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Introduction: Walking in the Digital City

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Abstract

The editors introduce the special issue, 'Walking in the Digital City".

We were standing in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. "No phones or tablets," we said to fifty students from the University of East London's Dance: Urban Practice program. We had brought our "Site-Specific" class to the park to experiment with Trisha Brown's work *Roof Piece* (1971).

Perplexed about the relevance of our avant-garde spatial scrutiny to their dance careers, they protested: *"Why are we doing this?"*

We insisted on doing the exercise first and then reflecting on the experience. Their continuous questioning of why we were doing different exercises made us reflect on the friction between our approaches. It seemed that their experience of learning dance through YouTube videos and other digital channels had something to do with privileging the visual rather than the sensorial exploration of the unknown.

This friction was the catalyst for debates on the impact of digital technology on embodied experience, which led to further discussions about our parallel and criss-crossing geographical trajectories: Blake, originally from California, moved from New York City to London to pursue his scholarly and artistic practice; Claudia, originally from Italy, moved from New York City and Los Angeles to Liverpool to take up a permanent position at a UK University. Our transnational moves forced us to seek out digital tools to stay in touch with friends and colleagues, before the spread of smartphones made this mode of global communication ubiquitous. Altogether, these experiences and discussions around how the digital could enable, extend, or at the very least change, our understanding of embodied experiences, were the inception for this special issue on "Walking in the Digital City."

Our original call for papers asked how technology might encourage new ways of walking through and interacting with the city. We revisited the ideas of cultural geographer Doreen Massey's *For Space*, in which she wondered if technologically facilitated communication potentially reduces the "happenstance juxtaposition of previously unrelated trajectories, that business of walking round a corner and bumping into alterity" (2005: 94). For Massey, what was at stake was our engagement with the diversity of the streets and more importantly, the requirements of "social negotiation" that accidental and unexpected social encounters foster (ibid.). Fifteen years after Massey articulated this, we wanted to explore how digital tools might create "happenstance moments" in urban

spaces, rather than serve as tools of disengagement and alienation. Aware of a new generation of interdisciplinary artists using blogs, listservs, mobile applications, augmented reality, and other digital methods to encourage new ways of walking through the city—something Phil Smith refers to as "walking's new movement" (2015)—we wanted to create a discussion around the concrete ways that people and artists use and (re)appropriate digital tools to inhabit, experience, and move through urban space.

The call was due in February 2020 and the changing global situation reverberated throughout the review and revision process. This was when the United Kingdom and United States were just learning about the severity of the new coronavirus, COVID-19, and its global spread. Northern Italy, where Claudia is from, quickly became the epicentre of the virus in Europe. By March 9th Italy was in full lockdown. The news of the drastic measures at first shocked the rest of Europe and the US, but a global lockdown followed shortly. Digital communication suddenly became the standard. Scholars and artists quickly shifted their classes and practices online—seminars, conferences, workshops and performances moved to Zoom, Facebook Live, Instagram Stories, Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, and other digital (and predominantly corporate) platforms. Happy hours, pub quizzes, family reunions, weddings, funerals, and other activities also moved online, as we looked for more ways to connect with each other at a distance.

Walking artists adjusted their practices too. The Loiterers Resistance Movement, a Manchester based psychogeography group, moved their First Sunday *dérive* online for the first time. Suddenly, what had been a resolutely local exploration was opened up to a global group of participants. Likewise, Sonia Overall initiated the project #distancedrifts, which continues to invite people to engage with walking prompts together through a Twitter feed. Blake, whose research and artistic practice has focused on the artistic medium of walking and digital exchange for the past decade, adjusted his practice as well. His project, *52 Scores* (2020) shifted from a hybrid model that combined digital and physical walks, to one that was fully digital and socially distanced.

This digital transition, and emerging reflections around its impact on the arts, made our issue more prescient. The articles included in this issue were written prior to the global lockdown and, because of this, rarely engage directly with the things that have changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of these changes were reflected on and

incorporated through the review and revision process, but overall the articles reflect a pre-pandemic landscape. Though the situation in which we are walking with digital technology has changed, the challenges articulated in these articles remain. We hope the tactics and strategies offered will aid the continued development of a critical approach to digital walking practice as the world continues to shift and change around us. This issue brings together a variety of approaches to walking and writing the digital city. From scholarly essays, interview formats, artists' dialogues to performative solo and collaborative writing, the contributions to this volume show the disciplinary diversity of scholars and artists who are integrating walking into their process.

