

## Buzzing, Bimbling, Beating Our Bounds: Walking A Line Through Manchester

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I waited at the Touchstone, a giant sculptural pebble outside the Bridgewater Hall. Its surface is smooth and placid but it remains the subject of minor local controversy. Is it art? Who is it for? What does it mean? It sits oblivious and enigmatic, trying to remain aloof but constantly appropriated by passers-by who find it irresistibly tactile and so it is stroked, slid down and occasionally scrawled on. It was recently screaming 'fuck the Tories' despite anti-graffiti coating. A man strolled past me and asked when the spaceship landed.

I wasn't quite sure who I was waiting for, but I knew why. It was the First Sunday of the month and so time for a wander with the LRM (Loiterers Resistance Movement). We are a Manchester based collective of artists, activists and urban wanderers interested in psychogeography, public space and the hidden stories of our city. I co-founded the group in 2006 and we gather on the First Sunday of every month for a creative walk which is always free and open to everyone. Our manifesto says:

*We can't agree on what psychogeography means but we all like plants growing out of the side of buildings, looking at things from new angles, radical history, drinking tea and getting lost; having fun and feeling like a tourist in your home town. Gentrification, advertising and blandness makes us sad. We believe there is magic in the Mancunian rain. Our city is wonderful and made for more than shopping. The streets belong to everyone and we want to reclaim them for play and revolutionary fun.<sup>1</sup>*

The LRM do agree that psychogeography has to be practice as well as theory; that praxis belongs on the street and is shaped by our footsteps. We use the *dérive* or drift as a conduit for art, activism and ludic exploration of the streets. Our creative walking disrupts the conventional use of urban space by rejecting the most efficient route from A to B and choosing instead to follow improvised, instinctive (and occasionally counter intuitive) desire lines. We have used dice and playing cards, transposed maps from other places, searched for colours, followed pigeons, focused on emotions, smells and sounds, hunted for signs of hauntings and used many other stimuli to guide our wanders.<sup>2</sup>

I began this journey many years ago motivated by love and curiosity for Manchester and a concern, sometimes rage, at the damage neoliberalism causes to our communities. The architecture of fear, division and surveillance is central to that; we engage critically, ask awkward questions and lay down desire lines (re)mapping and (re)imagining the city. The *dérive* offers alternative ways to think about space and walking together helps to connect, interrogate and explore our city. It starts unexpected conversations about, and with, that which is (in)visible as we wander and wonder about our environment. Walking together for us means finding poetry, community and wisdom in the streets. This month there was an added resonance to our mission. I wasn't thinking as much as feeling, viscerally, urgently, that we needed to explore who and where we are.

Since the last time the LRM convened the landscape of Manchester had been irrevocably changed by an act of terrorism. A suicide bomber attacked an Ariana Grande gig at Manchester Arena, killing twenty-two people, injuring two hundred and fifty others and shattering the lives of many more. This could not be just another First Sunday, and indeed there was a suggestion on the Walking Artists Network email list that we should not proceed as 'normal'.<sup>3</sup> I knew we would all be treading carefully with sore hearts but the alternative, to not walk, seemed even more terrible. I believed cancelling would be more disrespectful and alarming than walking sensitively with eyes, ears, heart, minds and arms wide open. Amongst many other things this atrocity was an attack on the everyday freedoms of women and girls who were predominant at the gig, and I wanted to respectfully assert a right for us all to be in my, our, city. I am troubled by a lot of the recent media coverage of what Manchester is and means, and want to challenge the essentialism present in that coverage. It still feels too raw and tangled for semiotics, but I am acutely aware that we are all, always, creating multiple stories of our place and that is an ongoing, active process. The LRM have always walked to add alternative voices, complications and contradictions to the palimpsest and so I sent out an invitation to come out and play with us on our regular First Sunday exploration. I waited with some unaccustomed trepidation at The Touchstone as fellow loiterers joined me.

