Tracktivism: on Walking a Neologism into the Field (of Activist Performance)

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It may seem a strange assertion from an eco-feminist artist in the 21st century, but I feel a certain affinity with Alfred Watkins, the Edwardian amateur archaeologist. Both eccentrics, horse-riders and walkers, we’ve also both had epiphanies in the Herefordshire landscape resulting in neologisms we might regret. For Watkins, this was leys or ley lines: the network of linear trackways that he identified by the alignment of ancient landscape features, along which he proposed Prehistoric man navigated by sightlines\(^1\). Likely erroneous, they ‘extend[ed] archaeology’s lunatic fringes for decades’ as Robert Macfarlane puts it and were later (mis)appropriated by the New Age movement in the late 1960s, who laid claim to them as mystical energy pathways further discrediting Watkins.\(^2\)

My own problematic neologism is ‘tracktivism’, intended to describe my rural, relational, eco-activist walking art practice. And it is something I have come to regret. Not because it has been misinterpreted by dowsers, but by fellow academics who anticipate it must be far more complex than simply walking along tracks with activist intent. I have been asked:

- Are you tracking something down? (The root of our ecological (dis)connection?)
- Are you keeping track? (Of rural politics and opinions?)
- Are you beating a track? (For others to follow?)
- Are you on the right track? (Or the self-righteous one?)

Possibly all, or none, of the above.

Tracktivism is a synthesis of walking art, one-to-one performance and eco-activism, which takes place almost entirely in rural landscapes. The shapes, routes and rules of my walking are guided by eco-activist concerns. However, the walking of tracktivism is not radical or subversive in and of itself in the sense of, say, a protest march or strategic trespass. Rather, my intention has always been to exploit walks as a device to facilitate unexpected conversations or interventions with strangers I randomly encounter along the way. In this way, tracktivism is a sort of peripatetic, pedestrian, pastoral version of what performance theorist Wallace Heim has termed ‘slow activism’: creatively-facilitated, artist-mediated conversations or interventions that may have subsequent, transformative potential.\(^3\) It is the unexpectedness of entering into conversation with an eco-activist artist, on foot, in an unlikely location that once caused me to describe it as ‘activism by stealth’.\(^4\)

Tracktivism was principally conceived as a tongue-in-cheek antidote to ‘slacktivism’: internet slang for the sedentary trend of participating in ‘feel-good internet campaigns that [don’t] actually help anybody or [have] political impact[,] pretending to care while sitting on your butt in front of a computer’.\(^5\) In other words, this is the kind of deluded apathy that echoes our inability to challenge our ‘performance compulsion’ – Baz Kershaw’s term for our fixed patterns of environmentally destructive behaviours – and prevents us from making changes to our everyday lives, even in the face of an intellectual understanding of climate change.\(^6\)
In a conscientious attempt to reinforce that syllabic difference as much as possible – to be as unslack as I can – I have spent the last few years falling into the clichéd elephant traps of performance art. I have done all the things that a good, self-reflexive, relational, somatics and-dance trained, female walking practitioner should know to resist: unintentionally exploiting spectacle; inadvertently dabbling in heroism; naively suffering for my art.

In *Tilting at Windmills* (2010) I walked between the wind farms of Mid-Wales collecting sound recordings of the conversations about changing landscapes and lifestyles in a changing climate. Walking too far too fast, my Achilles tendon got inflamed by my own trainers, in turn injuring my knee. So, I became aware of the ironic symbolism of a melting First Aid icepack on my leg, on what was rapidly becoming a ‘climate change pilgrimage’.

To draw attention to loss of local, rural food infrastructure, in *All in a Day’s Walk*, I lived for a month entirely within the distance I could walk away from home and back in a day, eating only the food grown, processed and obtainable within that distance. In winter I was restricted to a diet of dry sourdough, root vegetables and eggs and lost a stone; in summer to a diet of berries and unpasteurised cheese resulting in stomach cramps and bent-double silly walks, too ill to talk local food politics with strangers. But it didn’t matter because people were instead voyeuristically captivated by my clownish failure to thrive, drawn in to the drama of the activism in an unexpected way. This was walking art unintentionally disguising, framing or exacerbating ‘hunger art’.

