

## WORKING THE MIDDLE GROUND: MAKING BODIES IN FLIGHT'S PERFORMANCE WALK, *DREAM*→*WORK*

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ABSTRACT: *Dream*→*Work* is an ambulant audio performance project created by Bodies in Flight (2009-12). Originally concerned with how public space is animated by multiple performances that interweave the public and the private, the personal and political, the normative and the imagined, each new manifestation of the work increasingly came to focus on how public space articulates local histories with lived memories. It has been performed in Singapore, Nottingham, Bristol, Wirksworth, and Skegness. As artists, the performers are only ever visitors who walk the middle ground through the city without occupying it, in contrast to the locals who occupy the middle ground as their home, invested in its practical and ideological structures. The artists' method of manifold re-tracing of inhabitants' habituated behaviours and routes in rehearsal and performance has forced a disclosing of the relations between corporeality, identity, and the urban environment. This chapter explores, as a dialogue between co-directors Sara Giddens and Simon Jones, the project's development from stepping over the middle ground of the daily commute to dwelling in the lived histories of place, by charting its different local manifestations and proposing ways in which the artists' *passing through* can open out potential spaces for reflection from both within and outside the middle ground of the everyday use of public space.

RESUMO: *Sonho*→*Trabalho* é um projeto ambulante de performance sonora criado pelo grupo Bodies in Flight (2009-2012). Originalmente concentrada na forma como o espaço público é animado por múltiplas performances que misturam o público e o privado, o pessoal e o político, o normativo e o imaginado, cada nova manifestação da obra centrou-se cada vez mais na forma como o espaço público articula histórias locais e memórias vividas. Foi apresentada em Singapura, Nottingham, Bristol, Wirksworth e Skegness. Enquanto artistas, os performers são apenas visitantes que atravessam o espaço intermédio pela cidade sem o ocuparem, em contraste com os habitantes locais, que ocupam o espaço intermédio como seu lar, investido nas suas estruturas práticas e ideológicas. O método dos artistas de retratar muitas vezes os comportamentos e rotas dos habitantes em ensaios e espetáculos conduz a uma revelação das relações entre a corporalidade, a identidade e o ambiente urbano. Este capítulo explora, na forma de

um diálogo entre os codiretores Sara Giddens e Simon Jones, o desenvolvimento do projeto desde a passagem pelos espaços intermédios dos itinerários quotidianos até à abordagem das histórias vividas do sítio, mapeando as suas diferentes manifestações locais e propondo formas como a *passagem* dos artistas pode abrir espaços potenciais para reflexão tanto no interior como no exterior do espaço intermédio da utilização quotidiana do espaço público.

*Dream* → *Work*, an ambulant audio performance project, was originally concerned with the morning rush hour and the daily ways in which we make and unmake our selves in the journey to work. Created by Bodies in Flight (U.K.), it has been performed in Singapore, Nottingham, Bristol, Wirksworth and Skegness. As visitors, the performers walk the middle ground through the city without occupying it: their responses are at once too big and too small, too general and too specific for the place, in contrast to the locals, who habitually occupy the middle ground as their home, invested in its practical and ideological structures. As artists, the manifold re-tracing of the inhabitants' habituated behaviours and routes in rehearsal and performance forced a disclosing of the relations between corporeality, identity, and the urban environment, moving from ideas of transnational, transferable labour, to locally embodied memories of place. This in turn led to subsequent manifestations of the project, for instance, at the Wirksworth Festival (2011) and SO Festival (Skegness, 2012), which focused increasingly on a form of dialoguing with inhabitants in order to incorporate their voices into the work. This chapter explores this project's arc of development from stepping over the middle ground of the daily commute to dwelling in the lived histories of place. We chart the development of the performance-walk through its different local manifestations, proposing ways in which the artists' *passing through* can open out potential spaces for reflection from both within and outside the middle ground of the everyday use of public space.

### [Simon Jones]

Preserving the work means standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work. This 'standing-within' of preservation, however, is a knowing. ... He who truly knows beings knows what he wills to do in the midst of them. ... [T]he essence of *Existenz* is out-standing standing-within the essential sunderance of the clearing of beings. (Heidegger, 1978: 192)



Figure 1. Polly Frame, *Dream → work*, Singapore, 2009. Photo: Yuen Chee Wai.

