

Walking with the world: towards an ecological approach to performative art practice.

“One walks down the path to get somewhere, but one enjoys walking, and one leaves one’s house just to walk” (Lingis, *Sensation* 21)

Abstract

In this article I consider the potential in an artwork for walking to “world” the body. That is, how movement engages the body in processes by which a relational ecology begins to evolve. I begin with a concept of walking as a ‘minor practice’ that seeks a creative flight from the structured places of the city and of the body’s own capacity to succumb to habit and a loss of breadth of expression. Erin Manning’s writing on the moving body and Arakawa and Gins’ theories on body-space entanglement are briefly explored, and these concepts are then applied to Nathaniel Stern’s *Compressionism* performative work. This work, while it does not sit within any normative paradigm of walking based art, actively applies the differential potential of movement to explore the ecological engagement of such activities.

1. Walking

Every walk I set out on, even the most mundane and functional, is inherently an adventure into the unknown, into improvisation and discovery. If I am too jaded or numb to notice then I have only to invite a dog or small child to accompany me to realize or invent creative and connective possibilities. With dog or child in tow or towing me, my walk can never be simply a blinkered move from “A” to “B”. Instead it splits to become multiple, consisting of many foci, intensities, and heterogeneous singularities (Manning, *Relationescapes* 7). This smell, a pretty tree, a siren, a cat spotted, a game instantly evoked out of the walk, all layer an experience that that is being continually reinvented in response to stimuli. My body rearranges and responds to the rock underfoot, cold wind, the effort of a hill, the anticipation of a busy road ahead, the pull of the dog’s leash. As Erin Manning says, in moving the body and the space vibrate with potential relationships and affects (*Relationescapes* 13). Such a walk is capable of being expansive without necessarily getting lost or a losing of myself, becoming a spatial practice that “slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (De Certeau 93). Eventually I arrive at “B”, but it has become on some level a different I, a different city to when I set out.

Movement fundamentally disturbs boundaries. It complicates and disrupts established relations (social, physical and mental), multiplies and creates new immanent connection – relation in-the-act – and produces the virtual, extending the potential of the body in space. Walking is one such simple and everyday activity capable of folding body into the world, world into body, as it excites and operates processes of creative disruption. It is, in the broadest sense, a parasitic tactic for the disruption of social, physical and mental structuring and excessive stratification of habit that turns an attentive adventure of a walk into a rote exercise. Habits, as shortcuts or contractions of processes of learning are of course to some degree necessary, else we would have to relearn to walk and tie our shoelaces every day. Arakawa and Gins, however, propose that we must find procedures to either “escape or ‘reenter’ habitual patterns of action”, thus reinvigorating

our attention to these processes of contraction, and/or exploring alternative routes, in order to find space to reinvent both processes and outcomes (62).

In that light I first chart a concept of walking as a “minor practice” - what Michel De Certeau calls a “soft resistance” - that seeks a creative flight from what he conceives as the structuring homogeneity of the city. This is a flight also from what Deleuze and Guattari term bodies’ own capacity for “micro-fascism” (215) – their ability to succumb to stasis and a loss of connectivity and breadth of expression. Walking, I will argue, is intrinsically inventive and relational: to space, to the body itself, and to the potential that it both creates and differentiates from. Walking as a soft resistance is, as Highmore articulates, positioned less as direct opposition to structure and more as that which “hinders and dissipates the energy flows of domination” (152). As Manning states, movement is a temporal, re-combinatory operation of becoming that decenters subjectivity and troubles stasis (*Relationscapes* 23). A moving body, she argues, “is always more than one”, more than a fixed identity (Ibid. 63-4). For De Certeau, walking through the city recreates the space itself as more than a fixed “geometrical or geographical space” (93), producing instead a relational and contingent experience.

2. Making the world/performing space

‘The nomadic walker sees the city as a boundless stage where the self can be sacrificed and shattered, and where new ecstatic intensities can be experienced.’ (Lavery, in Mock 43)

