

**Brigitte Kovacs**

**Walking in a trio with Daniel Belasco Rogers and Daniela Hahn  
Berlin, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2017, 2 x 4 794 steps**

It is Friday the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2017. I wake up early and check the weather forecast on my mobile phone before I even get out of bed. Will it rain today? It is a cold, grey day in April and I am worried that I will have to record our walk in pouring rain.

At around 9am, I put on my shoes with the wooden soles that click with each step I take, turn on my audio recorder to register my thoughts in the form of a soliloquy and leave the tiny Airbnb room in Kreuzberg, which I have rented because of its proximity to plan b's studio. While I start walking and talking, I am repeatedly interrupted by the robotic voice of the *HERE WeGo* navigation system, which guides me through the busy streets of Berlin. This is the first time I have used a navigation system to get to a meeting point, but for my encounter with Daniel Belasco Rogers, it feels like the most appropriate way to get in the right spirit for the conversation.

Originally planned as a 'quartet walk', the other half of plan b, Sophia New, had to cancel her participation due to another appointment in Munich and I wonder how this will affect the conversation between the remaining three of us: Daniela Hahn, Daniel Belasco Rogers and myself. Will we be able to share the two microphones? This is the first time for me to perform a Walking Interview in a trio and I have built a device out of chopsticks to pass the microphone (which I would usually attach to my jacket) more easily between us.

When I arrive at the studio building, Daniel Belasco Rogers is already expecting me at the open window on the first floor. Minutes later, Daniela Hahn arrives as well. Before we start our walk, we have a look at the artworks in the studio and even before we start walking, we are deeply engaged in a conversation.

**Brigitte Kovacs (BK):** It is the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2017 and I am walking down the stairs from plan b's studio – Daniel Belasco Rogers on my right hand side and Daniela Hahn on my left. I would like to start our walk by asking you both if you could introduce yourself with a few words.

**Daniel Belasco Rogers (DBR):** Let's go this way. I am Daniel Belasco Rogers. I am half of *plan b* and we – me and my partner Sophia New – have been making performance work together since 2002 and then GPS work, me since 2003 and Sophia since 2007.

**BK:** Before I hand over the microphone to Daniela, one more question: I read different definitions about what *plan b* stands for: e.g. Berlin, being in the moment, being here, or also 'plan b' in the sense of finding another way. So what does *plan b* mean?

**DBR:** I guess, it means all of those things. I think it is interesting not to close down the

options but to leave them open. Or, as Donna Haraway says, “staying with the trouble”. Keep these things in an unresolved state? We’re gonna go down this way.

**BK:** On the right-hand side? As you said before, it is a pity that Sophia is not here with us today. It would have been great to walk in a quartet, but I am very happy that Daniela is joining us today. Daniela, could you introduce yourself as well with a few words?

**Daniela Hahn (DH):** I am a theatre and dance scholar and for a long time I have been interested in movements like walking, not only through the city but also in an outside environment, in a more rural environment. I have conducted a lot of walks and I am looking forward to walking with you and leaving some traces in the city.

**DBR:** Oh, apropos, I should turn these on.

**BK:** Oh yes, we all get GPS recording devices. It is amazing how small they are. They look like little black boxes.

**DBR:** These are data loggers. You can have those two. The one I use every day is a little bit different than these. It’s got a screen; it’s more robust. These ones, you just turn them on and they run. We use the little data loggers for our projects where we give GPSs to the public because they are very simple to operate. Well, this is simple to operate as well, but it has got too many options people get interested in and might do something with it, whereas with those, you just turn them on and they log your position. The fastest they can log your position is every second, so you just set it to a sensible time frequency.

**BK:** What is the time frequency you usually record?

**DBR:** This is on an automatic setting and of the automatic settings, this is the highest. I did some analysis of the GPS... We are going through these funny gates... I did some analysis of the tracks and it turned out that they are recording once every 12 seconds or something.

**DH:** And we can just put it in our pockets?

**DBR:** Yes.

**BK:** OK, let’s start with the recording process.

**DBR:** We are going through here.

**BK:** You have been recording your movements for quite a long time, since 2003. You started doing it when you moved permanently to Berlin.

**DBR:** Yes. There was a bit of a time delay. We moved in 2001 and I did not know what a GPS was back then. And, really, I met a GPS for the first time in a really interesting artist residency called Makrolab<sup>1</sup>.

[...]

**BK:** [...] So after the residency you started to use GPS to document how you got to know the city of Berlin. Sophia joined you in 2007 to record how her mobility changed after having a child. This is now 10 years ago, and in your case even longer. So what keeps you both doing it? What is it that fascinates you?

