

FIELD NOTES: NIGHTWALKS WITH TEENAGERS

CAPE BRETON, NS, AUGUST 18 – AUGUST 20, 2011

Most of the time walking is a practical activity, an unconsidered way of moving between two places. Despite its ubiquitous place in everyday life, walking has become obscured by functionality and practicality. It is often conceived of as a slow, simple mode of transportation in a global world where more efficient and exciting forms of transportation have been developed, or at most, is relegated to a mode of “fitness” in a culture preoccupied with health and longevity. American writer Rebecca Solnit notes that walking outside in public space has become an eroded activity replaced by technologies and services that don’t require one to leave home — a byproduct of fear of strange encounters and spaces.¹ Moreover, this fear has created entire systems of architecture, for example the mall and the gated community where to walk for the sake of walking (without a purpose for moving from one point to another) is subject to surveillance and scrutiny. In many ways, contemporary walking culture is a form of resistance to the speed and alienation of the postindustrial and postmodern. For artists who take up the aesthetic and intentional act of walking, the gesture becomes meditative, ritualistic and rhythmic — a bodily activity that is unpredictable and incalculable.

In August, a group of eight Toronto teenagers set out on a journey by van to Inverness, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia to perform a series of night walks, meandering over the bluffs and beach, through the darkened forest and around the town. After a 24-hour drive, the teens and four adults (including myself) set up camp in Inverness for a week. During the day, the teens swam and dove at the surrounding beaches, went on a mycological foray, hung out in a teepee and got to know some of the local Inverness youth at the local pub The Hoff. The teens are part of a youth art collective *The Torontonians*, a division of the research-art atelier *Mammalian Diving Reflex*, which is lead by artistic director Darren O’Donnell. Months earlier, they had begun conversations with some of the Invernessers on Facebook, tentatively getting to know each other, comparing their different neighbourhoods and musical preferences. The *Torontonians* are from Parkdale, Toronto, an area with the highest concentrations