In “walking the city” De Certeau examines ways that the deterritorialization of place and its restructuring as space is enabled through the act of walking and the positive personal and social implications of these movements (chapter VII). This is positioned as a “tactic”, a fragmentary insinuation into place to reappropriate it “without taking over in its entirety” (xiv, xix). Thus the tactic destabilizes from below without necessarily imposing new order, remaining immanent and essentially *per*-formed rather than a preformed strategy (xx). The multiple, personal and improvised walks performed within the city are a tactic by which the pedestrians “create for themselves a sphere of autonomous action within the constraints that are imposed on them” (Lamant 720). Walking reconstructs immanent space - experienced as contingent, composed of “vectors of direction, velocities, time variables...intersections of mobile elements” (De Certeau 117) - rather than space as a static, fixed or territorialized “place” that is the “law of the proper” (Ibid. 117). The walker reconfigures the impersonal, visible and knowable space of the city streets through “weak” methods born of creativity rather than passive or active resistance (Lamant 720), replacing the productive and pre-structured space with an improvisational experience that operates inside the established systems.¹ That is, there is to some extent a reconfiguring of relations out of existing entities, kept then by the continual differential action of movement at this point of splitting, rejoining and layering. It is a technique of

¹ In writing this I am aware of the somewhat simplistic and potentially problematic romantic image of the walker in De Certeau’s writing, who at times is perilously close to the image of the *flâneur* with its implications of at best idle dandyism. De Certeau’s walker remains untroubled by social constructions of the actual city (race, class, gender) that would potentially constrain her actions. See Driscoll, Morris, and Beryl for such critiques. (Cf Brian Morris, for a measured and sympathetic debate on this issue).

differentiation, positioned not as a negative to the actualized, but as a creative derivation from that which is already in existence that extends and complicates (Deleuze xx): a positive parasitism.

Movement, Manning argues, “allows us to approach (dialectical concepts) from another perspective: a shifting one” (*Relationescapes* 14-15). Walking here invites an intimacy and active engagement with the singularities composing an experience that splits the homogenizing actions of the city. The streets that I navigate or describe through remembered movements and sensations might perhaps disrupt any idea of an absolute organization of space with my shifting experience over time. Instead they become a “story, jerrybuilt out of elements” that is both “allusive and fragmentary” (De Certeau 102), layering and splitting the existing structure, filling the streets with forests of “desires and goals” (Ibid. xxi), and making the world habitable. An “in-between” is created that allows a movement, a flow of forces, bodies, affects, information. This in-between, forever active in walking, is the space where movement moves the body beyond identity. It is a force of becoming that outstrips the molar and the forces of cohesion (Grosz 92), an intensity that is felt as an “experiential duration that dislodges any concept of universal time” (Manning, *Relationescapes* 23).

The urgency of movement and the complex negotiations required to enter or exit a peak hour train, for example, brings to my consciousness the continual negotiations and collective reconfiguring of space required by moving in the city – calculating who will allow passage, who must edged around, intuiting minute adjustments of tempo and posture to keep a free space ahead. Positional information comes at my body from all directions as I compose a provisional line through the chaos, and premeditated, planned paths quickly become redundant in this situation. With every step the space available - the virtual possibilities for the next move – shift and both my body and my path must be renegotiated. It is in such moments that require an intensely improvised movement that the space might begin to approach a contingent, immanent quality that Manning describes (*Relationescapes*, 13-15, 29-34). This space might be, Manning argues, more than just a relational connection to space (my body shaped by its encounter with the environment), as the space “*configur[es]* as the body *recomposes*” (Ibid 15).

3. Worlding the body

Walking the space of the city proposes and conditions both movements and the body as it is projected and diffused into space. Environments provide conditions – platforms of potential actions - that affect the actions of the walker. A park bench, for example, that creates anticipation of a certain habitual action (sitting), and in this way works to order the movement in the space (Massumi, *Urban appointment* 4). These conditions can enable as much as they constrain, proposing new actions. Propositions, as “lures towards feelings” (Whitehead, *Process and reality* 259), construct potential from which events can draw, providing a virtual field from which the actualized differentiates. For example, a patch of grass might invite many responses from the walker: a place to lie down on, the danger of snakes in summer, wetness to be avoided after rain, the smell of the countryside and so on. These propositions potentially operate on multiple levels – sensorial (softness underfoot/ wetness/smells), affectual (inviting tiredness and an urge to rest, fear of danger hiding, joy of a free space to play), and kinesthetic (sitting, lying,

running, walking). The conditions of the space do not necessarily impose a habitual bodily response; rather, they can suggest, nudge, coax, lure or afford a range of potential actions into being. Such spatial propositions invite individual responses – actualities - triggered by common constraints, but which are nevertheless always at least on some levels singular.

Certain activities and spaces are designed with such disruptions in mind. These require an active and attentive care that brings to the fore the processes of connection and projection into the world. This active making of movement-body-space is the moment in which walking can most productively create through disruption to preconceived habits and structures.