We begin with daniel dillon's exploration of the augmented reality game Pokémon GO in his article **"Pokéwalking in the City."** dillon's mobile gameplay in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, provided a moment of respite from the rigours of doctoral fieldwork. The unexpected discoveries that gameplay encouraged became "fundamental to [his] work." In particular, it provided him a new perspective on the community of rickshaw drivers that were central to his ethnographic research by highlighting the social disparities of playful interactions with the city in relation to class, gender and access to technology. His article demonstrates the challenges of separating play from research and how this entanglement can lead to the production of new knowledge.

Following this, we explore the invisible infrastructure that supports activities such as Pokéwalking, through John Wild's article **"CODED GEOMETRY."** Wild presents a series of playful psychogeographic walks through East London with the collective CODED GEOMETRY, which follow the infrastructure of big data and the cloud to trace its physical presence in public, private, and Publicly Owned Private Spaces (POPS). As he moves through this infrastructure, both physically and metaphorically, he points to the contradiction between the ephemeral connotations of the cloud, and the material structures that support it, made up of out of sight cables, bulking data centres, and communication networks. The article gives insight to the darker ramifications of the digital transition. Looking at the materiality of the digital, it points to the challenges of the environmental sustainability of data.

Our interview with Babak Fakhamzadeh **"Strategies for Subverting the Tyranny of the Corporate Map"** also considers big data and how it interacts with the corporate dominance of the digital tools available to us. Fakhamzadeh has developed a variety of applications that offer alternatives to corporate big data approaches to navigating the city. His

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mobile apps draw on histories of experimental travel, countertourism, and psychogeography to introduce friction to the experience of travelling, and create unfamiliar ways to interact with and move through public space. The seemingly familiar interface of mobile phone applications are employed to disorient and defamiliarise the user and create new engagements with the city. Fakhamzadeh mobile-phone applications offer possibilities for exploration that counter the consumer logic of the capitalist city to facilitate more individual experiences and uncanny, unexpected encounters.

In **"Ways of Walking,"** Sylvia Solakidi counters Fakhamzadeh's notion of the smooth experience of corporate digital tools. For Solakidi, the use of apps is not a frictionless experience, but one of disorientation. Crossing writing genres and physical and imaginary spaces, she takes the reader through her journey: wandering around Antwerp, listening to music playlists on streaming applications, and trying to find her way through GPS maps. As her text moves through new spaces and temporalities, she explores how the digital intersects with the city to form a place of fragmented memories. Her writing deliberately recreates her experiences of loss and disorientation through suggestions and provocations for physical and imaginary walks that parallel her experience.

In their article "**Mapping a City's Energy,"** Rosemary Cisneros, Marie-Louise Crawley, and Sarah Whatley apply digital tools as a way of creating and enhancing memory. Reflecting on the two walking practices that were part of their research project *Dancing Bodies in Coventry* (2018-2020) and the online digital scrapbook tool they used to document the project, they show how digital documentation can communicate, archive, and enhance our responses to known and unknown environments. Their work considers how the city can be shaped through the "intentional movement" of dance and they explore how the intersection of performance and the digital can deepen our understanding of this choreographic space. In keeping with our focus on work that encourages walking practices, they end their article with a walking score that allows us to actively engage with the model they offer.

At the forefront of Claudia Brazzale and Leslie Satin's article, **"Cell-Out: A Long-Distance Mobile Performance of Scores, Reflections, Confessions,"** is the friction between labour and play, and work and leisure that are exacerbated by the digital age. Their relationship developed through the blur of personal and professional relationships that characterises both the art world and the academy. Through a cellular distance exchange that takes place walking to and from the studio or university, they offer an

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exploration of how their artistic, academic, and personal lives are interwoven. Their durational writing approach reflects the length of their personal relationship and distance (digital) exchanges; it skips, jumps and moves from past to present to future in a way that parallels Solakadi's solitary journey through the memories of her relationships with and in the city. Likewise, they offer simple scores for walking that allow the reader to join the conversation with their feet.

