

Prof Roberta Mock (School of Humanities & Performing Arts, Plymouth University, UK)  
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[PP] = powerpoint slide, saved separately

### Walking, Performance & Autobiography

[PP] sequence of slides to Simon & Garfunkel's 'Feelin Groovy' ending with "MAKE A WALK WRITE A TEXT READ IT TO AN AUDIENCE. BODY AND VOICE. "

Tim Etchells has suggested a number of excellent reasons why theatre-makers should be concerned with the city. Etchells, who is a British artist probably best known for his work with the performance company Forced Entertainment, says it's

"Because the city can trap you, nurture you, teach you, unravel you, unspeak you.

Because you are just one among many here, and the dynamic of one in relation to many [PP] (conversation, dialogue, difference, the negotiation of public space) is what theatre emerges from and thrives on, what art must address and what cities must somehow contend with if they are to survive."

Etchells writes this in the forward to a slim book entitled *Theatre & the City* by Jen Harvie, to which I shall return throughout this talk. Harvie argues that theatre "does more than demonstrate urban process"; "theatre is a part of urban processes, producing urban experience and thereby producing the city itself". She says that theatre does this in at least three ways: through dramatic texts, material conditions and performative practices.

My presentation today is essentially about the interactions between these three processes, which each combine doing, experiencing, and making. Although I will be referring to many artists, I'm going to focus primarily on the work of Carl Lavery, Phil Smith and Dee Heddon, all of with whom I collaborated to make *Walking, Writing and Performance* [PP]. In short, this is a book that comprises four autobiographical theatre scripts, one each by Carl and Dee and two by Phil, plus an essay by each that describes the processes of making them as well as their historical and theoretical groundings. All three generated their autobiographical scripts by engaging with the fluid relationships between specific places. For Dee, Carl and Phil – all in very different ways – the acts of walking, remembering and writing, and thus the construction of narrative self and performance spaces, were intimately related and this is what they tried to translate into a more formally structured theatrical language and dramaturgy.

All of the texts in the book, whether theatre script or essay, strive to capture the complexity of walking and thinking and draw on a range of perspectives to explore how material spaces might provoke an understanding of both who we are as individuals and what we have in

common. At the same time, they attempt to articulate the precariousness of common space, which is produced through highly personal engagements. The formal, usually written, expressions of these engagements have been called different things. For instance, in the last issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Annette Arlander offered a range of options, including autotopography, geobiography and topobiography.

Taking up Dee Heddon's lead, I tend to use the first one. 'Autotopography' describes a practice that plots one's conception of "self" in relation to place as well as a sense of place in relation to one's self identity. Adding "auto" to "topography" is to acknowledge and expose the fact that the writing of place is as much "a creative act of interpretation, of perspective and of location" as the "writing of self". Both are contingent, shifting, and always 'becoming'.

We began this book project together in 2004 and it was finally published in 2009. The main reason I usually give for this lengthy gestation, notwithstanding the fact that two of the scripts it features hadn't even been performed in 2004, is that it took me that long – as both an editor and a performance-maker – to catch up with the others conceptually and experimentally. So the end of my presentation this morning is going to consider how I began to apply what I learned from Carl, Phil and Dee – in particular, in order to understand my relationship with a specific city. And that city is Detroit, Michigan in the United States.

Now, there are a few things that should be said from the outset. The first is that all four of us operate from within academia (the exception here, to some extent, is Phil Smith since although he is a colleague of mine at Plymouth University, he still spends the majority of his working time as a professional performance practitioner). This means that – besides not charging people to watch or participate in our performances – our creative work tends to be driven by research questions and imperatives. The practice I am about to describe to you therefore is located within what is known as performance-as-research or PaR in the UK, a methodological practice which both values and valorizes the development of embodied knowledges.

The second thing to say is that there is a certain irony in using the performance texts in *Walking, Writing and Performance* in the context of this seminar. For a start, neither Carl nor Phil based their autobiographical texts primarily or solely on walks in urban environments. [PP] The four weeks of walking that informed Phil's performance of *Crab Walks*, took place across the villages, towns and coastal paths of South Devon. [PP] His second script in the volume, *Crab Steps Aside*, swoops across the UK and mainland Europe, indiscriminately taking in cities, beaches, towns, fields and waterways as he draws on an eclectic mix of walks in the Channel Islands, Switzerland, Italy, Munich and around South Devon villages again.

