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Yokel with a yoke: carrying the country through the city in activist walking performance

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In March 2003, I moved to live in Herefordshire – demographically the most rural county in England, apparently – from Aberystwyth, possibly the most rural university town in the world, where I also grew up. In the intervening decade, I have managed to transition from two degrees in biological sciences to two degrees in dance (my current PhD in performance is my second PhD, my fifth degree overall) via work as a landscape officer for local government, dancer, arts facilitator, lecturer and aerial performer variously in the cities of Hereford, Cardiff, Bristol, Worcester, Coventry and Manchester. But all stubbornly, resolutely commuted-to from my caravan (latterly yurt) home on a farm in south Herefordshire.

I am most definitely a determined yokel. Albeit an overeducated one...

In September 2013, I acquired a yoke. (An antique one, from Hereford reclamation yard, next to the River Wye.) And in October 2013, I spent six days walking in circles around the city of Hereford carrying water with it.

[*\[Which sounded like this...\]*](#)

This was for an eco-activist walking performance and installation *Drop in the Ocean*, part of an on-going series of works I am developing under the banner of 'tracktivism': my own awkward neologism for a synthesis of walking art and talking art. That is, my environmentalist concerns determine the shape and score – or 'rules' – of the routes that I choose to walk, in the aesthetic tradition of walking art; but I then use the act of walking those routes to invite and inform encounters with strangers in the tradition of dialogical practice. There's nothing clever or complex in tracktivism: I walk – quite often along **tracks** – and talk to people – with **activist** intent.

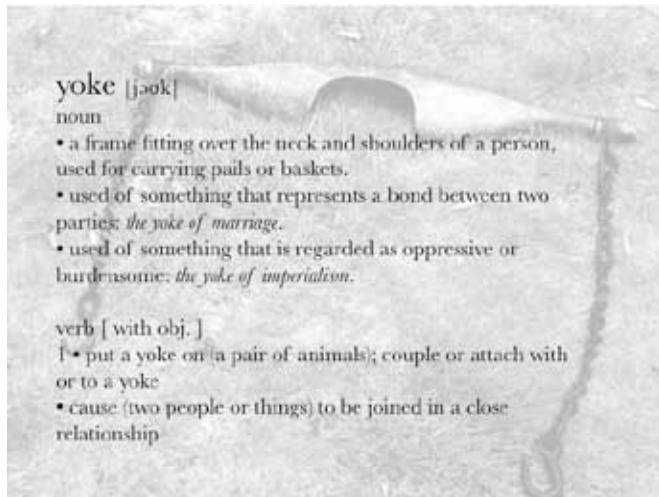
But, the 'track' is the key. Because I normally do this in the country. Wearing Gore-Tex boots. Mud is my comfort zone. The word rural is in the title of my thesis.

So I was already a bit anxious about *Drop in the Ocean* designed, as it was, to be performed around an urban centre. Taking its shape from the simple visual image of the ripples that form around a drop (it should be becoming quite apparent by now that, as an 'unsophisticated person from the countryside', I'm not remotely ashamed to be literal) it is a walk for six days in six concentric circles of progressively increasing diameter around a central point: a source of water around which the accompanying installation is constructed – a church font in this case – leaving from and returning to that place each day.

The title of the work is a reference to its aesthetic, but also to its underlying ethical pretensions. The (roughly) circular shape of the walks – I say roughly because the routes are inevitably determined by rights of way, the restrictions of shopping centres and water crossings, a particular problem in a city bisected by a river – are crudely emblematic of the repercussive ripples on the wider planet that emanate from the thrown stone of our everyday actions in our local environment. But the still-wider intention of the work is an attempt to acknowledge the overwhelming scale of ecological crisis at the same time as cultivating the hope that small acts of performance may have cumulative power. The ocean is, after all, only an infinity of drops.

The piece is also of course *about* water and facilitating a space for contemplation of our troubling, dichotomous relationship with it – that, in a changing climate we either have too little or too much, as this winter has ironically attested. But also how in that dichotomous relationship there is mirrored the disconnection between our abstract ***understanding*** of environmental problems, and our quotidian, embodied ***responses*** to them.



