

## **On ways of walking and making art; a personal reflection.**

### **Preface**

As an artist myself, I am aware of the dangers of categorising artists and their work, when in reality the business of making art is often messy and almost never discreet. However, whilst an artists' practice is created from, and responds to, a whole range of different personal, environmental, social and political contexts, I do think it is possible to discuss an artists work within the framework of something which they **do** – something practical, based in the everyday ... something such as walking. And so in this essay I hope to explore a range of widely different practices that, in one way or another, involve or gain inspiration from the simple act of taking a walk.

For the sake of clarity, I have broken down my essay into a series of headings (***Walking and Identity, Agency and Political Action; Walking and Painting; Walking, Maps/Mapping and Poetry; and Culture/Nature***) and discussed certain artists' work 'within' each section. However, in truth, it is almost impossible to categorise the artists represented in Walk-On, and most could be 'included' in any one of the sections I write about. That having been said, I do think that there may be something fundamental that links all (or at least most) of the artists here. And that is that they all take what I call an embodied or phenomenological approach to the making of their work in either:

- the way that they respond to things as we find them
- the way that they 'represent' movement through space (by walking) activating senses we sometimes takes for granted (smell, touch, taste, temperature);
- the way they engage with an embodied experience of *space and depth* (what Merleau-Ponty called the "flesh of the world");
- the way that their work engages with others (a fundamental and much overlooked element of phenomenology – if we experience the world through our bodies, then we must engage with others – touch/brush up against them and be aware of their sense of self – and of our responsibility to others); and finally in
- their practice could be seen as philosophy in action – put simply, that making art is a practical application of phenomenology.

## **Walking and identity, agency and political action**

Of course, the link between walking and art goes back further than the 40 years suggested by the exhibition's title, but we have chosen to begin with Richard Long for good reasons. In the notes to an exhibition I saw at the Arnolfini in 1982, Long identified why he, as a student at St. Martins in the 1960s, began to make art about walking – art that was walking/walking that was art.

In the mid-sixties the language and ambition of art was due for renewal. I had felt art had barely recognised the natural landscapes which covered this planet, or had used the experiences those places could offer ... I like the idea of using the land without possessing it ... I have become interested in using a walk to express original ideas about the land, art and walking itself.<sup>i</sup>

Many artists in Walk On recognise and value the natural world, making art that is not about possession or power, glamour or material things, but about real things in our environment, presented straightforwardly.

And Long's insistence that art is in need of renewal is still relevant today. There are, for instance, some historical 'myths' around walking and art-walking that I would like to dispel straight away, especially the link often made between art-walking and the idea of the 'pastoral'. Walking-artists are not walking away from the real world; Many are, rather, challenging the notion of the pastoral as an ideology 'that served to endorse a comfortable status quo for the landowning classes' ... a view of the pastoral as 'essentially escapist in seeking refuge in the country and often also in the past'<sup>ii</sup>.

The reality is that the relationship between art, walking and the world is a complex one. The idea, the culture, of walking is (and has been) politically and socially value-laden. At various times it has been socially exclusive and yet (for instance) for Wordsworth and the Romantics, walking and mobility became a weapon of resistance, a symbol of independence and self-determination. It embodied the free and radical mind.

Artist Tim Brennan has developed a walking practice based around a series of what he calls 'manoeuvres' over a period of some twenty years. The latest of these is 'iAmbic Pedometer: Ur Manoeuvre', (2013), and in this work, he resurrects the idea of the radical Wordsworth, with more than a 'nod' to Schwitters sound poem, *Ursonate* (both residents of the central Lake District around Grasmere and Ambleside) ...

iAmbic Pedometer: Ur Manoeuvre' is unedited hand-held video footage of a walk Brennan made through Sunderland, his home, the duration of the walk in this case dictated by the battery life in his iPhone . Wordsworth never visited Wearside as far as we know, but Sunderland is Brennan's home: he was born there and now works and lives there again. Like Wordsworth, his creative practice continually returns to a central hub.' In the video, we see him leaving home to 'manoeuvre his way through his urban surroundings, moving more slowly as he walks and talks, mumbling incessantly to himself as he goes. In the very process of walking, the familiarity of place becomes unfamiliar, a stage for creative performance. Only occasionally do his murmurs become more cogent, passages of comparative lucidity that give us some clue to his ventriloquizing Wordsworth's words from *The Prelude*. Or perhaps he is more an urban shamanic poet, speaking in tongues on the edge of (in)<sup>iii</sup>

Brennan's work contextualises and interrogates notions of Romanticism and the picturesque. In his work, the relationship between culture and nature, countryside and city, remains a complex one, and, indeed, in recent years the 'countryside' has become an increasingly contested area politically and socially, still seen by many as representing an hierarchical, privileged and exclusive culture.

