

## AV Festival *As Slow As Possible*, March 2012

Laura Harrington, *Layerscape (peat bogs)*, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> March, Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve

Mike Collier, *Street Flowers: Urban Survivors*, Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March, Sunderland riverside.

AAH Conference, Milton Keynes, 29 – 31 March. 2012 ‘*Walking otherwise: one foot after another*’.

The word ‘walk’ intrigues: noun and verb, thing and activity, it is at once common-sense and culturally complex. Most of us do it sometimes. We know that we ought to do it – that walking is ‘good for us’ and that for our own wellbeing we should do it more often. There’s everyday walking – down the road to school and back, out to the bin, round the supermarket and then to the kitchen to put the kettle on. All walking, but most of the time we’re scarcely aware of even doing it. Walking is so routine, so utilitarian, that we often overlook it. But even this ‘taken-for-granted’ walking shifts in experience when we can’t do it, whether through illness or injury, age or disability. Or when it’s a special bother to do it, perhaps because it’s pouring down, or slippery underfoot or just too hot (perhaps this is a particularly British view of walking).

And then there is more out of the ordinary walking, walking as self-conscious choice, perhaps. The reasons for such ‘out of the ordinary’ walking are complex, often highly personal yet also inevitably culturally specific. I’d rather walk two miles there and back again when going from where I live into the centre of town for a meeting. Why? Because I really can’t do car-parking in city-centre multi-stories (really, I can’t); because I hate waiting in queues for buses and anyway packed buses make me travel sick; because as a student, a very long time ago now, I would rather walk and save the money from the bus-fare for something else, and I haven’t lost that instinct. Personal choices but also socio-political ones: I do think we should leave the car at home more often, and anyway walking is good cheap exercise.

But, actually, when it comes down to it, sometimes we walk because we really like walking. I walk to get places I need to be; yet ‘getting there’ is often an excuse, something that masks my desire just to go walking. Much as I’d like to pretend otherwise, I’m becoming aware that my patterns of everyday walking are a bit out of the ordinary. I’m constantly shaping my life around walking opportunities. None of my walks per se are peculiar – I don’t necessarily go that far and most of my walks are constrained by the regular routines of family life and work.

More, as an academic, I’m increasingly drawn to thinking and talking about walking. At a recent art historian’s conference, participants in the session ‘Walking Otherwise’ considered, among other topics, walking as methodology of art historical research; street-walking (and loitering) as subject-matter in nineteenth-century painting; the textual and photographic traces of Freud’s walking holidays and walking as feminist strategy in recent artists’ films.<sup>1</sup> As one speaker observed, artists and art historians alike seek to explore walking in or as art, but also to go beyond this to consider the aesthetic, philosophical and political implications of walking as practice and method.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference/2012-conference/academic-sessions-2012/academic-session-28-ou-2012>

The ensuing discussion highlighted both the creative excitement around the humble act of walking, as well as the challenges it poses for academic researchers, perhaps echoing Simon Pope's notion of walking as 'ambulant science', modes of practice and research that rub against the grain of normal academic processes so as to allow for new forms of experience and understanding to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

The various modes of walking addressed here indeed gave some sense of how artists respond to walking as process and methodology, as inspiration for source material, as political activism as well as personal commitment. Listening to these diverse conference presentations, I also found myself wondering (wandering) about the relationship between (art) walking research and digital research: remembering a fellow historian explain how the internet revolution was about to change the nature of academia. Very soon, he remarked, we would be saving time and shoe leather, as we'd rarely need to leave our desks to walk to the library, archive or exhibition. Text and images would come to us. This was 1994, and the possibility still seemed remote. Yet, sitting in a stifling conference room in 2012, listening to such provocative explorations of walking practice, it does seem possible that the contemporary 'turn' to walking is in part shaped by our increasingly digital and disembodied (or at least sedentary) working patterns.

Over the previous two weekends in March this year I had the opportunity to think some more about these things whilst taking part in different walking events, both curated as part of the 2012 AV Festival, '*As Slow as Possible*'. The inclusion of such art-walks within the larger AV festival highlights another important feature of current practices. Curators and commissioners are increasingly drawn to incorporate walking in their programmes, partly because of its centrality to much contemporary practice, but also in part because of the participatory nature of some walking and the possibilities it brings for actively engaging audiences through personal involvement and shared walking experience.

The first walk was part of a day's journeying to view *Layerscape (Peat Bogs)*, Laura Harrington's film of that name. Created over a period of a year and exploring some extraordinary peatland environments of northern England, Harrington's 16mm film was made in collaboration with Sarah Bouttell, Debbie Bower and sound artist Lee Patterson. It was screened during the mid weekend of the AV Festival, in an abandoned bothy in a remote location on Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve. The screening required complex logistics, as viewers/participants journeyed there from various scattered parts of the region: some converging by coach from Newcastle, others making their own way to the meeting point in the tiny village of Gargill. From there, mini-buses transported participants further into the protected natural environment, where vehicular access is restricted.

Walking, finally, was only a small part of the day. But it was a particularly privileged kind of walking, across a terrain where normally we are asked not to walk. Peat Bogs may be less romantic than Rainforests, and they certainly receive less media coverage, but they are equally important as storehouses of carbon. Their future conservation and management has a vital bearing on our ability to manage climate change. The contradiction of being told this by our volunteer guides from Natural England, whilst still being invited to walk across part of the bog, was not lost on most

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/ambulantscience/Index/texts>

participants. Walking on the peat bogs was difficult not just conceptually (we shouldn't really have done it) but also physically. Underfoot, the ground gives and sinks, soaking inadequately shod art visitors, demanding concentration and stamina to pick one's way across the layers of knee-high vegetation. We smartly returned to the path.