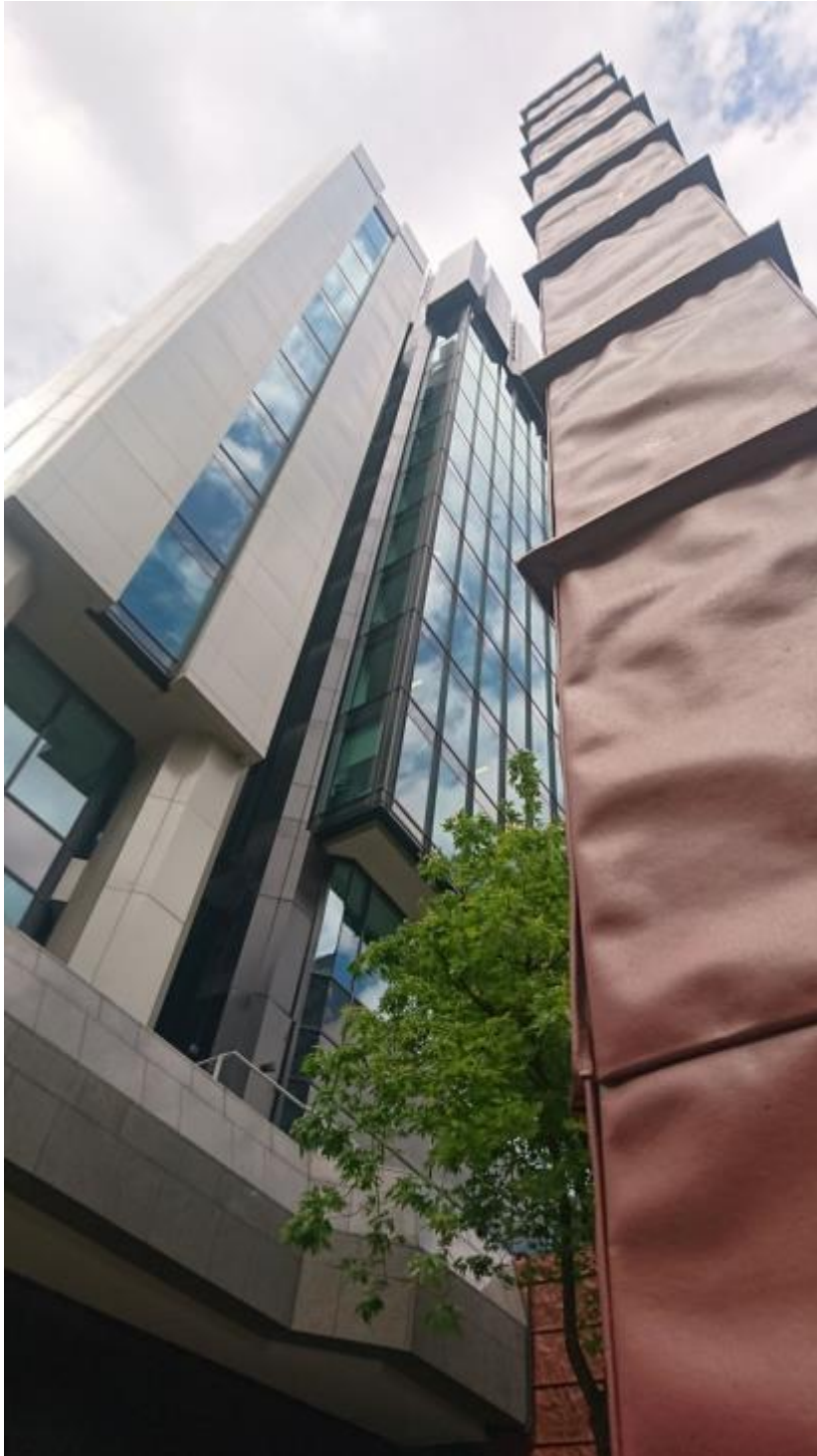


There was a welcome mix of familiar faces and curious first timers, and so after warm greetings I explained the expedition. We were going to follow a line drawn on a map of Manchester, trying to stay as true as possible to its contours. Our starting point was the centre of a cross – X marks the spot. There were sufficient numbers for three smaller groups, a friendly schism, most un-situationist, and so we each took a different spur of the figure. Additionally, each person took a decorative fluffy bee to act as a totem should they need a guiding wing. A symbolic object to toss and use for divination in case of confusion or obstruction is a common LRM device. The bag of bees was a timely gift from our friend Helen and so they were shared out before we parted ways.



The women I walked with traced a path across Manchester Convention Centre plaza. In 1819 this was the site of the Peterloo Massacre when a peaceful pro-democracy meeting was violently dispersed by the authorities. A community group has toiled for many years to ensure the story is not forgotten and the campaign for a fitting memorial continues. We thought about memory and justice and representation and began to notice bees everywhere. A civic symbol of Manchester for so many years they had begun to swarm with renewed vigour through the post-bomb city. We found them on billboards, bins, stickers, making

homes on tattooed flesh and in rooftop hives. The Industrial Revolution started here and though we cherish the co-operation, industry and resilience we attribute to bees, ultimately, we threaten their very existence with our 'progress' and environmental degradation. Let's hope their resurgence flourishes.



While walking we became seduced by textures, needing to touch, feel, taste our path instead of just looking. To stay true to our line meant navigating Library Walk, the space between the Library and Town Hall extension that was another focus for community action. Several years



ago Manchester City Council claimed it was dangerous, unloved and it would be better for all if it was closed off and partially built on. I was one of thousands who disagreed and fought with a mix of passion and logic to preserve our heritage and a much cherished right of way. Sometimes David cannot beat Goliath, and a place of sublime beauty was ruined by a vain carbuncle; but we won't forget the ginnel that roared and our fight for public space.



A bitter flavour lingered and so the scent of Chinatown was a delicious distraction. We reached the traffic of Portland Street and détourned into the Mercure Hotel to admire a modernist masterpiece made of piano hammers and bottle tops. William Mitchell's mural, a synthesis of art and architecture nestles behind a staircase, another everyday marvel.