*Dream → work* (2009) attempts to echo Martin Heidegger's definition of the artwork as a *preserving outstanding standing within* through its use of public space and its *desynchronizing of public time*. We began with the commute: a group of 12 auditor-walkers followed two performers through the city streets during the morning rush hour, listening through earpieces to the internal monologue of an every-person in the daily process of re-constructing their publicly facing self, moving from dreamtime to realtime. One performer manipulated the sound-score, made up of a live mix of text, song, sound-grabs from the environment, and ambient sounds relayed from microphones worn by the performers. He controlled these sources using a small portable mixer and transmitted the resulting sound-scape to small receivers worn by each auditor-walker. Lasting about 40 minutes, the walks were programmed to start at key intersections in the daily commute during the relevant time of day. In Singapore, for example, *Dream → work's* performances began at 7:30, 8:30 and 9:30 a.m. outside the Chinatown MRT (underground) station. By the simple re-mediation of their familiar environment through microphone, mixer, transmitter, receiver, and performer, the auditor-walkers were invited to reflect on their embodied experience of commuting those streets. Dressed as commuters, performers and auditor-walkers alike both disappeared into the crowd at times and then re-emerged by virtue of the attention focused by the group on the performer:

s/he was sometimes seen close-up, sometimes at a distance, the sound-score creating a cinematic soundtrack that turned what was habitual into something strange. Everyday sounds of traffic and overheard snatches of commuters' conversations were blended with music; performers' live speech segued into the pre-recorded, giving the impression that one was listening to their thoughts as voice-over commentary on the happenchance events occurring around them. For example, when performer Polly Frame crossed a busy road junction whilst conversing on her mobile phone, the auditor-walkers experienced her live speech dovetailing with a pre-recorded interlocutor discussing social plans for that evening, as they themselves negotiated the potentially dangerous crossing. Here the playful uncertainty of aural sources mixed with the serious, adrenalin-fuelled business of crossing a Singapore street in rush hour.

Behaving most times 'normally', the performers moved as if invisibly through the streets, narratizing them as they went, rehearsing a presentation to be made at work that day. Occasionally they discarded these masks by dancing or singing, suddenly making both themselves and the auditor-walkers highly visible to other commuters, reversing the roles of observer and observed. In this way, *Dream → work* explored the habitual experience of commuting by combining the walkers' own embodied memories and immediate sensations with the audio technology's capacity to mix happenchance and prepared sounds, thus opening up an imaginative parallel space-time within which to speculate on that experience from inside the space-time of the commute itself. The walk's rhythms force them to step aside in two opposing directions simultaneously: toward the immediate, what is passed over and no longer noticed; and toward the profound, what cannot normally be borne in the rush of the everyday and so is passed under, since in that place there is not *normally* time to disclose it and open it out.

### [Sara Giddens]

And now here, recalling that memory, those memories (colluding and colliding) of the experience of the making of the *Dream → work* walks, alongside but outside of the space-time of the actual experience. (Breathe.) Being here now.

Originally conceived to be experienced as part of the commute, the *Dream → work* walks (five to date) ask the auditor-walkers to share the same time within the sometimes very public space and simultaneously occupy a distinctly different time from those other others who pass us by, each with their own time and tempo, whose purpose in *this* time is very different.

As makers and auditor-walkers, we are performing the same physical, embodied acts – walking and being still. In that sense, we *are* actively participating in and as part of the world, occupying the same place. We invite the auditor-walkers to follow in our footsteps, both to move with and against the dominant flow of the commute, to step across, aside, outside from it *and* to come alongside, to be-come still(-er). Theirs is most likely a singular, one-off experience in amongst a regularly patterned everyday. Seeing for the first time, or as if for the first time, seeing anew their own everyday. To stop. To look, to listen, to smell, to taste, and to take stock. To dwell.



Figure 2. Polly Frame, *Dream* → *work*, Nottingham, 2010. Photo: Tony Judge.

