

**Notes of a
walking
guest
(at
Sideways
festival
2012)**

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At the end of summer 2012 I joined part of the Sideways festival in Belgium, a unique event with walking artists from all over Europe. The festival followers crossed the Flemish part of Belgium on foot from south to north. The organisation Tragewegen – which means “slow path” – initiated this “artistic walking laboratory” to mark ten years since its foundation. On the four-week walk the size of the group varied daily from 20 to 40 people. They were led by local guides, and local people were invited to come along. Over 30 artists carried out their projects along the way or at the weekend festival spots. At the beginning and end of the festival there was a symposium. The organisers summed it up like this: “33 projects in open space, a journey of 334 kilometres, 16 walking days, 5 festival weekends, 2 symposia and 1 multimedia donkey!”

The “multimedia donkey” was the project of Italian artist Peter Ankh. He walked along the whole route with a donkey that was equipped with a time-lapse camera. Another project was the “Walking Library” by Misha Myers and Deirdre Heddon from the UK, which started out by asking what books should be taken on a hike. With the help of assistants the artists carried a growing selection of books along the way and held readings on the route or at the weekend spots.

I walked along the first and last week of the festival. Back at home, I wrote the following notes about going sideways.

It's kind of weird arriving at a slow path festival in a high-speed train.



The walking guest

I started my project for the Sideways festival one year before the event took place: at just the moment when I heard from an artist friend that there would be a Sideways festival in Belgium in 2012. Unfortunately the closing date for project entries had already passed. So I just made up a project that could work anyway: I decided to join the festival as “the international unofficial walking guest”. Shortly before that date I quit my long-time job in architectural exhibitions to focus solely on my own walking projects. I began to work under the name “lerjentours. Agentur für Gehkultur” (agency for walking culture) in Switzerland, where I live. I was delighted by the Sideways organisers' response that I could come over and join the group: it meant that “my project” had been accepted.



In the belly of a cow

When I arrived at the farm on the Saturday evening before the Setting Out symposium that opened the Sideways festival, the artists had been on a tour. I strolled around and was invited by the farmer and his wife to join them in milking the cows. We stood in a shed on a platform below floor level so that they had the cows' udders at eye height and could milk five animals at a time. The farmer told me a lot about cows, especially about the “Belgian Blue”, a cow of sturdy and baroque appearance

that is bred for meat. They can't give birth naturally: the calves have to be removed by caesarian section. On our first walking day I saw one of these cows with huge stitches up and down its belly. These cows gave the first week's landscape a Rubenesque air of abundance.



As a guest, I arrived without a specific task. This gave me the freedom to react to whatever came up along the way.



Where am I

The first walking day I started my experiment of "walking without maps". Normally, I am the person who reads the map, so for me being guided was something of a luxury. I did not know how long we would be walking, which way we would pass, what we should expect to see. There was no talk of the future at all, just a walk in the present.



I closed my eyes/ears. Maps talk too loudly. They shout out all the things and names at the same time.



The horizon

On the longest journey of the first week I read from the book "Landscape + 100 palabras para habitarlo". The sentence "El 'paisaje' es siempre lo que está más lejos" (the 'landscape' is always what is further away) was very apt for this flat countryside, where we walked along a straight path in the midday heat.



Why walk with artists?



To go one's own way

On my walking projects I invite people to come along. I therefore studied the different styles of group guiding adopted by the various local guides. All of them had to deal with the fact that guiding a group of artists is like herding cats.



When I left after the first five days of the festival I knew that I should find a way to come back for the last week. It was too important to find out how this "experiment" would end up.



To endure

The day after my late-night arrival for a second stay was the longest walking day of all. I was amazed by the way things had turned out. I had the impression that people had left their projects behind and had come up with pure endurance because of the long walking distances. The main talk was about blisters and pain. The enthusiastic mood of the beginning was quite lost. That night I was depressed. Does endurance make any sense in relation to creativity?



