

On Walking

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the child grown into a giant journeys over the
whole world without a pass
Ingrid Jonker, *The Child Is Not Dead* (1963)

My idea of a piece of sculpture is a road.
Carl André (1966) in Lucy R Lippard (1993:125)

1

On Walking is an attempt to conduct walking research. Walking research means investigating when it is possible to walk, under what circumstances and for whom, how walking looks, what role shoes play, the relevance of walking for creating territorial boundaries and for whom, and what mechanisms encourage or hinder walking. This book also investigates the concept of walking – and its development as a theoretical, aesthetic, literary and artistic subject, which has primarily occurred in the history of ideas in the West – from different, African points of view and forms of practice.

The word *walking* triggers images of athletic or religious activities, from jogging, fitness walking and hiking, to walking in processions, parades and funerals. When we think of walking, we think of people strolling down a road. And yet, 17 years after the official end of apartheid – in a country where most art space today is as parcelled, and economically and racially segregated as all other areas of politics, living and working, and where public space is hardly ever accessible, even if it exists (besides football/rugby stadiums and parks during open air concerts) – it is still quite a challenge to imagine a real place where everyone can go, and by foot.

Walking as an idea allows us to turn the way we think about migration around and set it down on its feet. It describes an elementary, visible and extremely transient aspect of migration that we will explore at ground level, not from the top-heavy social, political and aesthetic point of view of migration discourse. If we look at the shoes and the feet, which have travelled 4 000km from Rwanda to South Africa, we can make out a parallaxic shift in the narrative of flight and migration, which marks a change in the act of viewing and in the way of being viewed.¹

In many ways, South Africa's history is one of immigration and emigration, brutal exclusion and disconnected realities. In place of referring directly to the histories prompted by the question of where do you come from? (migration discourse), the question raised here will be rather where do

1
See Žižek (2006)
Parallax View.



Richard Long
A Line Made by Walking, 1967
courtesy of National Galleries of Scotland and the artist

you want to go? How? What kind of shoes will you need? And what is your motivation for going?

2

One of the first impressions I had of Johannesburg was in 2010, on the first morning after my arrival, when I stepped out in a rich suburb onto 7th Avenue in Parktown North and watched the people walking quickly on a small path between the traffic on the street and the high fences with barbed wire and surveillance cameras around the houses. Many of the people were wearing a kind of uniform which I later learned to read as the marking of their occupation as gardeners, maids or security guards. I began to understand that the uniforms were a kind of entry permit in the suburb and that only black people were seen walking here. As a white woman, I was all of a sudden suspiciously visible. Were all the service personnel in this city black, and did the people who did not want to be recognised as working in the service industry not walk? A man who was driving by saw me walking. He brought his van to a screeching halt and asked me where I was headed. Apparently, I was not supposed to be walking on the street, even in a 'safe' suburb such as this one. Perhaps it was not even allowed. The ways here seemed just as set as the narrow path made by the people between the road and the houses with their maximum security systems.

It was on this narrow path that I began to think about walking while walking. I watched the people around me and was amazed at their light step and how they swung their arms in front of them. This method is very effective; it tones the entire musculoskeletal and respiratory systems and allows you to move forward quickly.

I had come to South Africa on a curator scholarship from the Goethe-Institut Munich. I was looking for a chance to continue a project about migration and photography, which I had started in Bamako, Mali. Before I arrived in South Africa for the first time, I tried to forget everything I had ever heard or read about the country. I wanted to get around and see where and how interaction took place, where paths began and where they ended, and where they crossed other paths. I wanted to find out how people from Zimbabwe and Mozambique climbed over fences in game reserves, and where people go when they leave South Africa. I wanted to hear who talks to whom and how. I wanted to set my foot in the inner city, the suburbs, the townships, the veld.

3

Walking is a political act in which one foot is placed in front of the other. The feet are in contact with the ground. The body establishes a relation to concrete, geographical and socially organised space and to its history and that of the living beings in it. The South African ground, the land, bears traces of the traumas of different groups of people, each in their own way. Will these areas ever simply be passable by foot?

