Interview with Anthony Schrag

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QUESTION I

Art-Based Research is meant to have a very wide horizon of aesthetic and art experimentation, challenge (and agonism) and reflection: this includes extreme play with artistic and performative boundaries. Why, then, does your radical experience (absolument moderne in the words of Rimbaud) of such a long Pilgrimage to Venice sound like an anti-system to many artists, professors and other experts of the Art World?

To be clear: the walk was never to ‘Venice’ but rather to the ‘Venice Biennale’. I was not on a Pilgrimage to the romantic city, but to the Prima Donna of the Art World. In this way, my project would always be a reflection of that system, because the Biennale exists as its nexus.

I cannot speak for how the work 'sounds' like to many artists, professors and other experts of the Art World - I have no control of their interpretations!! - but, I can say that the work was not intended as a critique to the system, but rather as an examination-through-practice of the centre of that system: the Biennale. In its most simple intention, my walk existed as a contrast to the object-based art-world of the Venice Biennale, and to walk - an ephemeral act that is both ambiguous and political at the same time - was intended to operate in contrast to a financially-driven, object-based, hierarchical Art World. Additionally, it was framed within a ‘socially-engaged’ process (a contested and difficult term, I recognise!). This form of art is significantly absent from the ‘Art World’ and so by literally taking this practice through walking to the Biennale, it was hoped to explore why such works are not present, and why they are not valued within that world.
This is what was intended, but it was not what happened: in the process of ‘doing it’ - day-to-day, kilometre-by-kilometre - the Walk became so many other things: a reflection on land-use; a personal journey; a discussion about migration; a physical test; etc.. In the end, I feel that the Walk was a very different experience from what I began with, and in regards to a critique of the Art World - I found that through its minutia (perhaps we can call it “the research”?) I did not care to either critique or examine the centre of the system. It was no longer important. To me, I felt that the examination or critique or reflection only gave more power to that centre. Instead, the end-point (the gates of the Biennale at the Giardini) was only one small aspect of the entire process, rather than being my ‘goal’. Instead, every single host, every single step, every single conversation, every single muscle ache were all equally parts of the ‘artwork’ and the Biennale was just one small aspect of that. As I write in my blog from the 86th day: “...I truly feel that if the Biennale ever wants this sort of work I do (socially-engaged), then it knows where to find me. If it wants me, the Biennale can walk to me.”

As to whether the project does push the boundaries of artistic research, I am still unclear. I have still many many questions about the project, despite being completed 9 months ago. Research, by its definition, must include failure, and so was the walk a success because I reached the decided end-point I had originally decided upon? Or was it a failure because the original questions I was interested in asking became irrelevant through the process? Does it succeed as research but fail as art?
Perhaps the conundrum occurs because the project was too plural. I address this in small part in the next question, but briefly, if a participatory project is to truly operate, it cannot exist within the mind/heart of the artist alone, but with the participants also, and they must exist equally if it is to be an ethical experience (in one reading of 'ethical'). How then do we represent such a plurality? Does the 'research' the fellow participant/collaborator is going through need to be collected and collated, or is that a form of colonization? How do they represent their experiences within an art-world if they are not artists? Can I truly every gather the all the data of experience, of conversations, of photographs, of films, of objects I gathered, of every memory and sensation? All those things combined go into the making of the entire project – they are all the data – but I cannot represent them all, and if I cannot represent them all, am I only showing an incomplete work? As research, therefore, there needs to be much more rigour. This is perhaps the true challenge to the system: a critique of how we incorporate this into our understanding of art-world systems.

QUESTION II

Lure of the Lost: A Contemporary Pilgrimage is a Participatory Art Project bringing in its "tissue//crowd" persons which don't belong to the art world, and persons which do belong to it, namely when you met them at last in Venice to discuss about Art, Power and Aesthetic Politics? If so, how "participatory" will be the moment of linking both crowds when coming to a synthetic moment of both types of active spectators: the ones that look at you as a pure (but strange because of peculiar external signs) pilgrim crossing the holy fields, and the spectators which are used to "Art Games" (Graham Coulter-Smith) that suddenly saw you arriving in the most symbolic capital of all the Art Power, Venice?