[PP] and I think that the non-urban nature of Carl's work is made perfectly clear by this photo he took during the 18 mile walk on which his performance text, *Mourning Walk*, is based.

Carl sets this piece within the larger phenomenon of what he calls "pedestrian performance" although he concedes that, initially, it seems that *Mourning Walk* has little in common with the neo-situationist approach of the practitioners he discusses. He includes on this list the work of Lone Twin and Graeme Miller, as well as Wrights & Sites, a group that explores the relationships between space, place and people, usually by encouraging walking and personal reflection. Phil Smith is one of its four founding members.

Whereas the practitioners Carl cites are largely interested in facilitating various forms of urban intervention that seek to establish "our right to the city", Carl is concerned with a more intimate and rural-based mode of performance. However, he believes that his work, like theirs, is deeply embedded in contemporary political concerns and that this manifests itself through his specific engagement with enchantment and loss. For Carl, enchantment is best understood as an act of reclamation, a way of championing a more poetic relationship with our environment – the very thing that the society of the spectacle denies us. Enchantment is not a method for turning away from the world; rather, it seeks to immerse the walker in the world's strangeness or otherness.

But perhaps as paradoxical as Carl's and Phil's rural performances based on urban practices, is Dee's choice to explore autobiographical mobility by not moving. Her performance entitled *One Square Foot: tree* was based on her exploration of just that: [PP] a carefully and deliberately chosen square foot of land on the outskirts of Exeter, a provincial city in South West England that many would say is only formally a city because it has a cathedral.

"What if," she asks, "rather than walking through place, one stops in place? If walking is seen as an implicit protest against the speed by which we (are forced to) live our contemporary lives, an activity in opposition to "fast transport", then choosing to resist movement altogether might be even more radical....Standing still, here, is an active choice rather than an enforced in-between point on a journey from A to B. Standing still" for Dee, "is to have arrived." It is "an action". By standing still and attending to her environment, Dee finds herself "travelling across centuries and continents, in the company of new acquaintances." [PP] In her performance text, she journeys empathically and imaginatively from Exeter to Glasgow to India to California to Georgia and Oklahoma, and finally to Strathnaven; she travels from 2003 to 1998 to 1821 to 1838 to 1814.

Sitting still, with you today, I am also mapping a journey across time and space, telling you a story of significant coincidences and collaborations. And so it is worth my mentioning that, since making *One Square Foot: tree*, Dee has become increasingly engaged in walking practice. In the past month alone she has published an article on walking and friendship in the *On Foot* edition of *Performance Research* edited by Nick with Carl Lavery. This reflects

on her experience of making 40 walks with 40 friends to celebrate her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and I'm honoured to have been one of those people. [PP] This summer she will be walking across Belgium with another walking artist, Misha Meyers; they will be carrying with them a library of books about or for walking. She has also just published an article on women and walking in a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* which focuses on site-specificity and mobility. This was co-written with Cathy Turner, another of the core members of Wrights & Sites, along with Phil Smith.

Now, there is much to be said about the gendered experiences of both walking and cities – and not least when you put the two together. To pursue this specifically today would be impossible within time constraints. It is, however, worth noting that one thing that autotopography has to offer is the potential to attend to and articulate difference. Indeed, Dee believes that the roots of autobiographical performance lie in women's radical performance practice of the late-1960s and early-1970s. This, she says, issued explicit challenges to the minimalist and formalist trends dominating the art world, but also to the misplaced notion of art as being neutral and in some way "unlocated" – that is, ungendered, unsexed and unraced.

And it is also worth pausing here to note another temporal-spatial coincidence. In 2003, the same year as Dee made *One Square Foot: tree* in Exeter, Wrights & Sites published *An Exeter Mis-Guide*, an evocatively illustrated pocket-sized anti-guidebook that suggests different activities, walking routes and perspectives to inspire those who live in or visit the city. [PP] The instructions urge the mis-guided to merge materiality, history and imagination; to observe closely; to be spontaneous; to be part of the world. Here's a good example: "Visit the following set of roads: George Street, Market Street, Smythen Street, King Street & Preston Street... The road signs will tell you that there is only 'one way' to navigate each area. Find other ways of mapping and signing routes through these public spaces." The walks that Wrights & Sites advocate are meant to be playful, thought-provoking and quietly but deeply radical.

To the surprise of the company, their *Exeter Mis-guide* became something of a cult phenomenon. They noticed that, "somehow a number of people became interested in a book about a city that they will probably never even visit. They found ways of transferring material from the specific to the general, or at least to another specific context."