4

In my desire to walk, to stroll, to explore my surroundings and to work this way, I soon reached a limit. First, I had to gain a new understanding of the very European, bourgeois concept of freedom of movement. The idea of freedom of movement and public space for everyone has its roots in the French Revolution, although it was originally intended as a right only for French citizens and not for subjects from the colonies. Even in today's Europe, this idea is threatened by increasing privatisation, gentrification and restrictions on civil rights through so-called anti-terrorism laws.² What would be the basis for public space and common access in today's South Africa? Would it be applicable to refer to the *Freedom Charter* from 1955, which states 'Freedom of Movement shall be guaranteed to all'?³ (The 'who work on the land' would have to be left out, because it allows those who do not work the land to be driven off it.)

It soon became clear to me that not only was I not able to simply walk wherever I liked, but also that other people only wanted me to walk where nothing could happen to me, whether I agreed with this or not, and for me only to meet the 'right' people, many of whom were of European descent. Restricted freedom of movement is a side effect of the consolidation of specific interests and constructions of belonging, which, when violated, result either in heightened visibility, or complete invisibility. Where could I go under these circumstances? How should I behave, how should I move? Was there a way to escape the paralysing fear that could be seen in the sharp looks people sent over their shoulders?

'If we observe very carefully someone who is walking, we also know how he thinks,' wrote Thomas Bernhard in *Walking* (2003:163–164). Is this true? Is this the palpable fear that is part of a clandestine and uneasy civil war, or is it the fear of civil war as such? What territories are reserved for what people or groups, what characteristics and attributes describe what is allowed or not when in a certain place? With whom can I come together, apart from those it has been

decided I should meet? Is it possible for me to move between different segregated and racialised territories without being identified with them? Can one walk through a territory without being occupied by it? What role does art and the art world play within the country's segregation mechanisms and property relations?⁴

Thinking about walking is by no means intended here only as a metaphor or symbol; it is also meant as something very practical and pragmatic. It implies that we are capable of reflecting on our positions as part of a situation. It also implies the awareness that a distance cannot be maintained to what is being investigated, and that one cannot remain *above* reality, but must instead take the path *through* the landscape in order to grasp the issue (in the literal sense of taking it in one's hands).

5

Concentrating our gaze on feet, walking and shoes heightens our experience of the surfaces and the visual effects involved in the movement of walking. Our eyes focus on the body, but the body does not become the inner essential or metaphysical agent of exterior circumstances. Each of us experiences, in his/her own way, how he/she feels in a specific situation, how he/she is, what he/she is, and how he/she moves.⁵ The situation or context determines the radius of movement, like the movement of walking creates a permanently changing contact, a surface of friction with the environment. This process takes place automatically. It only becomes apparent when something is wrong with our musculoskeletal system or shoes, or with how we make contact with the environment.

The musculoskeletal system becomes visible when it is damaged, dysfunctional, diseased, broken or in pain due to polio, landmines, homelessness, a lack of nutrition, obesity, exhaustion or calluses. In Europe one hardly ever sees obvious injuries to the musculoskeletal system. This is not only thanks to the quality of medical care and the lack of war in this areas, but also because there is a tendency to make people with injuries invisible there who would be visible in other places, or for these people to voluntarily withdraw from public view (for example, out of shame).

6

Shoes deserve a chapter of their own. Slippers. Sneakers. Worn out shoes. Gumboots. Objects. Fetishes. Shoes for walking. Shoes for standing. The bare minimum. Fashion. Hipness. Flip-flops. Shopping. Mall. Downtown. Italian shoes. Shoes from Soweto. Shoes can be very expensive.

² How freedom of movement can be compromised or restricted can best be seen by mapping the dangerous so-called 'no-go zones' during the World Cup in Germany in 2006, which were designated, predominantly neo-Nazi areas that were seen as dangerous for people of colour to enter, or the increased inspection of young non-white men under the somewhat euphemistically named powers of 'stop and search' of the British police, which took effect in 2009.

³ See: <http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/HIST/freedom-chart/freedomch.html>, last accessed 2 September 2011.

⁴ See, for example, Gordon Matta-Clark's work *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1973), Carl Michael von Hausswolff's *Konungarikena Elgaland-Vargaland* (1991) and Hans Haacke's *Der Bevölkerung* (2000).

