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Still Listening?

By Mark Peter Wright

Abstract

This paper is written through the combined experience of my own artistic practice and periods of immobility during 2010-2011. With it, I aim to draw attention towards physical, mental and political states of stillness and absorption. I will show how a period of relative physical stasis impacted upon my own practice and prompted a counter project to the now dominant methodology of soundwalking. Through personal reflection, I will demonstrate how walking is not always an entitled right; how class, gender and geopolitical forces impact upon a walk; and how the methodology itself may even perpetuate a culture of pursuit and entrapment. In doing so, the paper re-evaluates the politics and aesthetics of soundwalking whilst optimistically proposing listening as a form of walking.

Keywords

Still Listening, Soundwalking, Walking, Practice-based, Diary, Mark Peter Wright.

Preamble

Between 2010 and 2011 I was periodically incapacitated due to severe nerve pain in my lower back. Apparently, a combination of bad posture and years of repetitive lifting was to blame. I received intensive physiotherapy throughout the two years, and now, to some extent, I have 'managed' the situation; thanks in large part to a regular routine of stretching and bodily self-surveillance.

During this period, walking was not always an option, never mind carrying equipment or manoeuvring my body into different shapes and spaces. Feeling excluded from ambulatory methods such as "soundwalking" – a practice that involves the embodied cognitive activities of walking, listening and recording – I distinctly remember my focus scaling inwards, towards a more sedentary and corporeal sense of being. I thought about duration, stasis and the potential for small-scale studies of areas – no larger than my own body. With few practical options available I began to develop a counter project, one based on an appreciation of stillness and the nuances of absorption: of listening without moving. I developed a series of photographs under the title, *Exchanges* (2011). By necessity the work required a certain methodology. I would stand or sit in one place and listen. When I felt I wanted, or needed (physically) to leave, I photographed the surface below where I had been. Later that evening I would recall what I had heard, noting down a few simple, prose-like lines. The first outing of the project occurred during a symposium organised by CRiSAP (Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice) named *The Uses and Abuses of Field Recording* held in London, 2011. Along with seven other practitioners I was asked to consider, for whatever reason, how I used microphones to capture something of the world (Carlyle & Lane 2011). I decided to present *Exchanges* under the title: *I Do Not Want to Press Record*. During the presentation I read the accompanying written text aloud, with each image appearing for twenty seconds. The last line read, "I do not want to press record, I want to listen" (Wright 2011). Beneath is an example of how each photograph related to the fragments of spoken text.

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Mark Peter Wright; *Exchanges*; 2013; Image courtesy of the artist. See [Still Listening?](#) for details.

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EXCHANGES, MARK PETER WRIGHT, 2013.

A selection of these images has since been included in the recent publication: *On Listening* (2013). In the book, the text is displayed in a more poetic and instructional manner, based on the methodological process itself rather than descriptions of the listening event. The accompanying words now read: "To remain in one place, over duration and listen. What is imposed? What is lost? What remains?" (Wright 2011 cited in Carlyle & Lane 2013, pp.37-40).

Remote Walking

Prior to my back injury, walking had been an activity I had taken for granted. Growing up in a rural area of the North Yorkshire Moors (UK) I was more than used to walking. Getting from A to B meant leaving a small secluded village with next to no transport by literally walking or running to surrounding areas, the distance of which ranged anywhere between 3 and 13 miles. Walking was a consequence of everyday practicality, brought about by remoteness and isolation. Of course I went on other types of walks, those of the more organised kind, where I usually found myself along the ancient moorland paths of the Cleveland Way. I remember these types of walks not necessarily as picturesque, but more through a myriad of felt experience; of wind threatening to pierce my skin; of animal carcasses strewn and decomposing; of distant chemical works billowing smoke into the sky; and of thick, wet mud that threatened to stop me in my tracks. On reflection I am sure much of the work I make today is directly influenced by these walks. Since leaving the area at the age of 18 I have returned consistently to work: more specifically, to listen. For over a decade now I have used field recording as a methodology to investigate the very places in and around where I grew up. Considering my memories of walking it seems logical to assume that I must have employed soundwalking as part that endeavour? However, as I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling during those extended periods of 2010-11, I came to realise that back pain or not, I had built a resistance to walking in my practice. Exactly what was it I was opposing and why?

