

## **Walking from London to the world: An interview with the ‘Walkative Society’**

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doi: 10.34632/diffractions.2021.9736

The ‘Walkative Society’ is a student-led project which emerged in 2015 at the Royal College of Art (RCA). It emphasizes walking as a means of discovery and of engaging in a dialogue between ‘walkers’. The walker’s relation to urban spaces, their possible readings of them, and their use of them for a wide range of artistic practices are the subject of ‘The Walkative Society’ exploration. Through participant and guest-led walks, as well as written and visual documentation, the project explores how walking can trigger processes of thinking, researching, collaborating and creation. With a presence in different places such as London, Toronto, Los Angeles, Santiago, or Hong Kong, the ‘Walkative Society’ aims to re-discover and renew the practice of walking as a means of finding different ways for us to relate to the spaces that we inhabit in the era of urbanisation and digitisation.

We have had the chance to talk with Alastair Kwan, the current co-president of the ‘Walkative Society’, about their experience and approach to walking in the past and in light of the current world situation. You can check out their past and future projects on Instagram, Facebook or their website (<http://thewalkativeproject.org/>).

**Diffractions**—Should we start at the beginning? Can you tell me about the ‘Walkative Society’? How did it start?

**Alastair Kwan**—I should start by saying that there is, or there was, a difference, maybe not a hard difference anymore, between the ‘Walkative Project’ and the ‘Walkative Society’. The former was founded by Jaspar Joseph-Jesper and Simon King, who were both teaching at the RCA; one is a researcher, and the other one is a fine artist. They co-founded the project in 2013.

They were interested in collaborating with other practitioners like artists, researchers, musicians, and quite a big range of creative and academic people. Then, in 2015, the project became part of a bigger project series at RCA / Cross-RCA. Our main objective is inviting people to share their practices through walking as a common subject. This has, obviously, changed a lot since Covid. We have adopted an online format, but it has been interesting to ask people to ‘walk’ in this way. We are not constrained by the physical act of walking although we miss the act itself. In this online format, we have been able to get speakers from around the world, which is also good.

**Diffractions**—This raises a lot of questions. And, of course, one has to be: how did you manage to work with the world closing up due to the Covid situation? What was the approach you took towards it?

**AK**—In the beginning we had to stop everything we had planned before, a lot of physical walks were planned and we couldn’t do that anymore. In the beginning, it was a bit disappointing. However, we thought quickly of other formats to have the walks. Part of it was to take the opportunity to work with people that are not in London. That way we reached out to a wider group of collaborators. Also, the format changed: some of the walks we had were quite experimental: for instance, two artists in the summer did a live stream walking around; other people have been playing with videos and sharing screens online. Before it was about being physically there, but now we can use digital media and connect people live, it is more about simultaneous experiences. It’s all about meeting, I mean... people met before, but now it’s more important to get people together. And that is quite interesting.

**Diffractions**—But, I mean, we have had all of these types of media, like streaming and video-editing, for instance, for a long time now. Why walking? Of course, now it has to be [that things have moved online], but why start with walking and not with video, or with a more experimental kind of media? Because walking seems to be somehow ‘primitive’, but here you propose, or the guest artist proposes, a curated element to walking. What is the reason for choosing this medium and not another?

**AK**—This is an interesting question in terms of the shift to a digital format now, but I think that initially people came together with those for whom ‘walking’ was a research method in order to

generate broader topics as part of their artistic practice. So the true question is: how can ‘walking’ trigger different processes of thinking, of collaborating with other people? And, how you can approach topics such as urban planning, for example? In this sense, ‘walking’ is a different way to approach the world.

