

Artists' mapping under COVID-19: work from the Walk Create Gallery

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Walking Publics, Walking Arts: Walking Wellbeing and Community under Covid-19 was an 18th month-long AHRC-funded research project exploring walking in the UK during pandemic restrictions. The aim of the study was to explore the potential of the arts to sustain, encourage and more equitably support walking during and recovering from a pandemic. The walking arts strand of the project focused on artists and their use of walking in their creative practice; one outcome was an online gallery of over 100 artworks (www.walkcreate.org/walkcreate-gallery). The work in the gallery ranges from participatory walks, to walking scores, performance walks to virtual walks, guided tours to audio walks, as well as films, paintings, drawing and sculpture made in response to (and whilst on) walks. Here we focus on some of the examples of walking and mapping, through a small selection from the gallery. These works, by Gill Russell, Martin P. Eccles, Ali Pretty and Louise Ann Wilson use walking and mapping in very different ways, employing solo practices of rural and urban walking, GPS tracking, field recordings, mass participation, silk painting, storytelling, walking in the imagination and hand-drawn maps. Through these examples we briefly explore how artists creatively engaged with the conditions of pandemic restrictions, and how those restrictions informed and influenced the work created.

Gill Russell's 'Locking Down the Line' is a series of map drawings made by walking with GPS on Tam Beith Hill. Although this is a place that Gill has walked regularly and knows very well, she notes that as the news of the pandemic spreading across the globe intensified, her walking changed; "I began letting go... not deciding exactly where I was going. ... wandering into the undergrowth ... from birch tree to grassy hollow. I let the landscape guide me as if I was part of it, led BY it, rather than imposing my path on it." Recording these new off-path routes with the GPS tracker on her phone became a way to draw on the "blank canvas" of each day under lockdown restriction.

The resulting map-works are simple and strikingly beautiful. A warm grey background shows just the lines of roads and paths in white, with the walk routes as fine red lines. Thicker areas of buildup (repetition) resonate like anatomical diagrams, pulsing like blood vessels or veins as each image (or animated GIF) depicts a series of walks over a number of days. Russell writes, "I was drawing with my boots on the hill and the land was drawing itself through me. Then the next day again. Every day for 100 days I recorded my walks and mapped them. Eventually, faint paths appeared from places I had repeatedly walked and crossed over."

[[insert GIF here 'covid walking 8th June']]

<https://www.gillrussell.co.uk/p/covidly-walking-about.html>

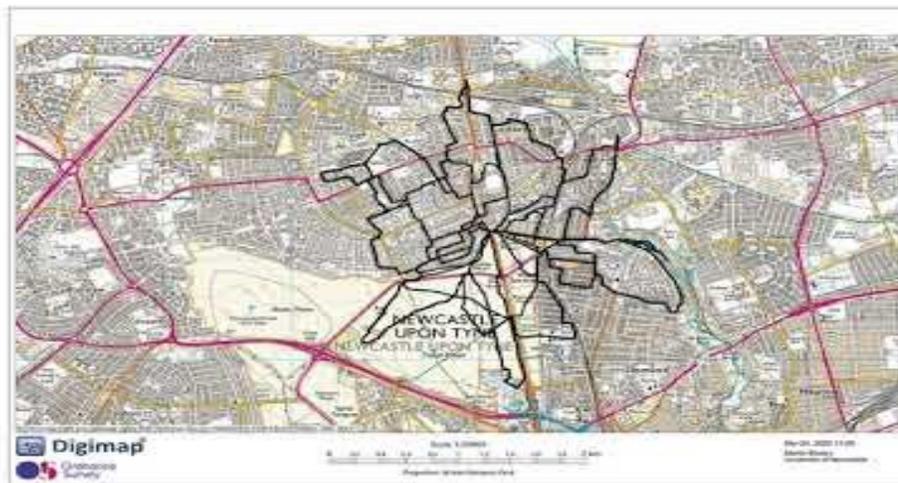
Where Russell's walks map hillside explorations, wandering, and finding new ways through a previously familiar landscape, Martin P. Eccles' 'Walking Contención Island' combines the reality of walking in his home city of Newcastle, with the creation of an imaginary new place, 'Contención Island'. Starting in March 2020 Eccles walked each day following a different trajectory, out for 30 minutes, and back, to comply with the direction for a daily exercise walk of no more than an hour. The 'points' that were reached were linked up on a map to form the Island of his containment. He notes, "contención is containment in Esperanto – an international name for an international virus." For each day's walk Eccles made a field recording, and wrote a poem (as well as marking the line on a map). While the Spring

lockdown of 2020 resulted in the furthest reaches of the 'island' being mapped, it was not until the second, winter lockdown beginning November 2020 that Eccles began to outline the coast of the island, shaped by the structures of the city – railway lines and cul-de-sacs dictating its form. "I now set out to walk its edge, to walk the shoreline of the island and, in so doing, to also mark off the days of the second lockdown."

