THE 'S' PROJECT: FROM FORDHAM TO UCLUELET AND UCLUELET TO FORDHAM

*(the shortest distance is not a straight line)*

Gudrun Filipska and Carly Butler

This collection of writings and images is taken from 'S' a collaborative project between Gudrun Filipska in the UK and the Canadian artist Carly Butler. It involves a combination of real and virtual walking, various documented mapping processes, a series of photographs, prints and performance works and an archive of postal communiqués.

View the S Project digital map at https://arcgis.baOle.

Tracked by pedometers, our steps, taken around our respective domestic locations, are translated to a digital map where our avatars walk carefully designed routes between the UK and Canada. The title of our project refers to the first transatlantic wireless signal sent from...
Cornwall to Newfoundland in 1901. The message was simply the Morse code signal for the letter 'S'.

We have mapped trajectories to find a variety of halfway points between our respective homes using combinations of celestial, nautical and gnomonic mapping techniques, embracing alternative cartographical practices and Google Maps alternatives. These maps and charts form part of the ‘S’ archive along with a catalogue of objects, artefacts and letters sent between us.

The idea of walking long distances without leaving home is a physical expression of our current limitations as artists and parents with ties to domestic space. It works with an ambivalence towards assumed identities generated around motherhood. The ‘S’ project explores the radical potential present in the circular/fugal and domestic walk (set against male, colonial adventuring narratives), feeding into dialogue about feminist walking and journeying practices. The project also critiques the idea of the globetrotting artist as marker of success, and challenges the attendant requirements of money and mobility, reaching out to another part of the world and sending a signal to another artist with an isolated practice.

The circular walk, collecting steps and mapping home territory

The world of the new mother is not one of travel, the threads of journeys taken to work, pleasure or tourist trips all tighten, to form smaller repetitive loops; Motherhood closes down territory.

In the essay 'Getting there: travel time and narrative', Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska discuss narrative as journey through the symbolic structure of film, siting Groundhog Day as allegorically representative of travel and tourism. In the film the protagonist is stranded and immobile within a small town, its banal routines – destined to repeat the same day over and over. As the authors discuss, the traditional Hollywood narrative (small town to big city) is turned on its head - the protagonist is cheated of a typical redemption due to the tight narrative loop that curtails his travel.

The routines of parenthood are not to be summed up simply with the Groundhog Day metaphor, yet the daily narrative can be similarly constrained and time similarly compartmentalized. If the idea of the back-to-front travel narrative as discussed by Curtis and Pajaczkowska were to be transferred, then in her own restricted and domestic territory, what redemption or transformation could be found for the mother? In regard to Groundhog Day, Curtis and Pajaczkowska state of Bill Murray's character:

As he is prevented from travelling in time and space, he is forced to travel inwards into self-consciousness and thus to re-construct his own identity rather than acting on the world outside him.

Theories, from those of the sublime to contemporary artist travel cultures, affirm the idea that travel is transformative. The masculine and historically colonial narratives equate travel with knowledge acquisition and enlightenment, the stasis of ‘home town’ is synonymous with ignorance. The questions we have posed as artist parents is how can the expansive and distant spaces which represent transformation be enfolded and made part of the looping ‘home town’ narrative, and are the very masculine iterations of long distance travel as redemptive actually wanted? In Filipska's previous work and research, she looked to the idea of fugue as counter to grand romantic travel narratives and the proposition of the circular walk as redemptive failure within this context. We have developed these ideas through the circular domestic walk in the ‘S’ project. The French term fugueur means ‘runaway’. It was taken up by psychiatrists at the turn of the twentieth century. According to the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders from the
American Psychiatric Association (DSM-III), *Dissociative fugue or psychogenic fugue* involves a time of unplanned walking or journeying of which the person often has no recollection and returns (or is forced to return) back to home, work and family. In his book *Mad Travellers*, Ian Hacking uses the case study of the first official *fugueur*, Henri Dada, whose journeying was associated with hysteria and epilepsy. The long ranging travels of this *fugueur* are positioned in opposition to Romantic tourism and are closer to vagrancy (although transient in state). Set against ideas of Romantic travel, fugue can be viewed as a *failed* journey, its flights always cut short due to the regaining of consciousness or being arrested. It lacks the lofty pursuits of the Romantic's travel or journeying as a sign of masculine prowess. It is this idea of *failure* in journeying that is useful in addressing the problematics of the romantic masculine walk. Although the majority of the French *fugueurs* were indeed male, *fugue* can usefully be developed alongside ideas of feminist walking practice and the circular, domestic walks which engage with a locality through repetitious and often curtailed perambulations. Interestingly, *fugueurs* were among a small group of males to be termed *hysterical*, hence suffering from a disorder usually reserved at the time for women and most particularly those in post-partum phase. *Fugue* was also thought by psychiatrists to be a release from everyday life, its traumas and tedium. In this sense, our fantasy long distance walk in the 'S' Project is also a type of *fugue*.4