The honest answer is that two crowds did not meet in person. The 'artworld' crowd stayed in their zones and the 'normal' crowd stayed in their zones: I am the only one that seemed to permeate that barrier in this context. For this project, this was fundamentally an issue with 1) time and 2) geography. Both these problems arose because of the act of walking through time and space, and so therefore I did not have time to develop deep or secure relationships with either groups because I was moving through their landscapes at speed. The most successful participatory works need to develop slowly and subtly, and perhaps it meant that this participatory process did not occur in a manner to which I am accustomed. Instead, what did happen was that relationships took other forms, i.e., digital. In one example, some 'non-art' hosts from the North of England kept a conversation all the way to the waters of Venice via email and my blog, exploring subjects about the world which they found interesting. They could not, therefore, mingle and participate with the 'artworld' crowd, but we continued to have dialogue about important subjects regardless. In other words, our participation with each other was quite intimate and narrowed necessarily by the mode of participation: private emails and other digital conversations.

Other participants - for example, some people that walked with me in France - engaged with the project for 1 or 2 days, walking with me for 10 hours and exploring
the project through our words and shared sore muscles, but then disappeared from
the project. Their type of participation was different again and much more about a
shared experience. Crucially, their contribution and participation was no-less im-
portant: it just occurred in a different form.

Arriving into Venice, the conversations were more formal and within the context of
a gallery, and led by a curator, and guided by the frame of ‘walking art’ and deferred
to notions of ‘art’, rather than the wider world, or a shared physical experience. This
sort of participation was different again, and also equally important, but incredibly
different from other types that I experienced over 88 days of walking and over 120
people walking with me.

What I am getting at is that ‘active spectators’ were all active in a plethora of ways.
This is not problematic to me. On the contrary: the purpose of participatory works

is not to act as a coloniser from one world to another, but an active participant in
many kinds of experiences: to not drag the ‘outside’ world into the frame of ‘art’ but
to explore the edges and collapse the barriers. The central fabric of a participatory
aesthetic resides in plural nature. It can - and is - many things, and does not exist
in a modernist, idealised form of a single monolithic idea. In that sense, there is no
crisis between engaging with one group in one format and another in a different
format again. Rather, the skill is to be able to continue to participate in a plurality
of forms, in the way that is important to that person or situation, regardless of what
‘world’ to which they belong.

Lastly, the notion of those that ‘belong’ to the art-world and those that do not ‘be-
long’ is problematic to me because it fixes and essentialises those characters. Nor
does the examine the semantics of authorship: crowd, spectator, participant, col-
laborator, viewer. These are all nuances within a participatory event the need to be
unpicked and unravelled so as to not create such hierarchies.

Personally, I would prefer to approach each person as a collaborator in my world
and work: they can influence me as much as I can influence them and it doesn’t mat-
ter if they are ‘fellow artists’ or farmers. We exist to feed and challenge each other’s
world view. Within a participatory context, this is more important than developing
works in which there are spectators and audiences, because that assumes a powerful
dynamic which I don't believe the artist should retain.

QUESTION III
Do you think it is possible to face the idea of ‘Agonism’ and ‘Negative Reciprocity’ in your
two projects of the Lure of the Lost (2016) and the Mirrored Jump done in 2008 with Alice
Finbow?

It is difficult to compare these two works, as they are fundamentally very different
approaches, made in different times and with different intentions. I was a different
person when I made both of these and those persons are different again from who I
have become Post-Walk and Post-PhD.

What I can say is that neither truly contained Agonism, nor 'Negative Reciprocity'.
Alice Finbow and I were · and are · interested in exploring the tensions and opportuni-
ties that become apparent in the comparison and interruption of movement.
Balance, symmetry, and notions of mirroring is essential to our shared practice. Mirrored Jump (2008) therefore is a quintessential work. The reciprocity is equal, not
negative. And while there is competition, our purpose is shared equilibrium. This
might appear similar to an agonistic approach on the surface, however, the subtle
difference lies in 'processes' and 'endpoints': In Mirrored Jump, both Alice and I
agreed on both the process and endpoints before the photograph was taken, and
so was not an agonistic process. We were working as one, rather than agonistically.
Additionally, the work was always intended to be a Photograph and once it existed,
the work then became complete. This is crucial to understand in contrast to Lure of
the Lost (2016), which was an open-ended inquiry: it began with a purpose, but that
changed over time.

