

Geo-interventions: walking art, 'deep-mapping' and the biography of place

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Abstract

As interest in spatial intervention continues to spread among scholars of geography and cognate disciplines, creative encounters with topography and attempts to 'record and represent the grain and patina of place'¹ become of growing importance. Creative methods and visual practices appear ever more prevalent amongst studies of the landscape as new methods of producing representations in and of place continue to evolve. Whether reflecting, depicting or politicising place, Art represents a set of intrinsically spatial practices. One such practice is the method of walking, of roaming through place(s). Walking allows for an inherently physical connection with the landscape through the placing of the body in the environment and the necessary contact between body and earth. Walking affords the practitioner an opportunity to narrate place from the inside, to challenge boundaries, to reimagine margins, and to intervene in place(s). This paper looks at the role of the artist as cartographer, as mapper of places and their particularities. Looking specifically at the practices of walking artists and the process of 'deep mapping', I will discuss the role of the practitioner in the creation and narration of a biography of place.

¹ Mike Pearson, and Michael Shanks. *Theatre/Archaeology*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Place: the texture of the landscape

In way of introduction, I wanted to briefly consider the following question: *What do we mean when we talk about place?* Certainly, place has undergone myriad conceptualizations and we can be sure that often, when one speaks of place, they have a particular 'place' or places in mind. Geographers have long struggled to define the term, with exemplary definitions seen in the likes of Yi-fu Tuan 's positing of place as pauses in the flow of space (Tuan, 1977), and in the non-representational theory of Nigel Thrift, that conjectures places as 'stages of intensity' within an ever shifting strata, a 'fusion between human and natural orders' (Thrift, 1996, p. 289). John Agnew (1987) defines place as a threefold process, creating distinctions between (1) physical place (*location*) (2) the relationship of a particular site to the spatial boundaries that surround it (*locale*) (3) the cognitive and physical interaction between human and site, of personal and emotional attachments (*sense of place*). Conceptions of place, and space, are myriad, to say the least, and we can be sure that when the geographer approaches the subject, she or he may very well be following a very different trajectory to the artist. However, as a point of entry into the discussion of place and art here, we might turn to a specific claim of place made by the geographer Edward Relph.

In his 1976 *Place and Placelessness*, Relph describes places as 'centres of our immediate experiences of the world' (Relph, 1976, p. 141). If one is to view art spatially, then it is apt to do so through this framework – as art itself works to capture, re-present and even create such nodes of experience. Place, and indeed places, one might argue, are the texture of space, the points of encounter that, as individuals, we flow through, pass between and work to create. Places provide points at which we become aware of our embeddedness, our dwelling within and upon the world. The immediacy of place which Relph refers to, its grasping of our senses, is key to art's working as a geo-intervention.

The use of the prefix 'geo' here, rather than the more popularized 'spatial' in describing specific types of artistic intervention, is an attempt to more precisely articulate particular topographic art forms as being *en-placed*. Where the work created aims to produce, map out, or provide a reading of what I term the *biography of place*, that is, its history, encounters, its potential. In this sense, *Geographia*, or 'earth description', more correctly attends to what certain practitioners are doing, and that is intervening in place rather than speaking to a greater, more abstract, spatiality. These types of work are often rooted, locative and even cartographic in nature. Furthermore, it can be suggested that these types of topocentric artworks can occur twofold: firstly, as representations of place and secondly, as representations in place.

One final comment on place before I move on, is that site-specific and place-based art itself can allow us to navigate place – such a practice provides opportunities for an alternative style of cartography, one which, as Pearson and Shanks (2011) suggest, can allow us to more accurately record the texture or 'patina of place'. Such is the role of 'deep mapping', a creative practice that provides us with such a possibility to map place 'deeply', to curate a set of applied topological examinations through site performance and artistic interpretation that offer a rich and multifaceted view of place to the viewer.

Deep-Mapping

Indeed, the work of the cartographer can be seen as intrinsically bound up with a practice of creative distillation, a reduction of the physical to the symbolic, the perplexing to the navigable. Farley and Symmons-Roberts describe the cartographic process as such in their work on marginal landscapes, mapping, they suggest 'is always an abstraction' (2012, p.16). But whereas the type of cartographic practice referred to by Farley and Symmons-Roberts depends on abstraction, deep-mapping is rather more focused on the capturing of detail – emphasising narrative over utility. Deep mapping, though a rather nebulous term, can be used to describe the process of recording and presenting a sensorially rich and navigable description of place, one that subverts the abstraction of traditional map-making in favour of narrating the

experiential. And whilst many practitioners of deep mapping do so within a literary tradition, there are those whose works are more physical or performative in nature.

