



Bealtaine Arts Festival, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, 25 May 2024

***We Pass Unseen; *Walking in the Way*, a response**

Introduction

In May 2024, as part of the Bealtaine Arts Festival, I was invited to respond to Pauline Cummins and Frances Mezzetti's work *Walking in the Way* and to the *Visible and Invisible* performance in Cork on Thursday May 23rd. To do this, I have chosen to reflect on and share aspects of my experience of living alone in New York while on a Fulbright Scholarship at the Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, from 2019-2020. I also sought to filter my thoughts and responses to *Walking in the Way* through the lens of Rebecca Solnit's book **Wanderlust- A History of Walking**, written at the end of the 1990s.

As this event was programmed in the context of Bealtaine - Age & Opportunity's annual festival celebrating creativity and older age, the **interwoven themes of women's safety and freedom in urban cities alongside that of ageing and its consequences**, are threaded throughout my text.

Rebecca Solnit writes about artists who walk, and, referencing English land and performance artist Richard Long, says 'contemporary art asks the viewer to do a great deal of work, to interpret the ambiguous, imagine the unseen'. P. 271

'**we pass unseen**', is how Pauline described *Walking in the Way* in a recent conversation with me, using a similar phrase about her and Frances' performative act of occupying urban spaces. In this way, they are asking us to employ our imagination to their process.

1.

Freeflow of thoughts of a woman walking solo in NYC...

I was in New York City from 15th October 2019 to the leap year of February 29th 2020. On arrival, the anticipation of what might unfold over the forthcoming months was electrifying. In October, I began my own walking- pouring over the map of New York's five boroughs and its iconic subway system, a system that has captured the imagination of writers such as Colm McCann, Patti Smith, Olivia Laing and Jeremiah Moss to name a few...

...Interweaving my own experience of navigating this city with that of so many others and experiencing that adrenaline rush familiar to women walking alone...

Solnit wrote about New York City:

'Two thirds of all journeys around downtown and mid-town Manhattan are still made on foot, and New York, unlike London, remains a city of people walking for practical purposes, pouring up and down subway stairs, across intersections -but musers and nocturnal strollers move to a different tempo. Cities make walking into true travel: danger, exile, discovery, transformation, wrap all around one's own home and come right up to the doorstep.' P 188

She also writes- 'one must have free time, a place to go, and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints....most public places at most times have not been as welcoming and as safe for women [as men]' ...'of course, women's walking is often construed as performance rather than transport, with the implication that women walk **not** to be seen, **not** for their own experience but for that of the male audience, which means that they are asking for whatever attention they receive. Much has been written about **HOW** women walk (Marilyn Monroe's wiggle); not **WHERE** we walk... ' p. 234

My experience was unfolding as I began to map the city, on foot, by bus and subway...traversing the streets and avenues during the short winter days and longer nights for four and half-winter months. I was experiencing two very contrasting parts of the city - living for the first 12 weeks in West Harlem with its eclectic demographic of Hispanic/Latino and African Americans, and streets lined with its small Mom-and-Pop stores who offered food from their countries of origin. The very large hardware stores stocked huge supplies of medical clothing indicating that much of the local population worked as carers and medics in New York's hospitals and homes. Cars cruising down Douglas Frederick Avenue with their young male drivers and Hip-Hop music blaring from car speakers - contrasted in every way with the latter 12 weeks when I lived alongside sedate communities of predominantly white (72%) New Yorkers living on the Upper East Side. This side of New York was always flooded with tourists as I was sub-letting an apartment on the Museum Mile; my local M10 bus journey was the only connection between these two very disconnected worlds.

In her extensive writing, Solnit mirrors my experience -

... she says 'on Sunday mornings the streets were busy and sociable with black women in resplendent hats walking in all directions to their churches, not with the dogged steps of pilgrims but with the festive stride of celebrants. Gentrification had not yet dispersed the Baptist congregations to other neighborhoods...'

And...

