

# Walking in Air

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**Last year we developed a project entitled ‘Walking in Air’ concerning the passage of the walking body through air, taking up the challenge of anthropologist Tim Ingold’s ‘thinking in movement’. Walking, in this view, is more than mere locomotion. It is a mode of thinking and knowing. We began planning the project in spring 2020, shortly before an airborne virus would bring the world as we know it to a halt. While waiting for the opportunity to put our project into practice with our collaborators, we did some preliminary ‘walking in air’ fieldwork. Each of us, on the same afternoon in January 2021, embarked on a separate walk in south London. The following collaborative text narrates aspects of our thinking and our walking.**

Emmanuelle Waeckerlé: *Today is the 7th January 2021, third day of lockdown 3.0. I should be driving down to Stump Bottom in the South Downs to meet Will for our first attempt at walking in air together. Instead I am sitting in my conservatory in Thornton Heath, at what has become my work desk since the beginning of lockdown 1.0 in March 2020, planning a local solo walk in semi-apocalyptic conditions. It is cold and bright outside and very still, a perfect day for walking. Yet the air I breathe and share with others can no longer be trusted because it contains increasingly contagious minute particles that we are spreading when we talk, laugh, sing, cough.*

Will Montgomery: On Thursday 7th January 2021, I made an exploratory foray for the Walking in Air project. In England, this was the second day of the third lockdown initiated in response to the coronavirus pandemic. I decided to walk in Battersea Park, the largest open space within reach of my home in south London. In the course of the crisis, our experience of air has changed. It cannot be conceived as an invisible

medium that we pass through unthinkingly. Now, city-dwellers such as myself think of air not only as the vessel of airborne contaminants, but, far more immediately, as the medium through which infection is spread. Air may be invisible to us, but that invisibility only increases the malignance that shades our experience of this gas, which is both around us and in us. By early January it seemed likely that the variant of the virus that had emerged in Kent in late autumn was more transmissible in outdoor settings than the version that had prevailed until then. Many urban pedestrians had taken not only to mask-wearing but also to giving other pedestrians a wide berth.

*Tim Ingold first got us interested in the connection between air and walking. Ingold writes of ‘[a] track ... at once terrestrial and aerial; ... formed by creatures – human and non-human – that must perforce breathe the air as they walk the ground’ (2010: 130). In the quiet days between Christmas and New Year and in preparation for today, I took my mind for a stroll, in the warmth and safety of my garden studio, through the walking worlds and words of Ingold, Rebecca Solnit, Luce Irigaray, Ernesto Pujol, Francesco Careri and Henry David Thoreau.*

*I have explored the parallel between walking, reading and writing, something Ingold has also written extensively about (e.g. Ingold 2007, 2015), in many poetic text scores, as well as considering the activation of that parallel in performances and installations. Ingold writes that, the ground being a busy place, a walker never starts from a blank sheet (2015: 49). Nor does the writer that I am, that process always beginning with clearing a path through the words of others until I can find my own. For three days between Christmas and New Year, my eyes, hands and mind wandered around past tracks of annotations and other marks on printed*

*pages: preliminary incursions that have informed my imminent movements in air.*

In thinking about the Walking in Air project, I had been wondering about the role that the apparently immaterial medium of air plays in the constitution of atmosphere – a term that embraces both the objectivity of physics and the subjectivity of mental experience. Derek McCormack characterizes atmospheres as ‘turbulent material fields within which to enact distinctive kinds of fieldwork that complicate any straightforward distinction between ground and air’ (2010: 41). How, then, are we to identify and reflect on fields that are at once material and intangible?

I was keen, moreover, for my fieldwork to encompass another elusive feature of atmospheres – sound. I wanted to draw on Gernot Böhme’s suggestion that attending to acoustic atmospheres is about ‘hearing as such, not about hearing something’ (2017: 132). Sound’s ephemeral nature means that it can only be objectified and represented to consciousness at the point of its disappearance. Its materiality, like that of air, is experienced as immateriality, apprehended as categorically distinct from the object-world through and upon which we move.