"What Happened?: An Examination of PLAYDATE," also looks at the relationship between art, labour and the city. A mixed-reality performance, PLAYDATE combined the use of cellphones and go-pro cameras to stream a cast of players, paired based on surveys about their job profiles, as they engaged with tasks that took them around Downtown Brooklyn, New York. The work combined action on the streets with a gallery display that brought together social media feeds and text messages from participants in real time (facilitated by a "media DJ" who created the flow of the event). PLAYDATE's decentralized format, and its purposely limited mediation, allows for the fragmentary nature of individual everyday experiences to emerge. In their article, director Ying Liu and participants Kenneth Pietrobono, Kuan-Yi Chen, John Matturri, and Seth Cohen reflect on the experience of the production.

One of the essential leitmotifs across all the articles is the use of smart-phones, and the multitude of applications developed for it, which mediate and inform our experiences of the city. The articles engage with mobile devices in different ways, but together they demonstrate the dominance of the smartphone as a medium, and ask us to consider how they are changing our experience of the city. They also offer models, strategies and tactics that push against the narratives of corporate media, big data, and the promise of digital instantaneity and global connection.

The gaps in these articles point to areas of inquiry and practice that need further consideration. Primary among these are notions of access and the commons. While digital platforms such as Twitter and Instagram often feel like global public squares, the truth of the matter is more complicated. The apps we are using to exchange ideas are overseen by corporations whose interests align with market priorities, rather than free speech, and are more akin to Privately Owned Public Spaces than public commons. Added to this is the important fact that not everyone has access to the digital city. Even seemingly connected cities such as London have so-called digital deserts, and network quality can be different even on the same street. In rural areas, smaller cities, and cities in less digitally developed countries, this divide is even starker (Says

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2020). There are also other issues at play that need to be considered: gender and income gaps in smartphone access and usage; the cost of data, both economically and environmentally; cyber-security; and notions of free-speech. As we write, the United Kingdom is reacting to the Sarah Everard's murder, after she was abducted while walking home. It has initiated what feels like an annual conversation around women's freedom to safely navigate public spaces on their own. Another reminder that walking the city is not the same for everyone. While this special issue of *Streetnotes* does not profess to offer solutions to these challenges, it provides a selection of artists and scholars who are using digital tools and mobile applications to disrupt, explore and engage with them.

Drawing from Solakidi's notion of the walk as punctuation, we don't consider this issue a full stop. It is a colon: an ellipses . . . an em-dash—it is not quite complete on its own; it requires further iterations, regenerations…and it asks you to walk as an essential part of understanding these works. All of the papers centre the practice of *actually* walking, and we hope you find instructions, provocations, and ideas that will encourage your own explorations. In keeping with that we end this introduction with a score Blake wrote in response to his own relationship to data:

"For Andrew Brown"

1. Head out the door and look for a dog. Follow it.
2. Create a hashtag for your stalk. That way you will know who is following you.
3. Walk towards the nearest data centre.
4. Walk into your data. Revisit the locations it has tracked.

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About the Editors

Blake Morris is a walking artist, independent scholar and research impact specialist based in New York City. His artistic work and scholarly research focus on inviting people to walk together, often at a distance through the use of digital tools. Projects have included *British Summer Time,* an ongoing series of global sunrise walks and the Arts Council England funded project *This is not a Slog,* for which he created three site-specific walks for Ovalhouse Theatre (London). His recent book, *Walking Networks: The Development of an Artistic Medium* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020) offers an overview of the current field of walking art in the United Kingdom and a definition for the medium. His writing can also be found in journals such as *Green Letters: Studies in Eco-Criticism*, *the International Journal of Tourism Cities*, and Claire Hind and Clare Qualmann's *Ways to Wander* publications (Axminster: Triarchy Press). Blake holds a Ph.D. in Drama, Applied Theatre and Performance from the University of East London.

Claudia Brazzale, a scholar, choreographer, and performer, is a Senior Lecturer and a joint-Programme Leader for the MA in Contemporary Performance Practices at the University of East London. She has taught at Liverpool Hope University, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Princeton University, Rutgers University, and the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) and has held positions as a Visiting Scholar at the Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Analysis at London South Bank University and the Institute for Research on Women, Rutgers University (IRW). In 2010-11 Claudia was the recipient of a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the American Association University of Women to support her research at IRW (2010-11). Claudia's work focuses on the seduction and consequences of mobility. Centred on feminist ethnographic methodologies, her research engages with the body in relation to the global flows of traditional dance forms; cosmopolitanism and globalisation; fashion, the body, and consumer culture; space, place, and migration. Claudia holds a Ph.D. in Cultures and Performance from UCLA and an MA in in Performance Studies from NYU.

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