4. Landing sites

“(O)ur very exploratory movements about [a thing] leave their marks on it.” (Lingis, Sensation 35)

The moving body creates what Arakawa and Gins call “landing sites”, an in-process “portioning out” (5) of the space to deposit sited awareness around them (7). The body, they state, takes cues from the environment to “assign volume and a host of other particulars to the world” (7). These sites are a way that the body contributes to and distributes itself into the world: a “holding of the world” in attention (81). They are a process by which differentiation of the field occurs, to different degrees of specification and diffusion. This, Arakawa and Gins argue, it is less a partitioning of the world, and more a process by which, perceptually and kinesthetically, the world and a body are immanently enfolded. In this sense the body not only differentiates the *space* through movement, but also distributes *itself* within the space, contributing its awareness towards things in the world (81).

Processes of landing sites then productively disrupt the limits of the body, constructing through dispersion a new extended, enriched potential body-ing. These projected landing sites fold, nest, diffuse and focus dynamically while the body moves. It is a constant creative noisy process splitting stable relations. Landing sites work to enrich experience with a potential further fielding of body in the world that ensures a “more than” of the kinesthetic body that is always dispersing and always reorganizing.

In a space foreign to me or one in which spatial relations do not remain stable, this process becomes more consciously attended to, but even in a familiar space one can notice the processes by which the space-body-movement relation enfolds the body and object/world into shared individuations. Entering a room I begin to create landing sites, depositing my awareness and body-potential to varying degrees of clarity in the space. A change in texture or resistance underfoot creates a foot-carpet site, background music sites attention vaguely in the direction of the radio. The chair in my way concentrates attention not only on the object itself and the chair-body kinesthetic potential (stopping, leaning, sitting down, a virtual becoming-with of chair/body that makes the chair also a bit body and body a bit chair), but also on the kinesthetic possibilities of surrounding floor space (the potential of walking around the chair). Attention is distributed in both the more physically concrete (arrangements of furniture) and on a more vague and diffuse level the ephemeral (reflections of light on surfaces, affectual tonalities). Landing sites

move through, over, around and inside other landing sites, each divisible into smaller sites, continually complicating relations as the body moves and redistributes itself in the environment (the floor board that creaks becomes a more defined site beyond the general distribution of “floor-ness”, for example).

These landing sites are in-the-making – a “tending towards relation”, as Manning says (*Always* 12). As I move through the space they make such navigation possible and begin to propose relational and kinesthetic possibilities. The landing site I deposit on the door opposite not only creates a site of attention, but also wraps body and door in potential future kinesthetic relation (my exit from the room). Vision here is haptic and kinesthetic, far from the role De Certeau assigns to it as a distancing and totalizing mechanism inextricably linked to power (92-3), “the optic array...not only provid[ing] base information but also the possibilities for action on the basis of that information” (Gibson in Mock 96).

5. Differentiating the body

“It is the mobility of life – its productive potential – that gives it its seemingly infinite rang of specific virtual and actual individuations.” (Murphie 1)

As movement can disrupt and reconfigure relations to space and extend the body into space so to the body within itself becomes differentiated through walking. Imagine perhaps that I am standing stationary at my door, about to walk out. Except that the “stillness” undermines itself. I am already always moving, Manning argues, in two important ways (*Relationescapes* 43-47). Firstly in that in a literal, physical sense the body is always in a state of intensive micro-movement, and secondly in the continuous gathering and incipient pull towards movement of the virtual. As I am about to begin, there are, Manning proposes, milieus of virtual possibilities that are composing themselves, creating tensions, an “elasticity” that is released as the possibilities resolve into an actual movement. The choices are not exactly infinite (in that not everything is physically possible), but are limitless in that they are being endlessly created, and in that each choice generates another equally complex series of choices. They resolve in the satisfaction of an actual event (my left foot takes a small step straight ahead), and all the virtual movements perish. This event “propels the preacceleration of a new occasion” (Ibid. 38-9). That is, the new sets of virtualities begin composing possibilities for the next step or micro movement. These virtual movements are shaped by many things (such as the limits of my body, habits, responses to the space and so on), and it is movement here that both generates and selects from the potential actions. Movement here could be seen as cutting across the body (Ibid. 46), connecting and disrupting the actual body’s relation to its larger potential, which is always also reconstituted by the activity. It is a technique by which a body accomplishes the shifting beyond itself of ongoing individuation. Here movement, in activating ongoing processes of becoming, is an active driver of this differentiation from stasis.