*Walking the earth upright is what defines us as human, thus distancing us from most members of the animal kingdom as well as the earth itself. We walk by necessity, for pleasure, for inspiration, for art’s sake, as a form of prayer and sometimes as an act of resistance – to protest against or escape something that does not agree with us. According to Solnit, ‘walking culture was a reaction against the speed and alienation of the industrial revolution’ (2001: 267). Perhaps that is why many poets, writers and artists became keen ‘saunterers’, to borrow Thoreau’s word – seeking freedom from the constraints of the everyday (1862: 657). Such as Simone de Beauvoir, an obsessive backpacking hillwalker, regularly leaving behind literary Paris and her intense relation with Jean-Paul Sartre: ‘A woman who walks as audaciously as she thinks’, according to Annabel Abbs in ‘Walking with Simone de Beauvoir’ (2021). This liberatory dimension of walking can be found in the*

*situationist dérive or the surrealist déambulation and in Rimbaud’s compulsive long-distance walking (he was ‘the man with soles of wind’, according to his lover Verlaine). We walk to make tracks on the ground, on a page or in our mind and heart, like artists such as Marina Abramović and Ulay walking the wall of China from opposite directions to mark their separation in art and life; the land artists Richard Long and Hamish Fulton’s soulful communing with the natural environment; Francis Alÿs’s poetic strolls in Mexico City and other metropolises; Ernesto Pujol’s socially engaged walks inspired by monastic rituals; or the writer Robert Walser’s compulsive sauntering, to name only a few. There is a lack of visible women walkers, though many did walk: Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Anaïs Nin and the numerous others recovered by Kerri Andrews in Wanderers: A History of Women Walking.*

Preparing for my own walk, I decided to focus on a few sentences by the American poet-critic Susan Howe. These lines, from her essay ‘Vagrancy in the Park’, form part of her discussion of Wallace Stevens’s late poem ‘The Course of a Particular’. Howe writes: ‘Maybe the nature of a particular can be understood only in relation to sound inside the sense it quickens. Setting sun. A mourning dove compounds invisible declensions’ (2015: 5). Howe’s thinking about Stevens’s poem is shaped by her encounter with the environment through which she walks, and her experience of that winter landscape is filtered by the words of the poem.

*I am a regular she-walker, for exercise, inspiration, pleasure – for art’s sake sometimes, as an act of resistance always. This afternoon I am going to a nearby meadow with a small pond, big open sky and a beautiful Manhattan-style skyline, in which Croydon centre’s brutalist architecture merges with the silhouettes of more recent high-rises. The two entrances are discreet and hard to find. It took me three years to discover this place.*

*This afternoon I am going to walk alone through the air, that invisible and weightless ‘groundless ground’ (Irigaray 1999: 5). My mind and body are guided by Pauline Oliveros’s, Luce Irigaray’s and Rebecca Solnit’s reflections: ‘Walk so silently that*

the bottom of your feet become ears' (Oliveros 1974: V); 'Gathered but porous, I receive the environment's jubilation' (Irigaray 2001: 2); 'the mind is a landscape of sorts and walking is one way to traverse it' (Solnit 2001: 6).

*This afternoon I am going to walk alone with my mind's eyes and feet's ears, intent on absorbing all that I can of my surroundings. I will be mindful of the fact that it is our careless exploitation of everything on and in earth that has caused the toxicity of the air in and around me as well as the pollution of the ground beneath my feet. Whitehorse Meadow was formerly allotments. These plots were turned in the mid-1990s into a public open space and a nature reserve, ironically after soil tests had confirmed widespread levels of lead contamination. Thornton Heath regularly fails to meet the EU's annual average limit for levels of nitrogen dioxide in the air, and in the month of August 2019 alone the carbon monoxide emissions from the local waste incinerator were nearly 200 times the recommended limit on two separate occasions.*

*This afternoon I am going to walk alone, determined to connect intimately with all that is below, above, in and around me, big and small. I can already imagine the skin of the path against the skin of my soles. '[T]he air is sweet, carnal and silent' (Irigaray 2001: 5) – transparent skin brushing softly against mine, hugging fluidly my entire being. As I traverse this toxic landscape I will remember Timothy Morton's words: 'What is left if we aren't the world? Intimacy.... Two hundred years of idealism, two hundred years of seeing humans at the centre of existence, and now the objects take revenge, terrifyingly huge, ancient, long lived, threateningly minute, invading every cell in your body' (2013: 108, 115). COVID has been around for as long as we have, if not longer. Now, perhaps, we have unleashed one of Earth's natural defences against the virus that we are. Earth doesn't care but I do.*