Wrights & Sites were invited to mis-guide people in other locations and eventually, in 2006, they produced a second little book entitled *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere*. Its title embraces the problems, complexities and ironies of an exercise in mapping an individual place onto the concept of a generic "anywhere". These issues can never be fully resolved, nor should they be. I lived in Exeter for 15 years and certainly I cherish the mis-guide to what was my home, more than I do the mis-guide to "anywhere". The irony for me, of course, is that (at that time) Exeter and Anywhere were one and the same. And equally ironic is the fact that some

of the Exeter in the original Mis-guide is no longer there (or anywhere) due to subsequent extensive redevelopment of the city centre. [PP]

According to Jen Harvie, what is so complex about contemporary urban life “is the sense of profound ambivalence it creates”. While critiquing the neo-liberal complacency of much urban theatre (and in particular, big budget franchised musicals), she draws specific attention to three forms of contemporary performative practices that demonstrate the flourishing political vigour of urban performance. These are 1) the performance walk – illustrated by the work of Francis Alys and Fiona Templeton; 2) protest performance, which Harvie discusses in relation to the mass bike rides of Critical Mass but perhaps some of you will remember the bike bloc organised during the COP15 Climate Summit here in Copenhagen in 2009, organized by the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination<sup>1</sup>; and finally 3) highly visible performative interventions such as those made by Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping.

**[PP] Here is Reverend Billy during the Save Coney Island Campaign, protesting the city of New York’s zoning plan which would abolish the historic amusement industry to make way for residential condos, hotels and retail space. What we can see here in this picture of the Mermaid Parade in 2009 is a combination of a performance walk, a protest and a performative intervention.**

*Theatre & the City* is an intentionally short book which is striving to construct a very tight and coherent argument. Because of this it leaves a range of perspectives open for subsequent exploration, many of which I am picking up on today. “The city” that Harvie discusses is of a very specific type – in particular, it is a ‘global city’ or a ‘world city’ like London or New York. I have, however, spent the majority of my life in or near cities and most have *not* been cities like these. Rather, mine have been provincial cities like Exeter and now, Plymouth which is also in Devon, which operate in hierarchical economic regional networks. The relationship between London and Plymouth, for example, is not unlike that which exists between ‘The City of London’ and the East End of London, to which Harvie draws our attention through the example of Back to Back theatre company’s *Small Metal Objects* which was performed at Stratford tube station in 2007.

**[PP] Here’s a photo of Small Metal Objects, which premiered in the company’s native Australia in 2005 and is still touring today. It was performed in Copenhagen in 2007 so perhaps some of you saw it. If not, the premise of the show is that two men are making a transaction in a busy public space with passers-by serving as extras going about their daily business. Audience members are seated some distance away with headphones so they can take in the entire spectacle while they attempt to hone in on the actors. The theme revolves around outsider status, and draws on the lived experiences of company members, some of whom are considered to have intellectual disabilities.**

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AByp-rHI\\_o&list=UUmK2yEh0UI6hscJ\\_wskJE5A&index=5&feature=plcp](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AByp-rHI_o&list=UUmK2yEh0UI6hscJ_wskJE5A&index=5&feature=plcp)

I think that what needs to be emphasized here is that, although the feeling of being an outsider is not unique to global cities (or any city), not ALL cities are sites of anonymity in a crowd, all of the time - possibly not even for the majority of it. Most of the cities I've lived in are characterised by a surprisingly frequent sense of emptiness, the threat of potential recognition and exposure. Furthermore, many, if not most, cities on peripheries offer relatively few theatrical experiences or alternatives (especially, for example, in England, following the demise of the provincial repertory system). Little city audiences do not always want to voyeuristically and vicariously watch big city spectacles. They sometimes want a way to access the way they *feel* in *their* cities and to understand better why their cities produce these feelings.

While by no means disagreeing with Harvie's observations as they apply to cities at the heart of global networks, there is still much more to be said about the theatre cultures in these 'other' cities as well as about the relationships between different types of cities. I think that this is one of the reasons why Wrights & Sites *Mis-Guide to Exeter* proved so surprisingly popular – it spoke to those large numbers of people who live and wish to be creative within small, provincial city cultures.