5. *Compressionism*

Nathaniel Stern's ongoing *Compressionism* performances (2005 - present) comprise a customized scanner- battery pack-laptop assemblage worn or carried as the artist moves the scanner surface across objects and surfaces while the scanning is taking place to "perform images into existence" (Stern) through a kind of seeing-moving in an environment. These scans are literally a "compression" of the temporal act into a two dimensional image, operating as an affectual expression rather than representation of the act. Here I am going to restrict my discussion to a particular iteration of the work in Montreal in 2012 in which I participated, where the scans were performed collaboratively in the city streets as part of a larger art project.

In discussing the work I want to ask what the performance of *Compressionism* adds to the already dynamic becomings of the moving body in space. Or rather, how it might reinvent and draw out these processes, doubling them with new levels of perception and consciousness. *Compressionism*, I want to argue, here altered not being, but the *manner* of being (Guattari, *Chaosmosis* 109): it performed the body (and space) in a new way, not to replace, but on top of and enfolded with previous space-body modulations. It challenged habits, provoking participants to intuit new ways of being on a practical, perceptual and conceptual level.

5.1 *Compressing* the city

Performing *Compressionism* was a somewhat awkward act. The size and weight of the scanner required that it be held in both hands away from the body, with feet braced to maintain balance. This created a tension running through bodies stretching towards objects to be scanned. Keeping the scanner steady required a certain clumsy cooperation between both scanner and bodyweight as counter-balance, and between the holder of the scanner and the person carrying the battery pack and laptop capturing the image. There was perhaps a zone of intimacy established, both between the collaborating bodies and between the scanner-body assemblage and the objects being scanned. Here scanner, body and space conjoined through the act of moving.

Compressionism involved a close investigative walking of the inner city landscape, through back alleys, park space, along surfaces of objects, architecture and bodies. It was an exploration of texture, colour and contrast held together by the collective movement of the bodies-scanner machine. The intensive, explorative, close visioning movement in the city enacted through the *Compressionist* event was composed and remembered through the personal, out of actions, disjunctions and sensations. The colour of a particular leaf, textural shifts in a building's surface, the passage from tree to wall to doorway, the incidental sounds heard while waiting for the scanner to warm up, the effort of a particular stretching of the body coloured one's memory of the event. It was a fragmentary mapping of a space – a haptic or closely focused narration carving intimate, personal actions onto the surface of the city space². The haptic here showed its potential in bringing to attention not just to the surface of the object, but also, in its engagement with multiple sensations, to participants' own interior/exterior boundaries (Marks, cited in Jones, 143). This was perhaps most intensely experienced here in the

² Perhaps also a 'joy' – in the incidental, in the freer explorative possibilities that *Compressionism* give permission to indulge in. Serres posits joy of body-in-world as a kind of sixth sense, composed from the immersion in the other senses (Serres, *The five senses* 311-345).

slow traversing of the surface of the object being imaged by scanner/hands as attention was focused both on sensations in extremities of the body and on the carefully composed space between scanner and object that needed to be retained.

In its intensive searching out of the incidental and the singular, the body-scanner ignored the established networks of movement (paths, roads, doors). Bodies improvised new literal connective passages that opened gaps in between such systems of place, moving up walls, through holes, over horizontal, vertical and angled surfaces, backtracking to points of interest, as it also invented new affectual connections. This was a space experienced “not [as] a framework, an order or an arrangement, but [as] a nexus of levels...[found] not by moving toward them but by moving with them” (Lingis, *Sensation* 33). We now understood the space scanned not through a stable image or representation, but through the movement of bodies – as a “vital space” mapped through experience (Lingis, *The imperative* 145).

5.2 dancing objects

“Each time an organ – or function – is liberated from an old duty, it invents.” (Serres, *The five senses* 344)

As participants slowly moved the scanner over the surface of an object, intensities of felt contours and small deviations were translated into larger movement of the hands and arms. The awareness of movement was heightened too in the fact that the object itself was always at least partially obscured from view by the scanner. *Compressionism*, in literalizing an exploration of disturbances to the ocular, created an imaging that was in the service of and serviced by a synesthetic coalescence of incidental sensations. It was a blind, groping approximation of the shape that was performed: a scramble of image memory, a drawing of the shape with the hands, a constant reforming of posture and balance, and an attention to the sound of the scanner’s processes that resonated with the rhythms of bodies moving. Each object invited potential movements in relation to its form. For the minute or two before the laptop compressed the data into a viewable image the event existed on its own as an awkward dancing of the object, an approximation of vision performed by a loose assemblage of other senses, drawn together by movement.