*Upon my return I will attempt to translate this hoped-for intimate encounter between body, mind, air and earth into writing that enables 'a hoped-for intimacy between sentences and sensation' (Robertson 2020: 42): between sense*

*and sensation. I am imagining a poetic score, a blueprint of this fleeting, redemptive experience of a particular apocalyptic 'here' and 'now', so that it can be lived again and again by myself and others.*



In my excursion my aim was, like Böhme, to hear 'as such' (2017: 132), rather than relating discrete acoustic phenomena to their object-sources. I wanted to cultivate a specifically aural mode of attention, attuned to sound's temporal and spatial ephemerality rather than the events it might point to. When Stevens writes of the 'cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves' (1997: 460), he encourages us to attend to the natural world as it is experienced rather than as the vehicle for neo-Romantic reverie. So I planned to reflect on the sense in the sensory, the sound of human and animal activity as filtered by branches and foliage, the modulation of an atmosphere that, in our extraordinary circumstances, is intuited as malevolent. Perhaps what Stevens calls the 'final finding of the ear' requires a skewing of attention towards Howe's 'sound inside the sense it quickens' (2015: 5). Am I finding or found in this final finding? Can I attend to the monumental indifference of the natural world when the 'turbulent material fields' through which I move are so full of threat (McCormack 2010: 41)? How can I orient myself towards these intangible objects? Are these what Howe means, perhaps, by the 'invisible declensions' of a 'particular' (2015: 5)?

■ The Croydon skyline from Whitehorse Meadow. Photo © Emmanuelle Waeckerté

Responding to these questions, I will again be taking a cue from Tim Ingold, whose work has been important to our project. For Ingold, bodies and spaces, earth and air, are intermingled in our passage through the weather-world:

Organisms figure not as externally bounded entities but as bundles of interwoven lines of growth and movement, together constituting a meshwork in fluid space. The environment, then, comprises not the surroundings of the organism but a zone of entanglement. (2008: 1796)

In my reading, this 'fluid space' can be aligned with the 'fluent mundo' of Stevens's long poem 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'. Peter Middleton, in an article on the auditory qualities of Stevens, has drawn attention to the poem's 'blurring of ontological boundaries between self, body, and sound in the modern world' (2009: 77). At the end of his article, Middleton shifts his attention from Stevens to Howe's book *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, observing: 'Her intricate syntactical shiftings bring out the issue of the difficulty of finding a boundary between the objectivity and subjectivity of sound' (80). This is the 'zone of entanglement' that I want to explore.

*I am on my way to the meadow via a stretch of woodland. I have been preparing for today for a long time. I am already aware of my feet, my breath, dancing together: breathe in 1 2 3 breathe out 1 2 3, breathe in 1 2 3, breathe out 1 2 3 steps. Eyes follow ears, feet follow eyes follow ears. Squirrels are sauntering in air, trees are standing in air, crows are flying in air, the sun is shining through air: the same air that I breathe in 1 2 3 out 1 2 3.*

*I am already walking in air and thinking about walking in the air that I am breathing in and out. The air I am brushing against and walking in. The air that I can't see, that I can feel and hear in my ears, on my skin, in my throat, my nostrils. I have been breathing and walking in air all my life. What is the difference between walking and walking in air since air is always there? Between walking as all two-legged creatures do and walking as a conceptual, poetic or artistic practice? The air doesn't care but I do.*

How can I realize and experience this zone of entanglement in a practice-based activity? I will wander in Battersea Park, listening, reading Stevens's short poem, thinking of Howe's terse phrases. As well as walking, I will sit at times on park benches. I will make recordings to document the environment that has my attention, in order to open an objective axis within the subjective listening I am engaged in.

