

An Exercise in River Crossing

Sarah Rodigari

Strategies for Leaving and Arriving Home

4 June to 25 July 2011

Depart, take the plunge.

Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*

In *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, philosopher Michel Serres describes a swimmer crossing a channel of water between two shores. The swimmer, who has up until this point been accustomed to standing vertically, wades into the water, heading with some uncertainty to the distant land mass. As the water deepens, the currents push and the tides pull, the swimmer begins a stroke. For a long time the option of turning back remains, even if that turning back is constituted only by a recollection of homeland. Soon, the swimmer cannot stand, and is no longer oriented by either shore—the one of the past; fondly remembered, and the one of the future; yet unknown. It is only here, in this third river, between the two thresholds of past and present/ east and west/ up and down, that the swimmer ‘abandons all reference points’. The swimmer is horizontal, utterly re-oriented spatially and temporally, subject only to the act of swimming and the matter of the water. Here, the potential for new discoveries and configurations expands, as the swimmer can no longer rely on the structures, categories and oppositions – the gravity, that makes familiar his world. However, before the swimmer knows it, he is approaching the new shore, ‘your foot, once it has crossed a second threshold, waits expectantly for the approach: you find yourself close enough to the steep bank to say you have arrived’.¹

Earlier this year, Sarah Rodigari walked from Melbourne to Sydney, primarily by foot, following the route of the (Old) Hume Highway or the intercity train line. She titled this work *Strategies for Leaving and Arriving Home*. This project was supported by Field Theory and Performance Space, but was largely self-initiated and self-funded. Belonging to a tradition of walking meets art practices including Richard Long (*A Line Made by Walking*, 1967) and Francis Alÿs (*The Collector*, 1991; *Fairytales*, 1995; *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, 1997), but perhaps more practically resembling Jessica Watson’s circumnavigation of the world by sail boat in 2010², Rodigari’s walk project was both a solitary and participatory event, conjoining notions of social practice, endurance and self-help.

The walk took approximately fifty days to complete, and Rodigari carried out the task with a number of guidelines or *Rules to Live By*.³ The physical action

¹ Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge: translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, with William Paulson*, The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 5.

² For details see http://www.jessicawatson.com.au/_blog/Official_Jessica_Watson_Blog/

³ ▪ Find the longest way to leave.

▪ Announce your dramatic departure to be sure there’s no turning back.

of the walk was accompanied by a blog⁴ that Rodigari updated periodically throughout her journey. From this node, a participant/ viewer/ friend/ family member could follow her route, send travellers' tips and offer accommodation. The blog displays readers' commentary and questions, as well as Sarah's responses.

Rodigari walked approximately 20km per day, from around 10am to 3 or 4pm in the afternoon. Often she walked alone, although she also invited friends and strangers to walk with her for one or two days. Sarah affiliated herself with local communities and groups, including regional art galleries, walking groups and friends of friends. Occasionally, she would camp in an official camping ground, especially if she was not alone. At other times she would stay with friends or friendly strangers. Towards the completion of the trip, she stayed more often in hotels, motels and bed and breakfasts.

Of the approximately 1000km journey, Sarah walked around 600km, and was driven the remainder. The walk cost in total \$5000 to complete and anything from \$20 to \$100 per day depending on 'accommodation, food and the kindness of strangers'. Sarah lost around 2kg and suffered very subtle skin pigmentation due to exposure to the elements. She maintains no injuries. She ate mainly freeze-dried food, miso, kombu, fruit and nuts and the occasional pub meal.

Twenty to thirty people welcomed Sarah to Performance Space on the afternoon of 25 July 2011. She had walked, with friends, colleagues and interested parties, from Bankstown that day. The foyer at CarriageWorks was decorated with colourful bunting and Daniel Brine had gone to a significant effort to make a welcome banner resplendent with embroidered walking boots and welcome proclamations.

Since then, Sarah has been occupied with the task of contextualising her *Strategies for Leaving and Arriving Home* within some kind of visual/ live/ performance art framework. As well as her own prerogative, this task has been assigned to her by funding bodies, institutions, audiences and colleagues. Rodigari has given a number of public talks and performances about this work as she wrestles with how, and why, to describe an ultimately personal experience as a 'work of art'. In these reports, Sarah accounted for the walk quite pragmatically, much like I have done above. She fielded questions about the practicalities of walking every day, the rules and whether she had 'broken them', and who she met along the way. She scrupulously and self consciously avoided discussing 'what it all meant', other than referring to

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- Sell everything you've spent the last ten years collecting on eBay so that you can afford ultra-light, warm, waterproof hiking equipment that you will only use this once.
 - Source redundant road maps, scaled 1:2500 and pin them to the wall across from your bed. Spend hours planning the flattest and most direct route, and then acknowledge that it's probably best to just follow the train line.
 - Romanticise solitude and anticipate loneliness, invite everyone to join you.

