

Moving-with a line (gossip, secrets, a messenger app)

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Abstract

This contribution explores a series of video pieces of encounters on street corners, in parks, at dusk, at lunch time. They also take place in private chats, in Facebook posts: circulating across a networked public, tracing notions of veracity, transparency and secrecy. In their gossiping nature they insist that something happened while attending to the power of silence and our attempts to comply and subvert at once. The work is interested in the constitution of public and private in circulation and production: what happens to a private self when it becomes public in: a series of movements-with, urban space, an audio-visual body of work.

1 two houses

I will try a starting point for this. It is here: two images of an ordinary small-town house somewhere in Northwest Germany. The house was built in 1935, three men moved in, one died in 1943, one married and a young woman moved in while he was absent. From 1945 onwards it housed at times more than 25 people, mostly strangers, two girls were born. The man who built it died in 1964, by then the regulation on housing refugees from the East had ceased and House was solely occupied by a now middle-aged couple and their two daughters. The oldest daughter moved out in 1970. The older image of the house is from the late 1960s, my mother in her late teens about to leave.

House is ordinary in its history where I grew up: it consists of an attic with an old sewing machine, it links to Poland and Upper Silesia, it links to the battles of Belgrade, Kursk and Stalingrad, numerous deaths east of it, someone survives and surrenders outside Vienna. Its basement houses untold stories and so does every room within it. From the outside, like on any respectable street in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1948, we would see net curtains in the whitest white, starched rigid. Occasionally, these twitch.

I stay at house for a fortnight in 2015. It is empty. All those who had moved into the new built have died. I take a photo with my friend and it aligns with the earlier photograph.

“The schizophrenic’s work is to make the house schizophrenic: an illuminated yet blackened construction at the center of a field. All of the lights are on and the curtains are not drawn, exposing the occupants in the rituals of their illnesses. There is the butcher with his hatchet, compulsively chopping the meat. There is the butcher’s wife, washing the table then setting the meat down upon it. There are the butcher’s children sitting down to eat. When the meal is done, they remove their clothing as a family and put it in a bucket to soak. Even this far from the regional metropolis, their nudity comes as a shock.”¹

The starting point is thus a rather specific one. And yet, it is also arbitrary: pick any point where public violence becomes private, folds inwards, at one point or another, affecting one person or another. That the people affected are not universal but specific is one thing patriarchy teaches us: when violence becomes private it usually becomes gendered; in becoming domesticated it is designated a private matter. Here, a first line is crossed, or indeed many: and it is these invisible ones that constitute the work, which in turn folds on and outward. With this, the work presented sits in a series of traditions, fought for, appropriated, claimed and reclaimed: they are neither personal essay nor confession, they are political, feminist, partisan. They are performative in their theory, their practice and their presentation – Sophie Calle, Bhanu Kapil and Chris Kraus stand as inspiration, many others remain unnamed. This work then is also generationally specific: it stands as part of the granddaughter generation of the perpetrators who liked themselves as victims ever after, it stands at the long shadow of the post-war generation. And, it stands also at a time when what we, the grandchildren, learned as our political task, the firm and resolute Never Again! is tried to be a rather short-termed never, to be undone and all that was to be claimed again.

In all this, don’t be mistaken, it also seeks pleasure, joy, love.

2 he told me

to draw a line, to stick to the line. Make transparent what is here and what beyond.

I could hear in his voice that this division works for him.

It is never one that I would have much confidence nor trust in.

Yes, if this is about boundaries, then let me pick the line carefully, and in abiding by it, let me move -
similarly carefully - across my own.

¹ Kapil 2011 *Schizophrene*, 54. All materials that are part of *the line* itself are presented here right-hand justified. *The line* is hosted at <https://the-----line.tumblr.com/>.



Figure 1: Moving-with #1 (source material from *the line*, 2017)

3 two cities, two routes

One evening I catch my shadow. I stand on the eastern edge of the crossing and it is already dark. As I walk across I overtake myself, once, twice and become multiple. I return to the other side and with the next cycle of the lights I repeat. I find myself repeating that evening and on other occasions. Watching the ground carefully, noting and tracing how many I can be. It is a simple effect, caused by overhead lights and passing cars. At the same time, it seems to capture the multiplicity of my walking along a known route. It is a commute which rarely starts at work, usually ends at home.