Staff were bemused but welcoming when we told them how much we admired the beauty in their stairwell. Later we watched a YouTube video, the end credits of a black and white chat show filmed here. Host Simon Dee jauntily drives forever down the helter-skelter carpark exit, frozen online in a state of untouchable monochrome grooviness.





Our path then took us along the canal, both within and apart from the city, a haven and a refuge and a paradox. Andy Warhol watched over us as we descended into the Undercroft.

The towpath leads to a subterranean space that has become a repository for horror stories of various scales from drunken missteps and illicit sexual encounters to subaquatic cryptozoological monsters and tabloid friendly serial killers. More prosaically we detected a whiff of homophobia from the fairy lit hotel balconies. Traditionally a cruising ground on the edge of the Gay village, signs warn against lewd behaviour and a conversation was recalled when a policeman told us visible queerness puts some people off their breakfast. (How anyone could see anything through the thick brick tunnel without peering very, very hard and really, really, wanting to be offended is a mystery for another day). We drifted by the faded Commonwealth Games mural and back out into the sunshine.

We emerged into a world filled with desolate carparks, cheap caffs and wildflowers thriving amidst debris. The paperwork has been filed; this liminal space will be gone soon, sacrificed for the predictable bland towers of expensive buy-to-let apartments. Has anyone told the goslings? As we retraced our steps we shared food stories — the best falafel joint, secret tofu studios, recipes for Injera bread – our collective appetites biding us together and making us hungry for a communal feast. Food as memory, comfort, identity, gift and nourishment.



I had walked alone across the city several times since the atrocity and we all struggled for words to explain the many changes we had marked. On the surface, sometimes, it was an almost imperceptible shift in atmosphere, but then a turned corner and the impacts were horribly tangible: The supermarket sign offering free candles, handmade posters memorialising lost loves, troops of armed police (some posing awkwardly for snaps with passing families)<sup>4</sup>, crime scene tape fluttering across blocked roads, the constant drone of a helicopter. May we never become numb to the noise of surveillance or the sight of a rifle. Over in St Anne's Square we knew there was a huge carpet of flowers, balloons and tributes, shrouded in eerie silence despite the crowds. The city shrinks to a village and everyone knows someone deeply hurting. On our path today we saw buses transporting crowds to a benefit concert headlined by a returning Ariana Grande. Her music may not be

our cup of tea but we cheered the spirit and thought of the smiles, hugs and quiet kindnesses blossoming across the city despite provocation.



We need those bees to pollinate this; as the poet Tony Walsh implored at the huge public vigil *Choose Love Manchester*.<sup>5</sup>

The three groups reconvened in a favourite pub and we swapped travellers' tales with the other loiterers. They had traced marathon routes and motorways, found abandoned palaces and baby raves, unpeeled layers of history and plotted new futures. Paul<sup>6</sup> showed me photographs taken on his *dérive*, a parallel world revealed by another random line on our shared map and a reminder that each step is a choice that can alter more than perspectives.











I'm delighted to say none of us came any closer to defining the soul of this gloriously diverse city that beguiles us all, and so The LRM journey continues. We will walk together across our differences with a shared sense of critical, creative mischief because that is our Mancunian Way. We know our footsteps won't change the world alone, but we can and will wander the city we love, daring to imagine radical new paths which make it a different, better place, if only for a moment. Defiant everydayness, solidarity and love are fine weapons and from our desire lines multiplicitous new maps are created according to our dreams of a wonderful city whose streets truly belong to everyone.<sup>7</sup>



**Endnotes**

- 1 Rose, M 2006 <http://thelrm.org/index> (accessed 21.6.17) This text has undergone several iterations and also appears on postcards, flyers and other samizdat texts
- 2 For further details of my perspective on psychogeography and the dérive see Rose, M 2015 'Confessions of an Anarcho-Flâneuse or Psychogeography The Mancunian Way' in *Walking Inside Out* ed. Tina Richardson (Roman and Littlefield International). Details of previous activities can be found at <http://thelrm.org> and the very active Loiterers Resistance Movement facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/10667409530/> (both accessed 31.7.17) Events are free and open to all, readers would be very welcome to join us.
- 3 The conversation can be found here <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A1=ind1706&L=WAN#4> in the Jiscmail archives of WAN (The Walking Artists Network) (accessed 31.7.17)
- 4 Much more needs to be said about this particular spectacle than this article allows space for.
- 5 Tony Walsh performed his poem 'This Is The Place' at the public vigil held in Manchester. The text is reproduced here <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/05/place-poem-tony-walsh-read-manchester-attack-vigil> (accessed 21.6.17)
- 6 Thanks to Paul Hazlehurst for generous permission to use his images here; all other photographs were taken by the author.
- 7 Thanks to everyone who wandered with The LRM on this particular First Sunday and over the years.