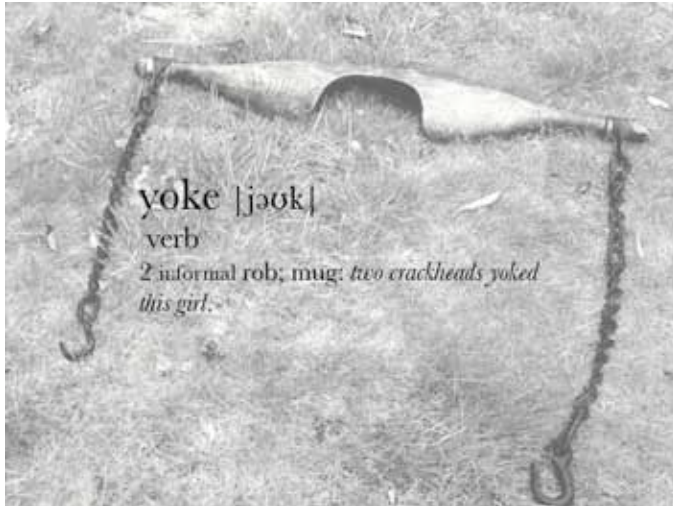


So, if at the heart of this deceptively-simple-but-really-quite-ludicrously-ambitious piece was indeed an attempt to facilitate some kind of (re)connection, then recruiting the yoke as a prop, provocation and metaphor was subliminally fortuitous, given (what I've later discovered are) its variously layered (etymological) meanings. And particularly given the 'burdensome' nature of the problem: 'Worried about neck strain' one friend Tweeted on seeing the yoke picture 'it's as if you're physically carrying the weight of the issue for us'...

Clarifying what that 'issue' might be is not easy, because the 'global water crisis' is too much a plurality to sum up in a convenient sentence. Though I can attempt it: in short, thanks to shifting climate, extreme weather, melting ice, pollution, increasing population and urbanisation, water is rapidly becoming recognised as both our most precious natural resource and our most devastating natural force.



But how on earth do you explain all that to someone in Hereford standing outside Tesco's in the pouring rain and expect it to be anything other than meaningless, aggravating media jargon? Especially when I discovered that a more recent, informal verb form of yoke is to:



rob; mug: as the Apple dictionary non-politically correctly has it '*two crackheads yoked this girl.*'

So I was already scared enough of the vulnerability of performing in the city, to all those dangerous city folks. But spouting statistics was almost definitely going to get me yoked. Or at least, I wasn't an accomplished-enough performer or a sufficiently persuasive activist to make them resonate. Having already lost my faith in conventional environmentalism earlier in the year – 'saving the world' seems a remarkably egotistical human pretension, given that the planet will probably survive very well without us once we've successfully annihilated ourselves – I turned instead to faith in community and, that old clichéd fairy-tale stalwart, faith in nature.



My sweetest, most resonant memories are swimming and falling in rivers; walking behind waterfalls; daily paddling in the sea as a child. The sheer transformative sensuousness of water, or rather my sensual engagement with it, has been the source of my enchantment with life, and my ethics of care towards the (natural) world – an ethics which I would wish to share with others.

But if all these experiences happened 'out there' in nature, then how could I

facilitate – for others – this same sensual re-engagement or re-enchantment with something we overly abstract (dual meaning intended), in the comparatively denatured (dual meaning also intended) and desensitising urban environment? I needed a portable way of facilitating transformative immersion in a peripatetic one-to-one live art encounter while carrying a yoke. Like Archimedes in his bath, I found eureka in a bucket: I was going to facilitate enchantment by consensual immersion – I was going to get people to put their hand into water.



Wearing my yoke, I walked my circular paths through the streets and fields; expectantly (but not too desperately), trying to comport myself and arrange my features in such a way as to simultaneously indicate and self-reflexively acknowledge that this was just strange enough to be interesting, but not so strange as to be threatening. For those six days, I walked until someone looked or sounded (even with a heckle) curious, amused, bemused or simply engaged enough at this incongruous/unusual/unexpected sight to bring us into encounter, to invite me to say ‘would you like to make a wish?’

