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Citation: Sampson, Ellen (2020) On Walking. Stimulus>Respond. pp. 18-27. ISSN 1746-8086

Published by: Stimulusrespond

URL: <http://www.stimulusrespond.com/> <<http://www.stimulusrespond.com/>>

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# *stimulus* → *respond*

ISSN 1746-8086

www.stimulusrespond.com

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*On*

*Walking*

*ELLEN  
SAMPSON*



*Author's note*

The film *Things Floating in the Hudson: 11th July 2019* – a lo-fi mediation on the river that bounds the west side of New York – was developed as a psychogeography: an exploration of my embodied experience at a particular place and time. I am an artist who makes work with and about walking, using it to make performances, narratives, and objects. I walk across urban spaces and fields and occasionally trespass on other's land. Watching the film, I cannot help but think about the hours I spent running along its banks last year, the solitary pleasure of body, pavement and air, and of the ease with which I moved through space.

The Hudson is 315 miles long, but this little stretch of it was briefly mine. Made nine months into a fellowship in New York, I walked and ran this paved stretch of shore almost daily-looking at old boats, considering but never playing mini golf, wandering to pier 45 to watch the milonga on Sundays. The river interested me, the way it carves and bisects the land – the tension between the urban and wild, the ways the tides both signify and embody change. In many ways it is unlovely, cleared of the boat yards and dilapidated warehouses where Alvin Balthrop once photographed trysts. Instead it is a municipal space of leisure – the detritus not of industry but instead of play – balls, water bottles, protective clothing.

And yet there was often the sudden joy of the unexpected: a jolt of pleasure at meeting an object out of place.



On

## Walking

I have always been struck by the phrase ‘a path well trodden’. A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground ‘being trodden’ upon. We can see the path as a trace of past journeys. The path is made out of footprints – traces of feet that ‘tread’ and that in ‘treading’ create a line on the ground ... A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. (Ahmed 2006: xix–xx)

Walking holds a particular place in our culture; not only are our movements learned, but they are socially and culturally specific: the way we walk is indicative of both who we are and who we would like to be. Walking is an intersection of the social, the bodily and the personal; it is learned, enacted and performed. More than almost any other activity, walking, renders us social beings. De Certeau famously commences *The Practice of Everyday Life* with a passage describing walking from the heights of the World Trade Center down into the streets of New York. The marks mapped out by our footsteps are, for de Certeau, cartographies of social structures; they are material and temporal manifestations of our social networks:

Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these ‘real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.’ They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize. (de Certeau 1984: 97)

The pathways we take are our routes through the world, our negotiations with the multiple forces and agencies at play. The paths we take produce and confirm our identities in an iterative cycle of repetitions and performances. As Ahmed so beautifully describes of paths and the orientations of the body: ‘Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created’ (Ahmed 2006: xix–xx). These lines might be physical, such as those De Certeau writes of, or social, the ways we navigate familiar and unfamiliar cultural terrains, separate from the road and an indication of desired trajectories (Van Wolputte 2018).

In crossing space we are in dialogue with multiple agencies beyond our own. These encounters, the meetings of both human and non-human affecting bodies, are individual, and bodily: cumulative and iterative. These meetings of agencies are the spatial, material and social networks that locate us within the world. We are produced by the spaces we inhabit and, in turn, negotiate those same socially and materially imposed identities by crossing and re-crossing space.

Walking is a confluence of agencies: as we cross space we negotiate the social structures which contain us, veering off track or toeing the line. Though the forces we negotiate may be social or political, it is our material culture which enacts these structures upon us. The things we meet in the world affect us. The shapes of our environments afford us certain movements just as our garments do. In moving our body through the world, we are in an entangled and complex negotiation of the body amongst the agencies which surround it. Meyer's description of how landscape shapes and reframes human experience, so that the spaces we have built shape not only our movements but also our conceptualizations of space and time, illustrates this particularly well:

The steps themselves represent a local time; the minutes required to climb up. In Venice, the steps of the stairway rhythmize the walk through the city. ... The city walker experiences the transition from the rhythm of the steps to another rhythm, clear, yet unknown, still to be discovered. (Meyer 2008: 158)

These groupings of bodies and things are the construction of the self in the world, so that 'bodily schema' (Schilder 1935) extends beyond the surfaces of the body into both the things which surround it and the environments (landscapes, bodies, screens) it inhabits. The spaces we move through act upon us just as do the agencies (material and other) in the things we wear, so that we are in a constant position of being affected, whilst at the same time affecting. Walking is an immersion in a cycle of affects: of meeting bodies that affect us. Walking is 'being in the world' – and in this 'being in' we are also becoming – changed and transformed by the meeting of agencies other than our own. The transformative nature of our encounters with the world is recorded both in the body-self – we are changed both physically and psychically in these meetings – and in our material culture. Ruggerone terms these transformations 'becomings':

The living corporeality of our practices, the fleshy experience of life we sense but cannot fully describe, like the feeling of walking through the city (De Certeau 1984), or sinking into a warm bath or wearing our favorite dress, all these are examples of perpetual becomings, events in which our bodies transform as a result of encounters with other bodies (human and non-human). (Ruggerone 2016: 8)

This text is an edited extract from Ellen Sampson's new book *Worn*, which will be published by Bloomsbury Academic in December 2020. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/worn-9781350087187/>

The short film *Things Floating in the Hudson: 11th July 2019* can be viewed at <http://www.ellensampson.com/things-floating-in-the-hudson>





*Things Floating in the Hudson: 11th July 2019*

1. Burger wrapper
2. Tennis ball
3. Glove
4. Footballs
5. Kneepad
6. Bottle
7. Tennis ball
8. Pank
9. Bike helmet
10. Leaf
11. Bottles
12. Ring

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