

Walking Until Art Makes Sense: How to Become an Active Spectator



by Anya Shchetvina, Franziska Klein and Romy Roomans

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Abstract

For the duration of this project, we walked 43.693 steps and 26 kilometers. One of the walks was rainy, while another required sunscreen. What they all had in common was a strong wind. We drank 7 teas, 1 coffee, 4 soft drinks, and 7 Capri Sun all together. We spent roughly 14 hours walking and now need some time to rest our feet.

As an urban inhabitant moving on foot, one might encounter the occasional public art piece daily, perhaps even without noticing. One day we, three citizens of the same city, surprisingly discovered that we ignore public art. Our city is full of interesting and beautiful sculptures, installations, and street art, but we seem to live in parallel universes. We pass by them on the way to the university building, to the train station, while relaxing in the park. We do not notice them much, or we forget about them immediately after, not giving a second glance.

Museums usually have some sort of tradition, a practice of how to walk in them, but when it comes to public art, the path is less clear. The ways of experiencing art in a museum are regulated: one walks from room to room, following a predetermined pathway, and views art from a safe distance. The space around public art is usually less organised. People are free to move, but also free to just pass by.

But both in museums and on the street, at the core of the spectator's experience there is movement — a move from one piece of art to the next, a stroll through the park, or a conscious choice to stop and experience art in the standstill. To explore how we coexist with art in a public space, we tried to contest existing walking practices. We started thinking about ways of walking that both differ from the museum tradition of engagement and disrupt our everyday passing-by practices.

This is not something new. Different practices of experimental walking have appeared in different contexts throughout the last century. A good example is a series of [WalkingLab projects](#) in which Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman used experimental walking as a method to explore and contest existing normative structures. The researchers suggest that walking becomes, in itself, thinking.

In their book *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World* (2019), the researchers introduce a “walking-with” approach. Walking-with means that we never *just* walk. Walking is a process of engaging, during which we pay attention to some things and ignore others, we collaborate with some objects more and with others less. Springgay and Truman push us to ask questions such as *what do we walk with?* The “what” in this case being geology, labor, senses, a particular understanding of space, place, time, et cetera. What is more, Springgay and Truman rely on the idea that “objects do not exist as discrete entities that come together through interactions but are produced through entanglement.”

What we propose is that the same principles can be used for walking-with art. Walking-with art then is a practice of entangling that produces both a spectator and an art object, their connections to each other and beyond.

Our everyday practices of walking through the city — be it a rush to the university or a casual walk with a friend — leave art pieces ignored or barely visible, making our everyday walks also selective and normative. How can we find new ways of being-with these parts of our city, new ways of entanglement? To answer this question we looked at different ways in which researchers and artists use walking as a methodology. We were reading and making notes on what different entanglement people aim to produce. Then we tried to think which of them could be applied to art. And, at the end, we walked.

Our team consists of three people, all with different backgrounds and experiences. We, Romy, Franziska and Anya, all live in Maastricht, a city in the south of the Netherlands. While some of us have lived here longer, for others this place and way of living is completely new. We embarked on all walks during the project together, but to let different voices be heard, each of us described one walk in the following text. Each narrative is partly a personal perspective, partly a gentle summary of different voices and a group reflection.

We embarked on a series of experimental walks to specific artworks in Maastricht. We tried to play with the material and discursive elements that took part on our walks, but also tried to keep it simple. Our original curiosity behind this project arose from the context of everyday walks. Thus, our walking techniques should also be easy to embed in everyday routines. The resulting walking experiments are described in a way that (hopefully) inspires the reader to apply them to public art in their neighborhoods and find their own way of walking-with art and making sense of it.

Walking-with Art and Companion Species (Romy's perspective)



Romy (she/her) was born in Maastricht but grew up in and around Sittard. She left Limburg for the purpose of higher education in Amsterdam, Reykjavik and Rotterdam, but returned south to pursue her master's degree in Maastricht. Having ventured off to the big cities, she now enjoys a quiet(er) life taking walks in the valley. Preferably with dogs, lots of dogs.

Although anthropologists like to refer to the current epoch as the Anthropocene — the epoch of humans and mankind's considerable impact (or damage) to the Earth — to be human is to coexist with *other* (animal) species. Companion species such as cats and dogs are perhaps the most direct link that humans have to other animal species. While walking-with art in public and urban spaces, perspectives of the non-human animals on this planet should be taken into account. Therefore, our first experiment consisted of a walk with a companion species.