I am unconcerned for myself along this route, I have always been. This level of unconcern is important: I move in public, after dark, on my own.

Following this first incident I explore these movements and add a few more. They are generally urban, yet, as I return to where I grew up, some rural woods are added. I would at some point like to call what I do a *dérive*, but I feel I am cheating: how can a commute ever be a *dérive*? And still, part of my doing is evidently drifting.

Who drifts?

Elsewhere I find a point to return to, outdoors, after marvelling at some largescale diamond dusted screenprints. The point animates a number of visits and something strange becomes something familiar, not quite assumed, but on occasion it too offers a drift not dissimilar to the one on my familiar commute. Over a winter and into spring I move between and along and slowly build a set of images and annotations of two sites, two routes and the connections within and across.

While a drift results in the visuals, the notes harbour a different sensibility: let me introduce the flaneur's shadow:

This, the photo that made me return to the grasses. it took me a while to find it again in my upload folder's excess.

It's interesting to try and retrace what belonged to the image on this bright May morning. It is so quiet, well hidden that I barely sense its resonance, but of course I know it exists somewhere outside and in. And I feel it is time for another round of discussions about memory work (and as often I am glad to know those who share my concerns).

My usual fear is active: that I will spoil or muddy what was before by adding the difference to it. Yet, if I designate the difference merely to be an investigation into extent and limitations, edges and

boundaries, that investigation may take another turn and allay the fear, in fact turn it into that curiously productive unknowingness that so often propels me along (tangentially).

4 on this last move along

I touched it. Cautiously first, my hand reached out and I kept moving. With just a tiny bit of pressure the finger glid along, each post making a sound, relating to the one before. At once I had established not merely the feel of orange but also its sounds. It was a fitting last encounter.

5 two sites, many routes

The messages were part of this too:

The limits of me in this space; the need to retrace that route (and not thinking that there were taxis).

And part of that route was clearly the conflict with Mairi and her saying that with my desire I'd deserve all that I might get – *wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen*² --. That was really apparent when I was walking.

But also: how so much of what I am doing is meeting fear, tugging at its edge. I am quite slow and persistent at that. It needs several iterations.

So, going back to the accommodation was the last thing that I needed to pick up here.

[24/February 2015, near Kleistpark]

While the urban sites become familiar enough to allow for a drift across various day times, the communication about and across takes on a more nervous disposition: what am I talking about, to whom, how and why. More crucially: what am I to say, what not to say. As notes gather and different small conversations strike up, information begins to diffuse and drift: it seeps into here and there, is not quite contained. What am I doing here?

After a few weeks I become curious about the omissions, the leaking and the blurring and begin to investigate the web of messages, notes and dialogue as it begins to accumulate.

“Kleistpark in Berlin in 2015.” I giggle: aye, right.

And so it continues: I translate, I move along, I make mistakes. Stories are told which are discernible, I edit, I delete, I revise. Other things come to me, and so the line, the movement, builds and connects from two cities, two routes to two sites and many routes.

² A German saying: who says A must say B also; it implies a threat (and less a drawing out of consequences): if you start going down a route, you have to accept all that is coming.



Figure 2: Moving-with #2 (source material from *the line*, 2017)

One project title made a statement (no shadow secrets), the other one, the one I keep, denotes a practice. I remember where I sat when I recognised it: watching green-feathered goselings and a narrowboat slowly making its way up along the city-centre canal network. I overtake it when walking and he and I smile at each other along our routes. In this, a space is created that becomes a holding container. I can deposit something in it and it is carried along. So I deposit: past and present, and let it circulate, iterate, alter here and there and it circulates further. That is all.

hey...back in hotel now... it's quite a long walk and i realised that it worried me a bit... it wasn't good back in december when i walked it at night... i had brought too much of my own rubbish back then and felt really alien/dislocated... i was worried i'd feel like that again and being v tired would have easily made me fall into that... so, this time the walk was good, i Rusholme i even lingered a little and observed, dropped into other people's stuff, that was good and v different to first time round... i also realise that i was quite worried about the hotel, they gave me a different, much nicer room (so no beige photographs this time round, but i am actually quite relieved)...