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*Thursday 7th January, 3.30 p.m., Whitehorse meadow.*

*The following section of text is a transcript of the recording of my first 'walking in air' fieldwork: my verbalization of thinking in movement.*

*I am walking towards the sun shining in a big blue open sky the air is crisp crispy cold and still trees are bare standing in air I cannot see my feet I can hear them on the gravelled path I imagine my feet ears pressing against the earth listening in gentle breeze brushing coldly against my ears my nose the ground is now soft grass upon soft wet earth with each step I can feel my nerve endings entering and exiting the ground rooting and uprooting myself with each step I am walking through air groundless ground hugging the grounded ground I am letting the absence of ground the air guide my steps feet follow air my body my hands my arms sails in the air the skin of my feet hugging the ground through the sole of my boots breathing in cold air as I take 1 2 3 steps breathing out warm air 1 2 3 steps my eyes guiding my blind feet my ears guiding my blinded eyes the air carrying and punctuated by human and non-human sounds the air is silent yet porous hello the air just carried a hello from a fellow walker is it david toop who said silence is the absence of human sounds air is silent yet full of non-human sounds I am meandering in the meadow up the hill down the hill always towards the sun the ground pulling me down the ground keeping me grounded the air keeping me aired and airy and light sharing the*

*ground the air with a multitude of visible  
and invisible humans and non-humans tiny  
and gigantic objects the sun is going  
down about to disappear over the rooftops  
the air brought me back to the gravelled  
path voices disembodied traffic  
roar footsteps a crow the bite  
of the cold on my fingers parakeets seagulls  
crows swallows crossing the air as I walk  
in and breathe in and out the groundless  
ground hugging every part of my body  
and lungs a plane crossing the air on  
the horizon a crow crossing the air above  
me my thinking mirroring my walking  
as I traverse the meadow of my mind with  
my mind eyes as I traverse whitehorse meadow  
with my feet and my feet ears squashy sounds  
soft ground against the crisp cool air.*<sup>1</sup>

I am walking in the park.

Although it is a weekday, the park is very busy. Lots of people are taking the air. I wonder whether I should wear a mask. The winter sun is low and the light white. The air is thick with the sound of voices.

I wander along a wide avenue and turn left into a formally arranged garden area containing absurdly ambitious topiary. Attached to the outer wall of the zoo (closed) is a small caged-off patch of land. A sign reads: 'This enclosure is being refurbished. The animals will be back on display shortly.'

I walk. I listen. I take photos. I sit on a bench beside a large, icy pond. I move on. I walk and think and think about walking and thinking. How hard it is to make air the object of my attention. The texts by Howe and Stevens that I imagined might frame and orient my activity are difficult to reconcile with my walking and thinking. I read them again, thinking of Stevens's crying leaves and the bareness of the branches in the park.

Children play. I am aware of how we walkers in the park strive not to pass too close to one another.

I pause and make a recording beside a large

bandstand. Did anyone ever really enjoy brass bands? The air forced through metal tubing. Marching, of course, is very different to walking.

I pay attention to my attentiveness: the associative drift of thought stimulated by environmental triggers on one hand, and the narrower, willed focus on texts, leaves, air.

I walk on.

Close to the icy pond I sat beside earlier is a windowless building housing machinery. I do not know what it does, but from vents in the walls comes the noise of rushing air. I make another recording.

Someone is learning how to rollerblade. Not for the first time in this park, I am struck by how well-heeled the people around me are, how their voices carry in the air.

My feet lead me back to the bandstand and I set up another recording.

As the light fades, my attention turns to light passing through the lattices of branches and twigs that form a canopy over the bandstand area. The temperature drops and I can see my breath in the air.

Battersea Park is home to many green-feathered parakeets and the twilight chorus is harsh. A runner in a green tracksuit runs several times round the bandstand. Strapped to his arm is a fitness tracker that beeps every second or so. I don't know what it's measuring. Later on, two women will go round and round the bandstand, accompanied by more beeping sounds.

Mostly now I am thinking about air as the vehicle of light: the large impact on my visual perception, as the earth turns and the sunlight hits it at a different angle. Blue becomes orange and then gold, and then everything turns monochrome as warmth and colour fade from the air.

When Howe writes that a 'mourning dove compounds invisible declensions' (2015: 5), she

<sup>1</sup> The audio recordings made by Will Montgomery and Emmanuelle Waeckerlé to document their activities are available at: <https://bit.ly/3OHsLB>

is thinking of the following lines from Stevens's 'The Course of a Particular':

And though one says that one is part of  
everything,  
There is a conflict, there is a resistance  
involved;  
And being part is an exertion that declines:  
One feels the life of that which gives life as it  
is. (1997: 460)

How difficult it is to be 'part of everything', as the recursive movements of consciousness slip to and fro between wandering and particularity. Instead of the soft and low tones of the mourning dove, I can hear the massed cries of the parakeets, sometimes blended with sirens from the city streets around me.

