



A BRISK WALK AFTER MIDNIGHT TO REDISCOVER ONE'S OWN BACKYARD

(PHOTOGRAPH BY BARNABY HEWLETT OF AN AIRPLANE AND THE MOON, TAKEN DURING A WALK)

A night walk in early spring is the ideal opportunity to freeze your bollocks off, which is the uppermost thought in my mind as I wait for artists CLARE QUALMANN, GAIL BURTON and SERENA KORDA outside RAJ NEWS in Bethnal Green in the East End of London on an icy cold night in January. The trio take me on one of their night walks, events they've staged every couple of months for the past year. While the December 21 midwinter night walk got around thirty people participating and featured a film by KLF cohort GIMPO, tonight is a bespoke walk just laid on for me.

All the night walks follow more or less the same route, a minutely planned promenade based on the three women's usual routines (all live and work locally). An inversion of the kind of walk that points out places of interest, the three describe their walk as "an archaeology of the familiar and forgotten". Setting off at a brisk pace – the weather is too cold for dawdling – the four of us soon plunge into the badly-lit back alleys of Bethnal Green, under a shadowy railway bridge and then out into semi-derelict territory that seems to be a kind of no-man's land, an eerie gap in the city ringed by the distant lights of London's skyscraper-studded financial district.

"We became really curious about the psychology of the overlooked and unfamiliar places, perhaps a bit grotty and a bit edgy," says BURTON. "And the most extreme way to experience that sensation is at night. That's the scary time; that's when everybody's told it's not safe. By the experience of walking through seemingly dangerous places in a large group and doing the walk time after time we're making the space our own."

The few people around look distinctly weird – an old biker wearing a leather jacket with a picture of the dog he's walking painted on the back; a man in a cycling mask and helmet that makes him look like a robot. A sign for a bed shop wishes its customers "happy nightmares", while a brightly lit showroom called NEW EVENTS has a strange swing contraption in the window and nothing else. To me it's disorientating, but to the artists (who know this route like the proverbial back of their hand), these are also signs of gentrification, suggesting to QUALMANN, BURTON and KORDA that they should start walking somewhere else. "This area of London's like a crack in the way the city's organised," says BURTON. "It's lightly abandoned and it's given us a way in. You don't have that freedom

in places that are more commercialised and regulated. I can see as the area gets regenerated that those freedoms are going to gradually ebb away." The freedom the three walkers mean is the ability to impose themselves on a seemingly inhospitable landscape – to document it, understand it, and to make it a place of play. They're obsessed with creating mythologies out of the tiniest discarded things, constructing stories not only about the characters they meet but also about minutiae they find on the walk – used chip forks, lost GUMMI BEARS and stray graffiti. They've recorded sounds on the route (and compiled them into a CD) ranging from "the sound of an air vent to an evangelical sermon". But they've also staged big interventions along the walk too – from musicians and a trapeze artist they've organized to perform in locations en route, to bill posters of their stories they've stuck up in the street. "The more I do the walk, the more I inhabit the place so it's totally natural to put things back into it," says BURTON. This didn't go down too well with the users of a warehouse next to the walk's scariest point, a dark footbridge over the railway line. GIMPO had organised a fire and soup for the midwinter walkers (it marks a rough halfway point), until some men charged out and asked him what the hell he was doing on their patch. BURTON claims the premises may be used for a real life fight club, and tells of someone who saw a blackboard inside with a price list chalked up going from £50 for a broken leg to a fiver to be pissed on. Like the rest of the walk, the warehouse is eerily dark and quiet tonight, but while it seems completely remote from the London I know, it turns out to be only round the corner from Bethnal Green's main road. QUALMANN, BURTON and KORDA also encourage me to find another new dimension in my experience of the city by becoming aware of specific smells on the route – laundry, baking, curry and, inevitably, urine. QUALMANN says she's looking forward to the day when scientists invent a machine that can record smells, so they can capture another aspect of their wanderings.

It's been a strange and stimulating evening. As we stagger into the APPROACH pub, the walk's official ending, I feel like I've travelled much further than the windy backstreets of Bethnal Green – into a new and half-familiar hinterland inside my brain. (Alex Needham)

www.walkwalkwalk.org.uk