

Walking in Red

*There must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street.**

A discrete gathering under some trees at 8.30am on a clean sunny morning. Here they come ... a small troupe swings by... they don't stop... blink and you'd miss them... three of us join the end of the line... walking against the flow towards the station. The volume dips unexpectedly, the muted rustle of thousands of people in transit... echoey announcements for trains to Grantham and Doncaster. The crowd appears to part in tacitly agreed moves allowing us through... we swerve purposefully with unexpected grace, in and out of the pools of light from the grandiose vaulted glass roof. It's a cinematic backdrop..... epic and ordinary..... locality turns into storyboard setting... the initiated and uninitiated become incidental extras or sometimes protagonists.

Primed to take note of the outer and inner by virtue of being here, we are invited or challenged to be in this place differently, unencumbered by the weight of bags or a destination. I watch my thoughts as they flit around, tens of thousands of other thoughts all around me.

Cracks in the pavement..... I catch my arms swinging and am disconcerted by this sensation of unburdened walking... muscle memory of childhood – a different sense of weight in the flexing in my feet. I pull my attention back to the dirty glass and textured concrete of the town hall and the weeds and hotel signs on Argyle Street, *Ceci ne pas un hotel*.

We are only ten minutes into the walk – a lot can happen in that time (duration is an AIR preoccupation – seven years, twenty-four hours, twelve hours.) A brisk constitutional round my neighbourhood of twenty-five years ago... hijabed girls on scooters heading for school, the ex-squat corner house with its plants. Actually it hasn't changed that much. A bubble of nostalgia. Time as a gift.

Being in a place one knows earlier, later, longer than customary has been AIR's methodology from the start. A productive discomfort often accompanies the pleasure. Reminders of immanence... flecks of dust in the sunlight. Walking, striding, shadowing, keeping up, falling behind, trudging, weaving through crowds. I think of verbs a lot today. AIR likes lists of actions, nouns, adjectives, places, numbers... maybe it helps give shape to a way of working that holds off from determining forms but seeks moments of clarity and precision. There was a big blackboard with chalked lists in their Archway office studio lending a slightly old-fashioned, didactic quality. Refreshments, thank-you's, sweeping up at the end of the day. Tasks well done. An ethical position suggested in secular acts, shared experiences, overlapping communities.

We have signed up for silence... it's not much to ask ... a human clock dipping into twelve hours, to and fro in loops or petals or a spirograph drawing in time and space. What is the status of these hours and this action? Left and right, joining in and slipping away. Slices of time, having apparently been neither the spectacle nor audience but arguably both. An artwork? Flaneuring with parameters? It is purposeful activity, resistant to definition. A farewell as AIR leaves King's Cross?

The line breaks with glimpses of red on fellow walkers ahead... markers of our benign cult. Past Eurostar outlets, man at piano, more reflective surfaces walking at pace at our own volition with apparently no decisions to be made and no obligations.

The scale changes in the space of a street. The blur of the Euston Road traffic sounds dissipate... .. birds start up... passing conversations become distinct. There's a notice on the playground in Somers Town protesting the buying up of public space... astroturfed play areas and parents and toddlers waiting for the nursery. No gangs of fluorescent jackets or cranes. There is a small group measuring space in the playground opposite the Crick institute – their grey beards and tweed jackets mitigate sinister but what's with the gas canisters? No time to ask – it's imperative not to stop... Phoenix Street and the Cock Tavern... clocking details / registering codes... I think more about what this walking does than what it means makes us back into creatures in transit.

The shocking blast of spring in the park... a kind of violence in the sharp lime green and black buds about to burst. Ah yes, Dionysian all this stirring... a royal blue sculpture with a small water carrying figure memorialising someone. It's always slightly doomy here... leaning tombs and Thomas Hardy's tree... past St Pancras Mortuary where a smartly dressed trio in black, two women and one man, middle-aged Afro-Caribbeans are talking quietly outside. I wince, embarrassed at our intrusion, and walk on.

Heading north, past the Alara health food warehouse and fish suppliers..... working spaces seem quaint and unlikely ... probably earmarked on plans somewhere. This feels like bunking off ...playing truant or walking your patch... looking for clues? Over the encased bridge and the railway lines, past dismal detritus and funny graffiti.... another film set. Euphoria... years of AIR walks that are a little longer than appears reasonable... walking prescriptions... when is that point when serotonin kicks in?

On the grass banks at the bottom of Maiden Lane estate workman are sitting... Polish... Rumanian... can't quite catch the language... they are smoking and looking at us – this line of serious individuals – do they notice the red that connects us? We become a mild curiosity. We look funny. It doesn't take much to be a disruption. An inventory of AIR's activities is marked by little fissures in the everyday run of things. They are politely defiant - never anarchy but never business as usual either. Peons to the unregulated. This feels essential now - stretches of time in which anomalies provide a jolt, a space, a small adventure. I manage five loops through the layers of place with its indigestibility and refusal to sit still and be one thing. Last walk of the day... long shadows and sweet light are a recipe for reverie... south of the Euston Road again... you can never cross the same Euston Road twice. A beautifully restored lead rooftop disturbs my equilibrium producing a momentary sharp pain as I pass my younger self outside the Scala. Alice in Wonderland disorientation. We come and go in waves and shoals. Organic metaphors in this place? I feel proprietorial but it doesn't count for much.

A large man with lots of bags tries to stop me as we nip abruptly into a courtyard with tapas bars and structural surveyors offices. I shrug apologetically, gesturing 'nothing to give'... *HEAR ME OUT* he shouts and it rings in my ears for the rest of the walk. They have been walking for twelve hours give or take – swollen hands from being on their feet. It's a long shift. They stop suddenly on the dot of 8.00pm – I feel affronted and want to go on.

* Jane Jacobs (1961)

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