If you don't find a solution to a problem, start walking.



Pilgrimage

One walking day a Belgium woman joined us who works for Tragewegen, the organisation that initiated the Sideways festival. She told me that she had arrived back from a four-month walking trip to Santiago de Compostela just three days previously. She had made this journey because she had been studying medieval history at university and was interested in this kind of centuries-old ritual form. I asked her: how is it possible to ever stop walking after such a trip?



Put the flowers out

During my first week's stay I started listening to the Flemish language. I liked walking near local people who were talking and adding the sound of their language to the landscape I saw. Sometimes I could even grasp the meaning of what they were talking about, because some expressions are similar to German, which is my mother tongue. I asked a Dutch volunteer to teach me some words and sentences and tried to imitate the sound. For my second stay I brought a Dutch language course with me (no Flemish one was available) and downloaded some apps to my iPhone to learn the pronunciation. On that longest Sideways journey, as we followed the canal a Belgian guest walked at our side. I took out my book and we started to exercise. We came to the expression "de bloemetjes buiten zetten", which she said was not really often used, but means "to party". An artist included this expression in her haiku for that day by starting with "Put the flowers out, ...". When I read this haiku at the last session of the Walking Library readings, it occurred to me that one book which still is missing from this library for a walk through Belgium is a book to learn Flemish.



Animal talk

On the first evening of the festival Beagle arrived, the donkey. Beagle quickly made friends with a donkey on another farm nearby and they began hee-hawing to each other. Two days later the morning started with the cock-a-doodle-doo of at least four different cockerels around the site. We heard the snuffle of horses in the last week as we walked through the paddocks. And there was the pleasant sound of pigs oink-

oinking behind the wall of the barn during the last reading session of the Walking Library.



Misfits

One day, the guide who had prepared the route was ill. The stand-in didn't really know the way, so people started to navigate on their own. That day brought me a lot of good material about people reading maps. There is a special kind of "trialogue" between walker, map and landscape. What is this map talking about and why does the landscape dissent? Do maps lie or is the landscape just stubborn?



Landscape cinema

The long distances meant we just had to keep walking, with no stops. The visual experience consisted of houses, streets, trees and things passing by as if in a film. Although the organisers offered to pick people up, no-one asked them to. Nobody wanted to miss a part of the film.



How could you be sure it was Belgium you were walking through?



Leaving traces

When we left the campsite one day some women from the staff of a nearby nature reserve walked with us just for the first hour. They were impressed that a group of international artists had come to walk through Belgium. They told me they thought people considered the Belgian landscape boring.



Where and how to express the impressions?



Circumstances

The guides expected us to follow them, the politicians to be photographed with them, the people with initiatives to understand their projects, other artists to be the audience for their tryouts, and the food team expected us to share glasses ... a network of expectations to travel through.



The nose of a horse

One evening a volunteer had a terribly swollen hand. An insect bite had caused a strong reaction. Members of the group helped her out with painkillers and antihistamines. Two days later, at the end of our last journey, a group of horse-drawn carts escorted us for the last part of the way. This company didn't surprise us because we had the impression that rather more horses than people live in this part of Belgium. I talked to

one of the horse owners (who walked along on foot) and he told me that just that morning he had had to call the vet because his horse was having breathing problems due to an allergic reaction to an insect bite. I like the scene of this man showing me the swollen nose of his horse on his iPhone.



Day of rest

On the walking-free Friday I started to wash clothes, put my tent out to dry, took part in a two-hour discussion, transported beehives in a wheelbarrow from a farm to a centre, carried shelves around on my bike and was physically involved in transporting 100 kilograms of books. On the Sideways festival website it said: "Vrjidag = Rustdag". Did I (and others) perhaps get the meaning of the Flemish word "Rustdag" wrong?