Without wishing in any way to reinforce the value relationships often inherent in binary oppositions, *Theatre & the City* has also provoked me to think about what theatre might be – or perhaps, how it is different – when it is *not* in a city. Does non-city refer to the suburban or the rural in the same ways, or is the suburb a key element of an urban paradigm? Thomas Angotti has pointed out that a dense agricultural area can have a population equivalent to that of a small city and in 1991 Joel Garreau used the term 'edge city' to describe a spatially extended settlement with a large population but no centre, which resembles a traditional city in name only.

There's one final thing I'd like to draw from *Theatre & the City* before moving on to describe the performance-making strategies used by Carl, Dee and Phil in *Walking, Writing and Performance*. And that is that it seems to suggest that a schism needs to be bridged between *performance* – that is, the production of communicative events within the specificities of time and space such as guided tours and walks, protests and high profile interventions – and *theatre*, a more formally bounded space in which actuality and metaphor comingle in specifically structured aesthetic ways. There is an assumption here that performance – even performance that plays with and revolves around a heightened theatricality – does the political, resistant work while the theatre co-opts, harnesses and neutralises this political potential. This seems to be especially true in theatre that takes place in conventionally designated theatre spaces and might explain why so much of the recent theatre work which has been considered politically successful and effective (such as *Small Metal Objects*), has been conceived as either site-specific or otherwise performed in non-theatre spaces.

[PP] While Dee and Carl performed their pieces in black box studios, Phil performed to intimate audiences in unusual venues across South Devon. [PP] **I watched *Crab Walks* in a beach hut in Teinmouth with four other people and *Crab Steps Aside* on top of a cliff with only one other person. Neither of these venues made his performance less than ‘theatre’, though, in a very formal sense.** I think that what Dee, Carl and Phil have in common is the desire to bridge performance and theatre practices, *through and as* theatre – and they do this primarily by harnessing the autotopographical. Lara Shalson has recently suggested that theatre’s legibility has always involved “the literalness of performance: labouring bodies, live co-presence, objects that are what they are even as they do the work of representation.” All have also cited the influence of live art, performance art and quotidian cultural practices on their theatre work. Indeed, the start of Phil’s essay in *Walking, Writing and Performance* concentrates on his effort, via Wrights & Sites, to free himself from what he calls “the limitations of the theatre” – that is, the use of landscape as backdrop or scenery – rather than to allow a site to resonate and perform itself. Walking thus became, for him, an anti-theatrical tactic.

It is also perhaps not surprising that Carl has done a lot of research about and with Lone Twin. Although they subsequently extended into representational performances for conventional theatre spaces, the company first became known for its labour-intensive task-based performances. [PP] **This is a photo of Lone Twin’s performance of *Totem* in 1998 in which they dressed as cowboys and attempted to carry a telegraph pole through the city of Colchester in a straight line, through shops and homes. Along the way, they carved the pole with the initials of those who helped them to complete the journey. Lone Twin have said that when they make theatre, they draw on both the structure and repetition of durational performance in their devising processes.**

As Nicolas Ridout has argued, “performance [is] that which allows us to see theatre *as itself*, by showing it turning itself inside out and revealing its operational guts”.

### [PP] *Mourning Walk*

Carl’s *Mourning Walk* begins with the following line, pretty much summing up its “operational guts”:

“On 29 July 2004, to mark the ninth anniversary of my Dad’s death, I walked 18 miles as the crow flies from the town of Market Harborough in Leicestershire to the village of Cottesmore in Lincolnshire. At the end of the journey I performed a ritual in a field. I have nothing to say about that. Certain things insist on silence and demand to be kept secret.”

*Mourning Walk* as a project is thus composed of two (or perhaps even three) separate yet interrelated performances, each of which fulfils a different function. The initial performance (the walk itself) was conceived by Carl as a rite of passage, a journey that was intended to have therapeutic consequences. He plotted it carefully with his mother, based on routes he

thought his father might have taken while alive and at the end of the walk, he performed a private ritual. The second performance – the documentation of the walk – was designed to be performed for an audience. [PP]

According to Carl, *Mourning Walk* takes de Certeau's notion of 'the long poem of walking' seriously. However, unlike de Certeau, he does not consider walking as a simple analogy for writing, an equivalent to language. Rather for Carl, walking is a mysterious mode of language production, a bodily rhythm to tease out the strange song of self. He wanted to use it to create an autobiographical text that would fold together memory, reverie and landscape. And through that text, he wanted to share his experience of mourning brought about *by* the walk, not his experience of mourning *in* the walk.