Dogs are considered a human's best friend, and those who cohabitate with dogs automatically incorporate the practice of walking into their daily routines. As a dog parent, you go outside several times a day. Oftentimes, this might just be a 5-minute visit to the patch of grass near your home, at other instances you will take your canine companion for long walks. But what is the role of art pieces in such walks? Is there even a place for art in such a multispecies collaboration?

Agustín Fuentes and Michael Alan Park ([Musharbash, 2015](#)) propose that walking with a dog is a means to coexist in (urban) spaces which allows for both humans and dogs to perceive the world differently. How exactly the dog's perception is altered by walking with a human, we can only imagine. For humans, however, this is easy to test out. This changed perception, caused by multispecies venturing, could change the way that we, as humans, engage with public art: by comparing walking-with art to another common walking practice. Or, for example, by looking at the art through the eyes, ears, and nose of a dog.



To explore this altered multispecies spectatorship, we took Finn, my 5-year-old Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, for a stroll through Maastricht. While it was a sunny afternoon, the wind was really strong, which made this specific walk a little challenging. For Finn, this was a completely new environment which meant that there was a lot for her to discover. Franziska, Anya, and I set out for a specific mural close to the city center. To get there, we had to pass through a large park that, luckily for Finn, has an off-leash path where dogs are allowed to roam freely.

We swiftly noticed how walking with a dog to explore public art is vastly different from taking a city stroll by yourself or with a fellow human. The pace is different because the dog decides where she wants to stop and smell. Because the dog stops at (what for us seem like) random places, the animal on the other end of the leash has time to reflect, take in the scenery, and feel the wind on their skin. The walk took up quite some time and energy, not only because Finn would stop at every interesting smell or sound, but also because the strong wind demanded stamina. Nevertheless, we found that our walk with Finn allowed for multispecies encounters where other dogs and their humans stopped for a chat or a sniff.

As with every good experiment, a problem arose. After we exited the park and slowly made our way through the cityscape, Finn decided to stop walking. Whether she was overwhelmed by the new environment and new smells it brought along or was simply tired of walking, we cannot know. This resulted in a small snack break on the pavement, less than half a kilometer away from the mural we intended to view together. After the break, Finn still

made no effort to walk on and seemed determined to turn back. Because we had brought her on this journey purely as an experiment, the guilt made us turn around and walk back towards my home.

Luckily, along the way, we did encounter several pieces of street art. Much like every other city, Maastricht is filled with the occasional piece of graffiti, ranging from actual wall pieces to a simple tag here and there. At one of the entrances to the park, as illustrated in the photo above, Finn stopped for an intense sniff. She took in the scent of the lower part of the wall, especially on the left side. Had she not stopped, we probably would not have noticed the wall.



We can conclude that while we may not have engaged directly with art, the walk with my canine companion shed new light on spectatorship as the way we — as humans — perceive the world and how this can change by walking-with attention to other animal species. Dogs follow their noses, their senses, their instincts, and walking alongside them allows humans to pay attention to their sensory experience as well. Walking with attention to other species allowed us to notice our surroundings more, as well as our sensory experience.

Dogs rely heavily on their senses to navigate the world. As human spectators, we rely mostly on our visual perception. Public art leaves very little room for sensory experience other than sight. This sensory hierarchy makes it non-inclusive to the visually impaired, as well as the non-human animal species that we cohabitate with. While some museums, like the [National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art](#) in Seoul and [Ugly Duck Gallery](#) in London, have actively contested this by providing art exhibitions that focus more on the other senses, many public artworks and installations do not facilitate these kinds of experiences.

In addition, walking with Finn uncovered that when walking with a companion species you cannot have an *intention*, because you have to monitor and regulate your dog's behavior to a certain extent, and you have to respond to your dog's needs. This was also reflected in

the planning process of the walk, where could we walk-with art that would still be comfortable for Finn?

The walk with Finn left us wondering, if we made it up to the mural, how would she perceive it? Does the paint in combination with the wall material have an interesting smell? Do dogs use this place to map their presence and in what way? Unfortunately, we did not have the time to take Finn out for another walk to see how she would have interacted with the mural. However, this should not discourage you to try it out for yourself!



Walking-with Art and its Past/Future (Anya's perspective)



Anya (she/her) lived most of her life in Moscow, Russia.