⁵ See Debord (1958) *Theory of Drifting* and Tiqqun (2010) *Introduction to Civil War*.

7

Walking is an economic indicator. Compared to other forms of travel, it requires a great deal of time. One can create very little value while walking, except perhaps by speeding up, talking on the phone, singing, having a conversation or thinking. People who walk, says the cultural studies scholar Tim Ingold in *Culture on the Ground*, are poor, criminal or logistically bound to a certain area, such as pupils walking to school (Ingold, 2004:322). In the context of South Africa, the first two reasons have become more or less synonymous. Men on the streets looking for work have been dubbed 'men on the side of the road' (MSR). They are treated as criminals if they fail to wear a recognisable marking, such as a work uniform. When the apartheid Anti-Loitering Act was reactivated in 2010 to ensure public safety during the World Cup, this was apparently done to drive the MSR out of the cities so football tourists would not feel harassed or concerned by the sight of poverty.

8

The German film director, Werner Herzog, wrote in his short book, *Of Walking in Ice*, 'You pass a lot of discarded rubbish as you walk' (Herzog, 1978:18). One does indeed see quite a bit of rubbish when walking along country roads. People throw things out of their cars – things one does not see when driving by. Herzog, who is walking toward a destination, also writes: 'While walking, so many things pass through one's head, the brain rages' (Herzog, 1978:9). Walking is inwardly directed friction that is just as dynamic as the body in motion.

Herzog is not the only one who has experimented with walking, or conducted thinking experiments while walking. Countless writers and poets have walked, either with or without a destination, recording their thoughts in action (Thomas Bernhard, Charles Baudelaire, Peter Handke, Arthur Rimbaud, Robert Walser), as have philosophers (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Michel de Certeau, Frédéric Gros and many others). They either walked to literally put their thoughts into motion, with an inwardly directed point of view, or to induce thoughts by moving their bodies. Walter Benjamin used the term *flâneur* (Benjamin, 1999:416–455), while Guy Debord and the Situationists International introduced such terms as *dérive* (drifting) and *psychogeography*.

'Thus quite naturally, when we see, we see nothing, but think everything,' says the protagonist in Bernhard's *Walking*,

who turns walking and thinking into a textual form that articulates both walking and thinking in relation to one another (125).⁶ Walking becomes a kind of refusal and a way of speaking/writing as automatic, manic production. In the book *Life & Times of Michael K* (1974) by the South African author, JM Coetzee, the protagonist Michael K walks through a country wracked by civil war. He refuses to be trapped by either of the sides, which are busy building up fences and camps:

He walked all night, feeling no fatigue, trembling sometimes with the thrill of being free. When it began to grow light he left the road and moved across open country. He saw no human being, though more than once he was startled by buck leaping from cover and racing away into the hills. The dry white grass waved in the wind; the sky was blue; his body was overflowing with vigour. Walking in great loops, he skirted first one farmhouse, then another. The landscape was so empty that it was not hard to believe at times that his was the first foot ever to tread a particular inch of earth or disturb a particular pebble. But every mile or two there was a fence to remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway. Ducking through the fences, he could feel a craftsman's pleasure in wire spanned so taut that it hummed when it was plucked. Nonetheless, he could not imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land. He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust (Coetzee, 2004:97).

Michael K's refusal to accept the circumstances, choosing instead to simply walk through them, as it were, and not to stay, transforms walking into a performative and radical political act. This reminds us of Mahatma Gandhi's walk in South Africa in 1913 against the Asiatic Registration Act (1907) and his walk in India against the colonial *British Salt Tax*⁷, as well as the statement, 'marching reminds me of so many terrible things', in Penny Siopis's film, *My Lovely Day* (1997), in which she draws an arc from the civil war in Greece (her grandfather's home country) to the militarism of apartheid. Toyi-toying is an anti-marching gesture and a militaristic form. The inevitability of historical circumstances and the consequences they have for the present occur to the mind in fleeting images while the legs do their work and traverse historical ground.