Images of routes taken around Fordham, Cambridgeshire and Ucluelet, British Columbia recorded through GPS Tracking Apps.
The protagonist's inner space (or space of self-critique) becomes symbolic of the expansive space of travel and escape, a similar mechanism is followed by us in the 'S' project, a sublimatory transference of the details and mappings of local and familiar territories (as well as the sometime boredom and tedium of motherhood) into fantasy journeys and the archive which follows their plotting. Through the daily counting of steps and their translation to digital maps we plot our progress on journeys towards each other and through unknown territories, developing a performative methodology which critiques the problematic of male travel cultures (and their redemptive and explorative narratives). Making our own current immobility explicit by walking great distances without getting anywhere we reference the temporal hiatus seen in Groundhog Day whilst at the same time attending to our own desires as artists to travel and adventure.
The ‘S’ digital walking project involves three routes:

**Route one:** *Road and shipping route* – (meeting point: Newfoundland). Filipska will walk a route from her home on the edge of the Fens in the east of England along the Icknield way, which the ancient chalk spine of England to Dorset, tracing the routes of various Drovers roads into Cornwall. In Poldhu, Cornwall her footsteps will be converted to nautical miles and follow a shipping route to Newfoundland. Butler’s Journey will take her from her home in Ucluelet, Vancouver Island to Saint John's Newfoundland, crossing Canada, roughly following the 50th Parallel and the Pinetree Line - a series of now defunct pulse mode radar stations established in the 1950's as a nuclear warning system.
Route two: Great Circle route – (halfway point: Baffin Bay). Great circle route navigation involves calculating of the shortest distance between two points on a sphere, a technique often used by mariners. Filipska’s route takes her towards Scotland, crossing the Atlantic, skirting Iceland and crossing Greenland into Baffin Bay. Butler’s route takes her through Canada towards Nunavut and into the Arctic.
Carly Butler, Great Circle Route calculation - Ucluelet to Fordham.

Great Circle Route Ucluelet to Fordham – digitally generated map
Route Three: *Land route* - (halfway point: Olyokminsky, Russia). Filipska's route takes her through the channel tunnel, up the coast of France and Belgium and due east - a route which is completely flat until the Ural Mountains. Butler's route takes her up the coast of British Columbia toward the Gulf of Alaska, passing Anchorage and crossing the Denali National Park. She will then cross the Bering Strait (only passable by land when frozen) and enter Russian territories, meeting Filipska at Olyokminsky on the Lena River.

Street View images from a dive into Olyokminsky via Google Maps. 2018
The first 'S' as motif. The first long distance radio transmission

On Signal Hill, St John's Newfoundland on the afternoon of December 12th 1901, Guglielmo Marconi and his assistant George Kemp sat alone in a cliff-top hut across the static sound and howling winds and listened. Their radio receiver attached to 500 ft of wires supported by kites. Approximately two-thousand miles away in Poldhu, Cornwall the largest known radio transmitter was sending out groups of three clicks, the Morse code signal for the letter ‘S’.

Although Marconi claimed he heard the three clicks, the truth of his claim is still a matter of some speculation based on residual notions at the time that radio waves travelled in straight lines and that Marconi may have mistaken atmospheric static for clicks. For us, the idea of the first S transmission is symbolic of ideas of communication and miscommunication and of the fertile space offered through long distance collaboration. It is symbolic of what lies between, both digitally as 'haunted code medium' and geographically. The idea of signal-sending is essential to the project. Marconi's Wireless telegraphy was subsequently developed into the SOS (1906), a simple distress signal which represents a cry for help. For us, it is a request to be saved from various domestic drownings and wreckages, or at least to be acknowledged in our drowning by another.

Carly Butler: Letterpress 'S' printed with Canadian seawater and Fenland soil sent by Gudrun Filipska.
Endnotes


2 The reverse is often seen in the horror movie genre. Kiersch Children of the Corn, 1984 and McLean Wolf Creek 2004.