In *Drop in the Ocean* (2013-2015), I walked for six days in ever-increasing circles, carrying pails of water with an antique yoke. I invited the people I encountered to make a wish by putting their hand into the water of one bucket, taking a stone and transferring it to the other. In between – as they hold the stone in their wet hand – I offer six verbal prompts for them to think through contrasting memories or perceptions of water. I conceived the project as a peripatetic wishing well that disguised an attempt to facilitate a re-appreciation for water in a changing climate through sensuous re-engagement with it. Yet, what people seemed most struck by was the sheer senselessness of what I was doing. What they found most beguiling
was precisely that I was not doing it for money or charity, for fitness, for punishment, for the water board, or (as one participant suspected) for *You’ve Been Framed*. They were, seemingly, touched by the epic endeavour of walking such a long way on the off-chance of facilitating such a random moment of transient intimacy.

At the Hafod Arms, Devil’s Bridge with an injured knee on the 6th day of the *Tilting* walk.
Walking as a way of entering – and moving away from – these encounters is particularly important to this practice. In sparsely settled rural landscape, walking allows me to transport myself across substantial tracts of land, to insinuate my way into unlikely geographical nooks and randomise the encounters I have. Meeting people on footpaths, village greens, in beer gardens, at bus stops, farm shops and allotments literally allows me to tread the line of a demographic cross-section. In this respect, walking is also useful as a socially levelling mode of encounter, as it places the walker ‘on the same level’ as their fellow interlocutor. And it confers a certain anonymity on me as the stranger passing through – with no apparent ties to place and perhaps, by extension, fixed ideology– that typically allows me and my interlocutor to engage with greater ease and candidness.

This was a conclusion shared by ‘public geographer’ Joseph Murphy in his walk along the Atlantic coasts of (politically sensitive) Ireland and Scotland, engaging in fruitful conversations about Gaelic culture as a shared identity that might transcend entrenched religious separatism.

Returning to the problematic of neologising there is an unintentional irony embedded in traktivism. Walking through mud, rain and heatwaves in the sparsely populated Mid-Wales uplands and Herefordshire lowlands, I haven’t met that many people. Consequently, if building a critical mass of support or awareness is one indicator of efficacy for traditional activism, then traktivism is far more ‘pointless’ than slacktivism. Furthermore, not all my respondents have wanted to engage beyond the moment of intervention; to enter the longer conversation necessary to slow activism. I am also aware that any wider ‘efficacy’ lies in the intangible, in the imagination, in people’s fascination with the sheer quixotism of what I am doing. This is the surprisingly evocative power of walking in the landscapes of the mind: from a verbal description of where I have been, where I am going, seems so often to come a
certain empathy with the effort of it; and in turn an understanding of what that reveals about activist commitment or environmental change: ‘You’ve walked all that way… just, for this?’.

The effort required to walk so far makes legible a form of care: caring about what I am doing and offering. Precisely because it is of the body, walking can translate activist intent into legible physical commitment: it requires embodied engagement with the landscapes in which the issues I’m addressing reside. But as the medium for a relational performance practice, it also makes patent a genuine commitment to engage with those landscapes’ (human) residents.

For Watkins, looking out over the landscape from a Blackwardine vantage point, ley lines became apparent to him in his sudden moment of epiphany as a network of lines, standing out like glowing wires all over the surface of the country. Appropriately enough, the etymological root of epiphany lies in the Greek epiphanein ‘to reveal’. And the etymology of ‘learn’ lies in the Proto-Germanic liznojan meaning ‘to follow or find a track’. So in tracktivism, I am perhaps revealing in my wake, but more importantly learning as I proceed. Learning from, absorbing and embracing the mistakes of my first three performance pieces into the one that followed, I decided the most radical, political, subversive thing I could do was something kind and simple. Trans-missions (2015) was a homage to Watkins, and a contemporary take on his ‘lines of power’; it was a five-day, sixty-mile walk across his native Herefordshire from the western border to the east, following the electricity transmission lines.