Compressionism here created a new sense machine, made new relation between senses through movement, and approximated a new eye-organ out of hands/feet/balance. Vision here no longer resided in the eyes seeing the operations of the body-scanner production. Rather, in movement it was situated (as Serres proposes it might be), “along the tendons and the muscles” (*Variations on the body* unpaginated). What would normally be felt as a movement of the eyes over an object (still a movement on a smaller scale – the eyes traversing) was explicitly performed (danced), brought to the fore through a shift in registers from eye to full body movement that inscribed in space the emerging relation. Here the body-scanner assemblage performed sight in space, and the image was burned into a new retina: the scanner-laptop machine.

The *Compressionism* event deposited a series of (mobile) landing sites – both those defined and more consciously prehended, and those diffused around the body/space event in addition to those that walking the space might normally require. Part of the direct bodily attention landed in the held scanner as the mechanics of holding and operating the

scanner forced new improvisation of relations and landing sites within the body. This was perceived perhaps in the attention becoming centered in the muscles of the hands and arms, in the feet maintaining balance (depositing more defined sites of attentiveness onto the surface, gradient and texture of the ground), and in the new and mobile collaborations of sensory input informing the movements that caused unexpected intensified conjunctions and the cooperation of surfaces beyond usual functioning. Less qualified sites were deposited in the vague attention to those carrying the rest of the equipment with whom movements were coordinated, and to the space around the object or surface being scanned. A more general field of unfocused attention fuzzily composed itself around the wider space of the activity that bodies negotiated while focusing on the object being scanned. The more defined and useful landing sites were in the mobile spaces in-between object and scanner surfaces, while the unseen object itself remained a more generalized “imaging” landing site, in Arakawa and Gins’ terms, nesting within the particular while resisting definition.

5.3 Resistance and accommodation

The awkward shifts out of habitual postural schema that the performance demanded were, I think, fundamental to the immanent rearranging of the body that was produced. Posture, as Lingis notes, is negotiated between two poles: internal organization and tasks being performed. In performing *Compressionism* perhaps the demands of the task encouraged a shift towards temporal organization that disrupted and differentiated from any habitual structuring (*Sensation* 55). The additional postural and gravitation burden of both carrying, balancing and concentrating on the scanning equipment brought these habitual postural relations and the disruptions to them to a consciousness that gave a heightened awareness. A sense of doubling of experience feeding back into its unfolding was evoked, with the presence of both a felt postural shift and a reflexive feeling of the feeling, working to moderate movements again.

Compressionism might be seen to address a heightened awareness of, and engagement with the processes of the virtual in two ways. Firstly in that it literally created new potential that the assemblage’s heterogeneous component parts did not hold on their own, such as new capacities for seeing, new postural explorations, new prehensive potential to trigger actualizations. Secondly in that it promoted, through continued disruption of any settling into habit, a kind of suspension in its own continued unfolding that made the ongoing individuations perceptually felt.

The assembling of body and scanner equipment provided new levels of potential intensive sensory difference. For example, the rhythms of the scanner head moving that the body attempted to follow but never quite duplicated, or the new decentering weight to resisted or fallen towards, and new restrictions on ranges of movements of the limbs all created tensions and difficulties. It was perhaps a system “advanc[ing] through problems and not through victories, through failures and rectifications rather than by surpassing” (Serres *Conversations* 188), a system charged with new indeterminacy. It required a new attention that drew the creative processes of worlding and bodying that are always occurring to a perceptible level. That is, they were felt *in-process* as much as in reflection – through the increased intensity they demanded and produced.

6. Conclusion

Compressionism, I am proposing, constructed new challenges, new tests of the body in environment. These invited creativity into the processes of moving, interacting and seeing, and an augmented or composite awareness larger than that of the body on its own prior to the event. Thus the body's field of sensitivities had been reconstructed.

It was in movement that the body, equipment and space were combined, and it was through the continued movements that they were forced to improvise new combinatory possibilities. In this way movement was the producer of relation. What *Compressionism* produced as its primary outcome was new expressions of movement, new improvisational collaborations between bodies/scanner/objects/surfaces/space that reconstituted them all as enactive and extensively relational, both collective and singular (Manning, *Relationescapes* 22).

Compressionism accentuated a felt quality of "not knowing": not knowing what was being captured, not knowing exactly what the scanner was pointing at, not knowing the start and end points exactly of the action, not knowing quite what constituted the body anymore or what delineated body/equipment/ space. This was not a "lack" as such, but, as Stengers notes, a "characterization of a mode of working" (286) that foregrounded the multiplicitous nature of the point of actual/virtual at which we moved. Not knowing was here commissioned as a technique of production and a style of "tentativeness", positioning bodies at the "edge of virtuality" (Manning, *Relationescapes* 35) that movement stretched out, gathering bodies into emergent and dynamic new ecologies.

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