Gesa

yes... clearly a tracing of my limits... city a little bit too strange and me a little bit too on my own to linger too long...

My I becomes mirrored, fragmented. At points it glitters in diamond dust, at others it gets muddied in the gutter along Oxford Rd. It pings and bounces along, occasionally acquires a heart as gesture or emoji. At times it sighs. In all this, it becomes unrecognisable, unpredictable and a bit unstable in its truth:

She fell in love.

No: it started differently.

He asked her if she was in love.

She said yes.

But he really wanted to talk about him having fallen in love

He asks her how she knew she was in love
She tells him.

He now said he didn't know whether he was in love.
Still.
Before, he assumed he was.

6 moving-with: a walking methodology

Walking art often centres on the walker themselves: the practice of bodily movement and, often, the sights seen, then encountered. In urban settings, this practice has traditionally two modalities that nonetheless relate: the flaneur and the drift. There is plenty written about either, more recently, participatory art and relational aesthetics add a focus on who walks with whom. I will offer (perhaps unsurprisingly, given what precedes this section) a rather specific line through this debate (and doing so omit much).

I am interested in questions concerning the constitution of subject, object and audience in an artwork—be it text, visual, performative or a walk, notably: ideas of them shifting, presenting or absenting at different points. This is the lens through which I would like to approach *the line* as a walking methodology. Taking *he told me* serious as a dialogue and event, resulted in a particular set of content, a particular approach and a particular form of exploring authorship, audience and subject/object relations within it. It concerns questions of form and containment: structural holding patterns, form. It also concerns a series of questions over the subject matter, to which I would like to attend here: how can we conceive of the moving across urban and digital spaces with content and material that is considered personal and intimate.

a. event as excess

There, where the barriers direct from the road back to the pavement, underneath the ring road, they stumbled. On two occasions the men I had found myself walking behind got caught out by an almost imperceptible kerb. They tripped. Noone fell. Yet, the first man I observed did that thing where you, quickly, embarrassedly, look around to see if hopefully noone noticed.

I, walking behind, felt suddenly incredibly sure-footed and fully expected to fall flat on my face fifty metres further along the path.

The funny thing: on my way to the station I stopped and investigated that spot for its unassuming kerb. I could not find it. It was so entirely absent that I even wondered whether the fencing had been

moved along somewhat during the intervening six hours to make the transition from road to pavement safe.

An innocuous event, is observed, recorded and then circulates, not just once but repeatedly. What constitutes the event, those involved, the record?

Adrian Heathfield³ in his introductory survey of performance art and history reminds us that time in performance art is often conceptualized as event and thus relates to psychoanalytical notions of excess: a too much to record and to bear witness to, thus “creating a breach in experience and comprehension, a breach that instigates the repetitious return of the event for its witnesses.” As live form, I argue this is also relevant for walking art, and doubly so if the work itself actively moves documents and materials between sites.



Figure 3: Moving-with #3 (source material from *the line*, 2017)

b. gossip and secrets as line

The line as the line between what is said and what it isn't – traditional divisions between public/private attend to the modality and subject of position and ability to speak (and those who engage in the act). In this, a position becomes attached to voice. The feminist methodology collection edited by Ryan-Flood and Gill attends to different registers, positions and choices in this field. So: really: let's skip across and be attentive to what is at stake when we want to talk about the intimate, the personal and transverse public/private in research settings⁴.

Miriam Glucksmann presents research done by Ruth Cavendish in the late 1970s on an assembly line investigating women's labour processes,⁵ notably the extent to which detailed ethnographic practice contributes to political and academic debates around organised gendered labour processes. Cavendish could only publish her research after several rounds of frustrating negotiations with the lawyers of publishing houses. Eventually, she rewrote highly specific accounts of work processes into general descriptions, hiding the company, the machine produced and much else. All this was done to avert the possibility of libel charges (which in the UK place the burden of proof on the accused, not the challenger). Much later we of course discover that Cavendish is in fact Glucksmann, who for two

³ Heathfield 2012 *Then again*, 29.

⁴ Ryan-Flood and Gill eds 2010, *Secrecy and silence in the research process*.