## [S]

The idea of contact does not represent the primordial mode of the immediate. Contact is already a thematization and a reference to a horizon. The immediate is the face to face. (Levinas, 1969: 52)

For Emmanuel Levinas (1969), the embodied encounter between two persons is actually the unspeakable and indeterminable point when-where we experience both the concreteness and the possibility of our humanity, what he terms its *totality* (the ideologies and practices within which we conduct our daily lives) and its *infinity* (the absolute possibilities of the universe which automatically and necessarily challenge us both in fear of death and in hope of justice): “The thou is posited in front of a we” (p. 213).

*Dream* → *work* steps over the middle ground *where* we all necessarily live with our commonsense and ideologies: it jumps over the continuous present of living *whilst* still remaining in the midst. It oscillates between *immediates* (that which happens there and then) and *profounds* (that which is at the deepest reach or furthest throw of the mind and so cannot be there and then). Thus, in Singapore the background synchronization of financing and trading is interpolated by each walkers' heightened sensory awareness of their own being there and then in the streets of that specific Central Business District. This is provoked by opening up sonically the various gaps in each one's embodied mode of walking those streets through feeding back live sound-grabs, re-presenting the 'present' aural environment. The 'other' of time is set forth diachronically through texts that open up possibilities of other times, of children and death, provoking memories and hopes through jointly listening to and having to consider these possibilities while face-to-face with the performer – *the* other as distinct from everyday capital's *an* other, any other, quasi-other.

### [SG]

*Dwelling* is in opposition to how most people move through their city-town space during 'their commute'. We may wait in order to commute, but waiting is not dwelling. It takes time to be still, not something commuters have to spare. And those participants choosing to see a choreographed performance are expecting movement.

I stop as you move. Less frequently, I move as you stop. Certainly, two directions at the same time. And now we both stop. The one and the other, amongst the other others – still-moving. Your quietening – in relation to my quietening. Face to face in the event-hood of it all: in this fiction, through this moving fourth wall, the one is encountering the other, as if again for the first time. We are held here together, as part of this particular and peculiar etiquette of performance – this *consensuality*. Standing still alone together. Arriving at this dwelling point, here and now. And in this somehow shared space-time we are asking the auditor-walker to give of and from within themselves, clearing a space so it can be filled again by you and your own *theres* and *thens*.

Finding my reflection through your reflection: Is this close to Levinas' infinity – the reality, "the concreteness" and the "possibilities"? Who am I within this stillness – not my-self, part-other, an un-whole-other, any-other, now gone and back again? I wonder how present I can be alongside this, your apparent presence, appearing in this stillness. Still distracted by the other others who

walk on by, pretending not to notice when we are spilling out so publicly. Can we be still long enough to feel we know in some way this shared still-ing, this still-dance?

It's such a delicate moment ... [to] think..... Ah, it's happened. ... *In the midst of standing still something else is occurring and the name for that is the small dance.* (Paxton, 2004: 9)

Discussing the inadequacies of language to describe states of the body, American choreographer Steve Paxton, in an interview with Peter Hulton, cites standing in an upright position when all the (so-called) “voluntary muscles” have relaxed and one is “standing still” with only the “skeletal muscles” keeping you “upright.” Like Spanish performer La Ribot, we are interested in this still-ing, this “quietness” as an opportunity for spectators to feel a “corporeal presence,” and that through this stillness a space-time is created for (as La Ribot says)



Figure 3. Tom Wainwright, *Dream → work*, Bristol, 2010. Photo: Tina Remiz.

“contemplating within a non-theatrical time” (La Ribot, 2008: 2). Although we may not choose to describe this as “non-theatrical” time, for the frames and etiquettes of performance and theatre still prevail here, this use of being in stillness does mark a difference. A different kind of space-time, out in public, in the place of the citizen, that is, the place of passing through. Now my body appears to be strangely still and the performer and spectator have time to locate themselves and each other, to move from one place to another, without having to move on to the next presented (or perhaps more accurately – *represented*) theatrical image. As writer Tim Etchells (2008) reflects, stillness becomes “an imperative beat which nods ... to the philosopher’s pause for reflection” (p. 1).