Contención Island is depicted through a timelapse showing each day's walk as a line drawn onto the base of the OS map of Newcastle. The black line of each walk appears one by one, until they fan out in every direction. The background map of Newcastle then slowly fades as the new 'island' of Contención comes into being, its coast line formed and its inner routes established. The soundtrack to the animated map work comes from the artist's field recordings; soft bird song, footsteps, and a distant hum of traffic.

<https://martinpeccles.com/>

[The 42 walks of Contention Island](#)



Ali Pretty's 'Land of the Fanns' community mapping project started before lockdown and had to adapt as restrictions were put in place. With her company, Kinetika, Ali was commissioned to work with communities across the low-lying area of Essex, Greater London and Thurrock known as Land of the Fanns to gather stories of people, places and histories. In 2019 and early 2020 stories were gathered on walking workshops, with each participant invited to translate their story into a visual design for a flag. Moving to remote delivery during lockdown, Kinetika delivered creative packs to participants, and ran zoom workshops to hear stories and support the flag design process.

The 100 stories are recorded on the project website, and each has a corresponding flag design; imagery relating to the story framed by the outline shape of the Land of the Fanns region, painted on silk. The flags are brightly coloured; acid yellows, greens and turquoise with hot pink and red outlined in the

white distinctive of silk and batik painting. The imagery is varied – waterscapes and flowers, eels and bicycles, cakes and footprints, some are designed and painted by the teller of the story, whilst others have been interpreted or painted from a paper design by Kinetika. As restrictions lifted in late spring 2021 the 100 flags became part of a walking festival ‘Tales of the Fanns’, pitched en masse in a display and carried by walkers through the landscapes that inspired them.

[[insert image Land of the Fanns Flags-photo by-John-Hastings-3-1536x1024]]

Louise Ann Wilson’s ‘Walks to Remember During a Pandemic: “With memory I was there”’ invites people to go for a walk along a favourite route that for pandemic (or other) reasons is not physically accessible to them. Through the drawing of a memory map participants retrace a walk in their mind’s eye and create a representation of the route including landmarks, features, sights and sounds. The emphasis in the work is on the process, the conjuring and imagining of the walk, rather than the map as an end product (although the maps produced are beautiful and fascinating artworks). Louise had used a similar approach before the pandemic, employing ‘surrogate walking’ when working with women who could no longer physically walk, but who longed for the sense of walking and connection to a particular landscape or location. Louise has described the maps as “creative, therapeutic and communicative tools”.

Some of the maps made by participants have been shared back with Louise, and are recorded on her website. Each is accompanied by explanatory notes, a story of why the walk is meaningful, when and with whom it was last experienced. One example (by Awena Carter) includes beautifully detailed drawings arranged around the edge of a hand-coloured map, annotated with location names and their associations: “the railway that took me to grammar school”, and “the holly where leaf rasps leaf”.

[[insert image Awena Carter’s memory-map – Walk Around the Cwm: ‘To Walk was My Delight’ from *Walks to Remember During a Pandemic: ‘With memory I was there’* by Louise Ann Wilson]]

As these examples demonstrate, during the lockdown stages of the pandemic walking offered artists a safe way to continue to make work within the limitations set by the restrictions. The works collected in our digital gallery provide rich examples of what is possible by using walking as a resource, material, and/or creative outcome and are an important archive of pandemic experiences. Our research foregrounds that many artists found it valuable to have time to slow down and focus on making their work, developing their skills, and exploring new things, whilst noting the distinct challenges to income and wellbeing that the pandemic brought. We also found that participants in remote, distanced and asynchronous participatory projects found connection and a sense of community and involvement, as well as solace, through these artworks. Although many of the artists in the gallery (and who responded to our survey or took part in interviews) had worked with walking, mapping and with a focus on place before COVID-19, many turned to place-based work or found that it became more central during the pandemic. This orientation to the local is unsurprising given the restrictions on travel. What is perhaps more surprising is the affective dimension: many people commented on just how much more appreciative they now were of their local spaces and registered a commitment to staying local post-pandemic. This prompts us to think about the impetus, during this global crisis, to map the experience,

to locate oneself, to track movement in a time which felt, for many, stalled and static, to turn real landscapes into imaginative ones, opening borders, routes and new ways of thinking and working.

Other artists in the gallery have previously shared their work in Living Maps Review, including the [S project](#), [Sonia Overall](#), [Ruth Broadbent](#), [Elsbeth Penfold](#) and [Morag Rose](#). You can explore the full gallery, and read more about the wider research project outcomes at walkcreate.org