I stay for a long time near the bandstand, walking to and fro, past it, round it. I think about Frederick Law Olmsted, the American designer of parkland. I think of Robert Smithson writing on the dialectical landscape. I think of Stevens walking in Elizabeth Park in Hartford, Connecticut. How each of these explored the relationship between nature and artifice. I wonder about the tenuous two-way bridge between the world we move through and speculative thought.

■ The bandstand at Battersea Park. Photo © Will Montgomery



Unknown to me, the lead connecting my audio recorder to its external battery pack has become detached, and my recording ends after only twenty-five minutes. I spend much longer in the park. A man arrives on his bike and stands by the bandstand. He waits for a long time – perhaps forty minutes – but we ignore one another. Eventually the man he is meeting arrives and their conversation fills the air.

*I have been walking with my mind's eyes and feet ears, thinking aloud about the air I was walking in. As I traversed the meadow east to west, I could think of nothing much, so entangled were body, mind and senses with my grounded and groundless surroundings. Step after step, I experienced a gradual disintegration of my rational self into a chaotic assemblage of feet, legs, arms, head, eyes, ears, skin, mouth, throat, lungs – each master of their own doing and thinking, listening, touching, moving, looking, feeling. My brain, meanwhile, was trying to process this overwhelming whirlwind of disparate information. I was no longer the well-prepared breathing and walking and thinking being that I started out as, but what felt like an effervescent mess of scattered body parts, thoughts and sensations. Walking in air literally blew me apart, or blew my mind – I'm not sure which. Imagine a kinetic human version of Cornelia Parker's exploded shed (Cold Dark Matter, 1991).*

*I am now sitting in air, watching the sun slowly slide through the hazy atmosphere. I feel a vertical pull towards somewhere behind the horizon as I witness the slow regathering of my porous self into a symbiotic system of receptiveness. Meanwhile buildings and trees are standing in air, birds are flying in air, being carried by it, grass is fluttering in air. The busy surface of the ground is tightly embraced by air, slowly melting into it. I was able to think on the way to walking in air and, now, as I remember that experience, much more than during the act itself. What is the difference between walking and walking in air since air is always there? The way we think, perhaps, as we tend to walk lost in thought, disconnected from our external environment. This disconnect is no longer possible, it seems, when you are focusing on the air you walk in. Then, it is as if you slowly become absorbed by air, melting into it.*

Behind my activity, orienting it, are the words ‘walking’ and ‘air’, the sentences from Howe, the poem from Stevens, my conversations with Emmanuelle, the various critical texts I read on this topic. It occurs to me that many of the poems I like represent thinking to itself. The objects and concepts they sketch take mental shape fleetingly and dissolve into recollected sound, shape and sense. My goal, perhaps, has been to replicate that ephemeral presencing through my own walk in the park.

*While walking in and thinking of air, I coexisted intimately for a while with what is below and around us, earth and air, deep seeing, deep listening, deep smelling my surroundings. Perhaps, like other visible and invisible two- and four-legged creatures around me, allowing my senses, every part of my body and the air in and around me, to guide both my thinking and my moving, rather than my rational or conceptual or stressed mind.*

*I walked en l’air, rooting and uprooting myself at each step, while feeling my inside and out to be as weightless as air. I became enchanted, inebriated even, as I walked with air more than in air.*

In all this walking and thinking, I return often to some words from Howe – herself a feeder on textual scraps. Removed from their context, I offer them as a replicable score:

Setting sun. A mourning dove compounds  
invisible declensions.

*I borrow Irigaray’s words from To be Two for a blueprint of this experience and possible score of walking en l’air:*

between earth and sky  
a breath comes and go  
joining one to the other. (2001: 4)

*I consider the potential of a score that does not lead to a road for walking on while thinking of air. Instead it is a path that I create each time I walk and dance inside out with air. I imagine a multitude of such (in)visible tracks crossing the earth, connecting us, step by step, with our surroundings. ‘The plants live together without difficulty. And we? How do we share the air?’ (Irigaray 2001: 3). How do we live together, and walk together, in that same air?*

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