### [PP] *Crab Walking & Mythogeography*

While Phil Smith's *Crab Walks* seems, on the surface, to be a tale of an extended walk he made to connect with childhood memories of staying with his grandparents on the South Devon coast, in actual fact it is a calling card for what Phil calls 'mythogeography'. The concept of mythogeography arose first in his work with *Wrights & Sites*, was developed further through the *Crab Walking* project in *Walking, Writing and Performance*, and culminated in a book entitled *Mythogeography* that was published in 2010.

For Phil, mythogeography refers to an ever-evolving set of performance, performative and critical practices that attempt to do four things:

- 1/ It seeks to transform space by performing it. This is informed by the idea that places are made and re-made by what is done there in the everyday, and that therefore the radical changing of those places can be achieved through interventions in their everyday life;
- 2/ It tries to develop ways of perceiving and understanding the multiple meanings of any place (and to widely promote such understanding);
- 3/ It works to develop the means to produce places understood through multiplicity.
- 4/ It entangles theories of space and the spatialisation of theory with performance and performative tactics in order to develop a strategy for resistance to restrictive and homogenising spatial practices. [PP]

Mythogeography advocates a self-conscious exploratory walking that encourages a heightened sensitivity to space; a sense of eventness with its performative engagements with others; and an ambulatory pace and flexibility that can switch quickly from the narrative of wayfinding to an extreme attention to detail. All this is described in Phil's autobiographical plays in *Walking, Writing and Performance*. Phil's various walks took place over an extended period of time in a variety of locations, stopping and starting, resisting predetermined routes by scuttling sideways and following his instincts by moving 'like a crab'.



“Crab walking” is “not going on a ramble, but taking the ramble on a ramble.” It is “led by its periphery” and is not a million miles away from the situationist “derives” or “drifts” theorised by Guy Debord. To Phil, drifting is a “spontaneous and playful travelling and research through cities, seeking out those spaces where ambience resists the imperatives and spectacle of capital; seeking through a process of détournement to make ‘situations’”.

The overarching aim of Phil’s *Crab* project was to give feeling to an idea, to pass on an invitation to explore. He was never particularly interested in creating a “true” or “real” sense of himself. Rather, through a somewhat mythical self-presentation based on his own experiences of recovering childhood memories, Phil’s autobiographical performances were intended to convey the impetus of a journey, the leaps of a dream. Their texture was intended to provoke the audience’s own picaresque reveries. His mixing of science and esoterica, popular culture and seriousness, nostalgia and utopian visions was a rhetorical device intended to act as an encouragement to “drift” (physically and theoretically), to overcome the obstacles and the twin lures of functionalism and passive spectatorship, and to find ways to transform these problems into mythogeographic detail.

### **[PP] One Square Foot**

Although Phil often walked with other people, and they are mentioned in his playtexts, Dee’s performance was created through a collaborative devising process. This process was led by Dorinda Hulton, who also directed Dee’s final piece. It was part of a larger project that involved two other performers, besides Dee, each of whom created solo work with the same creative team that additionally included a choreographer, installation artist, a composer and, occasionally as needed, an consultant ecologist. Each set a series of tasks that Dee responded to in order to generate performance material. **[PP]**

As Dorinda’s programme note states, the project “places the actor at the heart of generating material for performance. Stories, images and memories associated with a square foot chosen by each performer have found their forms through a series of interactions with creative artists working in different fields.” Over the course of 9 days, the performers and artists worked together on the site of the actor’s square foot, developing further material and determining how to present this on-site to a small, invited audience. This was then “moved” into a studio space, where it was revised over a period of six days, in preparation for its public showing.

According to Dee, the square foot of land she chose enabled her to construct a window for the spectator; not only onto her life and experiences, but onto a whole host of other bodies and places. The *One Square Foot* project offers a model for making an autobiographical performance that inevitably goes beyond the self, because the site itself becomes a co-author and co-subject. Without the site, the narratives would not have been identified in the first place. Moreover, the square foot leads to totally unexpected journeys, for you cannot predict where you will end up, nor what you will find under the soles of your feet.

Dee refers to this autobiographical practice that links personal, cultural and collective memories as “extroverted”.

[PP] In order to understand the relationship between the personal and cultural more fully, I chose to perform Dee’s text myself, to camera. My main strategy was to return the performing body to the site of the text in order to provoke a discussion about the instabilities of autobiographical narratives, the relationships between intertextualities and embodiment, and the supposed ‘authenticity’ of located memory as coherent story. While I learned a great deal through this exercise about how I might act as myself and about the ethical implications of autobiographical performance, it also revealed to me some of its more formal elements.