Finding my Feet

Walking has a complex history, weaved into literature, landscape and culturally specific events and circumstances (Solnit 2002). Through art, walking can be read as inspiration and reverie, prompted by 19th century romantic literature; as anti-art, evidenced through Dada and the Surrealists; as politicised urban drifts, inspired by the Situationists; as sculpture, motivated by Richard Long. The list is as endless as walking itself, and I do not want to get stuck in the well-trodden mud of its history.¹

On reflection, the tradition of virtuous, restorative walking through nature never quite sat right with me. Yes, my childhood walks had idyllic, even picturesque moments, but these memories are also littered with carcasses and reality checks along the way. A slaughterhouse positioned behind my parent's village home certainly offset any romantic inclinations. Human labour, animals and the landscape were almost indivisible: all were embroiled in knots of sweat, wool and mud. Walking was simply part and parcel of this world, a necessary tool inscribed into my feet as much as it was in the pathways and

monuments along the Cleveland Way. Urban traditions of walking, from Dada to the Surrealists, Flâneurs, on to Psycho-geography and the Situationists, also struck a discord with me. My experience was intrinsically tied to rural space, detached from the city and therefore outside the tradition of urban exploration. I was intrigued by the anarchic nature of the Situationists, but (and perhaps naively) I felt excluded by proxy of my own locale – a sort of regional disconnect. Land Art's take on walking went some way to fill the gaps with Richard Long being the obvious torch-bearer (e.g. see Roelstraete 2010). Another artist (more of my own time) who pricked an interest was Christian Phillip Muller. His documented border crossings seemed to comment more on the problematics of freedom and control rather than the rarified portrayal of a solitary stroller (e.g. see Kwon 2004).

Through these art historical examples, walking becomes more than mundane, it functions as a catalytic act: a way to disturb and disrupt, to awaken and invent – change is afoot. If walking enables change, be it physical, mental, political or artistic, it is problematised through societal forms of freedom and restriction. Class, gender race and geography are just four areas that – I would argue – influence the framework that surrounds an individual's 'ability' to walk. The reality of my own walking history was not established through art; it was set in the practical banality of everyday life, and functioned more as a sign of my own locational entrapment than any artistic or political act of invention. I could not find my creative feet amongst any of these reference points. I was still impervious to the histories of walking and as a consequence, resistant to its pragmatic inclusion within my own field recording methodology. Perhaps this can be understood through Rebecca Solnit's quote that states: "the history of both urban and rural walking is a history of freedom and pleasure" (2002, p.173). I certainly felt no pleasure or freedom in the type of walking I had grown up with. Furthermore, what or who, constitutes and controls freedom impacts upon whether or not walking is a pleasurable pursuit.

Kaufman (2001 cited in Johnstone 2008) states, "psycho geography is fundamentally an experience of mobility, applied to space as much to time" (p.95). However, the assumption of mobility can be levelled across all forms of walking, not just psycho geography. This pre-requisite, be it physical, mental, political or geographical, becomes further compromised by a simple yet overriding trait; that more often than not, the historical coordinates for walking are mapped through a masculine lens (Heddon 2010). Not only has physical ability been privileged in walking but by association, so too has gender, class and therefore time and space. The dominant and canonised art historical references cited here do, I believe, teeter on the edge of showing walking as a hegemonic act of observation, a game perpetuated by those who can. Perhaps these pervading histories and assumptions of mobility, pleasure, freedom and observation had implicitly (mis) informed my own relationship to walking, and by association, soundwalking? As I will shortly outline, soundwalking greatly contributes to redressing this canonical imbalance. However, during my back injury, neither walking nor recording were an option. As a consequence soundwalking still appeared very much out of reach. Or was it?

Why not Soundwalk?

Soundwalking is a method of walking through an environment whilst listening.² Often realised in groups or as a solitary endeavour, its "primary objective is to listen and reflect on the sound environment found in a specific location" (McCartney & Paquette, p.4). Artist Max Neuhaus's *LISTEN* (1966-1976) is one of soundwalking's earliest, art historical examples. The method was expanded upon in various guises under the acoustic ecology work of the World Soundscape Project (1977). Soundwalking disrupted the rarefied space(s) of indoor concert halls and led the public into new territories of listening based upon participation and the politics of place. Today the methodology is part and parcel of creative sound practice and an established genre in its own right (e.g. see Carlyle 2007; McCartney 1997-98; Westerkamp 2010). Its cross-disciplinary reach extends to social science and human geography movements, which, from the 1970's onwards, moved to include auditory perception in the study of social space (Feld 2005).