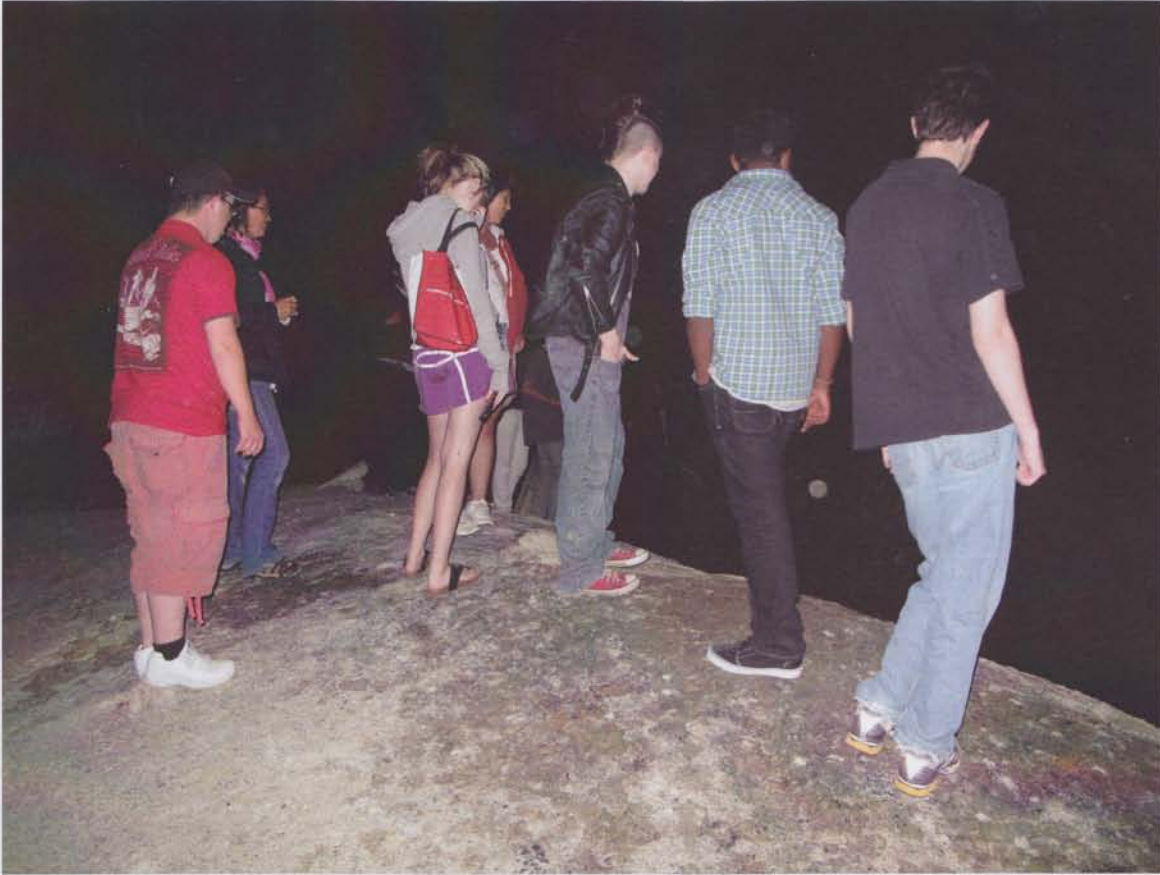


Mammalian Diving Reflex, Nightwalks with Teenagers, August 18 – 20, 2011, Inverness County, Cape Breton, collaborative performance with the Torontonians and the Invernessers. Photo: Amish Morrell

of new immigrants in Canada. For many of them, the trip was their inaugural introduction to the East Coast, to the ocean and small town coastal life.

At 5 p.m. on the three nights spanning our last weekend in Inverness, we’d gather all of the teens together around the picnic table for a production meeting and what we fondly called “country style meals.” By 8 p.m. we were gathered in the town square to meet Diane and Amish, and the other night walkers — locals, summer residents and the Invernessers, those who had come to walk and talk and meet the teens from Toronto. With headlamps, bug repellent and of course iPods, we’d begin our walk.

The walks were rarely held in silence, but rather punctured by conversations and burgeoning friendships. Aristotle believed that there were two types of friendship. One being genuine, the other determined by usefulness and pleasure.³ While Aristotle argued that genuine friendship was grounded in a moral imperative, and common interests, enthusiasms or views, the friendships initiated on the nightly performances between the teens and the other walkers were about an intimacy of a “shared activity” (rather than a notion of sharing something in common) of walking in the dark and experiencing the pleasure



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Photo: Amish Morrell

of the unknown and the incommensurate.

The Torontonians' nostalgia for the trip is saturated with memories of rocking it out in the van (we always traveled with music blaring); late night post-production grilled-cheese sandwiches; burnt daal; the salty, sticky hot air; the intensity of blackflies in Big Intervale; campfires; cookouts; marshmallows; lobster sandwiches; jumping off of cliffs into the ocean; mud baths; and endless hours of laughter. In some ways, the residue of *Nightwalks with Teenagers* resembles a form of travel writing, a genre that focuses on accounts of real and imagined places. But rather than a written, sequential arrangement of how the Torontonians felt, what they ate and other such details, we're left with carefully chosen fragments of a complex experience — snippets of conversations overheard on the walk, pieces of songs, hesitant new friendships and chance video clips. These "images" leave most of the journey up to the viewer's imagination — to do the work, to walk with them, and talk with them, to get to know them, again and again.

Nightwalks with Teenagers isn't a walk or a representation of a walk that can be traced on a map. Rather, it is a performance through which, in Allan Kaprow's words: "they will discover out of 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 and

then maybe nothingness as well."² *Nightwalks with Teenagers* calls attention to unpredictable social encounters, to the relations between the body and thought and to the way that each step reflects and reinvents the space in which it takes place. ■

Nightwalks with Teenagers was organized by Amish Morrell with the support of Inverness municipal councillor Jim Mustard as part of Diane Borsato and Stephanie Springgay's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, research-creation project "The Institute of Walking: Research and Creation in Relational and Interventionist Art Practices." Participants include: Saniya Ansari, Saif Azmi, Virginia Antonipillai, Diane Borsato, Ahash Jeeva, Dana Lui, Amish Morrell, Darren O'Donnell, Nerupa Somasale, Sanjay Ratnan, Stephanie Springgay, Chosang Tenzin, Chozin Tenzin and Kathy Vuu.

Notes:

- 1) Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Toronto, Penguin Books, 2000), 276.
- 2) Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), 9.
- 3) Aristotle, *The Nicomachen Ethics* (London, Penguin Books, 1976).