The perception of Britain as a country not of freedom and endlessly extending footpaths but one of exclusivity and xenophobia is a Britain that Ingrid Pollard's work critiques. 'Britain' she says about her project 'Pastoral Interlude', 'has traditionally been represented by an idealised rural landscape, the rolling green hills, the farm in the valley, and the sun setting over the wheat fields. The binary opposite lies within the city and its traffic, smoking chimneys, teeming hordes, that are constantly encroaching on the countryside.'

Pollard explains that her work disrupts such simple common-sense notions, questioning the construction of the Romantic countryside idyll and challenging assumptions of identity and ownership. 'Wordsworth's Heritage', 1992, shown in this exhibition, was originally commissioned by the BBC as part of a billboard project shown on 25 urban sites around the UK. Mimicking the mass tourist postcards found all over the Lake District, Pollard introduces contemporary black walkers into the setting of the countryside near Grasmere, and features Wordsworth's profile in the centre of the 'constructed' image. 'Wordsworth and his poetry', says Pollard, 'are icons closely linked with the 'Lake District'. The placing of Black walkers transforms the Romantic landscape and the questions of identity, belonging and heritage are brought to the fore in a thoughtful and powerful work that wryly and sensitively questions issues of identity.

Walking, Pollard seems to be saying, may appear to be one of the most egalitarian ways in which we can experience the world in all its richness and complexity, and as such, we may think of it is an experience that, intuitively, is common to most and shared by many, but this is an illusion. The walking experience is contextual and relative; issues of race and class are still barriers to engagement with the land.

Some artists in Walk-On have tackled this notion of exclusivity head on – Simon Pope, for instance (as well as Brennan, Fulton and others in this show) often undertakes group walks, deliberately ‘subverting’ the Romantic notion of the solitary walker. Pope has remarked, “My recent work has focused on walking as a model for processes of dialogue and negotiation.” His practice is socially engaged, operating, it would seem, in direct opposition to the idea of the solitary walker. He sees walking as having the potential the bring people together – to share experiences and to learn from a mutual exchange of ideas - and through his walking and talking with others he questions culturally constructed views and values of landscape

Walking is also a medium through which we can ‘expressively’ take direct action. Some of the artists in this show have taken a more direct view of walking as performativity agency – walking as action. In the UK, such ‘action’ has manifested itself variously and importantly across the twentieth century including the Jarrow March in 1936 (a walk that was undertaken again 60 years later by Brennan) and the mass trespass of Kinder Scout in 1932. In both cases, the ‘walk’ was a means of direct action in the political, social and geographical landscape. Brennan’s walk took place in August 1996 when he spent 25 days walking 298 miles walking the route of the Jarrow Crusade that had taken place sixty years previously. As Andrea Phillips comments in her essay on Brennan for the book *Codex: Crusade*,

the original march holds a very particular position in popular, left-wing histories of the twentieth century. In the face of chronic poverty, 200 men marched from Jarrow to London, utilising direct action to highlight the necessity of national government to find a solution to unemployment in the North-East ...<sup>iv</sup>

Dan Holdsworth’s light box and photographs refer in scale and subject matter to both the notion of the romantic sublime, and to the need for us take action in the face of potential environmental disaster. Holdsworth’s journeys to the landscape of southern Iceland involved him in a good deal of walking – and walking with a good deal of equipment. The images we are showing in Walk-On are photographic negative depictions of this landscape of volcanic ash and glacier, and Holdsworth’s ‘negatives’

not only abstract and subvert the sublime, they also question the impact that global warming is having on this 'beautiful' landscape. These ghostly images seem to preface an uncertain future – a landscape which is melting away. Tracey Hannah's video image of a walker endlessly climbing a hill but not reaching the top echoes the absurdity of the romantic notion of the solitary walker striding off up the hill – a walker who sees only the summit as 'his' goal – and not the walk itself. In a sense, the solitary walker moving single-mindedly and relentlessly towards a point but missing the flora, fauna and culture along the way is a disembodied walker, who really *misses* the point.