The work of Ukrainian artist Stanislava Pinchuk functions in such a manner. Pinchuk produces detailed monotone maps of spaces of recent trauma, creating topographical representations through repetitive pin-hole patterning. Her exhibited works are often site specific and though created through a mapping via abstraction, they provide the 'reader' of the work with an experience much richer than that of contour lines and text alone. Most recently, Pinchuk has used pin-hole mappings to create spatial readings of both the Ukrainian civil war and the Fukushima exclusion zone in Japan. In both collections, maps pricked into white card are used to narrate a story of place, to detail its biography.

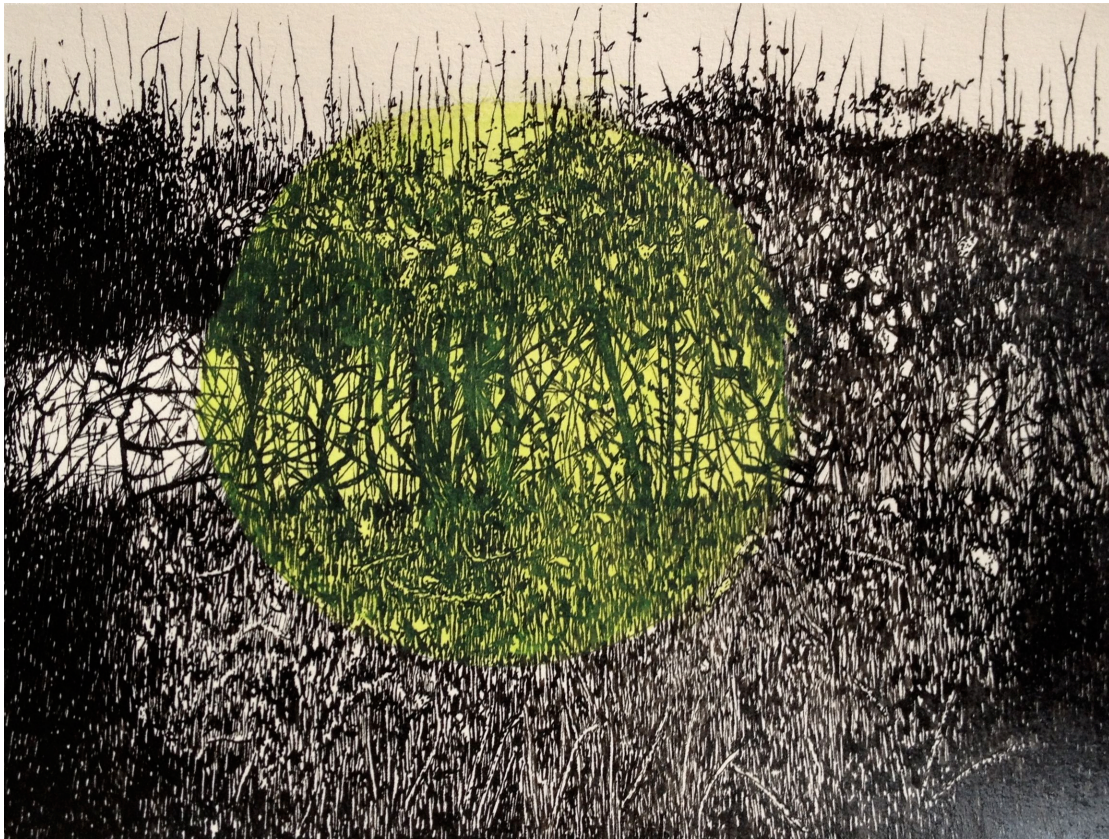


Fig. i. Clare Parfree, *Hedge South: hedgery witchery jiggery pokery*, pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 11×15 cm (2015).

A further example of deep mapping in relation to art practice can be seen in the works of London-based artist Clare Parfree, whose work aims to both draw out and destabilise narratives of place (Fig. i). Walking is central to Parfree's practice – her work develops from a creative mobility, a movement through the landscape in search of, what she describes as, 'a glimmer of strangeness' (Parfree and Thurgill, 2015). Parfree's practice aims at producing auto-responses to place and usually deals with a teasing out of the uncanny or folkloric aspects of a site.

Walking becomes a particular method in the production of her work, one on which the works produced are dependent upon in order to realise the hidden, mythologised aspects of sites. In doing so, the artist is able to produce works that seek to map out and respond to the affective nature of place. To be sure, Parfree is not alone in her predilection for creating work via walking and seeing, indeed the act of roaming is pivotal to the work of a wide range of artists. So what can be said about walking itself and how might we view it as method for creativity in its own right?

