

PERFORMANCE

The Pedestrians

Recent months have seen the British public take to the streets to voice their opinions on educational cuts, healthcare politics and unemployment issues. While there is much frustration about the lack of efficacy of such actions, marching through the city still remains a favoured form of protest and, as many other methods of objection, it works through a logic of flows, stoppages and making-visible; yet, it is particular in the way it makes use of something that has otherwise become almost invisible to us: the act of walking.

We live our daily lives as walkers, wanderers and pedestrians. We use this apparently simple act to visualise how we might be superior to other animals, with the history of humankind being represented by the image of bipedal evolution. Yet, while we may not be born ready to walk on two feet, the act itself seems so everyday that we rarely stop to think about it. We walk without thinking, however the figure of the walker has nonetheless been central to writers such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau and, later, Rebecca Solnit.

The city stroller is also the focus of the project, *The Pedestrians*, by New York-based artists Charles Atlas and Mika Tajima, which took place during the first three weeks of April at South London Gallery. Here, *The Pedestrians* transformed the main gallery space into the backdrop, framework and film set for a series of guest performances, including artists and authors such as John Smith, *New Humans*, Gaby Agis, Les Child, Richard Hornsey and Nina Power, and focusing on sound, talk, dance and a finale, all technologically manipulated and fed back directly into the space itself on several screens.

But what sort of walker are we meant to encounter here? Passive or active? Strolling or travelling? Is this about walking as a regulation of the body or marching as a form of protest? The answer would be all of the above. The one who walks is here shown to be doing many things: slowing down, speeding up, adhering to everyday habits and stepping off the beaten track. And this is both the weakness and the strength of the project.

The first event is a sound-based performance featuring Tajima's own group *New Humans* together with British filmmaker John Smith. As the gallery doors open we are directed to sit on the floor. Smith's voiceover to the music of *New Humans* provides a haunting soundtrack as we are taken on a narrative journey, going from the

mundane, to the personal, to the imagined, to the political.

The central figure of his story is not really the walker, but the tower, and the tale is broken up by the narrator's instructions shouted through a megaphone, as if to remind us of how our bodies are subject to rules and regulations within public space. Smith's tower immediately brings to mind other similar buildings within the writing and critique of the history of walking, particularly de Certeau's famed description of the totalising view of New York as seen from the top of the former World Trade Center v the urban rhetoric of the *Wandermänner* who experience the city from below. Yet, as Smith's story progresses, the building appears to merge into something akin to Michel Foucault's internalised panoptical tower, only to become again an actual, psychical object of control as the narrative moves, with strange ease, from the UK, to an anonymous airport, to the Israel/Palestine border. By bringing this element of control to the surface, the performance challenges the recent focus on mobility cultures within art and academia, which at times forgets that the freedom to roam does not belong to everyone and that the political choreography of bodies, whether these are stopped in their tracks or forcefully moved, remains a common instrument of power.

A few days later, the gallery becomes host to a performance talk by Nina Power and Richard Hornsey. It is an ambitious event which splices together a series of papers from both authors. The speakers complement each other well, with Hornsey talking about the history of pedestrianism, including topics such as pedestrian crossings and vandalism against Belisha beacons, while Power speaks of protest and access. It is, all in all, an interesting event, yet something appears to be missing.

I believe the problem is the format rather than the focus; that is, there are some artists who master the performance talk genre, like Andrea Fraser and Emma Hart. But this does not take away from the fact that the format itself is not without obstacles. The problem is not that the results of performance talks are usually fragmented and the argumentation non-linear. That, I would argue, is one of the strengths of this presentation format. My concern is that performance lectures often end up reaffirming the very thing they are designed to challenge. In this instance, I cannot but wonder about my own position in the audience: sitting on the floor without any opportunity to interact by asking questions. This would have made sense



Charles Atlas, Mika Tajima & New Humans
The Pedestrians 2011 performed with John Smith

if the purpose was for me, as a gallery visitor, to experience the control which work and space assert over me, and Tajima's choreographical instructions to the speakers throughout the performance appear to suggest that this is indeed part of the intention. Yet, it is somehow never quite enough and I would have liked a more direct physical address of the violence that spaces inflict on bodies and how bodies violate, address and create spaces. Instead, I am left sitting back and listening, which ironically allows this performance talk to become a passive encounter, reinstating or even amplifying the traditional audience/speaker dichotomy.

The last two events focus more directly on the body and its movements. Choreographer Gaby Agis has created a new dance piece, *Navigations*, exploring the physicality of walking as a very mundane act. Here, performers start out by simply moving about the gallery space; yet, as they begin to encounter one another, their personal walking patterns begin to develop and, upon leaving the gallery, one notices how people in the street also navigate between public and personal spheres. Finally, Les Child's *Parade*, which constitutes the show's last performance, explores the format of the collective body and serves to sum up other elements of the exhibition.

All in all, *The Pedestrians* provide an important contribution to the discussion of pedestrianism and the cultural and social ways we perform when we put one foot in front of another. Yet, the project is not without shortcomings and at times a more critical, more focused address gives way to the desire to encompass all aspects of walking. ■

The Pedestrians took place at South London Gallery, 1 to 21 April.

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