Hildegard Westerkamp is perhaps the greatest exponent on the subject. She began soundwalking in the 1970's as part of the Vancouver Cooperative Radio (LaBelle 2008). Westerkamp (1974 cited in Carlyle 2007) states that one of the central motivations in soundwalking is to "rediscover and reactivate the senses" (p.49). Often aligned with issues of ecology and preservation, she has developed a complex understanding of soundwalking and a pragmatic structure that leans towards a notion of listening as pedagogy. One could go so far as to call it a syllabus for listening. Westerkamp's walks involve the organisation of routes, the selection of leaders and the prescription of actions, tests or sets of rules (such as 'no speaking permitted whilst walking').

Many soundwalking legacies arrive from female artists such as Hildegard Westerkamp, Andra McCartney, Christina Kubisch and Janet Cardiff. Through such perspectives, soundwalking offers an

embodied, inter-subjective way of understanding one's own relationship to an environment through sound and movement. Not only do they re-frame an otherwise male dominated canon, I would suggest they also connect to broader (non-sound) contexts of feminised walking: a shared space that would include peripatetic approaches from the likes of Sophie Calle (*Suite Vénitienne*, 1980), Adrian Piper (*Catalysis*, 1970-1971) and Marina Abramović (*The Great Wall Walk*, 1988).

Despite all of these positive approaches, my own personal situation during large parts of 2010-11 was fairly straightforward: I simply could not walk. At the time I had bouts of extreme frustration. I began thinking everyone 'out there' was soundwalking. I wondered whether the methodology's broad application across social science and other disciplines might be diminishing the positive (gendered, political and subjective) legacies of Westerkamp et al? I began to imagine endless swathes of soundwalkers hunting and haunting the urban landscape in a quasi-psychogeographical manner. I thought of packs, gaggles, flocks and schools; walking as a collective stampede; the herd as a deafening, muting, silencing wave. Unfortunately for me such thoughts brought back memories again from a rural upbringing, specifically of fox hunting. It led me to question whether there is a danger of sound being treated similarly; as a form of prey, a pest to be isolated, reduced and ultimately captured? I began to think a resolution could be found in listening. Without the ability to walk, it was certainly one of my only practical options. Could listening offer the chance to do all that walking does but from a point of stillness and relative immobility?

Still Listening?

Lying on my living room floor I would simply listen. 80% of what I heard I could not see. I tried to keep lists and inventories of auditory events, both real and imagined. Living above a busy street in North-East London I could hear drones of acceleration outside; sirens wailing; footsteps beneath the window; somebody shouting and the sound of a dog barking occasionally. I imagined being out there amongst it all. I retreated back here, to the hum of the fridge and my body breathing. I listened to the pain that simply would not go away; the noise that interrupted my thoughts. I imagined pedestrians based on the sound of their footsteps. I removed the battery from the ticking clock in the kitchen. Draining the mundanity of my own situation, I became an ear grafted onto George Perec's *Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010).³ Finally, I began to accept walking into my practice.

My ear, still very much a part of me, became an extension into and through the environment itself. A wandering membrane, equipped with its own feet – ones that allowed me to move beyond my own immediate and confined position, and back again. At last I had found a walking that resonated with me: personally, politically and situationally. It was not in freedom or pleasure, defiance or counter-strategy, but in the pain and restriction of my own experience.

Writer and artist Salomé Voegelin points towards the similar affects of listening and walking, when she describes listening as:

A mode of walking through the soundscape/the sound work. What I hear is discovered not yet received, and this discovery is generative, a fantasy: always different and subjective, and continually, presently now (2010, p.4).

Voegelin (2010) suggests that through listening (walking) we creatively endeavour to somehow find and generate subjective meaning in the present. Even during my earlier resistance, perhaps in listening I was already walking? The remoteness and isolation of where I grew up was the reason for a protracted city-by-city move from the age of 18, one that eventually came to a halt (for now at least) in London. I moved to a city in order to come into contact with people, things and myself – to leave a sense of solitude so often associated with the romantic pathos of rurality and walking. Yet the myth of solitude simply does not apply to listening; it is always a collaboration, a relational process whereby sound is the elasticated agent that binds my listening to the world. Whether I am walking or not, in listening I touch, move and reciprocate, I affect "what is sounding. The relationship is symbiotic. As you listen, the environment is enlivened. This is the listening effect" (Oliveros, 2005, p.40).