‘It’s completely free!’ I’d have to add, diving in quickly. Because unfortunately, what I’d naively thought would be an innocent enough reappropriation of a gesture – a wish – we *do* associate with water, I quickly discovered was almost universally associated with money. So I found myself having to reassure everyone that it was completely free, not for charity, sponsorship, fitness, punishment, advertising or, one memorable occasion, *You’ve Been Framed.*)

All you need to do, I’d say, is take a stone from the water in this bucket, and transfer it to this one. And in between, all I ask is that you hold it in your hand for at least 30 seconds and think about water, while I offer (and most people accepted) a ‘thought score’ to help. It was important to me that people got their hand wet, but the words were an attempt to reinforce that sensation. An attempt at an evocative litany: water’s many guises from the domestic to the sublime. First memory of swimming to last cup of tea, the sound of the sea or the click of the kettle... the script changed with each encounter, drawing from and building on others’ responses (and my own experiences of walking between them).

I then invited them, when the thoughts had percolated through, to place the

stone, and their wish in the water of the other bucket. Some people wanted to keep the stone. Some spent a long time thinking. Some people returned the stone gently, reimmersing themselves. Some threw it in – discarded – with a splash. And one man said he did not believe in wishing. But nearly always, they then shared something with me – a story, anecdote, comment – about water. More or less political (abstraction, flooding, erosion), more or less personal (fear of the sea, beach holidays in Spain, a childhood in Africa).

Whatever their response, before we parted I gave them a hand-stamped card with a web address and the location of the installation. But, I always offered, ‘you may simply wish for this to remain a mysterious encounter...’

The installation was an anchor for and sonic pulse of the walking performance that ringed out from it. Housed at a busy city centre café in a working Anglican church¹, the installation was built around a circular labyrinth. Visitors were invited to use it as a space for a contemplative audio walk, accompanied by an ambient soundtrack of water. My walks started and finished in the labyrinth each day, and the stones representing the wishes collected were brought back to its centre, accumulating gradually over the course of the week. As did my dirty walking socks on a washing line, and hand-written tags of each outdoor encounter, brought back daily and pinned onto a map, on which I also drew each day’s walk routes. There were also ‘stations’ where people could wish, pour, wash, write. And, hanging somewhat mysteriously over it all was a ‘virtual water line’ of clear plastic fish bags containing not fish but model cows, cars, bananas, bottles floating in volumes of water, representative of that which remains hidden in the production of their ‘real’ equivalent. In short, the installation was a refuge, a reference point and a ‘container’ for the small amount of overtly political statistics I had allowed to creep into the piece – statistics that somehow assuaged my activist guilt that what I was doing ‘out there’ was so banal as to be useless.

¹ The venue was supplied by New Leaf, the organisation who had programmed the piece as part of their annual, week-long, county-wide sustainably festival h.Energy and for which they also needed something tangible and fixed that people could visit. All Saints has undergone a very contemporary renovation to house the award-winning café and it also has two of the only public toilets between Tesco and Marks and Spencer: the through traffic is impressive. The church is heartily reconciled to embracing the secular, but still politely placed its own constraints on the work, requesting that we respect this space of refuge and contemplation.



'Out there', beginning in the open pedestrianized centre, my first sense was, perversely (for all the squeak of my buckets and the yoke's bite into my neck), of blending in. Merging with all the people similarly burdened with plastic shopping bags. In offering a sloshing, clanking, metal portal to enchantment, the water, yoke and I were competing with another claim on people's attention. As Jane Bennett asserts, it is remarkable 'the ease with which enchantment as wonder-at-the-world is channelled into the thrall of shopping' (2001, p. 32). But still, the incongruity of the yoke was a draw – the ability of anachronism to bring the extraordinary to the everyday (even in the rain). People's faces flickered from amusement to uncertainty, trying to establish, it seemed, if I was another one of those folks about to make them feel guilty. Like the charity fundraisers with clipboards [*the 'chuggers'*], the Big Issue guy, or the silent girl dressed as a forlorn bunch of grapes, advertising the pub of the same name. People were too nervous, flighty, here. This was not my stage, I realised: it was already too crowded and confused by others with different agendas. But even as I circled and curved off into side streets there was a palpable shift in people's readiness to stop, to engage fully and the increasing frequency with which they did – as if here they had permission to speak, and breathe.