**DBR:** What keeps me doing it is that it does not have an endpoint. I know this is somehow a negative answer. In a way, I think, I would have to be stopped. I don't see a reason to stop, to draw a line under it because it is over 10 years now. So I missed the ten-year thing. Sophia wanted to do it for a year because she was thinking of those famous one-year performances of Tehching Hsieh. So it was very much a conscious decision: I will do this for a year and this is my motivation, I will see how my mobility is changing because of Ruby, our daughter. Wait, we have to cross here!

**BK:** But what can you actually experience with GPS that you could not experience before?

**DBR:** That is a very interesting question. What I like about it is that I am still not sure; I do not have a definitive answer, really.

[...]

**DH:** As far as I know, Guy Debord and the other Situationists conceived of walking as a subversive practice in the city, and it also means exploring the question of what the city does with the person that walks through it. That involves sounds and smells and memories, all the different layers that a city has, but is that what you are interested in? And then the second question is: What was the initial idea that started you to record GPS? Was it like, "Ok, there is a new technology that I can use", or were you interested in your daily routines? And how did that practice evolve over time? You mentioned earlier that the politicization of the practice started later in the process.

**DBR:** Well, the politicization of me in a way. That is interesting. To go back to this, first holding a GPS for the first time at the residency in Scotland... The moment of looking at the screen, there is a little arrow in the middle of the screen and as you move, it leaves a line behind it. There is nothing else on the map, it's a blank map. The only thing that you see are the traces we are leaving. The motivation I had was that I wanted to document myself learning about a new city. I came from London where I grew up and was born and lived most of my life. So as one does, there is a merging of identity between you and the location that you grew up in. [...] So when you move from one place to another – and I was 35 when I moved to Berlin – as a mature person, it sort of felt like I had to remove myself and my connections to the place I grew up in and find another place. The drawing became a sort of mapping... I thought of it as knowledge at that time. I tried to equate drawing or moving through a place with knowledge, which was a bit of a stretch, if I think of it now. It is not quite what happens, but I thought that was OK. I thought if I was able to note down, like On Kawara did, where I had been, I could slowly build up a picture of myself learning a city.

[...]

**BK:** You are not only recording your walks, you are recording all your movements. What

role does walking take in your practice, what importance? You don't have a car, so you walk quite a lot. Do you see walking as a performative act?

**DH:** Do you consider yourself a walking artist?

**DBR:** To be honest, I am a little bit reluctant to place myself in a historical context. I am a little bit reluctant to place myself firmly as "a walking artist". Walking is only a part of the thing. I think we got associated with walking artists, let's go down here...

**BK:** Oh, these are lovely gardens.

**DBR:** Yes, from up there to all the way down there to *Priesterweg S-Bahn*, they say that this is the biggest *Kleingartenanlage* in Europe. It is one and a half kilometres tall and half a kilometre wide and there are thousands and thousands of *Kleingärten*.

**BK:** We have already traversed quite different surroundings: The busy train station and now all those nice gardens.

**DBR:** What were we talking about?

**BK:** Walking artists.

**DBR:** I think I was aware that, first of all, psychogeography had a revival around the early Noughties. I got taken up by those ideas and a little bit later on, mid 2000s to late 2000s to now, I am familiar with the English-speaking scene and there was a real sudden resurgence on the topic.

**BK:** Yes, there was and there still is a special interest in walking as artistic practice in the English-speaking world. Do you have an explanation for this?

**DBR:** Wow. No, I'm afraid I don't, but let me think though. Why walking?

**BK:** Richard Long once said that he uses walking because it is so simple. You can conduct it everywhere. Might this be the reason why you are focusing on everyday activities like walking as well?

**DBR:** There is something I am interested in about skill level. I am interested in non-hierarchy. As an artist, you get stuck up in mythology. "You are special and we are not like you." You hear these kinds of funny things about the idea of an artist. "I am not creative. I could never draw". There is a lot of that stuff around and I am very reluctant to be drawn into it and I try to fight against it, so that I am not drawn into that rhetoric or ideological work. However, there is an idea that walking is a thing that is available to everyone, but I am quite critical of that as well, because you only have to ask a woman or person of colour how to do some urban explorations à la Situationism and you realise that there are certain places where certain people cannot go.

**BK:** This is another thing I wanted to ask you: Your practice is very self-reflexive; you are trying to analyse your images, the pictures you create. You also try to compare it to your mood diaries.

**DBR:** We only recorded our moods for one year.

**BK:** You also compare your own drawings with Sophia's. Is there any difference that emerges of how women move through a city compared to men? I would be interested in how you interpret your own images?