⁵ Glucksmann 2010, *Silenced by law*.

decades was not able to talk publicly about this piece of research. Part of Glucksmann's is a fairly traditional account of research ethics, anonymity and confidentiality. The publishers' fear of prosecution by business owners is what animates all concerns for secrecy, it is not the fear of vulnerable participants. It also demonstrates the burden placed on the researcher of not being able to publicly acknowledge the work as theirs.

Her account also raises the nature of research and what constitutes a document: a coherent account of research findings that originates within extensive and detailed ethnographic fieldwork is rendered general, universal.

What is sayable, what is spoken and what is altered in such a way to become speakable at once poses questions over what constitutes a record (and we are as much back with Heathfield's notion of excess as well as a much broader concern over the document or a documentary modality).⁶ Furthermore, what constitutes confidence in research? Ali asks "What can we see, what do we think we see, what do we need to know to 'see' better? Should we ever push to find the 'truth' that is lying behind the silence, the silence maintaining the secret?" – With this, she continues, none of these questions are merely concerning ethics or methods but in fact constitute the particular political in which the research is enframed.⁷ – Lines are thus continuously being picked, adhered to for various reasons, most of which concern also a political subjecthood; sometimes they are transgressed.

c. gossip and secrets as voice

Silvia Federici's essay on gossip traces the change of meaning and appreciation of gossip from godparent to companion in childbirth to female friends in early modern England, women who gathered with their gossips in taverns to amuse themselves.⁸ By the Sixteenth Century these terms had begun to change and take on the pejorative meaning it holds today: informal, idle talk – sometimes whispers – talk that harms others. Emily Janakiram links Federici's historical account explicitly to contemporary new enclosures as well as forms of solidarity in which the sharing of stories (in her example those around #metoo, notably among precariously employed workers) provides a contemporary significant to the gossip as female friend.⁹

The gossips that I drew on for this work are all well-versed in performative play: Sophie Calle and Chris Kraus. Much has been written, notably about the latter for her role in informing a whole number of younger writers and artists.¹⁰ Karolin Meunier delineates Kraus's candour from traditionally considered genres of the female confessional.¹¹ So, while the personal as writing from experience is

⁶ see, also Minh-Ha 1990 *Documentary is/not a name*, Azoulay 2008 *The civil contract of photography*.

⁷ Ali 2010 *Silence and secrets*, 245f.

⁸ Federici 2018 *Witches, witch-hunting and women*, loc 533.

⁹ Janakiram 2019 *Gossip girls*.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Mattar ed 2015 *You must make your death public*. The material used for *the line* are from Kraus's 2015, 1997 *I love Dick* and Sophie Calle's 2016 *True Stories*.

¹¹ Meunier 2015 *Speaking candour*.

key to construct a relationship between author and reader, the personal is less a vehicle to attest to the sincerity of the author, her good character but a tool that allows for immersion. The question of how much truth or actual life reality are contained is peripheral, even unhelpful. Disclosure is frequent, common, notably in digital – social – form. Kraus’s work allows us to grasp it conceptually as a contemporary form in which the private is political. The idea and intention that Kraus pursues is one that seeks disinterest as a route towards a public where Meunier interprets

“[t]he transitions from hidden to public, from thinking to speaking, from internal to external dialogue produce interruptions whose extension, formalisation and exaggeration (in literature) ... as techniques that highlight the constructed nature of such self-disclosures, as well as the difference in position between speaker and listener.”¹²

In this process, Kraus is able, by actively pursuing disidentification in telling it straight to offer a model of presence that circumvents both the confessional and the therapeutic. Doing so allows for insisting on the private and the everyday as political praxis and feminist concern: to analyse the autobiographical as social relation and “claiming a territory when writing about sexuality as well as working conditions as a woman.”¹³ A key technique for achieving this is unpacked in the following quote. Let me include it *in toto* here

“The transfer of what has been experienced – which on one hand entails the outward projection of interiority through speech, and on the other the act of bringing oneself into the game – may be impossible as an immediate gesture. As a technique, however, it can be strategically deployed in order to meet the demands of both public and private summons to self-reflection, or indeed to rid oneself of them. The truth created in this process would always be the truth of the situation. The concept of ‘being present’ in what one says or writes sets the focus on the reciprocal dynamic between artistic-literary practice and personal engagement: how the personal changes as soon as it becomes narrated in public, and what happens when, conversely, one begins to understand it as an experimental set-up, organising it according to certain criteria.”¹⁴

