

Signposts (Tromsø)

A silent walk with readings by Nickel van Duijvenboden & Marie Nerland
from Small Projects to a hilltop overlook in Elverhøy, Tromsø, Norway
Performance photos by Yohannes Mekonnen



21 September 2019, 14:00. A welcome at Small Projects, Grønnegata, in the centre of Tromsø. It is grey outside, drizzling and around 4°C. The exhibition space is empty. Everyone keeps their jackets on. We welcome the participants, shake hands and pour them a small cup of tea. There are around 15 people, most of them from the art and theatre scene of Tromsø, but not all. Also, one dog. Marie takes the word; she explains the walk will take around one and a half hours and will end about 20 minutes from the city centre. Nickel invites the participants to follow our tempo and to help each other out on steep or slippery parts. He also proposes not to speak for the duration of the walk. This is introduced not as a strict rule but rather as a gift to one another, a shared space. The walk begins; Nickel leads the way as Marie stays toward the back of the group to make sure everyone can follow.



1. Nickel at the waterfront in downtown Tromsø, an industrial-looking corner.

On the stone beach, when facing
the chalk cliffs and upon climbing
the thick pebbles, you hear, precisely on the point
reached by high tide – where the pebbles thus form a ridge –
a very peculiar echo of shifting stone
beneath your feet, a gnashing multitude, which
re-echoes against the chalk rising up
perpendicularly. A sound I think exists only here.

I cannot shake the idea that we are similarly
treading on what has already been done and thought, and
are so creating a new disturbance in some
immovable order, producing a strange and hollow gritting. A
sound some might associate with nails on a blackboard.

Is this about not attempting to
make up for an absence? Silence is
unsettling, a crevice of unwarranted
scenarios, speculations that subsequently
reverberate and cause a howl
of feedback.



2. Marie in a hidden courtyard between two busy streets, with patches of grass and weeds and looking a bit derelict.

Dear Nickel

I'm writing to you, it is early in the morning. One of our neighbors just passed outside of the window and waved to me, we are rare in this apartment complex because we keep the curtains

open. I'm often thinking of who all these neighbors are, what kind of life they have been living and how they choose or just ended up living here in these tiny apartments so far from the American dream of their own house, their own backyard, their own driveway, their own mailbox.

All the mailboxes here are unnamed, in the United States, it violates privacy - knowing where someone lives and knowing who your neighbor is. In the anonymous mailbox, we get lots of mail with constantly new names of former tenants who lived right here, in apartment 207. I collect the letters and the names and think about who they are the ones who lived here before. I tried to find some of them to forward the mail to them, but I gave up. I tried to return the letters to the post office but they didn't want them either. The pile of letters, most of them are commercial letters but some are with hand written names on the envelopes.

I wanted to write to you about the unopened letters. I wanted to write to you about the notion of time.

I sit inside and look out. In the huge shared back yard garden, my body gets insect bites and the smell of chlorine from the pool. I sit in the shade, thinking of how I will miss the smell of the sub tropic trees and plants and the intense warm blue color of the sky.

3. Nickel in another hidden courtyard strewn with rubbish and parked cars, finding inadequate shelter against the rain underneath a porch by some concrete housing foundations. A building gap nearby, full of water.

There is someone on the other side of the planet, distant enough to be exchanging letters with. She wrote me this:

'Dear Nickel, have you ever thought of ghosts? ... I'm not talking about any kind of monster. I just mean some sort of voices and images, images separated from the voices.'

She added: 'Maybe we both prefer ghosts.'

I've been thinking about it ever since. Had I ever thought of ghosts? It seemed like I hadn't, but indeed, I had. I'd once jotted down a line of Kafka's, which goes like this.

Writing letters really is a conversation with ghosts, and not just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which underhandedly evolves inside the letter one is writing, or even a series of letters - where a letter gives substance to the other and calls upon him as a witness. How did it ever enter our minds that people could converse with one another through letters!



These lines were taken from a particularly desperate flurry of letters addressed to Kafka's lover, Milena, whom he practically never got to see. It is safe to say that their love was enacted almost entirely in writing. Most of the letters are about the agony of not seeing each other, a mutual absence which is nevertheless curiously convenient to their correspondence, and continually perpetuated by both of them.

In a letter to someone else, Kafka confessed: 'The longing for other people turns into fear once it is fulfilled.'