'Young African American men still saunter by, their legs nonchalant while their arms and shoulders jump around as though staking a bodily territory.' ...in the UPPER EAST SIDE on weekends 'the sidewalks have been replaced by joggers and dog walkers pumping towards that great secular temple of the middle class, to the garden of CENTRAL PARK.' P. 195

2.

Preparation

I can fully relate to Pauline and Frances' preparation for their walking- their considered selection of the streets/clothing/make-up that they chose for each performance. Kate Antosik-Parsons in the **Walking in the Way, Performing Masculinity** book, notes [they] 'research the spaces initially as women recognizing how certain bodies move and pass in these spaces...' p.43

They are conscious of the intersectionality of gender, identity and class, and play with this in their performances.

My research/preparation was more modest, as I began in planning my daily journeys to MoMA in midtown. Initially I took buses to survey **where** on that route from 135th street to 54th, I might feel comfortable to walk – **alone** during the light of the day or perhaps after dark, which fell at 4pm as we got closer to the winter Solstice.

Here I was, an older white woman, alone on the streets and avenues of NYC, thrilling and exciting but aware of the inherent dangers of a big city!

I tested out the subway options with entrances/exits pouring mankind out onto unfamiliar streets. My desire to satisfy my Wanderlust (borrowed from Rebecca Solnit) led me to walk, ride the buses and subways, guided mainly by curiosity. I hid any trepidation I had by choosing the right clothing, footwear and bag/backpack to carry my laptop, a specific pocket for my MetroCard and house keys for easy access. Conscious of how I looked or how I might be perceived, enjoying my anonymity, I was a woman ready for anything, my antennae alert, adrenaline flowing...

Women are mindful of **where** they walk, and **how** they walk; especially when alone- my caring sister-in-law (who has lived in NYC for decades), even offered me a spray can of Mace for my personal protection! She advised walking on the sidewalk where the doormen are always visible (I have to add that this is only where the wealthy have doormen at the entrances to their buildings). Women understand only too well that after years of being aware of the male gaze, the wolf whistle, the uninvited comments, it is wise to be wary when travelling alone...

My new apartment in West Harlem happened to be beside a busy police station- this and the multiple locks on my door, brought memories of the scenes I saw in that great 1980s TV series- Cagney & Lacey. I quickly discovered that Spanish was the predominant language used in the local post office and riding the M10 bus from there downtown and seeing the demographic visually change as we reached 88th Street on West side of Central Park, was mesmerizing, as was the reverse journey leaving from the same street on the Upper East Side. Other than for work, New Yorkers do not cross the invisible lines demarcating them from 'the other'.

Celebrating Walking...as Pauline and Frances do in their performances, brings to mind a warning from Solnit where she cautions us on how various modes of contemporary life are altering walking to and from one's destination at the loss of being outside to simply, walk...

'the time in-between'...she says 'the very ability to appreciate this uncluttered time, the uses of the useless, often seems to be evaporating, as does appreciation of being outside- including outside of the familiar; mobile-phone conversations seem to serve as a buffer against solitude, silence and encounters with the unknown.' Page xv

'while walking, the body and mind can work together, so that thinking becomes almost a physical, rhythmic act-...'... ' Spirituality and sexuality both enter in, the great walkers often move through

both urban and rural places in the same way; and even past and present are brought together when you walk as the ancients did or relive some event in history or your own life by retracing its route. And each walk moves through space like a thread through fabric, sewing it together into a continuous experience-so unlike the way air travel chops up time and space and even cars and trains do. This continuity is one of the things I think we lost in the industrial age - but we can choose to reclaim it, again and again, and some do.' P 171

3

***Walking in the Way* -in memory of fatherhood**

One of the initial motivations behind *Walking in the Way* was a meditation on the artists' fathers. The very first performance in Dublin in 2009 happened on Fathers' Day - celebrating the role that good fathers play in daughter's lives. The artists were celebrating their fathers as makers, artisans and craftsmen...skills and trades that have lost their value in our contemporary economically-driven society. Reclaiming **their memories** and excavating **their legacy** by ambiguous mark-making on Dublin streets. To quote curator and writer Catherine Marshall, [the artists were creating] 'this glorious experiment to find out how it felt to use the streets as men, exploring their own relationship to maleness and in doing so [learning].. more about themselves as women.' P 17

I feel that this inter-generational embodiment of what we as daughters carry from our paternal lineage strengthens our resolve as women to reclaim public space.