Still, my practice had to adapt to the urban. Normally about facilitating more in-depth one-to-one conversational encounters in the vein of Wallace Heim's *slow activism* (2003), I had somehow to try and bring something of the timbre of that slowness to a fleeting exchange, more 'convenient' for the speed of the city (even a comparatively sleepy rural one). I was trying – instantly – to conjure into being Eliot's 'moment in and out of time', or perhaps better his 'stillness between two waves of the sea'... As an encountee later wrote to me:

In an intense week it was a moment of calm - of reflection and connection .. Both to the global issues embodied and expressed by water but also to myself - especially in that intensely personal moment of making a wish and dropping the stone into the bucket of water [...] next to the river - where I happened to meet you. That moment of stopping and being with you and taking a moment to be still and gather myself into a wish was very special. (Kate Gathercole, email 19/03/14)



This echoes what had already become apparent to me that, if what I was doing was any kind of activism at all, it was far less about water and its power to *enchant* or cultivate wonder-at-the-world, and far more about water as a fluid medium to *soften and connect* – to mediate perhaps – between spaces and people, between people and themselves, or even between people and authority. Like an encounter in the city centre with a wishing toddler and his grandparents (the little boy was so open to be enchanted, he plunged his whole arm into the water and got his sleeve wet) while behind us a security guard materialised and hovered, waiting to ask me to move on. Because unbeknownst to us, this open, city street we were on had become private property. Water as an activist co-performer here, was finding its way in through the cracks in our awareness that apparently public, civic, open-air spaces are becoming commercialised places where our freedoms (to, what, enchant a child?) are restricted. But perhaps even the security guard was a metaphor, for the kind of permission we need to offer ourselves to disengage from patterns of consumption and re-engage with the sensuous in the city.



Or the country for that matter: because if anything challenged my perceptions of a rural-urban binary then it was walking in circles around a city: the routes became a confusion of virtual contour lines, striding indiscriminately across

arbitrary administrative boundaries, trespassing over thresholds of perception. Repeatedly entering, leaving, circling and tangenting with the city served to dissolve the rural-urban binary into a continuum of meetings with people, cows, terrain, traffic. The walks were also revealing in their wake a plethora of micro-political minutiae (no less significant for that), like bringing the smell of cow shit on my boots back to a city that has just lost its livestock market to the construction of a shopping centre. Where builders on the scaffolding there took pictures of me on their phones as I walked past with my yoke, coincidentally on a day when my trajectory would take me miles out to the new purpose-built, sanitised, manicured, out-of-town livestock market.



Divorced from the city which had sprung up around it and where the displaced drinking water trough – erected by public subscription in 1883 and now largely divorced from public and purpose – is full of flowers. And a trajectory that brought me back to a city centre where the only bovine left is a fibreglass bull (outside Starbucks).



Intead I found it was the people who'd become the nervous, skittish livestock – just like the herd of dairy cows I walked through that same day on their way to milking: goggling, snorting and curious at the look and clank of my buckets and the possibility I might have something for them, but too suspicious and wary to

approach.

Coda

Walking in circles with something as fluid as water has had a strange effect on my ability to write about it – certainly to arrive at anything as linearly concrete as a conclusion. So I will finish with a kind of coda.

On 1st January 2014, I moved back to live in Aberystwyth, arriving the day before the tidal storm surge. The day or so after that, I walked with a friend, to the place where the damage was worst, and where ironically just 3 months previously we had shovelled shingle into buckets for me to take to Hereford to construct the pathways of the labyrinth. Shingle that was now piled feet high onto what was once the promenade, and being viewed by a steady stream of hi-vis clad officials, shell-shocked locals and disaster tourists. I wrote to her in a later email:

Feeling oddly emotional about storm destruction – so strange that we took shingle from there for *Drop in the Ocean*, to try and construct a performance, or ‘art’, or a space to encourage people to think about water, climate, inundation... and here is the sea doing it so brilliantly and apocalyptically all on its own.



References

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Heim, W. (2003) 'Slow Activism: Homelands, Love and the Lightbulb', in Szerszynski, B., W. Heim and C. Waterton (eds.) *Nature Performed: Environment, Culture and Performance*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 183-202.

Acknowledgment

Aberystwyth storm and post-storm damage photographs by Sara Penrhyn Jones.
Diolch o galon!