6 'Whereas we always thought we could make walking and thinking into a single total process, even for a fairly long time, I now have to say that it is impossible to make walking and thinking into one total process for a fairly long period of time. For, in fact, it is not possible to walk and to think with the same intensity for a fairly long period of time, sometimes we walk more intensively, but think less intensively, then we think intensively and do not walk as intensively as we are thinking.' (Bernhard, 2003:163).

7 See the chapter 'Mysticism and Politics' in Gros (2010) *Unterwegs, Eine kleine Philosophie des Gehens*.

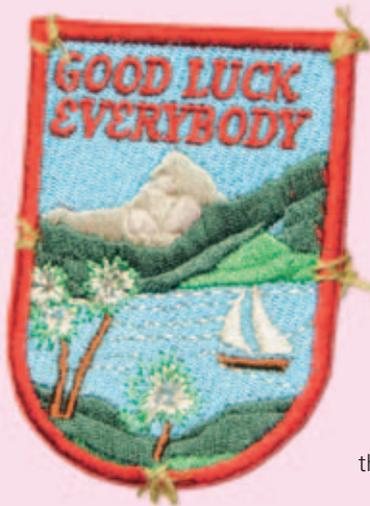
In its moments of resistance, reflection, thought, physical dynamics and enjoyment of movement, walking takes on an aesthetic form that also articulates a way of looking at the world through which one is passing. It becomes a continually evolving process of observing and exploring. A number of artistic approaches, which are primarily conceptual, draw on these elements of movement, change in point of view, and friction. Their most obvious form is the 'walking performance' (excluding the countless paintings, drawings and films which focus on walking, which I will not mention here). Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh lived in Manhattan without a roof over his head for one year for his performance, *Outdoor Piece* (1981–82), while Marina Abramović and Ulay collaborated to create the work, *Great Wall Walk* (1988), and Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller, and the performance duo, Lone Twin, stage walks as theatrical productions and performances.⁸ The South African conceptual artist and druid Willem Boshoff is another key figure here. Boshoff conducts plant and ground research on his *druid walks* and has coined the term 'multivagant' as 'given to much wandering or straying, especially in foreign countries or dwelling on many ideas. Multivagant people are restless individuals, they might hit the road to nowhere; mundivagant ones travel all over the world. In Latin *vagere* is "to wander".⁹ The 'foreign countries' here are significant in the context of the restricted freedom of movement in South Africa.

Not many artists refer to walking's communal attributes of contact and performance in their works – or they do so only very little, focusing rather on walking as a form of sculpture or architecture. Richard Long began exploring organising space around walking in his first walking work, *A Line Made by Walking*, as far back as 1967¹⁰, while Francis Alÿs began taking *paseos* (walks) through Mexico City in 1991, and the Durban-based architect and designer, Doung Anwar Jahangeer, researches life on the streets by means of walking.¹¹ Despite their different, even contrasting concepts, all of these approaches have in common the artist's decision to work in the outside world and its conditions, and to integrate different points of view. It is interesting to note that each location for an artistic event is not completely occupied and made visible, but rather the ideas of ownership, belonging, camp, gated community, art market segment and so forth are severely shaken up by the body moving through space.

[English by Michelle Miles]

⁸ See the chapter 'The Shape of Walk' in Solnit (2000) *Wanderlust, A History of Walking* on the 'walking artists' R. Long, H. Fulton, Abramovic/Ulay, C. Schneeman, C. André and others. Lone Twin, see www.lonetwin.com/, last accessed 10 September 2011; William D. and Lavery C. (eds.) (2011) *Good Luck Everybody: Lone Twin-Journeys, Performances, Conversations*.

Lone Twin/Kevin Mount *Good luck everybody*, 2011
Courtesy of Williams, D. & Lavery, C. (2011) and Lone Twin



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⁹ http://www.willemboshoff.com/documents/artworks/big_druid.htm, last accessed 6 September 2011.

¹⁰ See www.richardlong.org/, last accessed 10 September 2011 and Roelstraete (2010) *A Line Made by Walking*.

¹¹ See the product of his research *Spaza-de-Move-on* on <http://www.dezeen.com/2009/03/06/spaza-de-move-on-by-doung-anwar-jahangeer/> or on his web page <http://www.dala.org.za/>, last accessed 8 September 2011.