This does shed a light on the distance not only presupposed, but also imposed by corresponding. Indeed, my friend brought up the subject of ghosts in reaction to this paragraph of mine:

I have come to understand that correspondences are a peculiar kind of friendship – I do consider it a friendship – that exists on the condition of distance. I've sometimes worried that it was selfish to write letters to people that I don't necessarily feel the need to see, or know intimately. On the contrary, even, it suits me just fine to miss them. I mean missing in the active sense, keeping alive the sense of a lack. (Tending the lack, cultivating it.) I do not mean getting rid of them. In your case, I'm not sure if I can even say that I know you... I just know that I'm very fond of the way you write. I know it as a voice, a presence.

An absent presence. A present absence. Isn't that what a ghost is? Something (someone) which is at once there and not there? What Kafka calls 'giving substance to the other' is like an act of conjuring. It is a kind of speaking that anticipates its receiver in such a way as to simulate him

or her. Kafka was right to wonder in astonishment, ‘How did it ever enter our minds that people could converse with *one another* through letters!’ People converse with themselves through letters, that part of themselves which is inhabited by the other. After all, what distinguishes a correspondence from a dialogue is the fact that the person writing doesn’t get interrupted. A letter necessarily has the quality of a soliloquy. If anything, letters are a simulated dialogue, a dialogue with the other who inhabits, lives inside, one’s own body.

I once spoke to someone about the activity of exchanging letters as a means of measuring distance. There’s the distance implied by posting a piece of mail, the amount of time it takes, the stamps and traces and creases it collects along the way; in other words, the physical distance. But there is also the distance of minds, which may in fact be so aligned as to cancel any physical distance. Letters trace the incompatibility of thought. This is all about the question, to what extent do you and I differ – are we ‘of one mind’? – but also to what extent the you that I am conjuring in my writing differs from the real you, and in what sense the writer of the letters is of a piece with me. It is perhaps in this sense that exchanging letters is like a conversation with ghosts.



We move on to a disused set of steps leading through an overgrown patch between two quiet streets. People lend one another a hand. Umbrellas can be seen bouncing against overhanging branches. The road continues up, passing a long row of road construction machines used for microtrenching. Workers have been making trenches all week to supply the city with fibre-optic cables. Most locals are aware of this. Nickel follows the lines on the road.



4. Marie at a small soccer ground between the houses, lots of puddles, objects for children. Unrelenting rain.

We walk in the city we have only been a few days. The wet pavement, the wet grass, the first snow on the mountains. We walk on roads, along houses, and on so many dead ends. The colors of early autumn on the leaves. The sounds of this city, of all the constructions, the machines, the digging, the building, the renovation. The shifts of the clouds, and then how the sunlight falls for a moment on the mountains, a warm light suddenly there in the harshness.

Rebecca Solnit has this theory that the mind works like the feet:

I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour.

And how we live in an age characterized by the rapid and efficient.

I liked so much what you wrote to me:

In the opening paragraph of your letter, you speak about a chronic sense of behindness.

You wonder if it has to do with the nature of art projects. I think it is more existential. A reassurance: you'll always feel behind. That's because what seems to lie ahead is not reachable, it is there to haunt us and project a sense of loss. A future lost.

Maybe we share a sadness, of the time passing, of the shortcomings of our lives, of unjustness around us, of the brutality. Sometimes I think I have never been so lost as I am now. Maybe it is about aging, the turns of life, when things are falling apart, and the wish to get grounded.

I have longed for these days of being here with you, to hear your voice, to hear you read your writing, your texts and letters and to sometimes see your smile.



5. Nickel on the ramp of the striking building of the old swimming pool. A stunning view of the fjord. People can be seen exercising inside. A strong whiff of chlorine emanates from the vents.

I don't recall having told you about our last night in Normandy, when after a long and meticulous mental rehearsal – up to silencing a bunch of keys – I slipped out of bed and made a moonlit descent to the pebble beach. I passed the herd of cows we had gone to see and two skittish horses, and then moved through the woods, where it was so dark I could no longer tell asphalt and roadside apart. Under the trees, a herd of sheep stood slumbering along a wire fence. Awoken by my footsteps, they dashed away so suddenly it terrified me. When I reached the concrete ramp that gave on to the beach at daytime, I was shocked to realise that the sloshing accompanying me on the last stretch was produced by the waves that had swallowed up nearly all of the concrete. Only the upper edge of the ramp was visible. The beach was gone, the pebbles were down below, the water had surged up against the chalk. The nearby lighthouses swept their signals.

On the way back I was held up by a couple spending the night in a camper near the beach, who'd just walked their dog. The bright beams from their head torches kept them from view as one of them inquired, in French, if everything was all right, if I could even see where I was going. I put them at ease, a little unnerved myself about having to speak, and as I proceeded uphill, it occurred to me that they may have weighed the possibility that I would wander off into the sea.