One of these is the use of ‘listing’ which, while by no means buried in the written text, rises to the surface through recitation. In Dee’s text, she makes it clear that we learn who and where we are, and how to communicate this interrelationship, by means of listing. [PP] In *Mourning Walk*, Carl’s performative act of listing, of organizing knowledge and experience subjectively, quickly extends to the representation of place. For instance, his list of plants, soon after the list of the Ulster dead who share his surname, is described as a ‘botanical map’ of his journey. Later, Carl consecutively lists the names of people and places that remind him of his father.

In considering the work of Phil, Dee and Carl together, what soon becomes clear is the importance of storying, which is mapped not unlike a walk. Doreen Massey, a geographer whose ideas have been enthusiastically embraced all three, offers a conception of space that is interrelational, multiple and always under construction. In her book, *For Space*, she describes it as ‘the dimension of multiple trajectories, a simultaneity of stories-so-far’. [PP] According to Mike Pearson, a performance maker and theorist who has certainly influenced – if not perhaps directly inspired – much of the material in *Writing, Walking and Performance*, ‘Just as landscapes are constructed out of the imbricated actions and experiences of people, so people are constructed in and dispersed through their habituated landscape: each individual, significantly, has a particular set of possibilities in presenting an account of their own landscape: *stories*.’

One of the things that I had to start to contend with is why *my* stories do not feature walking. I have never been a walker by inclination, experience, or temperament. I have tended to ascribe this to the fact that I am from the Motor City ... or rather, more specifically and perhaps even more significantly, I’m from somewhere just outside metropolitan Detroit where it is even more imperative that one is able to drive. I identify simultaneously with two cities: Windsor Ontario Canada – which is where I was born and raised – and Detroit. My relationships with them can best be characterised by their liminality and multiplicity.

**[PP] This is the view of downtown Detroit from Windsor with the Detroit River between them. In the middle of the Detroit River is an international border. [PP] Here's a more unusual vantage point – of Windsor from Detroit.**

Effectively, I was brought up in a suburb of a city which itself can be considered a suburb of Detroit. And if there's one thing that's rather noticeable in autobiographical accounts of walking, it's that it tends to occur in either rural or urban environments rather than in the hinterlands between the two.

In 2008, shortly after finally completing my introduction to *Walking, Writing & Performance*, I made an "intervention" for the Hidden City Symposium that I co-organised at Plymouth University with Phil Smith. The aim of the symposium was to explore the possibilities for writing in site-specific performance practices that address the multiple narratives and trajectories of the city. Intervention may be a slightly grand term for what was essentially a powerpoint presentation with music – not unlike the one that began today's presentation, but with a bit of discrete extra dancing.

In retrospective, I recognise that I had been strongly influenced by and was responding to Wrights & Sites' *Manifesto for a New Walking Culture* which was subtitled *Dealing with the City* and which they performed several times in 2006. [PP] Like those of early twentieth century art movements (dada, futurism, surrealism), Wrights & Sites' manifesto has an agenda: it is a call to arms (or rather, to feet). Organized around the visual metaphor of a shuffled deck of playing cards, the text spoken by the company revolved around the concepts of the walker as playful performer, as artist, as compositional catalyst, as designer and as writer of the city. Wrights & Sites' reading evoked the wider performative potentials, the agency, of individual audience members, as well as the transformative potentials of performance.

My Hidden City intervention was my first attempt to unravel – through a very basic form of autoethnographic cultural geography – my relationship with cities and how this has shaped my understanding of performance.

As the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, among many others, has noted, bodies and cities are mutually constituting. Our relationships with particular cities determine our corporeal orientations, how we live space, how others see us. As "the site for the body's cultural saturation", the city is "the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed. In turn," Grosz writes, "the body (as cultural product) transforms, reinscribes the urban landscape according to its changing (demographic, economic and psychological) needs, extending the limits of the city, of the sub-urban." My embodied positioning in Windsor/Detroit has produced a fascination with these limits and how they are exceeded through the sub and super urban.

For many of us in Windsor, we were not content with just looking at the other side. Almost all of our radio and television was transmitted from the other side, we spent a lot of time on the other side, we were shaped by the many performances we experienced on the other side. As the Mexican-American performance artist, Guillermo Gomez-Pena has written “Symbols, aesthetic gestures and metaphors are contextual. And when they cross a cultural border they either crack open or metamorphosize into something entirely different”.

