

artesmundi<sup>10</sup>

**#4**

Sophie Mak-Schram

**Towards a Myth of Walking Backwards**

Many things happen concurrently. I sit in a darkened room watching people dance in slow motion. Downstairs, in a different year, I gather with a group seeking to stand together against the glib flow of neoliberal capital and its consequences for ways of living in common.

Elsewhere, later, I encounter the closed boxes holding the melted glass and can view them only as a form of containment. Shadows flit across the brickwork on a wet September evening. I don't see the work reinstalled in Wales, but I imagine it: it brings back a feeling of cold and lightness.

## on time as drag and space as earth

There is an inherent abstraction in the operational logics of the circulation of visual material. This circulation involves an uprooting that is presumptively consensual, the remnant soil shaken off in order for something to exist in the estranging non-time of the exhibition. Exhibition texts that make claims for the timeliness of works on show, do not root anything in the now. The artwork, quietly shipped across sites, and I, disembodied into a mode of looking-at, can only share the time I claim by disregarding the infrastructural realities of ungrounding that allow us to meet in this way. Time is ever-now, and space is never-here.

When Elizabeth Freeman writes of time, she considers how relations of pastness and the linear trajectory of an appropriate life yoke us to presumed heteronormative trajectories of work, family and progress. History, within this understanding, is past and thereby behind us. Freeman posits that looking to ‘temporal drag’ can function to queer our relations across and through time. Temporal drag embodies the past as present, renders it surreal as much as intimate. Drag distorts, refuses to forget, functions as a portal.<sup>1</sup>

Freeman’s thinking becomes a lens for Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, whose work [Moving Backwards \(2019\)](#) in turn becomes a lens for my experience of Rushdi Anwar’s [Few Lines of History \(2011\)](#). More specifically, it is a forgotten viewing of *Moving Backwards* at the Swiss Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in the autumn of 2019, and a subsequent viewing of it at the Van Abbemuseum in April 2022 after having worked with a number of Kurdish movements, that linger when I walk into the National Museum of Cardiff in December 2023 and see *Few Lines of History*.

Why be specific? My disembodied eyes have had the privilege of circulating in the same overlapping spheres of smoothed translocality as the artworks I re-encounter. I am trying to trace the processes of mythologisation by which abstraction emerges. Could this have something to do with drag too, in its sense of lag as much as masquerade? This also has something to do with space. The

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<sup>1</sup> All drawn from Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010).

forceful acts of transforming earth into concepts of resource and the stricture of logics like the nation-state, box up space into neat, allocated sites. The rushing rivers (the Taff, the Fulda, the Dommel) and wet pavements - I can't quite touch the dirt.

**These Days**

Whatever you have to say, leave  
The roots on, let them  
Dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear  
Where they come from.

**Charles Olson (1950)**

## **To stand with**

On their herstoric journey, the Zapatista contingent set sail for Europe across the ocean. They called their 2021 visit a form of reverse invasion in [one of their many poetically inflected public letters](#). Five hundred years since Spain's initial colonisation of the lands now known as Mexico, the Zapatistas staged a different relationship of, across and between lands.

A significant part of their time in Europe is one less chronicled in subsequent reflections on this first chapter of their Journey for Life. They spent months patiently moving through Europe to meet with *compañeros* and *compañeras*, moving across borders already artificial but further complicated because of the ongoing COVID19 pandemic. Prior to that, they traversed the ocean.

Arduous journeys often feature in narratives of transformation. During a journey, the hero changes by virtue of prompts, metaphors and chance encounters along the way. In this implicit structuring of relation, much like the more obvious construction of the pathetic fallacy, the environment is not an active participant in this process. 'It' is extracted from, rather than learnt with. This ability to move or journey through, rather than site in or cross-contaminate with, is one reliant on a form of abstraction. The environment becomes a concept as much as a resource, earth becomes land and land becomes property, quantifiable, ownable.<sup>2</sup>

This is one of the central contestations of the Zapatistas in their longstanding resistance to the Mexican state. Land is not property, or even separate from their community. Earth, as community, cannot be restructured or even negotiated through the logic of policy or proprietary claims. I think of this insistence on earth as an involved part of their self-conception, which does not stake a claim as much as enact a form of kinship. This is a kinship denied by the practices of spatial abstraction espoused through Western conceptions of how land and people relate. These dominant

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<sup>2</sup> The ideological underpinnings involved in the (often violent) transformation of earth as shared into land as property, is well argued in Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "[Decolonization is not a Metaphor.](#)" in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1(1), 2012.

relations of space structure future relations through classification systems and naming of land and its material and cultural kin.<sup>3</sup>

I like how Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards think of material kinship through Clementine's artworks: as a way to site oneself in the material world in intimate, affective and familial as much as familiar ways. For Kris and Clementine:

“...the question of *what* composes the world around us drastically depends on *how* one is situated within that world, and that in turn affects the *who* that one might be in relation with. Social relations organise what is designated material, and by extension they organise what or who is designated agential.”<sup>4</sup>

When the Zapatistas shift their geophysical position in the world, they do so with a seemingly intentional spatial drag. Tracing the very steps of material conquest that have naturalised certain forms of extraction and abstracted others into ideals – backwards – they insist on the concurrence of timelines and worlds without relativising the structures of oppression operative between them.

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<sup>3</sup> This is articulately assessed in Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Book, 2008 [1999]): p.51.

<sup>4</sup> This quote is from the introduction to *The Material Kinship Reader*, which Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards co-edited (Onomatopoe, 2022), on p.5-6.