Carrying a rucksack of low energy lightbulbs, I gave one to each person who offered me an inspiring message for me to pass on to and discuss with the next person. As I walked, I became aware that the performance was echoing the function of the electrical cables and pylons I was so diligently following. In being a conductor for transmitting messages about personal power from person to person, my walk seemed literally to ‘hold up’ over the landscape a sense of its inhabitants’ beliefs, hopes and desires. ‘Get to know your neighbours; we don’t do that enough anymore,’ offered a publican in Almeley. ‘Don’t be too hasty to judge others; you just don’t know the histories they carry,’ I was told on a driveway in Holme Lacy. ‘Don’t forget to help others along the way’ suggested Hazel, walking her daughter’s dog along Grafton Lane. Or ‘be grateful for difficult people in your life because they teach you how not to be,’ offered Rach, as I leaned into her garden from the verge on the busy A438. Other messages (perhaps unreasonably) frustrated me with their saccharine and generic predictability. I heard various iterations of ‘live life to the fullest!’ ‘make the most of all opportunities!’, or ‘smile more!’. Was I walking a series of trite, motivational fridge magnet slogans across the countryside? But, I soon realised, all messages spoke to the ‘energy’ inherent in being – and surviving being – human.
There was an additional element to this walking performance: tied to each bulb was an invitation to a convivial gathering – a picnic and art installation in a cider orchard – that took place at the end of the walk. In the orchard, a festoon string of 50 empty lightbulb holders awaited the hopeful return of each bulb that had been handed out. Marking out walkways through the trees was ‘craftivist’ bunting hand-sewn or drawn with messages – also of inspiration, power, energy – by the local community craft group over the preceding months. The micropolitical meanings and musings of these messages could only be revealed by walking or moving along them. On the evening of the summer solstice, the night after I completed the walk, 15 of the bulbs were returned by 35 people who ate local food, drank local cider, talked to each other, forged unexpected connections and made sense of it all amongst the apple trees.

In its message-carrying, this piece marked a strange reconciliation in many respects: swallowing my snobbery at slacktivism, I was seeking to stealthily subvert it. Most of us have experienced those moments of surprising solace, or sometimes shocked outrage, that can come from a well-timed message or article shared on Facebook or Twitter, which we might subsequently ‘like’ and share then quickly forget. I wondered if I could perform a pedestrian détournement of social media (and in some ways my own practice) by carrying those
saccharine or uplifting messages to more sustainable effect; using walking and talking as a slower, embodied way to share them and fully consider their meaning.

After all, in this might be the elusive activism in traktivism: walking as a practice of facilitating momentary ‘interruption’, Roy Scranton’s philosophical tool for living in the Anthropocene. In his proposition, he is drawing from an idea loosely sketched out by Peter Sloterdijk who suggests that to counter our accelerated world in which we are ‘plugged into […] theme-bound energy flows’, we should consciously practice a stepping-outside of the ‘collective field of excitation’ and into a state of ‘pondering’. Expanding on this theme, Scranton considers that this ‘excitation’ has become both amplified and focused in recent years by the demographic targeting of [social] media [that] narrow the channels of perception to the point that we receive only those images and vibrations which already harmonise with our own prejudices, our own pre-existing desires, thus intensifying our particular emotional reactions along an increasingly limited band.

In an era of worsening ecological crisis – and concomitant social inequality – he proposes that interruption is a means to (re)engage or strengthen our capacity for autonomous reflection, to actively contemplate our role and implication in wider processes. It is simply to pause, even momentarily, to ‘ponder’ the information or ideas one receives, and judiciously choose whether to pass them on, or ‘let the excitation die’, rather than thoughtlessly conducting or re-transmitting them in impotent feedback loops of pleasure or fear. (It may be no accident that Trans-missions – ostensibly about ‘unbroken’ transmission – bears that curiously interrupting titular hyphen.)

