myself, from its previous focus on the psychogeographical affects on human subjects to a shared activity with the unhuman players in these wounded spaces, attending to their place-stories, their metals, their subterranean networks, and their possible sites of future rewilding.

'Animism', decolonialisation and challenges to anthropocentric perspectives are on the rise, and, feeling their push, I wish to seek out more and more fractures in past apocalypses through which to walk and plant.



(This talk was given for the University of Regina's inaugural doctoral showcase 'Walking Art Practices: four perspectives from Canada and the UK' [4.11.21] organised by Ken Wilson.)