My growing older, with the inevitable questioning of what has made me who I am, has corresponded with a popular fascination with what the city of Detroit (so central to both my imagination and my experience as a child and young adult) has become. [PP]

I would describe the latter as simply a morbid encounter with an exquisite corpse if it wasn't usually accompanied by hints at the potential for radical utopian renewal. In 2009, Julian Temple's film, for instance, *Requiem for Detroit*, piggybacked on the DetroitYES project launched in 1996 with the “Fabulous Ruins of Detroit” website.<sup>2</sup> A disturbingly sumptuous coffee-table book entitled *The Ruins of Detroit* by two young French photographers, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, was published last year to critical acclaim. In its introduction, Thomas Sugrue, the author of *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, writes that:

The abandoned factories, the eerily vacant schools, the rotting houses, and gutted skyscrapers are the artefacts of Detroit's astonishing rise as a global capital of capitalism and its even more extraordinary descent into ruin, a place where the boundaries between the American dream and the American nightmare, between prosperity and poverty, between the permanent and the ephemeral are powerfully and painfully visible. No place epitomises the creative and destructive forces of modernity more than Detroit, past and present. [PP]

I tried to capture my autotopographical positioning within Windsor and Detroit, as well as the relationships between these cities, in the following generic points made at the end of my Hidden City intervention.

- Performers are shaped by cities and shape their cities.
- Cities do not only create specific performances, they are created through performances.
- Performances of cities take many forms: concerts, sports events, political rallies, riots, firework displays.
- The performance writing of cities includes songs, placards, badges, film scripts, T-shirt slogans, lists, and television jingles for local businesses.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.detroityes.com/home.htm>

- Some of the most exciting things about cities are what they border or are supposed to exclude.
- Sometimes the most interesting thing about a city is that it IS a border.
- Sometimes cities that seem most alive are cities that are dying – angrily.
- Many cities are similar and their fortunes are linked but each city is unique.
- Cities are autobiographical sites of performance as well as the sites in which memories perform themselves.

At the time of writing this, I was thinking primarily about the suburb-cities which ring Detroit – buffer zones that protect us from, and act as gateways to, the dark heart of USAmerica. That, however, is a very unidirectional point of view, perhaps most effectively countered by those who called Detroit’s suburban communities a “white noose” around the city, by now almost entirely African-American. I have come also to recognise Detroit as a threshold place itself. In fact, in Jerry Herron’s work on Detroit, he calls the city a “borderama”, an island adrift from the American imperative of opportunity.

When, in January last year, I finally got around to making a theatre performance intended to push forward my thinking on theatre and cities, it had a lot to do with the ways we might be affected by the determination of boundaries.

**[PP]** *Down/town* was a solo performance that took place on my 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. It explored the many issues that were raised for me in the making of *Walking, Writing and Performance* with Dee, Phil and Carl – in particular, the spaces between inter-related concepts such as city/suburb, liveness/mediation, speaking/performing and autobiography/alter-ego.

*Down/town* took place on the stage which was decorated like a suburban living room. Audience members were encouraged to sit, stand or mill about on it, although they could also sit in the raked seating, facing the stage end-on. There were close-circuit cameras situated on stage which meant that those in the auditorium had a close view of what happened there. About 2/3rds of audience members chose to hide in the dark in this way rather than interact with me on stage. Those who did were welcomed to my birthday party.

**[PP]**

But it is 1985 and we are in Southfield, Michigan, the closest suburb to downtown Detroit, separated only by 8 Mile Road (If you can see into the future, you may remember the Eminem song of the same name). I am Bobby and I am your hostess, the birthday girl. I am working the room this evening. I am something of a local celebrity – fourteen years ago I made a commercial and it is still shown every year at Christmas. I am Bobby, who once was and always will be the Tel-Twelve Mall Elf, and just for fun I’m wearing my elf costume tonight. Well, actually I got too big for the original elf costume so I’m wearing a new one I

made myself. Called upon to give my birthday speech, I sing a bit, I reminisce. I try not to be too bitter. [PP]

Bobby was some twenty years older than me in 1985 – although I was older than her when I performed her. In creating her, I embraced by personal history and my memories – these are not Bobby’s memories, although she is borne of them. The text I wrote for Bobby was a stringing together of Detroit television jingles, catchphrases, songs, poems and local memory texts. There really was a Tel Twelve Mall [PP] **Here it is when it was brand spanking new in 1968, the year after the Detroit riots which decimated the city centre.** It has since been replaced with a Big Box Power Centre of the same name. And it *was* advertised by a woman in an elf costume for years.