Walking as method

There is a certain type of artwork that has been fostered through the practice of walking, of being out and about in the landscape on foot. Perambulatory practices call for an obvious physical dedication to the environment; the body is forced to quite literally move in and around other objects, to rise and fall with the elevations and depths of the landscape. There is a restriction in speed, or at least the available speed at which one can attain when walking, and so we see an associated widening of the perceptive scope. In moments where we might otherwise be sensorially deprived, a reliance upon the unfolding of the landscape becomes abundantly clear (Figure. ii). That is to say, that a slow transition through or across the ground leaves more time for intake of the surroundings. Walking allows for an inherently physical connection with the landscape through the placing of the body in the environment and the necessary contact between body and earth.



Fig. ii. James Thurgill, *Epping: 3*, 2015

In his 2002 essay on ascending Glastonbury Tor, a large hill of clay and sandstone in the west of England, Jon Wylie discusses ontologies of visual perception as produced through what he describes as the 'incarnate subjectivity' (p. 441) engendered through acts of ascension in the environment, of being in-place. Following a description of both the social and mythical histories of the site, Wylie goes on to detail the act of walking the Tor, providing an annotated narrative of the walk underpinned by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (1962, 1968). Though Wylie privileges acts of perambulatory elevation, the power of walking itself is carried throughout the paper and the positioning of the moving body as a point of entanglement with the landscape only serves to reiterate that walking brings about an embodied knowledge, inaccessible through other forms of movement. Commenting on the way we encounter place through the method of walking, Jane Rendell (2006) states:

When we walk we encounter sites in motion and in relationship to one another, suggesting that things seem different depending on whether we are 'coming to' or 'going from'. Rather than proceed from the observational, to the analytic, to the propositional, by intervening and moving through a site, walking proposes a [...] method that enables one to imagine beyond the present condition without freezing possibility into form.
(p. 188)

This sense of the momentum offered by pedestrianism, of allowing the world to unfold before you as you pass through it, is what makes walking a unique practice in the understanding of place and space. Rendell goes on to summarise that '(t)hrough the act of walking new connections are made and remade, physically and conceptually, over time and through space (*ibid*, p. 190). Connections to place are important not only in providing us with a sense of belonging, of homeliness, but because they allow us to learn through an immersion in the environment; offering a position which confirms our embeddedness within the landscape.

The writer and naturalist W. H. Hudson worked extensively on research projects undertaken by foot, stating that 'with other means of getting about I do not feel so native to the earth' (1909, p. 25). Hudson reiterates the idea that there is a certain confirmation of emplacement in the environment that exists only for the walker, in being physically connected to the ground. Hudson goes on:

'in walking, even in the poor way, when, on account of physical weakness, it was often out of pain and a weariness, there are alleviations which may be more to us than positive pleasures, and scenes to delight the eye that are missed by the wheelman in his haste, or but dimly seen or vaguely surmised in passing – green refreshing nooks and crystal streamlets, and shadowy woodland depths with glimpses of a blue sky beyond – all in the wilderness of the human heart.
(1909, p. 32)

This romanticising of the walking experience, emphatic as it seems, has been the motivation for myriad writers, artists and enthusiasts to attempt similar engagements with the landscape. It is both the slowed pace and the opportunity to observe the world in detail that privileges walking as the method of choice for many of those who wish to explore their surroundings. Tim Edensor (2006) posits that the practice of walking:

allow(s) for a particular experiential flow of successive moments of detachment and attachment, physical immersion and mental wandering, memory, recognition and strangeness.
(p. 70)

Such a sentiment is shared in the contemporary travel writings of Robert Macfarlane, who's *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012) works through a personal rediscovering of the landscape through its ancient trackways, routes of pilgrimage and drove-ways. What Macfarlane presents is an immersive account of being-in-the-landscape, and much like the romantic accounts of Hudson, positions walking as the salient method in accurately experiencing and recording his surroundings. Macfarlane notes in the introduction to the text that much of the thinking behind what is written 'was only possible – by foot' (xi). Macfarlane places much emphasis on the role of travelling through the walk, as well as the mystery of paths themselves; 'The way-marking of old paths' he states, 'is an esoteric lore of its own' (2012, p. 15).

The esotericism of pathways is one which is then, only knowable through travelling in or amongst them and one which calls for both a placial immersion and spatial transgression, for following markers and moving beyond them. Movement on foot takes us within and through places; walking affords us time, to observe and to reflect; to see and to hear; to touch and to smell. Walking allows us to not only reflect on but to react to place; a view that is crystalised in the contemporary works of psychogeography, a so-called psychic engagement with place (See Home, 1997; Pinder, 2005; Self, 2007; Papadimitriou, 2012), that explores 'the behavioral impact of [...] place' (Coverley, 2006, p.10).

