

Introducing the Walking Threads Project

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The bare and cold room with wooden floors of Dunbar Hall, Aberdeen, had become a place where bodies were moving and discussions flowed. From the 17th to the 22nd of March 2014, a performance workshop, titled “Performance reflexivity, intentionality and collaboration: A Sourcing Within worksession”, was hosted at the University of Aberdeen as part of the ERC-Advanced Grant project Knowing From the Inside led by Tim Ingold at the Department of Anthropology. The organizers of the workshop, anthropologist Caroline Gatt and performer Gey Pin Ang, aimed to explore how intentionality and reflexivity work together at the centre of creative decision-making in performance, in order to assess its relevance to anthropological practice. Using physical and vocal exercises, participants explored modalities of action that felt organic rather than forced; both in movement and in sound.

Following the workshop, five of us – Brian Schultis, Peter Loovers, Ragnhild Freng Dale, Valeria Lembo and Paola Esposito – found ourselves still in tune with and responsive to each other in ways we had not expected. On the 21st of March, a sun-filled Friday in early spring, we decided to spend our afternoon together going for a walk in Old Aberdeen, towards Seaton Park, in the vicinity of Dunbar Hall and the University of Aberdeen. After visiting the medieval St. Machar’s Cathedral our walk took an unusual turn. As we lingered passed the graves in the churchyard, Valeria took a ball of golden thread out of her bag. This was an object of “personal relevance” that she had brought to the work-session as a prop to work with, following Gey Ping’s instructions. Now she was unravelling it, admiring it shimmering in the sunlight, and offering one end to each of us as she did so (see Lembo, this volume). From that moment onwards, as though under a silent spell, our stroll transformed, turning into what we retrospectively, and on Peter’s suggestion, have come to know as “Walking Threads”.

We resumed walking in silence, out of the graveyard into the street. With each of us holding on to the thread we let the thread walk with and between us, so that we were both leading and being led by it – pulling, following, sensing and guiding. As we passed through the gates of Seaton Park, which is adjacent to the Cathedral, the scene changed. Suddenly surrounded by the luxurious vegetation of the park, a sense of possibility captured us. Following one of the footpaths, we descended into a beautiful and carefully maintained garden. There our walk spread out as a myriad of forms and colours, and intangible qualities caught our attention as we were swept into a transient flow. Not only did we become tangled in the thread, but also with trees, passers-by, the wind, Peter’s video camera. Our limbs and clothes were caught in a meshwork of lines and knots, bindings and unbindings. All the while the thread drew ever-shifting shapes through the air. By the time we were in a less trodden area of Seaton Park, by the River Don, “walking” had become more akin to dancing or, as Brian later remarked, “drifting” together. By the river’s bank, we tangled the thread to a solitary post. There our walk with the thread came to an end. Not so in our lives. Walking back the way we came, a sense of play and exploration still accompanied us.

After that day, and in the months that followed, we exchanged emails and shared pictures and videos of the walk. We began to ask ourselves what to make of our experiences on that Friday afternoon. In keeping up with the creative momentum, we decided to give ourselves some time to allow our individual thoughts about the walk to take shape. We set up a web-based group archive where we would gather material relating to the Walking Threads and individually, or in some cases in collaboration, began contemplating on its practical and theoretical reverberations. The collection of essays, reflections and creative interventions in this volume is the result of that engagement. It can also be read as an exercise in attunement – no longer pursued in each other’s presence but across time and space as we live our lives in different places, covering the distance through our memories and imaginations.

As our conversation evolved and we shared our initial reflections, common themes and perspectives emerged – such as our common reference to Deleuze and Guattari (Esposito, Loovers, and Schultis, this volume) and Ingold (Esposito, Loovers, and Lembo, this volume) – binding together our individual experiences and expressions of the event. This theoretical or philosophical commonality is not that surprising

as Deleuze and Guattari and Ingold have been at the front of a different approach towards materials in which movement and becoming stand at the core (for instance, Deleuze and Guattari 2003; Ingold 2013). There could have been other entry points. Strathern and Green, for example, refer to threads and knots as metaphors to engage with and describe complexity within anthropological language and thought. Green (2014) questions the tensions that come into play with entanglements and how differences are created in each encounter. Strathern (2014: 34-35) contends that the ways in which relations come into being need to be an essential part of ethnographic description and the forming of anthropology. Descriptions are, she holds, themselves an intervention in reality, and as such internal and external conditions shape both the reality and its description as they come into being (ibid: 23-27).

