ARTICLE

A montage of small movements

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Abstract

In 2016, I was invited by musician/composer B6 to devise a participatory work for the recently opened art space Reformer art in Hunan Lu, Shanghai. I had been intrigued by a question posed by human geographer Nigel Thrift: What happens if we look on kindness as a technology rather than an emotion; a way of producing generosity in the body, a positive affective swirl? If we produce maps of spaces in new sensory registers like geographies of kindness, might these “geographies then leak out into the wider world?”... An observation by Mark Twain on the dynamics of rivers, guided my approach to distinguish three motions while exploring kindness in the built environment: turbulences (random acts of kindness), ripples (the effect on us when watching and relating such acts), and finally currents (reassuring myself and my companions that acts of kindness are part of a human undercurrent). With generous technical support from the team, I was able to install a large, circular map that covered a 20-min walking radius of the neighborhood. A projection of wandering ripples programmed to light up the locations where my walking companions had identified an act of kindness slowly changed the focus and purpose of the map toward emphasizing ephemeral moments, moments that energize our affective landscape. As signs of ongoing processes, these moments were not part of determinant systems; instead, they were undeclared yet consequential actions. During Chinese New Year 2017, I revisited the locations that had hosted acts of kindness back in November 2016 and from these reflections – A reading with my feet – The following transcript for a meditative film essay on movement and how it agitates the air; on environments and the incipient; on kindness as technology and kindness as an emotion, emerged. See https://vimeo.com/215920711.

Keywords: Affects; Fugitive presences; Bloom spaces; Re-distribution of information; Embodied experience

Transcript for a Film Essay in three parts: A Montage of Small Movements

The American writer Mark Twain noted that when he was a riverboat captain he saw with very different eyes than his passengers. While they enjoyed framed pictures of the passing landscape through windows, he observed the ripples on the water’s surface.

1. See also p. 213–219 in Nigel Thrift 2007 Non-Representational Theory, Chapter 9, “The politics of urban trauma: from love to kindness” section, Routledge, Oxon.
Alert to markers of unfolding potential, he looked for signs of undercurrents while steering the steamboat along the river.

**Part 1: Turbulences**

Feet shod and feet bare: how do they experience the ground?

What would worlds perceived through feet look like?

How do walking bodies "grasp" the turbulence they set in motion?

How do the webs of significance woven by sedentary perception differ from those woven by the embodied experience of pedestrian movement?

It all begins with a walk, two people unbeknownst to each other plunge into the current of everyday life walking side by side.

Walking along in a city leaves no visible trace. It is as if we just skim a surface prepared for us.

What happens when a body brushes against air?

What kind of turbulence do we set in motion?

What new terrain opens up?

The paths trodden as we ponder these questions radiate out from a core, the place where the dance is and a warp of threads. Held only by gravity, the warp responds to the body's every move and reveals fugitive presences … profound and absolutely ordinary … slashing the surface.

**Part 2: Ripples**

Traversing a 20-min radius from the core, we, a stranger and I, walk along the streets repeatedly throughout October 2016.

We set out to make a map, a map made of random acts of kindness, acts we are about to witness.

We explore the notion of kindness as a technology as well as an emotion.

We gather material to map spaces in new sensory registers like a geography of kindness. We wonder if such “geographies” were to spread like ripples beyond their source, "might they leak out into the wider world?"… (Thrift, 2007).

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2. This observation is taken from a lecture ‘Extrastatecraft Part 1’ by Keller Easterlink, given at the AA on November 1st, 2013.

3. The reference, *The place where the dance is*, is a nod to an extract from T.S. Eliot's poem ‘Burnt Norton’ in Four Quartets: ‘At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless. Neither from nor towards. At the still point, there the dance is’.

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**Kindness**

A witnessing of human contacts that release unwanted tensions

- A momentary suspension of planned time
- A still life popping up out of the ordinary
- A collision of lives
- A being ‘in’ something with another
- A being pulled into a place you did not intend to go
- Part of a chain of action that is always reaction
- A sharing of vulnerability
- A sense of being connected
- A moment of vitality
- An unexpected encounter

Four months later, no trace is left of our presence. Streets, such as traditional maps, exist independently of being looked at.

- At the turn of the new lunar solar year the city takes a pause: the streets are empty stages.

- On reentering them echoes of conversations that had wound their way down the spiraling passage of my inner ear comingle with my now embodied imagination.