Considering Agonism then: it is based upon a committed but combative relation-
ship, rather than a purely antagonistic critique. It is a parallel strategy. It's tensions
are shared tensions, but not always balanced or egalitarian. While the endpoint of
an agonistic approach is usually agreed upon, the processes are not. Lure of the Lost
could not said to be truly agonistic, because I never had a reciprocal relationship
with the Biennale, nor did we · me and the Biennale · agree on an endpoint. As an
amalgam of inanimate things and social constructs, it could not form a relationship
with me, and so the work could not be agonistic. Also, the Biennale began as my
subject, and not as collaborator and (as I explain in the first question) that subject
became less and less important in my Walk, and so the concept of ‘Negative Reci-
procity’ evaporated. (My understanding of Negative Reciprocity concerns a loss in
value; a depletion into negative. Consequently, if something something becomes
less important, it cannot loose value, as its value is worthless. In a desert, water has
high value, and so it becomes important. In the same metaphor, the Biennale just
became another sand dune to me, rather than the Oasis I was desperate to reach.)
What I am trying to unravel here is that both 'Agonism' and 'Negative Reciprocity' require specific kinds of power relationships, and neither works - *Lure or the Lost* or *Mirrored Jump* - were formulated upon that sort of power dynamic. In *Mirrored Jump*, we were both equals throughout the entire process, and so notions of agonism/reciprocity were not a concern. In *Lure of the Lost*, relationships between myself and my 'subject' (The Biennale) were non-existent, and so, similarly, notions of agonism/reciprocity were also not a concern.

The notion of 'negative reciprocity' in terms of physicality, however, could be said to be present in both works because both required excessive amounts of energy, and there is little corporeal return for such energy. This is an entirely intra-personal reciprocity, however, and was - in both projects - was counter-balanced by the production of 'artworks'.

QUESTION IV

"Lasting for three months in total, Schrag’s journey has been carefully route-planned to take in several pilgrimage sites. Giving a sense of the scale of his endeavour, his path has also been modified to take account of the curve of the earth. With 450 hours of walking to be completed, Schrag has in front of him a summer of eight hour days of walking at a swift pace. «It’s a blessing. I’m just about to finish my PhD, I’ve got all these questions about my practice, what next, turning forty, and I get to have three months just to think about them.»"


How did the deep experience of those long 450 hours, being involved in so many silent and communicative people, silent and whispering landscapes, and other unimaginable
situations, help you to shape the issues you had in mind for your PhD before the first step from Huntley?

This is an entirely practical answer: Within the schedule of my PhD, I had planned to write and complete the thesis in July 2015. In January 2015, it became clear that the opportunity to do this walk/project was going to become a reality. Knowing how difficult the physical and emotional commitment would be to do that walk, I wanted to ensure that the PhD write-up and the walking did not overlap. I understood then that this would mean that I would need to be very, very strict in my time-management so that I could complete and hand-in the thesis before I left as well as have sufficient training to prepare for the walk.

I therefore locked myself in my office all day writing, and went to the gym in the evenings to build up strength for the walk. The result of this gruelling schedule was that I managed to hand in my thesis 5 days before I departed from Huntly. I knew that I would have about 3 months before my PhD Defence in Newcastle, and this became the timeframe in which I would have to complete the entire stretch from Scotland to Venice: 2500+ km.

Many people commented to me that I was lucky to have the time to reflect on my PhD and prepare for my Defence during my walk. However, the walk required an extreme physical commitment in order to walk 30-40 km a day, each day, and in the evening I simply collapsed with exhaustion, so I rarely thought about my thesis, or questions about my practice, or indeed my fortieth birthday. I lived entirely through my body, and corporeal concerns were the only ones that existed for me: nothing else mattered. I also needed to be focused on the social-engagement elements of the the walk which required I be present and dialogic with participants, meaning I also did not have mental space to contemplate the subject of my thesis. Additionally, the route did not exist like a normal pilgrimage path in that I had to navigate every turn and road with maps, and this required the last of my mental concentration powers.
I therefore did not think about my subject for the entire 88 days or the 450 hours of walking.