Whilst we applaud their emphasis on relations, moments of fixity and fluidity, and theoretical or anthropological interventions, we have taken a different route and one that bears more resemblance with the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and the anthropology of Tim Ingold. If we were to link our work to the metaphorical threads of anthropological thought, as Green advises us to do, we suggest that we are closest to Tim Ingold's call for finding ways of "corresponding" with the world (Ingold 2013: 7-8). Walking Threads could be understood as one such exploration towards correspondence, in emphasising the methodological potentials of an "education of attention" (cf. Tim Ingold), where we grow with things and beings in this world. The engagement with the golden thread, as a material that matters, affords the unfolding of a particular way of thinking that is *with* the world rather than *of* or *about* it. Our concern is not with description per se, but with the affordances of different ways to engage with and in the world. To us, the thread is not a metaphor, it is a concrete thing which both guides and shapes our experience in definite if open-ended ways. To walk with the thread, and to stay with it, is to witness how "experience" takes form and begets "meaning", "thought" and "imagination" in manifold ways. As we share our experiences with the thread, we weave movements and stillness, utterances and silences, thoughts and dreams with those of others. The threads keep us grounded and connected whilst allowing "tensions" to arise and resolve. The literal tensions of the thread through contra-movements are entangled with our theoretical and poetical descriptions, which again come to shape our experiences as we keep going along.

Since that sunny day in Aberdeen, those first tentative explorations and experiments that make up this special issue, have spread and have become entangled with other places and people. Caroline Gatt and Gey Pin Ang, as initiators of the workshop, were the first to be invited to join in the Walking Threads project and our subsequent work around it. We also decided to share our Walking Threads project more widely by taking it to new academic settings. Our first public presentation of the Walking Threads was at the conference "Spaces of Attunement: Life, Matter, and the Dance of Encounters", Cardiff University, March 30-31, 2015. The second was at the "Beyond Perception 15 symposium", University of Aberdeen, September 1-4, 2015.

In engaging other people in walking with the threads, we have refrained from offering an explanation of the walk in our presentations. Our intention has not been to impose meaning onto the Walking Threads, but to entice participants into questioning, wondering, exploring and experiencing through the different threads presented, both literal and metaphorical. Attempting to stay true to our original experience of the Walking Threads while guiding others into it, we have used movement, song and poetic expression (see for example Freng Dale, this volume) to create, and re-create, conditions that made the first walk with the thread possible for us: a suspension of direct literal communication; an attitude of "listening"; a sense of opening to the unexpected – elements that had already emerged in "Performance reflexivity, intentionality and collaboration: A Sourcing Within worksession".

To continue our conversations amongst ourselves and with others, we have set up a website at www.walkingthreads.wordpress.com to document the experiences as well as to give possibility to other participants in the Walking Threads to contribute with their comments and feedback. We have also commenced exploring other threads. Peter Loovers, for example, has engaged with threading trees while other artists have shown interest in sharing their own particular approaches to working with threads. Our shared email exchanges form numerous other threads that spread across space, time, materials and states of mind. So where does this engagement take us? What thoughts and images does it conjure up? What dreams of the future? We suggest that underlying this project is a sense of urgency toward restoring our connection with the world in ways that are playful, sensitive, sustainable and decentralized.

Exploring the interweaving of perception, action and thought through the threads, witnessing its

intersections and trajectories of becoming, is a simple yet important move in this direction. Walking Threads is an exercise in multiplicity. It is to see and to experience ourselves and the world as interwoven. Play and playfulness are central to this engagement. As Ravetz has highlighted, anthropologists tend to orthodoxically consider play as a topic for study, rather than something an anthropologist indulges in while working (Ravetz 2011: 175). By intersecting and linking methods of work pertaining to the performative practice with the anthropological and philosophical research (see for instance Ang, this volume), one of our biggest challenges (and gentle provocations) has been indeed to integrate play and playfulness within the academic context and our researchers' practices and lives.

Finally, it is likely that, had it not been for the Walking Threads experience, the five of us would have lost sight of each other. Researchers meet at conferences and workshops and share great conversations, touching moments and illuminating experiences. They promise each other to exchange bibliographies and ideas and to stay in touch. Yet, because of their busy, at times chaotic lives, those conversations and exchanges seldom are coming to fruition. Walking Threads gently bonded us together. Its materiality afforded us the opportunity, if ever so fragile, to stay connected, to spin each other's creativities and weave them together through collaboration.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editorial board of The Unfamiliar for dedicating a special issue of their journal to the Walking Threads project and for their insightful comments on our work. We further want to thank all the participants in this issue, particularly Ragnhild Freng Dale and Valeria Lembo for their contributions to this introduction.

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