Solnit in her writing reminds us 'Throughout the history of walking, ... the principal figures-whether of peripatetic philosophers, flâneurs, or mountaineers, have been men, **and it is time to look at why women were not walking out too.**' p 233

This has been a concern of many other artists as well as Pauline and Frances.

Solnit quotes the poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) who wrote in her journal at nineteen, "being born a woman is my awful tragedy" (1951)

She continues:

"Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors, and soldiers, bar-room regulars-to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording- all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yes, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west. To walk freely at night". Plath seems to have been interested in men for the very reason she was unable to investigate them-because their greater freedom made their lives more interesting to a young woman just setting out on her own.' P 233'

Walking in the Way draws our attention to another Solnit observation where she says '**Cities have always offered** anonymity, variety, and conjunction, qualities best basked in by walking: one does not have to go into the bakery or the fortune-teller's, only to know one might. A city always contains more than any inhabitant can know, and a great city always makes the unknown and the possible spurs to the imagination.' P. 173

'The history of both urban and rural walking is a **history of freedom** and of the definition of pleasure. Urban walking has always been a shadier [than rural] business, easily turning into soliciting, cruising,

promenading, shopping, rioting, protesting, skulking, loitering, and other activities, that, however enjoyable, hardly have the high moral tone of nature appreciation. ' p. 173-174

...'the possibility of human predators keeps city dwellers in a heightened alertness, at least in some times and places.' p. 174

4

Citizenship and Walking-

'Walking is only the beginning of citizenship', according to Solnit, who says 'through it the citizen knows his or her city and fellow citizens and truly inhabits the city rather than a small, privatized part thereof. Walking the streets is what links up reading the map with living one's life, the personal microcosm with the public macrocosm; it makes sense of the maze all around. In her celebrated *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes how a popular, well-used street is kept safe from crime merely by the many people going by. **Walking maintains the publicness and visibility of public space.'** P 176

Danger, and the Advantage of Ageing

Solnit also addresses the **advantage of ageing** ...where she writes about herself ' the constant threats and the few incidents of real terror transformed me. Still, I stayed where I was, became more adept at navigating the dangers of the street, and became less of a target as I grew older. Almost all my interactions nowadays with passersby are civil and some are delightful. Young women receive the brunt of such harassment'... 'I think, not because they are more beautiful but because they are less sure of their rights and boundaries (though such unsureness manifested as naivete and timidity are often part of what is considered beauty). ' P 242

She continues 'Having met so many predators, I learned to think like prey, as have most women, though fear is far more minor an element of my everyday awareness than it was when I was in my twenties.' P 242

Referring again to her research as a historian she states:

'until the twentieth century women seldom walked the city for their own pleasure, and prostitutes have left almost no records of their experience...' P 188

The City as Muse

Walking in the Way is an example of how cities act as muses -and there have been so many artists, writers, musicians and poets who have drawn from this deep well as a source. Again with reference to New York City, it has been the inspiration for many gay poets, including Walt Whitman, David Wojnarowicz, and Frank O'Hara, as well as the performance artist & activist musician Patti Smith and cultural historian Olivia Laing. In MoMA, when I was there, a central theme for its Education programme in The Creativity Lab/A People's Studio was the city, where the public were invited to add to a Collective Imagination through dropping into the studio and participating in carefully designed workshops with contemporary artists exploring similar themes. (see References below for more details).

