

*All in a Day's Walk* | From slowing down to walking fast

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**Warning: slow down**

There is a phrase in Welsh usually said with a weary sigh by a long-suffering grandparent: '*gan bwyll nawr, gan bwyll*' meaning 'go gently now, go gently' and it is as familiar to me as the notion of *slow* is unintuitive. I have been talking, eating, writing, thinking, running, walking (too) fast most of my life. Until last winter when I quite unexpectedly tripped myself up with my own eco-activist walking performance practice. It was the equivalent of being winded: academically, artistically and ideologically. And I was forced to stand still, regain my breath, acknowledge my materiality and consider what happens in that expanded space of unfamiliar deceleration between slowing and stopping. And in doing so I've had to revisit my notions of speed and life, activism and performance. This is an attempt to share some of these thoughts (more questions than answers) which are still in a process of waking slowly from dormancy, so you'll have to forgive them their lumbering, somnambulant clumsiness. At the same time as forgiving me any lapses into overly speedy delivery...

**All in a Day's Walk**

From 6<sup>th</sup> December to the 6<sup>th</sup> January this year I lived entirely within the distance I could walk away from my Herefordshire home and back in a day, eating only the food that was grown, processed and obtainable entirely within that distance. This was *All in a Day's Walk*, a score for a month-long walking performance, which also dictated that:

- I could *only* walk, using no public transport and accepting no lifts
- I could only cook, heat water and my (effectively off-grid caravan) home entirely on local wood and
- I could not accept hospitality or food from friends or guests that didn't meet these criteria

It was walking performance...



League of Gentlemen style. I lost track of the number of times I found myself hunched over some gnarled root vegetable asking earnestly ‘is it local?’

### Herefordshire

The score derived from my interest in – and need to – **walk from home**. And in doing so, explore what a day’s (walking) distance in a day’s time could be used to draw attention to, to measure or calibrate, politically and locally. I now live in deepest, fertile Herefordshire – as a farmer in my native Aberystwyth once said enviously ‘ahh Herrrefordshire; where you can do *proper* farming’ – so I had become aware thanks to my Machiavellian farmer landlord that perhaps the most overtly political issues lay in the ground right under my feet: the food produced from *terra firma* is far more vulnerable and far less robust than we think, tangled up as it is in carbon economies and ecologies, land ownership and stewardship...

### Tracktivism

Of course, you doesn’t or shouldn’t need a political reason or ecological excuse or a even dog to go for a walk in the country. But *All in a Day’s Walk* was my first tentative foray into establishing more firmly an eco-activist rural pedestrian performance practice that I call **tracktivism**: my own clunky neologism for a synthesis of two distinct (and inherently slow) practices: walking art and talking art. I think of what I do as a subtly political redeployment of the aesthetics of an artistic walking practice (by which I mean my environmentalist concerns usually determine and shape the routes that I am choosing to walk); routes that I then use to facilitate and inform conversational encounters with strangers in the dialogical arts tradition...

There is nothing clever or complex here: I walk – along **tracks** – and talk to people – with **activist** intent

### Slow activism

I suppose in a way it’s a pedestrian, peripatetic, pastoral version of Wallace Heim’s **slow activism**: [*which I know many of you are familiar with but for those who aren’t is*] typically a one-to-one, artist-mediated, dialogue-based performance that she terms slow both because of the duration of the event, and also it’s ‘temper’: the developing, reciprocal process of communication between

participant and performer (2003: 187).

But I also situate my practice, in the sense that it also often rooted in the everyday, within what O'Shaughnessy and Kennedy call **relational activism**: the almost exclusively female practice of sharing and promoting environmental awareness through community relationship-building *in the private sphere, behind the scenes*: the often overlooked but equally important 'acts behind activism' (2010: 555).

### **Sweat map**

If I'm walking artist at all, then I'm a stereotypically male one: I like to walk far, fast, hard and usually alone, free [*if I can cite Dee's 40 Turns, in turn citing Robert Louis Stevenson's benefits of walking solo*] free 'to set [my] own direction and pace, unencumbered either by the speed of the 'champion walker' or the slowness of the 'mincing' girl (Heddon 2012: 68) It seems that speed even underscores the walking and gender, walking and companionship debates...