She came to Maastricht 9 months prior to this research project and is still learning how to walk slowly (a practice that is rare in megapolises). After studying art theory and history in high school and on BA level, her relationships with art are complicated. Within this project she is trying to improve them, seeking new ways of being with art that go beyond a strict traineeship of an art historian and leave more space for movement and speculation.

Our second walk entangled us with the configuration of space and time in which art projects exist. There is a path to and a space around every art piece. Art might slow you down or make you walk faster to pass it. It might teleport your thoughts to other epochs and countries. There is the history of the place where it stands, of the topic, and of the materials used to create it. Art pieces occupy a particular time period between construction and deconstruction, and we happen to be co-habitants in time and space with it. But it might be different for future citizens.

As we have mentioned before, we tend to ignore public art in our everyday life. Does that mean it creates some kind of empty space and time capsule that exists beyond our attention and practices? To engage more with this “emptiness”, we aimed to walk and explore the space that public art takes up.

Many walk artists and researchers worked with similar topics. The [walkwalkwalk](#) project for example organized a *Nightwalk midwinter 21st December 2010*, where participants remembered and wrote down things that disappeared during the last 5 to 10 years — “a personal inventory of things that have gone”. The project [Expeditions to planet B](#) used walking as a method to investigate a desirable future. Springgay and Truman describe in their book *Anarchival* walks in which people made alternative archives of forgotten past, but through embedded experience instead of writing or collecting.

Our walk included two sculptures, two installations, and two questions that we discussed along the way: “*what was here before?*” and “*what could be here instead?*” Firstly we walked around a *Bear Jo* statue and a *Bear Pit* in Maastricht’s City Park. Then we headed to the statue of *D’Artagnan* and an installation to his honor in Waldeckpark.

This approach to walking made our movement similar to a detective investigating. We were not just walking in a relaxed, idle manner, we were looking for signs, for clues that could help us find answers. Looking for the clues, how each art piece is linked to the past, we understood better how some art pieces work as [places of memory](#). They save memories of places or events. Sometimes in a literal way — an art installation can preserve a particular space where important or traumatic events happened.

The *Bear Pit*, for example, preserved a place of an actual former bear pit but was transformed into an installation. It preserves and highlights a place where animals died, and the installation highlights it as something painful, as a mistake. The *Bear Pit* also houses a collection of sculptures inside, that represent different animals whose species were eliminated by humans. Inside the *Bear Pit* rotunda, time and space exist in a different way. The idea of geographical distance does not apply there, because it does not matter how far away these animals were killed. And the past does not become something that happened, otherwise, it is present with us in this material form.



The statue of *Bear Jo* is placed nearby, yet outside of that pit. This statue represents a bear who lived in a pit, but died in childhood years.

With other statues our walk worked more as a critical perspective and made us question the use of public space. Would we design this place in a different way if we could?

It was hard to think about a future without a *Bear Pit* as it in many ways exists in its own space and time. But the statue of *D'artagnan* stands right near the road and works mainly as entertainment for tourists rather than as a memorial place. Without it there could be more grass, a straighter road to the park nearby, people would walk faster and with a different rhythm, without making a stop. Without this statue the municipality could place more benches at that place, people could take a rest without worries that they might be part of a picture taken by a tourist who is passing by.

But when talking about places of memory, like the *Bear Pit* or *Bear Jo* nearby, it is not just about material urban landscapes. It is also an urban memory landscape. Deconstructing such art pieces, reinhabiting these spaces would lead to rewriting the memory landscape and the way in which the past is blended with everyday life.

This critical approach and entanglement with different configurations of space and time made me feel less like an idle flaneur and more like a citizen who could be responsible for the urban space. Of course, as a person who has spent only 9 months in this particular city, I am not linked to it as strongly as Romy and other locals. But this feeling of being an active spectator, a responsible citizen, goes beyond that. Produced by this walk, this feeling can stay with me when I go back to Moscow and other Russian cities. I have this new way of walking-with art in my tool box and it is up to me now, where to use it.



Walking-with Art and Distractions (Franziska's perspective)



Franziska (she/her) grew up in a small town in the east of Germany, but left looking for bigger adventures and different roads to walk on. Having studied in Tübingen and Durham (UK), she came to Maastricht to combine her two previous directions of study: natural sciences and cultural studies. She usually walks with music, annoyingly mouthing the lyrics as she walks along.

Distractions are defined as (1) an object that directs someone's attention away from something else; (2) the act of distracting or the state of being distracted ([Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/distract)). Usually, being distracted is seen as negative, as diverting focus away from where it really should be. For walking, many studies have argued in a similar vein, specifically looking at higher accident rates caused by pedestrians who were distracted by smartphones or

headphones. However, distractions are always inherently part of walking – we just do not notice the ones that we have gotten used to.