### **Walking and painting**

What relevance does walking have for a painter? It might be argued that whilst the painters included in *Walk On* could not be described as 'walking artists', they *are* artists who walk, and whose embodied practice I would describe as phenomenological. Their work is not *about* walking, but nevertheless, I believe that walking has played a role in defining the form that it takes. Indeed, I would argue that walking has generally had an influence on the development of some aspects of modern and contemporary painting, stretching back (as many things do) to Cezanne, and beyond (for instance to Turner's Welsh itinerary, watercolours and notes of 1795 and the young Cotman's journey and watercolours of Yorkshire in 1803). Cezanne himself walked extensively through the landscape surrounding Mt. St. Victoire – an activity that, I maintain, had a direct influence on the formal development of his work.

James Hugonin's studio lies under the north-eastern foot hills of the Cheviot hills. When I first visited Hugonin there in 1988, he suggested going for a walk in the hills behind his studio. It was then I discovered that Hugonin walked or ran in these hills almost every day – something he continues to do to this day. This became the first of a number of studio visits and walks I took with Hugonin and I *thought* I could see how the act of walking had impacted and had a profound affect on his paintings. It would, I think, be too easy to say that the form of the beautiful paintings he makes relates directly to the way that light flickers and shifts across the Northumberland hills – although it is hard not to read one aspect of these pictures in this way. His *Binary Rhythm (Dark Red/Indigo)* screen prints 'breathe', creating dynamic and oscillating spaces – spaces that we are a part of both figuratively and intellectually as we engage with the rhythmic forms that draw

you into his work. As the writer Richard Davey explained in a recent essay about Hugonin's work,

These works may not seem to reflect the Northumbrian landscape, but they are painted in studios bathed in a very particular light ... they reflect and imitate our experience of natural colour, not as something neatly divided and classified, but as something that is part of, and emerges from the landscape: colour as dappled light: sparkling or dull, rippling and flowing in a state of constant flux; a substance as fugitive and ephemeral as quicksilver or a rainbow.<sup>v</sup>

Another painter for whom I believe walking and phenomenology are important is Brendan Stuart Burns. The paintings in the exhibition could not have been created without the artist having walked extensively through the landscape – in this case the landscape of Pembrokeshire. They were made whilst Burns was artist in residence at Oriol y Park, Landscape Gallery, St. Davids, when he also wrote extensively about the walks he made in his journals. From these autobiographical notes, it is easy to see how these walks 'become' the paintings which allude to 'the ceaseless movement of coastal winds, the brilliant light and flicker of inshore wave and water' and 'the shapes, structures and textures of sea-worn littoral rock, the reflected and refracted colour of mollusc shell, lichen and vegetation at the marine edge.'<sup>vi</sup> These excerpt from Burns' journal echo the way Cezanne walked and painted his landscape at Mt St Victoire

(25 Aug 2009) St David's to Solva, 4.5 miles. It's been at least 10 years since I walked in this opposite direction, usually walk Solva – St. David's ... Extremely hot this afternoon, took nearly 5 hours to walk the 4.5 miles ... with the heavy rains of previous nights, many edges were new and un-trodden, and vulnerable. Colour particularly rich ...

(29 Aug 2009) These cliff walks and beaches, St. Nons, Caefai, St. Justinians, Porthclais have all become so familiar, so personal, only now beginning to engage in an honest and meaningful relationship. The small paintings in particular have only yesterday become more confident and immediate – with new and honest influences from the immediate locations and experiences.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Walking, maps/mapping and poetry**

I have always enjoyed 'reading maps' – partly out of necessity, to find out where I am and where I am going, but also for the poetry of the place names which fire the imagination. A map is ...

neither inventory nor itinerary, but a litany of landmarks, calling out natural features which have been associated with human history, human whim, human folly, human interest. The names on the map and on our breath recall a past people intimate with the land: where there are fields, every

field has its name. The objective map is a social inscription of the apparently personal. To walk in a named place is generally to walk where others have gone before.<sup>viii</sup>

Around the same time that I was first introduced to James Hugonin, I picked up a copy of a book by Tim Robinson called the *Stones of Arran – Pilgrimage*, and shortly afterwards, on a subsequent visit to Connemara, I bought a small guidebook and map – the map produced by a company called Folding Landscapes, which, it turned out, was Tim Robinson. Walking and map-making are, I think, interlinked, and in the first chapter of '*Pilgrimage*', Robinson explains how he began making maps – something that started shortly after his move to the west coast of Ireland. His first map, of the Arran Islands, was well received locally and had 'prospered moderately with tourists'. But, perhaps, for Robinson, the most important thing was that it now brought him into contact with 'the specialists in various fields who visited Arran.' And so, as he embarked on a second version of the map, which was published in 1980, he 'walked the islands in companionship with such visiting experts as well as with the custodians of local lore whom I sought out in every village.'<sup>ix</sup>

Alec Finlay's work in this exhibition (produced in collaboration with Ken Cockburn), is *The Road North* – it is a word-map of Scotland, composed by Finlay & Cockburn as they travelled through their homeland in 2010 and 2011. They were guided on this journey by the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, whose *Oku-no-hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North) is one of the masterpieces of travel literature.

