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## We Make a Path by Walking

Rather than being a record of specific place Paul Gaffney's work eloquently documents the process of travel as a metaphor for change, the physicality of the external challenge being mirrored by a transformational internal journey. He tells **Ric Bower** about the particularities of his approach.

**Ric Bower:** What constituted a typical day when you were travelling?

**Paul Gaffney:** The places where you stay on these long distance paths dictate a rhythm. You need to be in by 10pm and they kick you out early in the morning. I would have packed the night before, get up really early, have a quick bite to eat and then just go walking. I was using the kind of routes where I would not have to use maps, I would have some idea of the distance to the next stop but that was it. I didn't research what I was going to see or where I was going to go. I just knew that if I started at point A in the morning I would be at point B by the evening. It allowed me to not be preoccupied with lots of the decisions one usually

has to make when travelling, I wanted to keep it as simple as possible for myself; my mobile was turned off most of the time.

**RB:** So you just dropped off the face of the planet...

**PG:** No, I was doing it as part of a Masters programme; in the year I was walking for about five and a half months split into several walks. The shortest was a week and the longest five weeks. While I was walking I had very limited interaction apart from other walkers; when I was back I edited the images and got feedback from fellow photographers, tutors and classmates. It was important that I had the space to stand back at certain points to establish how the work was developing. I tried not to go out looking for images that I knew would work, instead, I tried to react to what was around me and to be truly present. That is the meditative aspect of walking, I practice meditation in the mornings, but I find that the act of



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1-4. from *We Make a Path by Walking*, Paul Gaffney, 2014

walking naturally brings about something close to meditation; it is rhythmic, you feel physically grounded, it brings you into contact with your body and slows down your mind. Whether it is for a few hours or a few weeks, when you spend the time in close contact with nature, it changes you. There were challenges. It was not like I was a monk and my mind was empty. There were times I was thinking 'oh no... the light's crap...and I haven't taken a photo for days'.

**RB:** The images themselves are stripped back to the bare minimum, rather like you when you were walking, I suppose. How did the aesthetic of the images evolve?

**PG:** I knew that the images should work in sequence to suggest an inner journey and they also needed to work as a book. It came down to

the editing in the end, there are 40 images in the book which works out as an image every 60 miles. But of course I was taking images every day and it is only when I got back and started editing that it became apparent that certain images started to flow together so, although the landscapes were quite different, it would not jar. Some images that I really loved I had to leave out; they acted as a full stop and demanded a comment. I had to 'kill my darlings' for the sake of the series. The editing is tough and takes months but I love it.

**RB:** Are you surprised by people's response to the work?

**PG:** Everyone is familiar with the experience of walking in landscape but I want them to come to it in a fresh way. I don't caption the images with location information so that the narrative remains open.

**RB:** What did you exclude from the images?

**PG:** I passed right through cities; I met people along the way and the conversations we had became part of the overall experience. I considered recording some of the conversations and playing them alongside the exhibition of images. In the end I felt it would make the process too complicated and remove me too far from my original intention. Figures in the image would narrow down how it might be interpreted which I did not want to happen.

**RB:** I am guessing that you changed personally as the project progressed. >>



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>> **PG:** There is a natural progression of time within the work which is mirrored by the progression of my process. I would stop less often, I was taking less images as time went on. I was searching less and became more confident that the images would just come. On the last walk I took a cluster of images that I knew would sit together. I don't think my aesthetic changed but my approach to editing did.

**RB:** Many creative practitioners have been defined by the journeys they have made, from Stephen Shore and Woody Guthrie in the States to Laurie Lee and Hemingway in Spain. Do you feel a connection with these 20th Century pioneers?

**PG:** Well, we are all on an individual journey I guess. If I asked you what had changed over the last year you would perhaps pinpoint certain things that have happened, much of what happens you will have forgotten because so much has happened. When you are on the road and everything is stripped right back, even small changes feel far more pronounced, they become memorable. I really like *The Pond* by John Gossage, it's one of the few books that have seen that uses landscape to convey the narrative of a journey in a particularly interesting way. It creates this fictional walk through a nondescript urban path; there are so many layers to it, it opens up to you over time. I learned a lot from that book. As I am sure you will find yourself, the more time you spend looking at work in a certain area the harder it is for it to surprise you, so when I find something that does it is really great. Increasingly I am finding that surprise in other art forms.

**RB:** Do you have a view on photography's role as an access practice within the broader societal context?

**PG:** On a basic level it is easy to make a photograph, in the same way that it is easy to write a few words on a page. Photography initially piqued my interest for different reasons to why it interests me now. When I first started, I joined an evening class and set myself the task of documenting a day in the life of my grandfather. He was 92 and his day was spent by the fire, he was really content. Before I could start the project he had a stroke. We knew he would never be living at home again on his own so I made this series of images based around the environment



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that he would never again inhabit. To my surprise, my family really got it. I knew I could make something that was meaningful to me but I had wondered if I could make it meaningful to others too.

When I started out walking I felt I had something to give by doing it; arguably, the photography was secondary. To go back to your question, photography can be a quicker route to self-expression; after all, the technical aspects of taking a picture are not that complicated.

**RB:** Why did you choose to walk in Europe?

**PG:** I never thought of myself as a religious person but I met this Australian guy, who described a pilgrimage, *The Way of St James* in Spain, where you walk 800 km in 23 days finishing at Santiago de Compostela. It is a route that has been walked since the 8th century. Hearing him describe it made me really want to do it; so some time later

I booked the flight and was walking the following week. It was a profound experience but also very tough physically and mentally. I had done a ten-day meditation course which you spend in total silence and this journey was strangely similar; there was a duality between the internal journey and the external journey.

When I came back I knew that I needed to do a project based around long distance walking and meditation. There is this network of routes in Spain where you can walk in a line for 1000 km and you don't have to think about where you are going to stay; it does not require much planning and you can do it for very little money. Camping is not a good option because it adds four or five kilos to your pack; you should really only be carrying 10% of your body weight when long-distance walking.

I met people along the way who became part of my journey; they were walking for so many different reasons. Some people were doing it because it was a cheap holiday and they could drink wine every night with different people; others had very religious reasons for walking. I was tempted to include these different people in my images but I stopped myself because they were not the reason for my engaging in the project in the first place. I speak Spanish and love the Spanish culture but ultimately it was not a project about Spain or about its people. The reason for doing most of the walking there was down to logistics. I wanted the images to be anonymous, not connected to a particular place. — **CCQ**

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**Paul Gaffney** (b. 1979) is an Irish artist who is currently undertaking a practice-based PHD in photography at the University of Ulster in Belfast. He has been nominated for various international awards including the European Publishers Award for Photography.