⁴ www.strategiesforleavingandarrivinghome.blogspot.com

the anxiety such a question provoked within her, during the walk and afterwards. On her blog, she states:

On the road I was asked a lot about why I was walking, on a personal level I can answer quite simply that I wanted to gain perspective. In walking I have created a distance and a memory between the life I built for myself in Melbourne and the one I am now building here in Sydney.

While such a statement does little to contextualise this project as ‘art’, it does demonstrate how the walk enabled Sarah to reconcile time and place as she relocated herself, quite literally, step by step. Moreover, this act of creating temporal distance by physically walking brings our attention, as viewers or participants, to the scar between Melbourne and Sydney created by the voracity, speed and frequency of travel. For commuters between these two major cities, it is *not* the journey that matters, but the speed with which we can reach the destination. Like magnetic poles, Melbourne and Sydney represent a binary opposition par excellence, where the particularities of the space between them—the townships, communities, economies and landscapes—have been obliterated by our need to negate place in order to save time.

As the fourth most busy flight route in the world, with up to 800 000 people commuting between Sydney and Melbourne via plane each month, and the continual upgrades to the Hume Highway increasing the efficiency of car travel by circumnavigating the small townships that once relied on the trade commuters brought, the passage between the two major cities reflects our best attempt to obliterate the tyranny of distance, which as a nation, we know so well. The act of walking then—slow, methodical and utterly restricted by Sarah’s somatic limits⁵—confounded the normal economically rational attitude towards distance and efficiency.

But what I find most interesting about this work is not this metaphoric suturing of the wound between Sydney and Melbourne, but rather that Sarah has willingly entered the space between point A and B, exploring this third river that Serres describes. The flexibly and improvisatory nature of her journey, allowing as it did, the feedback and input of spectator/ participants to alter her path or influence her experience,⁶ left Sarah in the hands of not only time and place, but also wholly subject to the logic of the work—re-oriented as the artist

⁵ i.e. the length of her legs.

⁶ *Having made primarily participatory performances over the past six years, in which structures were created for willing participants to be guided through a web of experiences, this walk was an opportunity for me to consider values of exchange in performance in another way. By placing myself inside the structure and imposing the rules on me as opposed to willing participants, it allowed me to invert this impervious relationship. Those who connected could predominately do what they liked; they could change the nature of the walk if they chose and each person who engaged with the walk, in some way did. Whatever they did had a lasting effect on me. It has been both a deeply personal and shared experience to have people join me on my walk, be it in person or via the web,* Sarah Rodigari, blogpost, 12/08/2011, www.strategiesforleavingandarrivinghome.blogspot.com.

who walks, or for Michel Serres, a swimmer who swims. In this space, the binary oppositions between Melbourne and Sydney, live art and performance, social practice and visual arts, journeying and walking, and audience and spectator are simultaneously collapsed and conflated. Moreover, not only was Sarah swimming in the physical space between the threshold of leaving and arriving, but also in a creative space, where the walk-as-work was undefined, it's meaning always imminent, even in the doing. We can therefore find the third space, to which Serres refers—the river within the river—not literally somewhere along the hurtling Hume Highway, but in both Sarah's and our own reflection upon the project.

Recently Sarah defined her walking, and the rhetoric she builds around it, as one of *vulnerability*.⁷ This state, rather than connoting some passivity or uncertainty, actually allows a space of opening between artist and viewer. Sarah's sense of precariousness concerning the purpose or meaning of the work, and in particular her willingness to show us this ambiguity, is the key to occupying the space between leaving and arriving for both Sarah and her audience. In this sense *Strategies for Leaving and Arriving Home*, while serving its own specific autobiographical function for Sarah, also realises itself as social practice, where the spectator and artist are in a process of co-creation of both meanings unimagined and futures unknown.

This recognition is what Clare Bishop, via Jaques Rancière, proposes for participation and social practice in art when she describes the potential for practice that 'would invite us all to appropriate works for ourselves and make use of these in ways that their authors might never have dreamed possible'.⁸ However, this revelation is only possible in the moment that both artist and viewer relinquish orientation, bear all and surrender to the unknown, or ... *take the plunge*.

⁷ Private conversation with the artist, 25/11/11.

⁸ Bishop, Claire. 'Introduction: Viewers as Producers.' *Participation*. Edited by Claire Bishop. London: Whitechapel and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 16.