But Bobby the Tel Twelve Elf is primarily an act of imagination. I created her to embody, discuss and demonstrate that performers are shaped by specific cities and shape these cities. Bobby was not intended as a character but as a conduit. She was meant to reflexively represent cultural memory, localised through individual and collective processes of mapping. Simultaneously, however, I also conceived her as an alter-ego – that is, a second self. Because she expressed my critical ideas through my body, her voice always doubled my own. [PP]

The relationships between alter-egos and their creators are often ambivalent, sometimes liberating, sometimes self-destructive. I can’t really pretend to be Bobby, anymore than I can pretend not to be. And this has caused me some discomfort – not least because, in the process of making a piece of theatre about a specific place, I slowly came to realize that Bobby is the me I was afraid I would become in 1985, the year I left North America.

As Dee Heddon has argued: ‘the performance of personal narratives might bring hidden, denied or marginalised experiences in the spotlight, proposing other possible life paths.’ Autotopographical performances do not always tell the audience what has already happened. They can also be shaped by what might have happened and even by what it has not happened yet. [PP] It is also possible to argue that once these narratives have been embodied as a performative act, they *have* happened. As Alice Rayner wrote in *To Act, To Do, To Perform*, “Performance is not a result but rather a beginning... [T]he doing of any given performance will create its own past and become available to the reification, narration, and textuality of the act.”

While this may all seem pretty far away from the generation of performance texts through walking, it was directly inspired by Dee’s extroverted autobiographical practice and Phil’s mythogeographic call to perceive space through multiplicity. It also explains why some boots *aren’t* made for walking. As the geographer Tim Cresswell has noted, it has become increasingly important that we attend to the “conditions that produce specific forms of movement.” *Down/town*, in many ways, was an explanation of why it has never seemed either safe or practical for me to walk in what I believed to be the archetypal city.

### [PP] *Mobile Homestead*

In the autumn of 2010, as I was preparing my own autotopographical response to Detroit, Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* moved slowly through the city to the suburb of Westland where he grew up. Although he had lived in LA for 35 years, it felt to many as a kind of homecoming. James Lingwood, a co-director of Artangel (the British arts organisation that produced the project) noted that *Mobile Homestead* was the artist's typically complex response to "the city he could never really leave". At its centre is a full-size replica of his childhood home, a 1950s single-story suburban ranch house.

I want to end on this non-theatre work today for a number of reasons. The first is because of the way it harnesses the autobiographical so firmly in its evocation of location, community and sense of place. As Fiona Wilkie has recently argued, Kelley's work does more than evoke a complex history of movements within and beyond Detroit – which includes the riots and so-called "white flight" of the 1960s, the automobility demanded by its major industry and the spatial mapping of working-class social mobility. She also suggests that *Mobile Homestead* is neither unusual nor contradictory in its position as a site-specific artwork that only makes sense in relation to contexts of mobility. [PP]

Mike Kelley took his own life in January of this year but before doing so he ensured that *Mobile Homestead* found a new home, near the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown Detroit where it will settle next year. This seemingly impossible detournement is what Jill Dolan calls a "utopian performative". Dolan suggests we might find pleasure and hope in such gestures because they offer a "glimpse of the no-place we can reach only through feeling, together". When *Mobile Homestead* is repositioned, the groundfloor will be used as an open space for diverse community activity. However, Kelley also designed a labyrinthine basement complex, to be used explicitly for more covert, sub-cultural activities. Reminiscent of Carl's differentiation between elements of *Mourning Walk*, Kelley described these activities as "private rites of an aesthetic nature".

And in many ways, this co-existence of very public and very private, the social and the secret, the sited and the non-sited expressed through a consideration of mobility, mirrors the autotopographical work I've been describing by Carl, Dee, Phil and myself. [PP]

None of us believe you will or should be particularly interested in our lives – rather, our performance texts aim to propel audiences into taking responsibility for the making of their own performative gestures. We hope that they help people to unearth their own stories. We hope that somebody makes a walk or at least reflects on why they haven't. We hope that somebody makes a text and performs it to others. We hope this inspires others to do the same.

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