Psychogeography necessitates walking in order to gain the desired psychical and physical bodily responses that coerce the walker into following new routes, reimagining urban spaces and being led by the built environment. The *derive*, a predominant psychogeographical technique that requires drifting or psychically led spontaneous changes in trajectory, is a method of movement that could not be realistically, nor safely, replicated by any mode of travel other than by foot. Indeed, one gains a far richer topological perspective through walking, moving the body both within and around built spaces, over and under, in and out. But despite the packaging of walking in psychogeographic practice as an unfiltered response, it nevertheless works to produce an outcome. Whether it be photographic, cinematic, literary or performance

based; walking here is not merely for discovery and re-imagination but for artistic and counter-political production. In this sense, we might well look again to the works of art's practitioners and theorists for examples of how walking might be used to form creative interventions with place and landscape, to provide a malleable secondary response to a movement through the environment.

Much of the work of land artist Richard Long, for example, is firmly embedded in walking practice. Long uses the natural landscape as the canvas for his work, problematizing notions of trace, occupation and fixity within it. Works such as *A line made by walking* (1967) (Fig. xviii) and *England* (1967) were produced by walking repeatedly in linear patterns across open meadows; the effect being the flattening of grass and flowers which led to a temporary performative sculpture in the landscape; the production of a falsified trace of habitus.

In other works, *Sea Level Waterline* (1982) and *Brushed Path: A Line in Nepal* (1983), Long has repeated the walking process through and across a beach and forest respectively (and over a course of twenty one days for the latter), each time resulting in the adding of a human centered narrative to a place that had otherwise been remote and uninhabited. Not all of Long's lines are produced in this way, others are sculptured through natural materials that have been scavenged from the vicinity of the artwork and invariably arranged in the formation of straight line, circle or spiral. The effects of the walking and gathering and arranging of objects, whether native to the landscape or not, to create linear patternation, works to engender a notion of emplacement, of positioning the human body –whether absent or present in the artwork itself– within the landscape through suggestion of habitus and ritual.

The use of walking as artistic method is well documented within creative geography, with much work being done on the links between pedestrianism, place and creative production (Romney, 1987; Pinder, 2001; Butler, 2006; Edensor, 2006; Hawkins, 2011; Lorimer, 2011; Middleton, 2011; Wylie, 2005). Much of the work places an emphasis on pedestrianism as an immersive embodied practice, what Tim Ingold (2004) describes as a weaving through place. This sense of a negotiated entanglement firmly places the human body in place and purports an embeddedness of the practitioner within the site of enquiry. Such was the appeal for geographers during the humanistic turn of the latter half of the twentieth century who began to focus upon the positioning and connections of the human body within the wider natural landscape (Entrikin, 1976; Tuan, 1976; Cosgrove, 1978; Ley, 1981; Pocock, 1981; Daniels, 1985). Humanistic geographies employed place-based analysis in order to respond to people-place relationships. Tuan (1976) places the role of humanistic geography as gaining 'an understanding of the human world by studying people's relations with nature, their geographical behavior as well as their feelings and ideas in regard to space and place' (p. 266). In terms of practice then, no method brings the researcher or practitioner closer to place and

nature than walking. Cultural histories of walking (Nicholson, 2010; Solnit, 2002) illustrate how engrained walking practice is upon myriad cultural endeavors; artistic (Long, 1967; Knowles, 2013), literary (Bernhard, 1971; Auster, 1987; Sebald, 1998; Sinclair, 2002) and academic alike (Tilley, 1994; Wolfreys: 2007; Ingold and Vergunst, 2008; Pink, 2008; Cheng, 2013).

In conclusion then, walking offers us a unique practice both for getting to grips with the landscape and, moreover, for gaining a deeper understanding of place (and space) through an embodied medium that allows us a passing in and between of sites, stimulating an observing, sensing and engaging with them. Perambulatory practice, that is to say walking as creative method, like that seen in works by the likes of Long and Parfree, forms a negotiation of place that can only happen at ground level. Creative responses to place, as shown in the works of deep mappings, bring a sense of embeddedness, of emplacement to the viewer and the artwork alike. But, of greater import still, is the ability of the place-based artwork to provide us with a narrative or biography of place, to highlight, tease out and elucidate the many affectual qualities that place affords us and to crystalize them in material form. In doing so, art holds the capacity to bring us closer to the rich, immediacy of experiencing places and therefore provides us with a greater sense of what it means to dwell within and upon them.

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