The journey, the walk and the remoteness of the place served to frame and appropriately site Harrington's film, screened in the upland bothy cinema. Slowness: through long, lingering shots of the vegetation, animal and insect life, Harrington's film is meditative. It reflects something of the slow process of filming while exploring different peatland sites of the North Pennines and Northumberland. Close-up shots of a vast inhospitable landscape, populated by reticent and modest plant-life, of mosses, heather and sedges; their changing seasonal cycles are both ancient and current. Peat grows slowly, an accumulation of partially decayed vegetation expanding at the rate of only a few millimetres a year. Harrington writes in her blog of the immersive process of exploration and revisiting, as she and her collaborators experienced the shifting and passing of time through the landscape. The film and its soundtrack attempt to convey something of these non-human rhythms and scales, of vastness and microscopic detail. Juxtaposed with sound that both amplifies and veils field-recordings, the work is complexly site-specific. And as Harrington herself notes, the choice of 16mm film adds a further layer of meaning to this ecological framing, relating directly to the light from the environment in which it is exposed.<sup>3</sup>

Walking is central to Harrington's research methodology, as she explores the complex ecology of places, revisiting sites repeatedly, often in company with other artists, scientists and guides. Walking, though, was less important to the audience's experience of the work, which was more dependent on the place-specific location, in all its inhospitable bleakness. Whilst it was rewarding to be guided over the peat bogs en route to viewing the film, it wasn't essential to viewing the work, and indeed some visitors choose to avoid this part of the trek, preferring the (slightly) warmer sanctuary of the make-shift cinema.

From this remote and exposed Pennine peat bog to Sunderland city centre: the AV Festival art walk that followed on March 25<sup>th</sup> played out this rural/urban juxtaposition. Walking this time is (art) work as well as source of inspiration. Many of Mike Collier's curated walks are also collaborations, slow-moving explorations of urban 'edgelands', those in-between, marginal and often unsung places where rural and urban coincide, where 'wildness' survives or infiltrates. This one was no different. Led by Collier and naturalist Keith Bowey, *Street Flowers: Urban survivors* took a group of fifteen on a walking, talking, pausing, listening exploration of Sunderland's riverside. At various moments on the four-hour walk, we found ourselves considering the signs of spring underfoot on a much-trampled path, beside an overspill University car park; exploring the flora clinging to the surviving brickwork traces of Sunderland's once-dominant industries; marvelling at the bird life on the Wear's marshland. And listening of course to those sounds of wildness normally obscured by the clamour of the city. For some of us, there was an element of astonishment in the process, a shift in our usual patterns of city occupancy, and growing awareness of our tendency to overlook.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://harringtonprojectsea.wordpress.com/2012/03/15/layerscape-peat-bogs-2012/>

Again, for most of the participants, this walk required driving. It also required considerable determination and self-discipline, to meet at the rendezvous point by Sunderland's National Glass Centre at 7.30 on a Sunday morning. Worse, this was the morning after the night before, when clocks had moved forward into British Summer Time. Participants, then, could be excused their mild disorientation, made worse for some by the experience of driving there through thick fog, which disappeared, mercifully on cue, on approaching Sunderland's riverside. But the disorientation was exacerbated again by Keith's introduction to the walk, where he asked us to stop before we got started, close our eyes and slowly turn ourselves around, listening all the while to the sounds of the place: the weather, the river, the birds, all discernible at this early hour.

The day began cold but bright, to emerge slowly as one more of those fine, sunny, warm but unseasonal March days that had confused both flora and fauna. This seasonal disorientation, indeed, became one of the conversational themes of the walk, as we moved at a sedate pace along the north bank of the river from Sunderland's National Glass Centre, passing the site where coals from Monkwearmouth Colliery used to be loaded onto ships,<sup>4</sup> over the Queen Alexandra Bridge (this more of a route march, unedifying and pedestrian unfriendly), and back along the opposite riverbank, skirting barbed-wire fences and industrial allotments.

For Collier, the relationship between walking and artistic practice is a complex one, involving extensive collaboration, participation and conversational exchange. He curates walks that are inherently sociable, their meandering format inviting conversation and the sharing of knowledge even (or perhaps especially) among strangers. As process, the walking is ephemeral. It is repeatable, but never replicable, the vagaries of weather and seasonal patterns ensuring this. For some, the walking is enough in itself. Their engagement in the process ends with the cup of tea at the end of the walk. Others may use the experience as springboard or inspiration for other creative experiments, photographic or otherwise. The shared experience, for Collier, generates new knowledge of species and plant-life encountered during the walk. This 'botanizing' on the streets is married with the diverse individual perceptions and social observations that inevitably emerge as the conversations develop and the walk unfolds in its place-specific way. All of this serves as material for thought, layered intuitively into the fabric of the abstract paintings and drawings he constructs back in the studio. Text is important in the architecture of Collier's work, the familiar unfamiliarity of vernacular names, dialects of birds and plants once known but fleetingly remembered, hinting back to the specificity of places and their ecological frameworks. Some of these art works return to the urban streets in the form of billboards, their visual poetry re-creating new encounters for by-passers; others find their location in the white walls of the gallery, where visitors again may walk, one foot after another and round again, in different but equally embodied experience.

Three events, then, over three weekends in March this year, all allowing a certain personal indulgence – walking, talking, listening, about art, research and other things.

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<sup>4</sup> "1835, Jun 13 - After several years labour the owners of the Monkwearmouth Colliery (Messrs. Thompson, Pemberton and Co.), succeeded in loading the first vessel placed under their improved modern staith, with a cargo of coals. The workmen on the occasion were profusely regaled with strong ale, and great rejoicing took place throughout the whole of the day"  
<http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/w001.htm>