Bhanu Kapil’s approach to a similar subject matter takes in forms of somatic practice that resonate with Ana Mendieta’s work and moves these into text. Her moving-with secrets in a series of publications (such as *Schizophrene*, see earlier, and *Ban en Banlieue*¹⁵) involves a series of recurrent motifs, which over the books iterate. In *Ban* a key setting of a fragmented and shifting narratives are the outskirts of 1970s London, where she grew up as British-Indian ‘immigrant’ (Ban: the nickname for Bhanu; as much as being banned from someone and, thirdly, a reference to the riots across the French banlieues). The events encountered concern the race riots of late 1970s England and the violent murder of young woman in New Delhi in 2012. In these, the fragments attest to the distributed

¹² Ibid, 79.

¹³ Ibid, 86.

¹⁴ Ibid, 85.

¹⁵ Kapil, 2011 *Schizophrene*, 2015 *Ban en banlieue*.

violence of contemporary social reproduction (also in its racialised and gendered forms) as well as the presence and refusal of narratives of victimhood therein. The motif I want to raise here is the laying and lying down across the text of *Ban*. De'Ath picks up an early incident – the “young, brown girl, Ban” walking home during a race riot:

“She orients to the sound of breaking glass, and understands the coming violence has begun. Is it coming from the far-off street or is it coming from her home? Knowing that either way she’s done for—she lies down to die. A novel is thus an account of a person who has already died, in advance of the death they are powerless. To prevent.”¹⁶

De'Ath continues:

“Contrary to the helplessness suggested by these lines, the recurring motif of the book – the ‘passive’ act of lying down – implies something other than passive victimhood: insofar as the liberal ideal of individual agency is thrown out, so is the lie of meritocratic liberal progressivism, which never accounts for the ways gendered, racial and class violence undermine its bootstraps logic [...]

Most often, the speaker mentions that Ban is ‘lying down’, but sometimes – usually in what seems like the present, or recent past – it is ‘I lay down’. The act of lying (passively) or laying (actively) on the ground makes for an antagonism and refusal, especially given its place in the history of political protest and the recent significance of die-ins to protest the Iraq war, or the police killing of black people in the US. But lying down is also a feminised gesture, near-ubiquitous as a sign of feminine sexual passivity.”¹⁷

The material presented in this conference contribution takes the audio-visual work of *the line* to explore the moving across and between different terrains and spaces. It transverses too different modalities and registers. In doing so it provides an outline for a series of concerns of a walking methodology that understands itself as a moving-with, a concept that I developed further from Springgay and Truman’s *Walkinglab* and their explorations of a walking-with.¹⁸ The movement is at once performative (like a drift, or like the practice of the flaneur are), yet, by shifting traditional terrains and moving towards concerns of networked presence and identities, it leaves ‘walking’ in its traditional sense behind. The material presented is keen to understand this moving across boundaries (of public, private; of analogue and digital) and does so as research practice. The reference points are presented through a series of related artistic works. There are numerous others, undoubtedly. The ones presented here allow for a holding together of some of the larger themes around (inter-)generational memory, violence, and the seeking of a presence within these that transgress in their own right (or is this then transversing?) – the flaneur’s shadow.

¹⁶ Kapil *ibid*, 20, in: De'Ath 2016 *L(a)ying down in the banlieue*.

¹⁷ De'Ath 2016.

¹⁸ Springgay and Truman 2018 *Walking methodologies in a more-than-human world*.

i look out the schizophrenic's house to include in my Times New Roman manuscript (it buckles and tears the page and i observe in wonder). i read through the small book again and as i do i feel the sun glare in my face in All Saints Park where i read most of the book, flicking back and forth not quite believing what i was reading and what dare she was proposing.

i disobey the instructions for in text citations—she won't get an auto number by word, no way.

(i briefly consider if this post should travel across too)

— the messages that arrive as i am just about to post concern another book on long term effects of family displacement, this time not concerning partition. they overlay my typing. and another one, why is this in German?

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