### [S]

[I]n vulnerability lies a *relation to the other* that is not exhausted by causality, a relation prior to all affection by the stimulus. The identity of the self does not set limits to submission, not even the last resistance that matter ‘in potential’ opposes to the form that invests it. Vulnerability is obsession by others or approach to others. ... An approach reduced neither to representation of others nor to consciousness of proximity. (Levinas, 2006: 64)

Levinas’ insistence on the inexhaustible responsibility we all bear to the other, as the essence of our humanity, this vulnerability to the other’s approach, became a critical aspect or, more properly, a critical relation in the daily making of the work, precisely because the work is made amongst, and many of its sources are drawn directly from, the host of the everyday – their daily living in, their investing in the making of that place, their daily performing of it. This relation is not an inter-acting in Bourriaud’s sense, nor a spect-acting in Boal’s sense, but a dialoguing as described by physicist David Bohm (1998): an opening up of a space *to listen to the other through sustaining an absolute and radical suspension of judgement*.

The artist’s will to make, to set forth, to put in the place of something else, in essence to re-place someone else’s will, is profoundly challenged by these others who literally stop us in our tracks. To resist these approaches would occasion strife, specifically because it is the others’ place that we appear to be re-placing. And to convert the others’ stories into material would be to reduce them to an expression of our own will. So the only way not to do violence, to begin properly to answer the call of these others (in Levinas’ sense) and yet still make the work an exercise of our own, is to open a space within the making, within the process, *to dialogue*.



In the Wirksworth version (2011), our commissioners asked us to make a walk that drew attention to the architectural industrial heritage of this Derbyshire town. We decided not to replicate the local tourist industry's commercialization of the Industrial Revolution but to focus on 1973 – the year that saw the opening of the High Peaks Trail, a key event in the development of that post-industrial heritage industry, and also both industrial strike-action and accidents in the then still-active local coal-mining industry. We asked locals who lived through that period to read newspaper articles from 1973, ranging from reports on the Markham Colliery Disaster to advertisements for 'warehouse boys' and housekeepers. Around these readings, the inhabitants casually added their own commentaries and observations. In the churchyard at the centre of the town, the performer stopped outside each house and a reading or comment was played. Thus a space was created within the heritage site that evoked a still-living historical period, recognizable as both near to us now and yet very different in its industrial relations, gender politics, and the like. The various visually evident layers of architectural history were placed in a relationship with an 'official' newspaper history read aloud by the voices of those who had lived through it. This diachronic layering was further developed as the version wound back time to reference the Romans, then first settlers, then the geological pre-history of the surrounding landscape which produced the coal and stone which later formed the natural resources upon which the Industrial Revolution was founded.

This dialoguing inflects indirectly the mood of making, rather than directly informing a fall to judgement, or into will as decisive actions in making the work – what we might think of as the artist's signature. To be clear, this suspension produces a relationship between our own will to make and the others' wills to tell something of their own place from their own points of view, from the inside. It resolves a problem, fundamental to participatory art-practices, posed by Heidegger's essential difference between art and life: the artist's will to stand outside the everyday, not to disappear into reality. Namely, as we come from the outside, in our willing, our artistic act of re-placing, we wilfully refuse to know our host's place from the inside. However, to allow their wills to prevail, or even to occupy a space within the work, would render the art *as life*, would dilute its own-ness, bleach out its insight with the everyday. Hence the significance to our making of Levinas' welcoming the other, by way of Bohm's suspending judgement – between strife and translation. In this way, our will is both humbled in listening and preserved in not having to submit directly to the others. The indirectness of dialoguing without judgement or purpose, without

taking a stance on the matter, as part of the process of siting the work, opens up a space for both artist and local in the performance, actually affecting the mood of working. As such, it enriches the work in ways we cannot feel and the others cannot tell.

[SG]

*Stillness* is the moment when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. (Seremetakis, 1996: 12)

Seremetakis suggests in this dwelling place – a stillness, a contemplative space-place. How much effort – to create a space-time for dwelling! Much more difficult to organise this space-time than the walking: keep moving and you



Figure 4. Graeme Rose, *Dream-walk*, Wirksworth, 2011. Photo: Tony Judge.

will not be noticed as much, will not be questioned, you don't stay still enough in one place for it to be an issue. "Loiter with intent." No, you cannot dwell in it, only move through it – with purpose. All that time spent dashing around, making new acquaintances, taking care of the potential.