- A meshwork made up of memorized impacts ripples, while nudging toward new vistas.

- The scent of a tree that met us as we turned a corner,

- An old rusty bicycle, its saddle protected with a plastic bag,

- A house, a villa with a sign saying, it is a kindergarten,

- The edge of a pavement sloping down to street level.

- While waiting at a traffic light, peripheral vision beckoned to the left where an elderly couple walked hand in hand......................“that's cute not kindness.”

- Walking ahead of us, a man supported a woman struggling to keep upright while pushing her wheelchair… …“that's not kindness, it's social obligation.”

- A rental bike.

- The spot in the middle of the road where the traffic policeman patiently explained to a woman we know not what, but it took a long time and without his guidance the traffic was building up, and he just carried on attending to the need of the woman, quietly, calmly.

- A conversation,

- A shared walk,
To the core, the place where the dance is.
In giving testimony to that,
Which co-scripts futures,
We shelter threads drawn from the air.

At this corner we saw two people pondering over a map:
Is one of them responding to a stranger's question about
directions? Or are they a couple deciding where to go next?

A solar panel on a parking meter.
A food stall, now closed for the holiday, then spreading
out into the street providing seating for customers who had
bought a complete meal with meat and rice and vegetables,
all for only 10 yuan. "In an affluent neighborhood where
many people work in low paid jobs, this is kindness, don't
you think?"

Someone held this door open for a delivery man.
Here a man smiled at us while passing.

Along this cycle lane a security guard pulled an old
ladies shopping trolley

And once again, an elderly couple, a woman pushed a
man across this road, he was sitting in a wheelchair…….
“that's love not kindness.”

At this junction, I was told pedestrians are given a better
view because the buildings and walls converging here have
no pointed corners, they have not been chopped off, they
just have not been build.

And here, a raised voice in a quiet street, a man
delivering food could not locate an address. A couple,
just about to drive off in their car, got out and helped him;
chatter and laughter echoed down the street.

25 walks, 73 encounters with kindness, eight directions.
I scan for fugitive presences.
Scan again and again.
For what is nascent.
I wait for it.
I attend to it.
I recall futures beckoning, good confident futures.
Echoes of their song ring along lines trodden and lines
traced.

Something made by a craftsman.

Last October, empty chairs had been lined up outside
this printing equipment shop, a quiet shady spot.

On this street peripheral vision alerted me once again.
Two bicycles met in the middle of the road. A young man
handed something to a young woman, they cycled off in
opposite directions.

Here, my companion walker noticed a woman smiling
at us as we crossed paths.

There are empty crates where a few months ago a man
approached a stall with no customers, he begun a banter
with the salesman, and suddenly there was a surge, people
were drawn to the stall.

Next to this tree, a woman massaged another woman's
neck; they were waiting outside a building, waiting for it
to open.

Here, a car slowed down as we crossed the road.

And here, a scooter did not hoot as a bike got into its
way.

And once again,
Time taken out, time shared.

This formula consisting of walks, fields of attention,
and environments, which causes the formation of a bloom
space (a form of attending to what is happening).

The locations that hosted acts of kindness – hitherto
undeclared yet consequential – became ripples, animating
a map that mirrors the space where the dance is.

It is a first tentative step toward mapping intensities
registered in passing.

Like an apprentice captain on a steamboat, our close
observations in the street accumulate into a body of
experience as together we learn to negotiate, to read, and
write dispositions of flows, swirls, and ripples: markers
of unfolding potential and moments that energize our
affective landscape.

Part 3: Currents
What happens in the process of giving this world a gesture,
What happens when we share these gestures of air.
through relating the occurrence,
When we read with our feet,
Listen to the breath,
Watch it choreograph the dance of a finger,
See it weaving a relational net

Currents of time, time memorized, time experienced,
time recalled, lunar solar time, time pregnant with futures,
73 acts of kindness looked for, observed, spoken, and
written:

At the place where the dance is the flow of writing has
been slowed down, we read by following lines at the point
of conception. In anticipating their meaning, we encounter ourselves.

We linger in this close proximity of life.
What matters here is not meaning.
What matters now is the construction.
A making of flesh,
An embodiment of pastness,
A giving testimony of the present,
It is only by accrual that bodies in flow become a dramatic force.

“The man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today’s ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.” Walter Benjamin

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