**DBR:** It is very difficult to extrapolate from Sophia to all women and from Dan to all men.

**BK:** Yes, of course.

**DBR:** However, your question is a valid one, but I cannot really answer it because of that. What we noticed when we compare our maps is that you see that there is a difference in how I like to find new ways to cross the city. I like to have knowledge about the back-ways. I have a pride about my ability to navigate through a city, what I consider to be 'well'. This is to have knowledge of where I am and what my options are and to find different ways. I use this website, *bbbike.de*, which is a bicycle navigation online thing, which lets you click various options. What it does is that it puts you away from the *Hauptstrasse*, from the busy streets, so you have to zigzag through other ways. I have always been interested in that way of moving through a city and Sophia just is not. She feels like she gets lost quite easily and she is nervous about navigation. I am fascinated by it and she is concerned about it and she often jokes that she is the only person that can get lost even with a GPS. That is really clearly reflected in our movements around the city. What I cannot do is to extrapolate that for you. There is a lot of strange gender defining around mapping and navigation. There is this classic "women cannot read maps". I am very reluctant to say all women cannot read maps and all men can navigate because I have met women that are shit hot navigators and men that are just useless. But what I do observe is a slightly different thing. What I would like to question is that walking is available to everyone at all times everywhere. There is a certain power assumption inherent in saying you can go everywhere you want, you can drift.

**DH:** That is what I said before: it is subversive in a way.

**DBR:** But there is also this: Yes, you can take off a year to drift around the world, but you've got to fund that. It is very difficult to do that with a child, it is difficult to do that safely if you are a vulnerable person. I know people of colour who cannot go to Brandenburg that easily, I know people who have different sexual preferences or transgender people who have to be very careful where they go. There is an assumption that places open up to you. They don't open up to everyone equally and Guy Debord, who did most of the conceptualisation about all this stuff, is a white European man.

**DH:** He was in a privileged position. But speaking of gendering, when I understood you correctly, the practice started off as something very personal, maybe even biographical. You used the recorded data as a kind of trigger for narrating the city, but also your relation to the city. But I am wondering what the relation between the personal and the social is, because the everyday – and you are definitely interested in exploring the everyday – has both aspects. How do you personally relate to the environment and then to what the environment does to you? I am interested in the personal and the social.

**BK:** Maybe I can even add something: You are recording everywhere you go, so basically, everywhere in the world. But you live in a big city, in Berlin, and your work is very urban. Would you call the city your canvas, or even location a medium? What importance does the site have for your work?

[...]

**DBR:** Gosh, I could go on for hours for each one of those questions. The everyday, let's go there. What I am interested in is less to make a journey in the landscape as... well, the city as my canvas... It is strange for me because, for example, Jeremy Wood, who was in the *Walk On* exhibition<sup>2</sup> as well, he got a GPS before I did, but around the same time, the early Noughties; his initial concern was to go out into the countryside drawing with a car. The first drawing he made was a fish he saw in the Oxfordshire roads and by driving around in his car, he drew the fish. Then he did a boat drawing in Brighton. He got enormously skilled and he does large, intricate drawings. I was coming from the opposite point of view. I am not going out into the streets to do a drawing in the sense of purposefully writing something across the city like in the famous Paul Auster novel; I am not going to make a funny face or an alphabet, like the Japanese person did, cycling through the streets of Tokyo to create a font. The drawing I wanted to see was the drawing of my daily life. I wanted to use the GPS to have this other perspective on something I was doing anyway.

[...]

**BK:** You were saying before that Jeremy Wood uses the GPS as drawing machine to draw specific outlines. In your case, you also call the GPS a drawing machine, but of course your images are much more abstract. You are speaking of "mechanical mediation", which I think is a quite interesting term in the context of expanded drawing. Could you elaborate on that term?

**DBR:** I am interested in drawing, anyway; a classic idea of a drawing, a hand drawing with a pencil on paper. I am attracted to drawing. I am also interested in other ways of producing a drawing. We go down here, *Veilchenweg*. Other ways of having a drawing produced through machines that might react to movement. I have just realised while talking to you that I am interested in a way of drawing which is mediated. What that does is it gives you less control, so there are less possibilities of getting worried. This was something that Daniela was talking about, actually, in a workshop last week. The people were drawing and there was a lot of frustration in the room about the perceived inability to draw, which is something people confront a lot. This is our *Kleingarten*. Let's see how things are getting on. We've only had it for the second year now.