Marie on the same location.

At a book store before travelling here, I discovered a book that I brought with me. I just read a few sentences in the book store and it captured me. It is by the Korean writer Han Kang, and is titled *The White book*. I felt at home in her writing. The book is about grief and mourning, on place and memory. On one of the first pages of the book she writes something beautiful on walking:

We lift our foot from the solid ground of all our life lived thus far, and take that perilous step out into the empty air. Not because we can claim any particular courage, but because there is no other way.

Now in this moment (...) I step recklessly into time I have not yet lived.



6. Nickel on a long and slippery path alongside the soccer stadium, an shortcut ascending through shrubs and weeds. Wet feet. Drenched sheets to read from.

Dearest Nickel,

Thank you for your message and your kind encouragements to write you. My failure to write has to do with my great trouble concentrating on anything I might consider meaningful to write about. I'm ashamed of this and that only worsens it, so much is clear. As I write this, I feel a physical sense of impotence. This has nothing to do with you. Your friendship is very dear to me. I'm overjoyed every time I receive a letter of yours. I'm aware of my great insufficiency in writing you a rewarding letter in return. I do hope this crippling feeling will pass. The many times that writing a long letter was beyond my reach, I've thought of sending you something small, a postcard with a thought that occurred to me on a walk or a visit to an exhibition, or simply when wondering about a shaft of light or something I couldn't grasp. I hope you will have time to meet soon. I'm curious how you are and curious what you're making.

7. Nickel at the base of an antenna on a hilltop, surrounded by a small wood. The sun has come through.

I was writing you a letter but I was unable to finish it. I wrote it on a ruled sheet in the back of a notebook I usually carry with me, and there it remained. Sometimes I was reminded of it when I mistakenly opened the notebook from the wrong side. By now weeks have gone by, perhaps you've been waiting for a reply, waiting until gradually it no longer feels like waiting, till you forget that you are waiting or whether you have been waiting in the first place, and

now I continue, and as I retrace the lines that I never sent, it feels like you already know all of it and there's no point in writing them anymore.

'On errands of life, these letters speed to death.'

The last sentence from *Bartleby, the scrivener* by Herman Melville. Do you know Bartleby? He was a scribe, that is, a clerk especially appointed for copying texts, before the dawn of the photocopier. A monk copying holy scriptures is a better known example of a scribe, but Bartleby worked on Wall Street copying legal documents. He is both a writer and not a writer – he's writing, but without being the author. The story is narrated by his employer. At first, Bartleby is one of his fastest-working, most meticulous employees. But at a certain point in the story, when he is asked to do something, he replies: 'I'd prefer not to.'



This is where the anonymous copyist suddenly defines himself. 'I'd prefer not to.' From that point on Bartleby starts saying that more and more often, until in the end he carries out no tasks. Yet he works at the office. His boss, the narrator who spends his days at the desk next to his, repeatedly finds himself, to his great astonishment, accepting Bartleby's nonacceptance, until the point that Bartleby is just a presence. It drives him mad, but somehow he cannot bring himself to fire him.

It prompts one to ask, if you are an artist and say, 'I'd prefer not to', how long one remains an artist, and if you are a veterinarian and say, 'I'd prefer not to', how long one remains a veterinarian and if you are a writer of letters, and say 'I'd prefer not to', how long one remains in a correspondence.

‘On errands of life, these letters speed to death.’ That final sentence is about the dead letter office, a place that really exists. A dead letter office is a facility within a postal system where undeliverable mail is processed. If they find no clues as to where to forward or return the piece of mail, it is incinerated. ‘Dead letters!’ Melville writes, ‘Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned.’

Supposedly the dead letter office is the last working place of Bartleby the scrivener. Some have argued that last sentence to mean that Bartleby, who can be a scribe no longer, himself becomes the dead text ‘on an errand of life,’ because in that way, he can be read and be resurrected from death by the narrator and the reader.

We move around the antenna to find a barely distinguishable path flattened on the forest floor. It leads to the driveway of a private house, which turns out to be one of the participant’s. We continue past a red church and a small cemetery.



8. Marie at an outlook on the other side of the hill, with a sweeping view towards the fjords. Everybody takes in the sight of the grey water and the snow-capped mountains. A illuminated plane glides by, leaving a trail. It is about to start raining again.

My father used to go for long walks almost every day, and then because of his health getting worse his radius of walking has over the last years been shrinking and shrinking, now he barely can walk maybe one hundred meter, but he does it, every day he leaves the house and go for a

walk, on the road above the house where I grew up, the house is in a forest and the road he walks is the road that goes up to the mountains. And there he walks, but just very short, just the beginning of the road.