Following Basho and his traveling companion Sora, their journey took in 53 'stations', from Pilrig to Pollokshields via Berneray, Glen Lyon, Achnabreck and Kirkmaiden. They left Edinburgh on 16 May 2010, the same date that Basho and Sora departed Edo in 1689, and finished their journey at Glasgow's Hidden Gardens in May 2011.<sup>x</sup>

## **Culture and nature**

In 1998, Chris Drury wrote:

The edge is the division  
What is known is always from the past  
Through knowledge, the new is a reworking of the old  
The sum total of knowledge is culture  
Culture is the veil through which we describe nature  
The process of nature continues despite our analysis  
Our analysis is part of the process of nature  
The process of nature must include the actions of man

Whether or not they are destructive  
Man's description of nature as something separate – out of town – where  
the edge is the division  
between 'nature' and 'culture', is an illusion.  
'Nature' and 'Culture' are the same thing.  
There is no division.<sup>xi</sup>

Drury sees no distinction between culture and nature – the false line drawn between the city and the country, and many artists in *Walk On* make use of new technologies in their work, exploring the relationship of technology to the body - our embodied relationship to the world. GPS is, after all, merely a new form of mapping; a tool, just like the early signposts, way markers and cairns people would leave to help them locate their place within the landscape. For instance, in *'Home'*, an exquisite small book of nineteen cairns photographed by Mark Wilson and Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir on a walking expedition in the north of Iceland in 1998, the artists explain that the weather conditions were ...

consistently misty. Visibility 10 meters except in the fjords. The largest scale map of the area in existence is 1:1000.000. In such conditions the reliance on a compass is imperative. Inevitably, at times, we would need to rely of something else

This something else was their embodied, intuitive relationship to the environment of which they had become a part – a marriage of technology and animal instinct.

The work of Brian Thompson embraces new technologies of making and walking. He uses traditional materials (local wood, porcelain, glass, bronze), but deliberately records some of his walks with modern satellite navigation. Tracking

his movement through space, the lines inscribed by the technology become the first notation, the outline drawing, for the sculptures he subsequently fabricates using (in the case of his glass sculptures) technically sophisticated water-jet cutters'... they are coded memories or traces of well-trodden routes. Lines traced here are layered over abstracted, pixilated maps, evoking a contemporary digital cartography.<sup>xii</sup>

Tim Knowles creates art works that trace walks dictated solely by the direction of the wind – wind-walks. Relying on natural forces, Knowles' work deals with the boundaries between culture and nature. His 'tools' include a mechanical devise driven by chance which registers the movements and changes in wind direction; changes to be followed by the user who has this apparatus strapped onto their head. In *'Seven Walks from Seven Dials'* the meandering route of the wind-walker [guided solely by



the wind] collides with buildings, walls, railings, ventilation shafts, parked vehicles – culture and nature literally in collision. The resultant ‘drawings’ don’t differentiate between body, stone, concrete, road, tree or car and appear from out of this meander as unpredictable traces – lines sometimes organic and free-flowing, and at other times, as the walker hits a wall, for instance, mechanistic and angular. However, Knowles’ work also acts a critique of the restrictions we take for granted in our everyday manoeuvring around the urban landscape – the hidden ways in which our lives are controlled.

Today, walking and mapping have taken many other forms, as witnessed in a number of works by a younger generation of artists. Rachael Clewlow’s *‘Explorer’* are colour coded and abstract annotations of her daily routine: Monday’s blue, Tuesday’s green... reminiscent of Rimbaud’s synesthetic poetry; Plan B’s *‘all our GPS tracks, 2011-2012’* are etched into acrylic sheets creating an intricate web of lines that immortalises their everyday lives in Berlin, whilst Jeremy Wood’s *White Horse Hill* is a beautiful sculptural rendition of a GPS walk in Uffington, Oxfordshire, as seen from the heavens. Elsewhere, WALKWALKWALK drift across Bethnal Green collecting stories and objects in their paths, creating a narrative of place.