Interruption might have been an anathema to Watkins, for whom the landscapes of the past, and possibly the mind, would have been freely navigated, along uninterrupted (ley)lines of sight, but in the uncertainties of the Anthropocene, it is precisely this practice that we need to learn and cultivate, to navigate the landscapes of the future.

Images are author’s own where unspecified.
Endnotes


6 Baz Kershaw (2012) ‘This is the Way the World Ends, Not…?’ On Performance Compulsion and Climate Change’, Performance Research, 17 (4), pp. 5-17 (p. 9).

7 Somatic practices reject the notion of dualism, embracing the inherent wisdom of the ‘mind’ as it inhabits the whole organism, not simply conscious thought, which is in turn not regarded as being separate from or superior to the corporeal body. My own training has included the practices of Alexander Technique, Body-Mind Centering (Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen), Authentic Movement Practice (Janet Adler, Mary Starks Whitehouse) and experiential anatomy (as taught by Andrea Olsen and Caryn McHose). See Thomas Hanna (1995) ‘What is Somatics?’ in Don Hanlon Johnson (ed.) Bone, Breath & Gesture: Practices of Embodiment. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, pp. 341-352.


9 Hunger art is a term coined – or certainly popularised – by Kafka in his 1922 short story Ein Hungerkünstler (A Hunger Artist) which describes a man who starves himself within a cage for the entertainment of an audience. The character was directly based on Italian ‘hunger impresario’ (my term) Giovanni Tucco who staged fasts in cities across Europe from the late 1800s encouraging others to ‘exhibit themselves as they slowly starved sometimes in or near… lavish banquets [or] often in circuses and travelling fairs’ in Patrick Anderson (2010) So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance and the Morbidity of Resistance. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (p. 59).

10 In saying this, I remain cognisant of the fact that rural British landscapes are largely inaccessible to many physically disabled people due to the difficulties of terrain or the presence of stiles and other barriers, not least perceptual ones. E.g. see Sue Porter and Dee Heddon (2013) Walking Interconnections: Performing Conversations of Sustainability. [Online] http://walkinginterconnections.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/What-we-found-Insights-from-the-research.pdf. (Accessed 19 January 2016) and Hannah Macpherson (2008) "I don’t know why they call it the Lake District they might as well call it the rock district!” The Workings of Humour and Laughter in Research with Members of Visually Impaired Walking Groups’, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 26, pp. 1080-1095. Equally, cultural barriers of belief or expectation of ‘who uses the countryside’ also exclude ethnic minority groups – and especially women of ethnic groups – from engaging recreationally within rural British landscape e.g. see Divya Tolia-Kelly (2008) ‘Motion/Emotion: Picturing Translocal Landscapes in the Nurturing Ecologies Research Project’, Mobilities, 3 (1), pp. 117-140.

11 In Wanderlust, her seminal treatise on the history of walking, Rebecca Solnit frequently alludes to the kind of perceived neutrality that itinerancy brings: ‘many professions in many cultures, from musicians to medics, have been nomadic, possessed of a kind of diplomatic immunity to the strife between communities’ (p. 15); ‘a solitary walker is in the world, but apart from it, with the detachment of the traveller rather than the ties of the worker, the dweller, the member of a group’ (p. 18). Rebecca Solnit (2001) Wanderlust. London: Verso.


14 In subsequent discussions of this work, most respondents have been surprised by how many bulbs were returned. (As a rule of thumb, only 50% of ‘out of town’ guests will typically attend a wedding, for example. And these were strangers who lived up to 50 miles away.). Returning the bulbs required a physical journey to the orchard. This was an act of generosity and bravery on the part of the participants, but also required access to a vehicle, the money for fuel, the time to take out of a precious day off, the confidence (or smart phone) necessary to navigate to a rural location using only a postcode. What the patches of ‘darkness’ – the unreturned bulbs – revealed was, potentially, a whole raft of social, mental and economic barriers to participation, not simply a general apathy (as I might once perhaps have assumed).