Writing about performance art which emphasizes the body as art, Kristine Stiles says 'these artists amplified the role of process over product and shifted from representational objects to presentational modes of action' and Solnit adds '...it seems as though these artists are remaking the world, act by act, object by object, starting with the simplest substances, shapes, gestures. **One such gesture- an ordinary one from which the extraordinary can be derived- is walking.**' P269

In summary, I wish to end with a powerful statement by Solnit, where she cites the artist Allan Kaprow's prophesy in 1958, about **all** walking artists and in this instance Pauline Cummins and Frances Mezzetti's *Walking in the Way*.

'they will discover out of the ordinary things the **meaning** of ordinariness. They will not try to make them extraordinary but will only state their real **meaning**. But out of this they will devise the extraordinary.'

'**Walking as art** calls attention to the simplest aspects of the act: the way rural walking measures the body and the earth against each other, the way urban walking elicits unpredictable social encounters. And to the most complex: the rich potential relations between thinking and the body; the way one person's act can be an invitation to another's imagination; the way every gesture can be imagined as a brief and invisible sculpture; the way walking reshapes the world by mapping it, treading paths into it, encountering it; the way each act reflects and reinvents the culture in which it takes place.' P 276

On a personal note, my reading of the *Visible and Invisible* performance on May 23 (2024) had to change at the last minute due to personal reasons and I could not be in Cork. This meant that I walked the route, talked with Pauline and Frances and studied the dynamic photographs taken by Juliette Rowland a day after the performance.

My response to this radical, humorous, touching, political and collaborative performance is to take this time to reflect on humanity and society where the individual connects with community.

Pauline and Frances have between them, years of formal pedagogical practice in their respective fields of teaching in art college and a diverse range of community engagements. They are seen as leaders in their field and role models for younger artists who recognise their radical activism. Through their teaching and mentoring, they have empowered many to explore Performance as an art form and to take risks and explore the extremities of identity through *Walking in the Way* in particular.

As artists who inhabit the public realms of our cities, in their *Walking in the Way* they offer us the **unseen** as a way to connect and reflect on what it is to be a citizen whose rights can be threatened by the patriarchal world in which we inhabit and try to live our best lives.

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References Notes and Further Reading-

Pauline Cummins Frances Mezzetti **Walking in the Way , Performing Masculinity** book 2023

Masculinity, WAAG (Women Artists Action Group) 2023

www.walkinginthe-way.net

Rebecca Solnit **Wanderlust- A History of Walking**; Granta 2014

Olivia Laing **The Lonely City- Adventures in the Art of Being Alone** Canongate Books 2016

Peter Selz and Kristine Stiles **Emphasizing the Body as Art** in **Theories and documents of Contemporary Art:A Sourcebook** Berkeley: University of California Press 1996

Jane Jacobs, **The Death and Life of Great American Cities**, New York: Vintage Books 1961

Wendy Woon **The People's Studio/Creativity Lab/ Collective Imagination** MoMA

<https://stories.moma.org/art-as-experience-80-years-of-innovative-learning-with-moma-e31327baad81>

Wendy's Subway independent artists publisher Brooklyn New York <https://www.wendyssubway.com/>

Frank O'Hara **Lunch Poems** The Pocket Poets Series 1964 about lunch time excursions during his breaks from MoMA

POPE L <https://www.moma.org/artists/37145>

Kris Harzinski, **Hand Drawn Map Association (HDMA)**. Explore the creative and ephemeral ways we document and imagine location. Reflect on your understanding of social, emotional and physical place as you create a personal map inspired by HDMA's expansive collection of artist maps.<https://krisharzinski.com/hand-drawn-map-association/>

My touchstone reading material included [Moss' Vanishing New York; Solnit's Wanderlust; Laing's The Lonely City; Smith's Just Kids; and Thich Nhat Hanh's 'How To Walk']

***we pass unseen'** (quote Pauline Cummins in conversation with the author on April 16 2023)