So in true lone twin style, with *All in a Day's Walk* I also secretly wanted to see how far away from home I *could* walk, how far I could push myself. My political cover story may have been drawing a map with my feet of the area that sustained me. But I [*sure as hell*] wanted to draw the contour lines with my own sweat. (Not Bruce Springsteen's )

### **Loss**

Gratifyingly, then, the score for *All in a Day's Walk* imposed harsh limitations on a then dairy-allergic, potato-avoiding, autoimmune arthritic, lifelong vegetarian in a Herefordshire December – but I wanted it to act as a frame which would draw attention to loss:

- **loss of rural infrastructure** (that saw the oats and wheat and oilseed rape grown on the farm where I lived shipped as far away as Manchester to be processed)
- **loss of knowledge** (of how to grow and store, cook and eat 'seasonably')
- **loss of connection** to seasonality, ecological processes, food producers, land and each other

And of course, it did. As well as, in the mud of the wettest winter since 1870, losing my footing, balance and dignity on more than one occasion.

### **Experiment**

But as a scientist I know that the most honest research outcomes are those which answer a question you weren't even asking, a hypothesis that you didn't even set out to test. So it's the absences and losses that I *didn't* expect that became the most interesting:

- **i lost a shocking amount of weight** because I certainly didn't expect to be effectively walk-fasting for a month – that it would be SO hard to find food
- **and [therefore as a 'bloke'] i lost face** – on a diet of mostly vegetable stew and eggs, balancing calories in and out became more important than walking far, hard and fast...

Worryingly – the weather and the weariness – also meant that I didn't encounter many people randomly out walking and meant I had to rethink how people were going to engage with the work at all – placing greater emphasis on the blog, documentation and other methods of dissemination. But, in actually walking to meet the producers, growers, makers themselves I realised I was slowly embedding myself so thoroughly within local networks, that I did gain a 'slow audience' through people's intrigue and engagement with the concept, the perceived difficulty of what I was doing. And I did have many subsequent invitations to give talk about the work across the county, throughout this year.

### **Metabolism**

During the performance itself, and back in the domestic sphere, what I did also *gain* was a gratefulness for the food I did consume and an awareness of how and where that resulting energy could be most sensitively and productively expended. My practice was no longer about 'just' the walking or much about the talking at all, but attending – slowly – to the rhythms of living and the creativity inherent in a practice of survival and nurturing myself and others [*weirdly, I had more guests that month than in any other, all of them clearly masochistic in their willingness to be fed unseasoned vegetable gloop*]. It felt like I was cultivating a practice of domestic performance art, or practicing the performance of domestic art, an eco-logical slow juggling act of waiting for wood to dry, dough to rise and (sourdough) leaven to bubble...

This all threw into focus for me that – even as an eco-activist artist working in a slow medium – I had still unthinkingly bought into a culture and work ethic that equates speed with efficiency, attainment, and results. And equates slowness with sluggishness, sloth and guilt. Even a fast metabolism is prized in a culture of greed and abundance because it allows us to consume more and weigh less.

### **Running**

Up until this point, I'd actually even been contemplating becoming a running artist [*oh I'm such a lone twin wannabe*] as a more suitable, more attention-grabbing, more urgent, less frustratingly pedestrian (I thought) medium for a practice that was ultimately about addressing runaway climate change.

Although I now realise that actually if running – so calorifically indulgent – is what made us human (as Gregg Whelan writes 'running produces humanness; it is the body's first performance' (Whelan 2012: 114)) because it allowed us to pursue prey, to eat sufficient protein to develop our brains and subsequently our greed and arrogance – then running's got an awful lot to answer for. You could argue that we've been running headlong towards apocalypse ever since – the connection between speed and apocalypse has long been acknowledged:

### **Speed and apocalypse**

*Now I'd always promised myself – in an Elizabeth Bennett-Mr Darcy kind of way that I'd never read from Robert Macfarlane but as he's not here, he won't have the*

*satisfaction of knowing that I have:*

*[he's talking about ice-climbing in China. Of course]*

'My sense of wonder at the frozen waterfall and the halted river derived from the absolute stasis of something that would normally be absolutely turbulent. Perhaps our quickening obsession with speed has to do with our end-of-the-worldliness: the latent sense [...] that apocalypse might come either by ice (the death of the sun) or by fire (nuclear holocaust). [...] Reading [...] Gautier's journalism I came across a passage from 1884:

How strange is this wild urge for rapid locomotion seizing people of all nations at the same instant. 'The dead go swiftly', says the ballad. Are we dead then? Or could this be some pre-sentiment of the approaching doom of our plant, possessing us to multiply the means of communication so we may travel over its entire surface in the little time left to us?'