Balloons

I had a vision of the walking group as balloons that had been filled with a mixture of high-quality helium, but filled and filled and filled and filled and filled, and then just tied and released to fly away (to their home countries).



Relativity theory

After independently organising a short break and a small room for a group discussion – something that had been lacking

during the weeks – we agreed on a short presentation where everyone could submit an object that stood for their experience. We were allotted a small time slot at the beginning of the Moving On symposium on the last weekend. Four weeks of walking experience in a 10-minute presentation, or Energy = mass (object) x speed².



Unpack the suitcase

At the end of the Moving On symposium I talked to some young people who had come over from Brussels to attend the lectures. I wondered what impression our object presentations had made on them. So one of them wrote in my notebook: "The act of 'emptying out one's bags' gave me the feeling that the walkers were opening themselves up to us, saying: 'here you have my papers, that's where I come from, where I've been.'"



Evolutionary step

I first met Annika in the toilets of the cultural centre during the Setting Out symposium at the beginning of the festival. She was quite unhappy. The nine-month-old girl didn't want her nappy to be changed. I held her up to the mirror, which calmed her down for a moment. She tried to stand on her own. Later, after four weeks of the festival, on the last morning before I left, she walked five steps up to me. I asked myself what step I had taken by going Sideways.



Am I the only person leaving this walking festival on foot?



Extroduction

I like to leave a festival on foot, go to the bus station, wait for the bus and then board. It's a way of saying goodbye in steps. But this time the bus didn't come. I started to re-read the timetable and saw a note in small letters saying something to the effect that I should have called an hour before catching the bus, so that it would pass this way. What should I do? I knew that if I didn't get the 11.15 train in Genk, which was 10 kilometres away, I would have problems, because my husband would be leaving home the same evening and the kids would have been left on their own. So ... I started walking. I tried to hitchhike but nobody picked me up. Just as I arrived at the junction with the road to the farm that had offered us a warm welcome for the last weekend, a car drove out and stopped by my side. It was the blonde woman who had welcomed us when we arrived on Thursday at the De Lieteberg Zentrum. I'd talked to her then and also on Saturday night at the Orquestina de Pigmeos nightwalk. She was on her way to meet her father, who was having an operation in hospital. She offered to drive me to Genk station. While in the car she told me that Chus and Nilo, the Spanish artists of the Orquestina, had stayed in her house while preparing for the night performance and that the voices we had heard in the forest had been recordings of elderly people talking in a regional dialect that is close to German. Their voices had been recorded some years previously by Frans, our kind-hearted farmer, to preserve knowledge of old agricultural techniques. When I got on the

train in Genk (the one I needed to catch), I bumped into Chus. We started to talk and he told me a lot about the research they had done and the contacts they had made to stage their performance. So on my way back to Switzerland I received a marvellous “extroduction” (as opposed to an introduction) to the Saturday night’s piece.



The Sideways experience

Who experienced Sideways? The artists in the programme, the organisers, volunteers, assistants, all those who helped by providing food or accommodation? The local, national and international guests who came along for one hour, a day, a whole week? Everyone who joined for the weekends, the audience, the sponsors? All the people we met along the way? I would say all of them experienced Sideways. For the next Sideways festival I therefore propose a guestbook where everyone who encounters it can write their names down and so feel part of this expedition!



A letter to Andy and Sinta (the organisers)

Although the Sideways festival had its occasional ups and downs, I am totally, absolutely and heartily grateful to you for putting on this terrific event. The Sideways festival brought together, in a unique way, local people and initiatives with national and international artists and thinkers on walking. The walk through Belgium was not just a hiking trip but mainly a process of interweaving people’s knowledge, impressions,

ideas, and their thinking about places. An impressive experience! Just those two weeks of walking and staying with the Sideways festival gave me so much material, so many impressions, ideas and contacts that I could work on this for the next ten years. So let us meet again at the next Sideways festival 2022.

Yours
Marie-Anne

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MA' with a flourish.

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