**BK:** Now we are getting into a topic that is especially interesting for me, because my research is concerned with the relationship between the activity of walking or moving and the medial artefact that responds to it. I would be interested in how the analogue everyday activity of walking refers to your medial artefacts, because they depend on the data you collect by walking, but they can take on different shapes. In some works, you use only black and white squares; others are engravings, prints or drawings. Does the medium say something about the walk? Is there a special reason why you present your walks in this way?

**DBR:** I think about this question as a question about materiality. Sophia is very strong on insisting on the transfer out of the digital or conceptual – let's say the data world into something haptic, something relatable to the body.

**BK:** There are different mediation steps in your work. First you have the activity of walking, which gets transformed into digital data and later into artworks. There are different stages. What is the "art" for you? Is it the walking, is it the recording or is it the mediation of the recording?

**DBR:** Again, I think this looking for the art is difficult for me. I am sorry to be insistent on being evasive on this question, because this goes along with the art being a separate activity out of one's daily life in a special rarefied location by special rarefied people...

**BK:** I think most artists record their walks when they follow a pre-defined artistic concept. It is different in your case. Your life can be seen as an ongoing performance because you are recording every time you leave the house. That is the only criterion: It must be in public space.

**DBR:** It is not so much that. It is not a conceptual meta decision, public space; it is just that I cannot get GPS reception in a house. If I could, I would. It's really that simple.

[...]

**DH:** I think the importance of collecting data has changed in recent years. Did that have an influence on your work? I mean, starting off your practice, you used the data for drawing lines and now it shifts to another question of how is collecting data used to know something about our lives.

**BK:** And even there are two different approaches: on the one hand surveillance, governmental surveillance, using our data and, on the other hand, there is also self-tracking like the *Quantified Self* movement, for example. People are recording their movements, sleep, nutrition and they are sharing their data with others. You are using GPS devices that have a receiver but no transmitter, so you decide what material you want to make public and what stays private. How does your work feed this debate? You have recently been part of the *Sensitive Data*<sup>3</sup> conference in Munich. What was the outcome of this conference? [...] What importance does your own body have for your practice? Is it an instrument or drawing device, or is it more than that? Can you observe changing bodily conditions like pregnancy, illness, growing older in the way you move?

**DBR:** We are going back a different way. The GPS tracking is also used by biologists on animals. I am quite intrigued with the idea that they found that you can identify sickness in an animal depending on how it moves. We are going down this way. That is very intriguing, but I have not applied that on us yet.

**BK:** And on a personal level, your own experiences, like you know you had been sick at this and this time, and you would look at the drawings, could you see it?

**DBR:** Yes, there is an absence. That has happened to me recently. I had a *Magen-Darm-Grippe* and I was inside for three or four days, so that is an absence. What I realized after

doing it for a few years was that the gaps are as telling as the presences of data.

**DH:** Like in the archive.

**DBR:** Exactly. Most people are gathering data when they are doing certain things, and the rest of their lives stay undocumented, but because of the assumption you can make about our data – that it is continuous – the gaps tell you something. What I started to do is a meta-analysis of our lines where I fill in all the missing gaps. If you imagine that a line goes along and then it goes into a tunnel and it comes out the other end. That is the simplest example. When you connect, you fill in that gap, because I was actually doing this journey; it was just that the GPS did not record it. Another example is your GPS disappears somewhere and a few hours later it appears at a similar place and that could mean that you slept there. It is probably somewhere you live or you are staying at the time. It is mathematically all in the data. You don't look for presence but you look for absence. The absence tells you, "Ah, there is a gap there", but you have to ask: was I ill, did I sleep, was I indoors, but also did I lose data, did I forget the downloading cable?

[...]

**BK:** What is the difference between mapping, tracking and tracing for you?

**DBR:** I go through phases using one term more than the other. In the beginning, I was into drawing, the drawing of my life, and then I started to call it the daily practice of map making, a nod to everyday life, a nod to cartography and map making. My repulsion to cartography is that it is an enormously hierarchical artefact, like the idea that maps are often made because of ownership and colonization. They are made by the powerful; they become an enormously powerful political tool.