I was finally scheduled my defence for Oct 6th, and with my arrival into Venice being Oct 1st, followed by speaking engagements, press, and travel back to Scotland, I similarly did not have much time to prepare. However, I completed my Defence with only minor corrections, I think this success emerged out of two possibilities - or a combination of both: Firstly, the PhD was such a mental process, and the Walk was such a physical process, that perhaps the time spent focusing on a different way of making (through my body instead of my mind) allowed the chaos of a doctorate to settle and naturally filtrate. This is, of course, highly unscientific and possibly illogical, but the adage 'a change is as good as a rest' seems appropriate: being immersed into something wholly differently perhaps helped me to return to the intellectual study with fresh eyes.

The second possibility is about bravado and confidence: When I walked into my Defence, my over-lying emotional stance was one of invincibility. I had just walked 2638 km; I had, under my own power, gone over The Alps; I had beaten loneliness, physical and psychological trauma; I had completed a mammoth task. The Defence seemed paltry in comparison; I probably swaggered into the room. I have no idea if this affected my results, but I think I probably made quite an impression.
"My feet are battered and bruised but thankfully I didn't get too many blisters - I'm sure my feet will be glad of a change of shoes, I might burn the ones I've been wearing just for public safety."


How would you connect these serious words of body pain with the absurd aesthetic suffering provoked by Capitals of Objecthood and Naïf Art Expectations such as the Venice Global Arrangement? And how do you link both pains with the essay you just produced to be published in this book about Research in Arts?

The absurdity of my walk occurred in a similar way as the Samuel Beckett's theatre work I write about in this book - it was an endless repetition, and in that endless repetition, we find ourselves examining the absurd suffering, and (perhaps) finding a way out of it. In *Play*, we are exposed to an endless, rapid-fire, rhythmic, painful experience, and the end of the text a stage direction occurs in which the author instructs us to: "Repeat Play." He directs us to repeat the trauma of the experience with only slight variation. Similarly, in my walk, I woke every morning, repeated the same rituals of packing, the same rituals of taping my feet, the same rituals of shoe-tying, the same rituals of map-reading, the same rituals of food-finding, the same rituals of ache, of muscle-spasm, of pain, each day. Like in *Play*, the daily walk was endless repetition of my feet, one-after-another, with only slight variation.

The place of the Biennale - a Capitals of Objecthood and Naïf Art Expectations - has a similar rota of absurdity: new artists, new curators, new spaces, new parties to attend, new art-stars, all repeated, endlessly. That aesthetic suffering occurs for different reasons, but its process is the same, one-after-another, with only slight variation.

I do not read the two experiences - my aesthetic suffering or that of the Biennale - as anything different. There are only different kinds of pain in the world: some one wishes to endure, others that one ignores. I lived through the walk because it was an aesthetic suffering of my own making/choosing, and so had ownership of it in a way I do not have ownership of the Biennale.

Also, within the walk, I found that there were aspects that led me away from the existential void, and these appeared in the differences of the people around me: those hosts and fellow walkers introduced into my experience novel concepts, novel ideas and gave me reasons to continue forward. They mitigated the absurdity, and the suffering.
This is perhaps the reason why I work within a participatory manner: people are always more exciting to me that objects of capital or art-world experiences because people are always different. The artist Anne-Marie Copstake once said: “I work with people who are not me” and I find this endlessly uplifting: other humans shine light into the dark crevices between the repetitions to show valleys of light and joy. It is through that shared, common suffering with slight variation that I find redemption. Not in art-objects, or systems of power, but through endlessly different human experience. Again, this process was revealed via the walk, and through having to go through that painful experience - both physically and emotionally - I came to understand the lack of relevance of the Biennale to me or my work, and its cycle of absurd aesthetic suffering not a cycle I chose to explore. People, however, were part of that suffering, and the potential to escape it.

Photographies:
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