Not yet a quietening of the mind – but perhaps a focusing – a foregrounding. My mind can't yet be still – sorry – always moving from one thought or sensation to the next – I can sense more now! How have we arrived at these moments? Through movement? Through walking, making the stopping and stilling more profound in its difference from that repetitive walking, doing stillness by way of movement, but just as readily finding movement through stillness. I sense a stilling. I sense your stillness. How do the senses still? Those senses that ordinarily themselves can never be still as they actively project into the world around them and the mind follows.

### [S]

In stepping over the middle ground, we still leave the auditor-walkers as carriers of that middle, in fact the actual possibilities of that middle. They work the middle that we step over; they respond from that middle to our producing of the immediates and profounds. And this answering the call of what is there and could be there, from within the there, places them both within the middle of things and outside of them. They become aware of their together aloneness: they are the necessary middle; or rather, the necessary being in the middle of things, amongst the host amidst things. So, as the work is peopled by a host of such ideological enactments, it is relieved of doing that work itself. Furthermore, *Dream* → *work*'s refusal to dwell in that middle, the absence of specifics from that cultural, ideological matrix calls forth the auditor-walkers' own ideologies: space *without* ideology admits the possibilities not of a 'non-ideological' place but of a reconfiguring of space-time *with* the ideological. And that reconstituting is *properly* the future work of the auditor-walkers themselves *after* our work in the work is done, since they must live in that space once we are gone.

### [SG]

[T]he deployment of different ways of slowing down movement and time ... [are] powerful propositions for other modes of rethinking action and mobility through the performance of still-acts rather than continuous movement. (Lepecki, 2006: 5)

As Lepecki (2006) writes, to offer quietness in the noise, to offer stillness in dance, to be quiet and to be still, interrupts (or is it punctuates?) the flow. We are drawn to this quietness and this stillness. When I am deliberately not doing in this place and time of passing through, I can recall my own sense of stillness. I see your body stalling and I reference my own body in its manifold stillness; and through this presencing I recall, I remember. I may or may not be able to dance those steps you have just danced, but I can be still, still alongside. As Lepecki (2001) writes, “to engage in stillness is to engage in different experiences of perceiving one’s own presence” (p. 2). This is as bespoke as the work is to each time-space. Even this stillness, this quiet is never the same. Just like the walk itself, filled with the same overflowing of difference in every part, in every place, person, day, and countless extraordinaries within the everyday. The work is essentially about ex-posing these profound.

When can I experience this stillness for myself without being concerned for the experience of others? I’m always more careful within these circumstances, always already watching out for the walkers’ welfare. How fast, slow, far, steep? Taking care, looking after, respecting. In the meantime, this time, I will take care of you as best I can.

Once again back to this present, being alone alongside, reading these words, re-presented. Only when I sit can I write. I cannot write unless I am still and my mind is focused, cleared of the everyday as much as possible. Making a clearing in which to dwell.

## [S]

The act of consciousness is motivated by the presence of a third party alongside of the neighbour approached. A third party is also approached; and the relationship between the neighbour and the third party cannot be indifferent to me when I approach. There must be a justice among incomparable ones. There must be a comparison amongst incomparables and a synopsis, a togetherness and contemporaneousness; there must be thematization, thought, history and inscription. (Levinas, 1998: 16)

Thus, the clearing of *Dream* → *work* must be predicated or, in our case, literally grounded on its relation to the everyday, whence it emerges and *through which* every participant must have passed in order to reach this clearing and be involved in the work. For the work to be first recognized as a work, in order for its preserving to become possible, it must produce its very relation to the

everyday *as its incomparable work*. This echoes what for Heidegger is the very definition of Being – that its own being is an issue for it: art's relation with the everyday is hence *posed as a problem for the work* and its participants and their own relating to the world whence they have jointly emerged in the preserving of the work. To see the world thence askance is to see it *as if for the first time* and so to see what it is *possible to do with* that world. In this way, even those very lived technologies, ideologies, and corporeal habits of movement and thought are turned against themselves to *ex-pose* what they normally *en-close*. Thence, *Dream → work's* participatory aesthetics must be by way of and about presence: *to be in the co-presence of* is to appear before the other, performer, auditor-walker, a face-to-face, as Levinas described it, of absolute alterity in the midst of the everyday.

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