Imagine, for example, a cobbled alley in a city center: our focus is automatically partially diverted to making sure our feet move across the uneven stones without tripping over them or twisting an ankle – even more so when it has been raining. The rhythm of walking, usually so familiar to us it becomes unnoticed, is disrupted by distractions, pulling our focus towards it ([Vergunst, 2016](#)). These distractions can include the weather, our environment ranging from cobble stones to bird songs, technological influence, or our own bodies.

There are some artists who have worked with these distractions of walking before. In [Dartmoor Walks](#) (1995), Richard Long presents different distractions to the walking body during a 24-hour walk, including the weather, a river, light, birdsong... a never-ending decree of distractions. Francis Alÿs took a different approach in his video work [Railings](#) (2004) by creating artificial distractions by having people walk through London with a stick banging against various metal railings – the *ding-ding-ding* causing an auditory disruption to the rhythm and sound of walking step-by-step. These distractions of and in the rhythm of walking have been part of methodologies of walking, and have found their way into artistic representation.

Similarly, the practice of mindful walking and the “art of noticing” ([Tsing, 2015](#)) have found their way, beyond a meditative origin, into an academic context. Experiencing a walk, not for transportation purposes or ideal background motion for phone calls, but to connect all senses to surroundings, bodies, and distractions, can provide new knowledge and analysis ([Jung, 2014](#)), as can a focus on the “everyday”, the mundane. In our third walk experiment we proposed to use these distractions of walking and connect them to art: walking-with public art and the distractions surrounding it.

As with the other walking experiments, we set out to find our way to a specific artwork, in this case the Sprankelplek, an art installation part of a larger project across the Netherlands aiming to create a public meeting spot in low-income neighborhoods. This mindset of our walking-with experiment already shifts what can be understood as distractions: while on an “every day” walk, public art could be a distraction, here it becomes our focus. Upon arriving at the installation, we were confronted with a difference to the other artworks we came across so far: the goal of this piece was to create a space to exist in, not as spectators, but as participants. Through our presence in the space, the Sprankelplek was able to actualize the goal that it was set out to accomplish –



to transform a place into practice. We subconsciously did just that when we arrived, engaging with the installation by sitting on it, climbing its beams, and walking through it.

Once we found a comfortable spot – who knew lying on a piece of metal could feel relaxing – we started to focus more on the distractions surrounding us. Surprisingly, we found that rather than divert our focus away from the installation, its surroundings added to the original message: to create a space for interaction and thought. Birds singing and children shouting created a white noise that reinforced our focus. Of course, distractions did start to set in after a while, two categories standing out in particular: our bodies and technology. Romy started getting distracted by an itch in her ear, taking focus away from the space created, and our bodies started reminding us that we cannot lie on metal forever. At the same time, the metaphorical itch to check our phones pulled our focus back into another, online space.

Walking-with the distractions surrounding art, in particular public art, brought up interesting perspectives for us. Some of what we thought of as distractions proved to become part of the artwork itself, creating a new and changing meaning.

When we returned from our walk and discussed our experience, one question came up again and again: did our focus on distractions work so well because our idea worked, or because the architect's idea of working with distractions worked? To find an answer, we set off on a second walk, deliberately choosing a different type of public art, but with the same intention in mind: to explore the impact of distractions on public art.

We had all walked and driven past the mural we chose for our walk many times, glancing at it before moving on. As part of Maastricht's legal graffiti wall, it covers an entire side of an old factory building, showing, on first glance, a powerful woman holding a finger to her lips, as if she is asking us not to reveal a secret. When we walked closer to her, some secrets did start to fall into place: I noticed the large umbrella she was holding, as well as the writing above her head: the Umbrella Academy. Recognizing those hints, I was able to understand the mural's connection to its namesake, the popular Netflix TV show.

When I wanted to share my insights with my two walking companions, Romy and Anya, I noticed that they were not looking at the mural - they had become distracted. A dog waiting for pets, other graffiti, the plant life and the old factory building in itself had drawn their attention away. It was only after calling out that I was able to bring them back to me - to then promptly draw their attention towards an article about the mural I had found on my smartphone, effectively using technology to draw focus away from the artwork in front of us.