I admit this is an optimistic, even utopic assessment of my own situation and history. But surely it's important to ask: could a form of 'Still Listening' be incorporated into the history of soundwalking? More provocatively could it be assimilated into the broader history of walking? Could a confluence of mobile walking and still, sedentary listening bring about a collapse in the binaries of freedom and restriction? Could it bring about a new, inclusive form? What would 'Still Listening' sound, look and feel like?

Being still so often implies being left behind, not quite being up to speed; you certainly don't want to be

'caught standing still'. Yet fascinating examples (financial, political, geographic, physical) of stillness can be drawn from all spectrums of life and arts practice. Perhaps one of the most poignant images of stillness I remember as a nine-year old child was observing the still student, defiantly standing in front of military tanks in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Like walking, stillness is also a force for change. Where, then, could examples be found specifically from within sound studies? Could their integration help better appreciate and understand the methodology of soundwalking?

Sound recordist, archivist and media guru Tony Schwartz, is one example I would offer. Often positioned as a prop to Alan Lomax, North America's most celebrated sound recordist, Schwartz cuts an interesting figure. Both Schwartz and Lomax's sound archives now reside in the Library of Congress (USA). Schwartz's collection, some 30,000 recordings, is near double the size of Lomax's. A folklorist and ethnomusicologist, Lomax famously traversed the globe to gather his exotic and hitherto unheard indigenous recordings. Schwartz, on the other hand, remained rooted not only in New York, but within a specific postal district due to his agoraphobic condition. From 1945-1976 Schwartz aired a weekly radio program on the sounds of New York. He went on to deliver lectures for New York University, Columbia and Emerson Colleges remotely, through video recordings based in his home. Schwartz was a politically engaged sound activist, committed to sound as a social medium and to the music, people and daily activities of his post-code: 10019. Yet to read the history of soundwalking is to omit Schwartz's story. Why? Because of his agoraphobia? Because he was not as entitled to walk as so many others are? Because he didn't cover the miles? With 30,000 recordings of New York, surely his ear did? Schwartz clearly exhausted his own immediate area, he documented and communicated it through any means he could. Regardless of his agoraphobia, his ear walked through a chaotic, relational milieu of politics and social welfare, and in doing so he was able to touch and receive the world beyond the isolating circumstances of his personal situation.

Postscript / Postamble

Listening, like walking, is a process. It is not bound by form. It is inter-relational and inter-operable, even when in my own isolated and immobile position. Soundwalking has positively bucked much of the male-dominated history of walking, but perhaps it's time to be even more inclusive of restrictive and marginalised circumstances? The crucial aspect to soundwalking is the pre-amble if you like. To ask: why do I want to soundwalk? What is my own connection to the history of walking? Why this place and not another? And perhaps most paradoxically of all, why walk at all if listening can tread as many miles? The *Exchanges* (2011) project I developed during my back injury came out of a particular history, and a set of specific circumstances. The series of photographs that resulted were my own representation of 'Still Listening', one that – although physically restricted – remained always in conversation with the world.

Of course in listening I am making an assumption: that one can hear. Yet this is at one and the same time the point to all this: that walking is different for everyone, and that for me during 2010-2011, I walked through listening. For that, I am ever grateful to my hearing.

LISTENING IS WALKING, PHOTOGRAPH, MARK PETER WRIGHT, 2013.

Footnotes

1. For that reason, I refer the reader to the following texts for a surveyed application of walking in arts history (e.g. see Careri 2002; Coverly 2006; De Certeau 2011; Evans 2013; Gleber 1999; Ingold & Vergunst 2008; Nicholson 2008; Roelstraete 2010; Solnit 2002; Thoreau 2006; Wilson, 1991). [↗]
2. Although audio recording commonly takes place whilst soundwalking it is not a necessary pre-requisite. [↗]
3. Perec's text, originally from 1974, documented the everyday events, rhythms and occurrences from one specific location (Saint-Sulpice Square, Paris) over three days. He describes this process as an observation of the 'infraordinary'. [↗]

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Bio

Mark Peter Wright is an artist and current PhD researcher at CRISAP (Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice), London. His work explores relations of power and mediation between humans, animals, landscapes and technology: amplifying these subjects through critical interventions, actions and gestures. He works over various mediums and has exhibited across a range of contexts and platforms. He also delivers talks, lectures and workshops regularly within public, arts and research-based contexts.

He is the founder and editor of *Ear Room*, an online publication exploring the use of sound in artistic practice. With Salomé Voegelin he co-curates *Points of Listening*, a monthly series of events and activities based in and around London.

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