## **memo for labor**

you cannot separate the job from the house from the rent from  
the earth from the food from the healthcare from the water from  
the transit from the war from the schools from the prisons from  
the war from the water from the house from the healthcare from  
the war from the transit from the schools from the food from the  
job from the prisons from the rent from the earth

**Ryan Eckes (2018)**



## **To walk around**

The glass boxes are closed when I visit *Few Lines of History*. I'm told a younger viewer tried to touch the glass displayed inside, so the material integrity of the works now has to be protected. There is a gentle irony to this experience of viewing the stained glass through the glass box against the photographic backdrop of the destroyed church the glass itself was salvaged from. Certain solidarities are more permissible than others. Material worked into abstraction, into signification, is comfortably on display.

I think of material artefacts smuggled out of territories, both by colonial forces and by communities. The material as token, symbol, but also as an interface: a way to engage with other worlds without having to deal with the unrulier physical and socio-cultural realities of other voices, agencies, bodies. Another instance of walking backwards: [the Picasso in Palestine project](#), where a painting by Picasso is transported to Ramallah in order to make the borders, infrastructures and bureaucracies of division and oppression visible. Despite these realities being embodied and understood by people there, it takes an abstracted material object to demonstrate the affect and tension of the socio-political context. In this room at Amgueddfa Cymru, I am trained and willing to be moved, and appreciate leaning in to peer at the glass. This glass was formerly evidence or remains, and has now become presented as conceptual ruin and poetic form. I feel the tension of this material kinship and its hidden material costs.

The poetry of the object matters, still, when I think of the dancers in *Moving Backwards* referencing the Kurdish resistance fighters by wearing their shoes back to front. Do the glass pieces come in back to front too, to hide their escape? The clink of the sequined curtain automated to close you, the viewer, in, whilst watching *Moving Backwards*, echoes in my memory as I look at the stark plinths of Anwar's work. I can imagine a similar, softer, clicking if only I was allowed to move the stilling postcards on the rails to the right of the glass boxes. To touch them would be an intimacy too far, but certain forms of touch, like certain forms of movement, are allowed. It feels increasingly important to work out ways to know and talk honestly about how things get to where they are, and what epistemologies my looking sustains.

The temporal drag that claims history queerly, shifts in the enactment of resistance strategies to escape state capture. These are proximate moments: the Kurdish fighters walking backwards, the dancers dancing backwards, the church bombed, the glass displayed. Lines of distant histories. This distance is one of space – the anachronism of concurrent worlds and struggles denied by a linearity of progress and thus temporalized as distant, not of the here and now. Concurrently, the colonial radio audio bleeds in from the room next door.



## To spiral

I can't situate this sense of drag in Wales, despite how often I cycle across a bridge and feel the Taff rising as an embodied dread. The overflowing banks and turbid waters are not abstractions. I know of many more cogent eco-critiques of the circulation of artworks but somehow, I feel too implicated to be able to do more than connect the dots of my own repeated viewings.<sup>5</sup> I know that the soil is toxic here, much of it, and that kinship with earth is only getting harder.

I remember:

We were not allowed to photograph the Zapatistas because of concerns for their safety. Instead, to avoid worrying them during the day we spent together, we took many pictures of their legs, feet planted on the grey concrete ground of the museum room. We had just finished an activity commemorating those not present into the room by way of writing their names, with chalk, on pieces of red fabric. This was a reference to a Zapatista practice of commemorating fallen comrades, where names would be woven or stitched into their *palikates* (bandanas). In this way, they continued to fight alongside them. Many of the group tied their inscribed textiles to their shins. Sat in temporal community, feet firmly planted on abstract ground.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sean Roy Parker's "[Vague Decay Now!](#)" is a good one.

<sup>6</sup> This memory is from a moment during the Kurdish-Zapatista Assembly, which I co-convened with Iliada Charalambous and Denisse Vega de Santiago in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum in October 2021. A lot of what was said, felt, held, that day still resonates with other movements and ways of acting for social justice I have since seen or worked with. The journalist Frédérique Geerdink, who joined us for the day, has written a clear article on what happened on that rainy autumn day: <https://medyanews.net/the-inspiring-arms-of-struggle-of-kurdish-and-zapatista-women-article/>

**Sophie Mak-Schram** cares about how a diverse ‘we’ (comes to) know and what forms knowledges take. She works with others, both as method and as form. Spanning experiential education, inclusion work, collective practices and artistic research, Sophie convenes, writes, reads, makes objects to learn with or listen to, and performs. [@makschram](#)

**Sophie Mak-Schram**’s ‘Towards a Myth of Walking Backwards’ is the fourth in a [series of eight newly commissioned texts](#) developed alongside [Artes Mundi 10](#), which is showing in Cardiff, Swansea, Newtown and Llandudno between October 2023 and February 2024.

Mae gwaith **Sophie Mak-Schram** yn gofyn sut daw *gwybod*/aeth casglebol i fodolaeth, a’r ffurfiau gall gymryd. Mae’n gweithio gyda pobl eraill fel dull a ffurf. O ymchwil creadigol, addysg-o-brofiad a gwaith cynhwysiant, mae Sophie yn ymgasglu, sgwennu, darllen, perfformio, a chreu gwrthrychau i wrando arnynt a dysgu ganddynt. [@makschram](#)

Y darn hwn gan **Sophie Mak-Schram** yw’r pedwerydd yn ein [cyfres o 8 comisiwn sgwennu gwreiddiol](#) wedi’u datblygu yn rhan o [Artes Mundi 10](#), sydd ar ddangos yn Abertawe, Caerdydd, Drenwydd a Llandudno rhwng Hydref 2023 a Chwefror 2024.