He enjoys his short walks, still the freedom to go for a walk, with his body so much burdened with arthritis, stiffness and pain. I asked him: Don't you miss going for long walks in the mountains, and he said to me, there is so much I miss. I think he has this ability that maybe is a gift, to value what is now. My father chooses to think of what he is able to do now and not on what he no longer can do.

In a few weeks I go to my father, maybe that is why he came to my mind while writing on walking. The walking, that we so much take for granted, how it needs our bodies being able to do it.

To walk, to move through a landscape, through a city, through a text.



Nickel on the same location.

It's good to be writing you again. I'm now in Tromsø in the Arctic part of Norway. It reminds me of my 'letter' to you that I read in Kirkenes three years earlier. And being here, the explorations on foot, the plants on the side of the street, the coarse texture of the asphalt, the smell of ice in the air, not only remind me of Kirkenes but also of Bergen, Reykjavik, Helsinki, even Canada. Places where I've also marked my presence by writing letters.

You write that when you're painting, you feel as though the past and the future could be the other way around or that they could be parallel. 'Metaphors can transport past and future like stitches when you're sewing several layers at the same time.' I think that is very beautiful. You're right, there's a circulation of time and a mixing up of tenses. When I read a letter it is always in the present tense, but you know the letter was already sent, or not yet, and no matter how long the letter will take to arrive, the person on the other end will read, or rather, *is reading* it in the present tense as well. Reading and writing are stitched onto each other. I once started a letter to an old friend thus:

There seems to be a different passage of time in our letters; when I go back to our last writings, the actual dates don't correspond with my impression that something has just been said. That doesn't mean nothing happens in the interim, rather that there's a conversation taking place on a different level, one less quotidian and more spun out. Regretfully, the hiatuses on my end are getting longer and longer. It's interesting to observe that certain thought processes and developments are continuous preoccupations throughout our correspondence, and that it takes a multitude of experiences, often repeated ones, to make that giant vessel inch ahead or change its course by a degree. Though it may sometimes appear to be at the mercy of opposite currents, it apparently moves very slowly and persistently.



On the way here I had a long stopover in Oslo, so long I decided to leave the terminal and make a walk. I was meant to meet Marie in the transfer area, but she preferred to rest somewhere quiet. Leaving the airport is quite difficult. Sure, you can walk to the exit, but not without passing all kinds of shops and one-way gates and sluices suggesting that your exit is

irreversible. It works on your nervous system, like being invisibly tied to the traveller carrying your passport who is supposed to be waiting at the gate, but who you've temporarily abandoned. You need to push through this feeling by way of some hiker's disobedience – the same kind you need for climbing fences.

I always think of Richard Long here, who walked in exact circles he drew on a map first, asserting his freedom to trespass on account of an ancient law called 'the right to roam'. I knew I could leave the airport because I'd done so before in the same place. Once outside, I followed the exact same route I had the previous time, across parking lots and along roads full of traffic. Even here, you somehow sense you're not supposed to move away from the airfield, let alone on foot. There are no footpaths and no signposts, just tracks in the grass left by people who parked somewhere and rushed to the terminal. One wonders where this island of arrival and departure, of commercialism and pollution ends and the country begins.

The previous time, I had stopped short of reaching this boundary. Now, I went beyond the place where I'd then turned around. There was a petrol station and past it, a sign for cyclists with distances to Hamar and Hønefoss and Oslo. I passed the bus depot where I saw a driver who'd completed his shift now waiting at the bus stop himself. Across from where he sat, I took an unpaved road into the country. Soon, heavy machinery thundered past and in a field of stubs, the man parked his combine harvester while from the tractor, his wife emerged and took his picture in the giant machine, a scene so charmingly choreographed I realized they must have rented their harvester for the first time. They greeted me, not in the least worried about my presence on this country road, which would soon dead-end on private property. Overhead, the planes kept roaring by. It was time to head back.

The walk ends, tea and chocolate are shared. Conversations recommence. The response is enthusiastic. Many express their amazement at encountering new paths in one's own town, and gratitude for the decision to walk in silence. This was not experienced as being oppressive but truly enjoyed. Some also commented on the walk as having exactly the right pace: rather fast and straight, unwavering. Little direct reflections on the text, though it becomes clear from the conversation that everyone has an acute memory of a different passage or phrase. These remembered parts of the reading are embedded in the specific quality of the respective reading locations. People head back towards the city in small groups, conversing. Later it is commented that the walk enabled a kind of communing. Another participant says that the third location, with the text about ghosts, took place where her grandmother's house used to stand.