Also, you use the word ‘primitive’ but what I see is a very rich *tradition* in ‘walking’, in arts, but also in other practices like urban planning, architecture, design. There’s an emphasis on the act of walking, and how you relate the space to the body and, you know, people are active through the act of walking, such as performers or activists. And they have, of course, theoretical bases [for it] as well as [it being] part of their practices. It could be the Jumping Society, or the Fighting Society; however, walking is not only an activity specific enough, but you can also take it in very different directions; that is what allows the Society to be [what it is]. What I mean is that the ‘Walkative Project’ allowed musicians, artists, architects, or people with different backgrounds to come together. I think all these strands find a common place in walking.

**Diffractions**—You mentioned, for instance, the position of the body in relation to spaces: do you think that allowing someone to ‘curate’ a walk can restrict, in any sense, the creativity, or the attention, of the ones following the walk? I am asking this because it also seems to be a question in museums or galleries where curators try to oblige the visitors to follow a certain path in order to read the exhibitions in a particular way.

**AK**—There is definitely an element of curatorship, but let’s make a distinction here: when we invite people to give a walk, we are asking them to share a part of their practice, so the walk is not so much ‘curated’, it is more of a part of their work. It is a way of saying, ‘This is my practice’. Hence, it is not quite the same as a museum curator, or a guided tour. And that is, at least, what we have been trying to do in the ‘Walkative Society’. Of course, it has changed a bit recently; we still have this kind of led walk in the online series, but we have started to do new things lately. In the summer we had an interchange with another school, for instance, which is a rather new thing for us. And, again, it starts from walking as a tool for making and collaborating over borders during lockdown. However, I think that there is still a distinction between a guided walk and what ‘Walkative’ does, which is a practice-based process and a way to interact with people. It is not just a talk or a curated walk.

Maybe the only aspect that might be related to curatorship is that we bring people from different practices and from different research areas together. However, I think the walk itself is a collaborative act, and the intention is always to share or create some knowledge or experience while walking together. In this way, maybe it is not necessary to walk back to a particular place during the walk, because the sense is to be together for an amount of time, and then you can always go back and go deeper in some of the aspects of the walk.

**Diffractions**—I have been surfing the ‘Walkative Society’s’ website, and what I have found to be quite interesting is the fact that you do walks not only in urban spaces, but also in gardens or amongst nature. How do you choose the projects and the spaces? How do you choose your collaborators?

**AK**—I think we do not follow any rules. Sometimes we invite people, or we receive proposals sent in. When the project was founded there was a strong emphasis on urban theory and planning, but now that it became more of a student-led project, it expanded a bit more. I guess that every president tries to bring in people that are more related to their own practices, but we also invite students to propose something ‘walkative’; in this way we do not set an agenda or a plan. Thus, it is a mix of guest speakers whose projects we find interesting while allowing students to use walking as part of their practices. Moreover, we introduce walking as a research method; last year, for example, we had a one-week workshop where we invited students to participate in workshops, talks, and to walk with us or together, and create some responses to the walks we did together. Thus, it is not only some sort of a ‘curated’ walk, but more about how to relate walking to your own artistic practice.

**Diffractions**—It seems interesting that it was, actually, the world shutting down that gave you a chance to open up to a new way of ‘walking’. In other words, the change in our relationship to the space gave you the chance to go further.

**AK**—Yes, the switch to the digital walk was the beginning of reaching out to different cities. In the digital format, we have walked in eight different cities around the world; before that it was only a London-based project. On the one hand, we are very happy that we have had this shift and that we are connecting all these places in the world. On the other hand, I still miss the physical

walk. Of course, they are two different things. Digital is a great way to connect people, and expand the walk, so to speak; but I am really hoping we can go back to physical walking because physical walks give you the chance to meet people and talk. And, definitely, if there is the chance to do physical walks again, it does not mean that we are going to stop doing other forms of exchange, because by now we have realized that there are different ways to work with the project.

**Diffractions**—Thank you for your time, Alastair, and fingers crossed you guys can go back to walking the streets soon enough!

**AK**—Thank you for this opportunity! Until then, we are keeping up with the virtual walks. Check out our social media to stay updated!

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