**DH:** To mark your own space.

**DBR:** You just need to look at the United States of America. There is the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel where they just said, "OK, here is where Canada starts and we are everywhere below that line". This line dividing people up is the colonial idea; it doesn't really matter who was here before, this is our virgin territory. We ignore the fact that there is indigenous meaning and ownership, story and sacredness about this. We just draw a line and say this is a political unit there and it is different to that political unit. The meanings of your actions are different on one side of the line to the other side. I am repulsed by maps like that but I am also fascinated because if we think about time and a city, it will take us probably a day and a half to walk from east to west across Berlin. I once walked from north to south and it took us 10 or 12 hours and we were totally ruined. Walking 12 hours on pavement, you really feel it in your hips and knees. It takes you time to occupy a city on this level, as we are doing now, putting our bodies through it, but with a map you get to experience an aspect of it instantaneously. I find it very interesting that it is a sort of time machine in the sense that it really takes time and space and shrinks it and flattens it in an interesting way. It becomes an amazing way of documenting something that took an enormous amount of time to do and that is a very important part of the practice. When you touched on the *Quantified Self* movement, there is also something we often quote when we are talking about this sort of aspect of it. It is the story of the king that wants the best map of the territory and of course the best map you can get is the one-to-one map. You make a map that is as big as the territory and you record everything



but it turns out that you obliterate the country with your map and it can no longer function because it has a map on top of it<sup>4</sup>. Pointing out the ridiculousness of a form of recording that is as long as the thing that you are doing. So at a certain extent, you have to reduce or scale, find a way that the documenting of your life is the only thing you are doing, because then your life has disappeared in its own documentation. You are doing nothing more than just recording what you are doing with your life.

[...]

**BK:** When you are recording, is the knowledge that you are recording shaping the way you move, the paths you take or the way you walk? Are you always aware that you are producing an artwork by recording your movements, or do you forget about that?

**DBR:** All of the above. That sounds rather dissatisfying. Practically speaking, if you are doing something more or less 365 days a year for more than 10 years, you have done all of those things. You have forgotten it. Increasingly, I look down into my bag to check if my GPS is on and it is; that means I have turned it on, but I have no recollection of doing it. It became a totally automatic reaction, like “out of the house and turn my GPS on”. So there is an automatism. Although I’d rather not try to do a Jeremy Wood and to draw something in the landscape, there is of course a change. It has to affect my movement. I don’t think it does it so much, because I do it every day; it is such a part of my life that I quite often forget it, but if I am in a new place, I am super excited. If I go to a new place in Berlin or to a new city, these lines become really precious and it is very clear where we are recording these traces that we have not done before. Also, there is another point about knowledge: Why would you do this thing for so long if you won’t go to reflect on it? There is a call and response. There is a two-way process between the knowledge of recording and what it makes me do.

[...]

**DH:** Where do you want to take your practice? What is the future?

[...]

**DBR:** I am interested to find a way of recording data in an analogue way, so in a material way. Not just because of being able to relate to it as an object, but to have a data record that is out of the grid.

[...]

**BK:** You already built an analogue drawing machine that you can carry with you. Can you describe how it works?

**DBR:** It is a thing you can strap to your body and a plate hangs and can move while a pen is held stationary. On the plate, there is a small sheet of paper and the drawing is made by the plate moving under the pen. What that does is to record some aspects of movement. So the frustration we were talking about earlier, that a GPS doesn’t record gestural movement, is answered by this machine. It does record gesture, even very fine gesture. It’s another experiment. It is not that I knew what the drawing was going

to be like – it was a surprise once I built it, and it was also a surprise to try and learn how to move to make a certain thing. Again, there was a process of finding out how much do I move. Also, there was a social aspect: I was walking around Linz in Austria, where I was when I was building it, and of course it is a really strange object, so I got into conversations with people about what it was. That was quite nice. So it also had a performative aspect. A GPS is in my pocket, nobody knows I am doing it, but there it was very obvious that I was practising something.

[...]

**BK:** Since we have arrived at the studio now and we are not walking any more, I thank you for the interesting conversation.

**DBR:** I have had a fantastic time.

[...]

**DH:** Maybe we can try the drawing machine now? I would love to walk down the stairs with it.

**DBR:** Yes, I am trying to find you some paper.

**BK:** OK, then we are doing that now. So once again, thank you very much.

**Our walk ends where it started, at the studio building of plan b. After I stop the recording, we keep on talking and Daniela Hahn and I are allowed to try the drawing machine Daniel Belasco Rogers has built during his residency in Linz. It is interesting how different our drawings look. What movements does it actually take to create the varying shapes?**



<sup>1</sup> See: [www.artscatalyst.org/makrolab-scotland](http://www.artscatalyst.org/makrolab-scotland)

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.art-circuit.org.uk/index.php?/forthcoming/walking-journeys](http://www.art-circuit.org.uk/index.php?/forthcoming/walking-journeys)

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.muenchner-kammerspiele.de/en/staging/sensitive-data-the-art-of-surveillance](http://www.muenchner-kammerspiele.de/en/staging/sensitive-data-the-art-of-surveillance)

<sup>4</sup> Borges's short story "On Exactitude in Science"; see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_Exactitude\\_in\\_Science](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Exactitude_in_Science)