At the same time, we found that the things we noticed as distractions guided our interpretation and understanding of it. Different from a piece in a museum - complete with a description of meaning written and framed next to it - here the distractions, the rhythm of walking, and the actual artwork created a co-existence of body / art / companions / thoughts / distractions, a flow that we could follow at our own pace.



Stepping away from the hallways of museums, with their traditions and norms, into our own walking patterns, we also noticed that, while we recognized our distractions, we did not feel embarrassed by them. In a museum, when you catch yourself staring at a bench in the corner instead of a painting in front of you, desperate maybe to rest your feet, it often feels like you have failed at completing the task your surroundings have given you, namely, to focus on art. Walking-with public art and distractions gave us the opportunity to realize that, while we still might look at the large ivy plants climbing a rusty steel construction instead of the mural we came to see, somehow both work together to create a different focus on the artwork after all.



What else?

The walks we chose to embark on for this project were based both on existing walking methodologies, as well as with the idea of the “every day” walker in mind. We each focused on the experience of one way of walking. Yet there are other ways which could prove equally as interesting and that we encourage the reader to try. Here are a few ideas:

- Mapping (See Almahmood et al., 2017; Springgay & Truman, 2018).
- Sensory walk — listening, touching, smelling (See Springgay & Truman, 2018).
- Walking queerly — asking questions about power and normativity beyond art. Where is power in this piece of art? Where is normativity in this piece of art? How do you relate to them? How to contest them right there during the walk (See Springgay & Truman, 2018)?

Making sense

The main result of our work are walks in themselves, but some parts of the experience might still be important to put into words. First of all, let us talk a bit more about our work as research, by unpacking our choice of method and our understanding of what we study in these three walks.

There are different interpretations of what public art is, as both "public" and "art" are being constantly discussed. We relied on the idea that public art "consist of material- or performance-based artwork on sites with free physical and/or visual access" ([Zebracki, 2011](#)). This broad understanding includes all kinds of objects, without sensitivity to their age, type or a notion of "artistic value": statues, installations, memorials, murals and graffiti walls. We did not work with architecture, but only because it was difficult to arrange, and others trying our walks would be welcome to do so. Neither did we work with happenings or performative art, as our curiosity and intention lies in the domain of static art pieces that we pass by every day.

In our work with methods, we followed the idea of Springgay and Truman (2019), who state that research methods in a qualitative study are never pre-existing and static. Methods are not all-purpose tools that can be used in multiple research questions without changes. Instead, Springgay and Truman suggest talking about not only methods, but also *intentions*. You approach research with an intention in mind and your movements, your process of exploration, is following this intention. Usually, academic essays have big ambitions. Our ambitions and intentions were purposely small, local, embedded into our subjective vision and everyday life more than in discussions and disputes. This allowed us to move more intuitively, to play with both an uncommon question and a new approach.

Our interest started with a gap or glitch in our own lives that created curiosity and movement. We had two intentions in mind. Firstly, we wanted to explore existing and possible relationships with public art that surrounds us. Secondly, we wanted to find new, more engaging ways of being with these art pieces, ways that could easily be transferred to our readers' experience.

Conceptually, our main tool was the idea of "walking-with," which we applied to public art by using different techniques of walking. We treated our co-existence with public art as 1) a movement, 2) that brings different participants together. The way in which we make sense of our interaction with art then derives from what or whom we take with us and how we move.

While it was not our main aim at the beginning, walking methodologies showed us that a relationship with art is not something that happens only between an object and a person. For instance, walking with a dog made us realize that urban space belongs not only to humans but to other species, and we rarely know how art influences them. In trying to be sensitive to the dog's intentions and movements, we realized that our experience of public art is predominantly linked to our sight. Walking while thinking about "what was here before" and "what could be here after" highlighted our own role as citizens and inspired us to think speculatively about possible urban landscapes. And on our walk-with art and distractions, we noticed that rather than feeling embarrassed by being distracted while studying art, public

art seems to include distractions into a bigger picture, creating something more than there was before.

Thinking about whom we walk with, along with experiments on how to walk differently, helped us make art meaningful in a new way. An implied message of art did not always make sense to us, but art objects as part of the public space did. Our perception of art awareness/non-awareness, but also the specific aspects of artwork that we experience, do not depend on our subjective qualities or socio-structural features, but on our "modes of living with" or walking-with.

Dear reader, please, welcome this text to be your co-walker next time you pass by a sculpture, mural, or another public art object you are trying to make sense of.

Warmly,

Romy, Anya and Franziska

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