Yet, whereas the Baudelarian Flaneur or the Situationist Drifter may have been happy to lose themselves in the city, following their whim or instincts, the contemporary Flaneur, often accompanied by a GPS device is a reminder of the state of our world today. The delicate, beautiful ‘walk lines’ that we see in these works, are also the traces of our contemporary social existence, of our daily movements tractable by others, under constant surveillance. *Search* (1993), by Pat Naldi and Wendy Kirkup, consists of silent video footage documenting a synchronised walk undertaken by the artists in Newcastle upon Tyne city centre in 1993, recorded on the then-brand-new 16 camera surveillance system run by Northumbria Police (Newcastle upon Tyne was the first city centre in the UK to install a Closed Circuit Television network). The artists walked separately across the city secretly observed by the surveillance cameras. The raw footage was given by the police to the artists who edited it into twenty 10-second sequences which were then transmitted completely unannounced during the commercial breaks on Tyne Tees Television between 21st June and 4th July 1993.

Whilst *Search* was a carefully controlled and choreographed walk, along a ‘route’ determined by the location of the surveillance cameras, it revealed a secret and hidden ‘history’ of the way that we are monitored and corralled in our interaction with

the urban environment. This is the other side of the solitary romantic walker, unable to loose him or herself in the contemporary urban environment – observed and monitored literally, at every turn.

Since the title of our exhibition is *Walk On, Forty Years of Art-Walking from Richard Long to Janet Cardiff*, it would seem only fitting to end my essay with Janet Cardiff. In her audio walks, Cardiff also uses new technologies (Walkman, MP3 Player, audio-visual equipment) – and makes little or no distinction between the urban and rural, indeed both ‘sites of meaning’ often overlap in her work. The artist encourages us to experience/perceive the world by using a range of senses, not just the visual (something which our culture from the Enlightenment onwards has tended to preface).

Writing of *Munster Walk* 1997, Cardiff says:

I am interested in how audio affects our perception of the physical world. We understand three-dimensional space by using our vision, but also by the character of the sounds we hear. If these sounds are manipulated and changed, then our perception of reality can be drastically affected. If you are physically walking though an urban space, you can suddenly be transported, through binaural sound, to the feeling of walking in a forest.<sup>xiii</sup>

It has not been possible in the space available to me here to discuss the work of all the artists in *Walk On*, and my choice of whom to speak about does not indicate a particular hierarchy or preference within the show or the work selected. I would like to leave the final word to Hamish Fulton whose ‘essay’ in this publication I urge you to read and re-read. Fulton continues to be source of inspiration for me 30 years after first seeing his work in a show in which I was peripherally involved called *Coastline* shown at Newlyn Art Gallery

***I believe in diversity (debate and discussion, we agree to disagree.) A diversity of walk categories, a diversity of art-making, a diversity of artists.***

I hope that this is what we have achieved in *Walk-On*.

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<sup>i</sup> Long, R in Wallis, C. Ed. (2009) *Heaven and Earth*. London: Tate Publishing

<sup>ii</sup> Gifford, T. (1999) *Pastoral*. London: Routledge

<sup>iii</sup> McKay, C. (2013) *Their Colours and Their Forms: Artists’ Responses to Wordsworth*. Sunderland: Art Editions north and the Wordsworth Trust

<sup>iv</sup> Brennan, T. (2004) *Codex: Crusade*. Sunderland: Art Editions North

<sup>v</sup> Davey, R. (2010) *James Hugonin*. Edinburgh: Ingleby Gallery

<sup>vi</sup> Gooding, M; Curtis, T; Moss, S & Price-Owen, A. (2012) *Glimpse: Brendan Stuart Burns*. St. Davids, Pembrokeshire: Retreats group

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- vii Gooding, M; Curtis, T; Moss, S & Price-Owen, A. (2012) *Glimpse: Brendan Stuart Burns*. St. Davids, Pembrokeshire: Retreats group
- viii Reason, D. (1987) 'A Hard Singing of Country' in: S. Cutts, D. Reason, J. Williams, L. Burckhardt, G. Murray, J. Bevis & T.J. Clark (eds.) *The Unpainted Landscape*. Edinburgh & London: Coracle Press
- ix Robinson, T (1990) *Stones of Arran: Pilgrimage*. London: Penguin
- x <http://www.theroadnorth.co.uk/>
- xi Drury, C. in Syrad, K. (1998) *Chris Drury, Silent Spaces*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- xii McKay, C. (2013) *Their Colours and Their Forms: Artists' Responses to Wordsworth*. Sunderland: Art Editions north and the Wordsworth Trust
- xiii Christov-Bakargiev, C. (2002) *Janet Cardiff: A survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller*. New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Centre