(Macfarlane 2003: 134-135)

### **Space between**

Speed of course is a relative thing and a construct of our perception of the passing of time. I mentioned that I felt my practice – in the sort of violence of the fasting, hunger and weight loss – had tripped me up. And it's a well documented phenomenon of accidents, how in the moments before impact, time dramatically slows down. (Because *[if I can explain with my scientist's hat]* on, in conditions of stress, the amygdala takes over, and new memory is laid down with greater frequency, the resulting richness giving the illusion of time having taken longer to pass – rather like the interminable waiting of childhood [www.eaglemanlab.net](http://www.eaglemanlab.net))

So the process of deceleration opens up AND is opened up BY our noticing and our awareness of (temporal and physical) 'space between', echoed in my practice the spaces between each step we take, space between me and the people I talk to, the space between speaking and listening. The is also of course, the space between now and apocalypse...

Which, given that the biggest, most unexpected and radical loss of all that I've experienced since December has been my total, fundamental **loss of faith in environmentalism**, I'm increasingly convinced is inevitable. *[I have officially walked up that Dark Mountain and I'm not coming down [www.dark-mountain.net](http://www.dark-mountain.net)]* This is at the same time as an utter faith that Earth will continue to support life in some form or another.

Perversely, this makes me hopeful – because there is still a **space between** and it's how we choose to fill that space that matters. And it's also a provocation – for me, for others – to rethink activism in quite radical, ingenious ways.

### **Rethinking activism**

That slow, convivial, creative activities have enormous transformative potential

has already been widely acknowledged and promoted through, for example, the work of Betsy Greer, and the practices of craftivism, knitivism and baketivism. [craftivism.com](http://craftivism.com) [In fact there are so many badly neologised activisms – mine included – that I've been thinking there should probably be a new word for the process of doing it: **neologivism**, **neolotivism** perhaps?]

My feeling is that ecological activism needs to be similarly realigned, away from environmental behavioural change *per se* (which is still an instrumentalist approach to activism, derived from an instrumentalist speed-driven culture) towards ways in which we simply live better in the time and space we have left: reclaiming agency, reconnecting with our humanity; understanding, appreciating and acknowledging our own resourcefulness and our ecology, celebrating and exercising our ingenuity,

How on earth to achieve this delicate shift through a delicate practice of walking and talking (to not many people in the countryside) I need more time to work out: a walking artist leaping out from behind a bush to reassure you of your agency and resourcefulness on a public footpath in rural Herefordshire is too Pythonesque for comfort. Though the element of surprise should never be underestimated...



And I remain interested in the playful possibilities of speed and perception: if the speed at which we lay down memory of new experience dictates our perception of the passage of time, then what becomes familiar becomes routine and gives the sense of time speeding up because fewer and fewer new sensations are encountered, fewer memories laid down.

So if it is unusual encounters that might cause an interruption, intermission – that *playing with the speed, location and nature of performance or performative encounter* can generate a space and time of slowing down – the real time of conversation and vegetable growing and farming, *the time that takes as long as it takes* – then this might be the space or a space in which the fullness of our vulnerable humanity might be explored.

## References

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## **Slow walking somatic/experiential exploration**

1. Group starts in centre of semi-circle facing out towards their chairs
2. Fast walking race to get there first (notes on speed walking)
3. Turn and walk forwards away from your chair back to centre... (notes on fast)
4. Acknowledge people around you
5. Slow walk race backwards to sit down (notes on slow: together with others, open attention, resourcefulness, responsive to what you encounter)

### **fast walking forwards**

separation from others

alienating

goal-oriented

### **slow walking backwards**

as a conversation with your self

walking with yourself... and with others

you might notice

the back or the back of your neck bristling – let it widen

your breath – let it deepen

your weight – let it sink

your balance – let it find itself

the companionable concentration of the others around you – let it support you

and your ingenuity

responsiveness - if you brush past or into someone, notice the shift of weight or focus

the exchange of weight from foot to foot is about cultivating or exercising a

*method* of dialogue between/within ourselves

a means of cultivating/embodying the method and technique of conversation...

is about noticing the richness and resourcefulness that exists in the

**space**                      **between**

interstices

joints

toes

ankles

knees

hips

steps

paces

places

people

lifting falling catching sinking sitting

*Anecdote from my podiatrist: the Chinese have less arthritis because as a culture they walk more slowly with softer joints...*