

Conversation

RAMPAÍ, RAMPAÍ.

Yeb Wiersma, Zoe Blennerhassett

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Video call conversation with Zoe Blennerhassett and Yeb Wiersma about walking during pandemic times and the act of walking as part of her artistic practice. The transcript of this conversation is part of a series of interviews published by Zoe Blennerhassett (communication designer, Dublin).

Yeb Wiersma— You're walking! I didn't expect this. You really practice what you preach.

Zoe Blennerhassett— Ah yeah, well it's the best stype of day for a walk in Ireland; grey and rainy.

Y— Ha! The land of overcast. The Irish have a large number of words for rain, right?

Z— Oh for sure, words for rain are an essential part of our vocabulary; spitting, bucketing, pouring, pissing, hammering. It's an endless list...

Y— The way people describe the weather, how they experience it, actually reveals a lot about the way they're feeling, about their state of mind. You are the weather, they say. Some people dislike talking about the weather. Dismiss it as smalltalk. I find comfort in it. Brings us back to our bare essential. Us amidst the raging elements. How are you?

Z— As well as can be in the midst of everything going on. Definitely, as you say, finding comfort in the elements.

Y— I hear you. Where are you walking? What do you see, smell or hear?!

Z— Well, currently I'm walking out of my estate. Let me just turn around the camera to show you. I live in the suburbs just at the base of the Dublin mountains. A calm area to walk in. It isn't very built up, around every corner there seems to be a forest, a stream or a lush field of green. It smells wonderful thanks to the recent rains.

Y—You mean that sweet, petrol-pungent smell which occurs after rain? It has a particular name I am blanking on.

Z—Most people try to avoid getting caught in the rain, but as soon as it starts to pour I'm outside putting foot to pavement. I love the feeling of heavy droplets hitting my skin or the pitter-patter against an anorak hood.

Y—Sometimes I assign myself to stand still and discern ten fleeting sounds, smells or movements in, on or around myself, like the honking of car entering my ear, a runny nose, a shadow passing. Dry and observational. It's a good exercise to move back into the body's knowledge centre. Is this something that you have been doing a lot during 'Covid Days'? 'The act of walking?'

Z—Definitely, I have been walking endlessly. Enjoying walking without any time constraints. What about you? Where are you based? Have you been walking?

Y—The ancient Greeks had two words for time; 'kairos' and 'chronos'. 'Chronos' refers to clock time – time that can be measured – seconds, minutes, hours while 'kairos' measures moments, not seconds. It refers to the moment where the world takes a breath, and in the pause before it exhales, fates can be changed. I had to think of this when you just said you have been enjoying being outdoors without any 'time' constraint.

Y—To come back to your question, I am based in the centre of Amsterdam. There's no strict lockdown here. I can go out. Which is unfortunately not the case for many citizens elsewhere who are not allowed to leave their homes. Or have to stay foot because of their poor health. That's hard. But yes, I have been taking long walks. I am walking myself these days, like walking the dog. It's been a sort of lifeline, keeps me going and grounded.

Z—A link to our sanity..

Y—Another essential. Walking is my call to action. I walk to gather energy to start working. Call it productive procrastination. By being in motion, I trigger a kind of peripheral thinking, an unconscious process in which ideas, images and words can start to cook. Unusual or odd associations rise to the surface. Make way for subjectivity and imagination. Something very useful in the creative process.

Y—Simultaneously I consider walking as a tender practice. We are living, sentient beings. Constantly yearning for connections, syncopating with our environment. Sometimes I find this overwhelming. Whenever this happens, a mode of sensory overload, one remedy is walking. A simple movement, one foot in front of the other, proofing my existence. It brings me back to the sheer animal pleasure of being alive.

Y—It must be an interesting moment for you to be reflecting on the role of the physical body within your current ‘body’ of artistic research?

Z—Absolutely. The whole nature of our day to day lives definitely changed. When ‘Covid’ came, it forced us to step outside of our ‘caught up’ daily routines. It forced us to engage with our surroundings differently. People started seeing things that they had never noticed before. I found the restrictions in Ireland particularly interesting; we were confined first within a 2km radius of our homes, which expanded to 5km. Limitations can always provide a useful lens if we choose to engage with them, and it seems that many people did. It’s exciting to see.

Y—Like you say, we’re constantly running around. From A to B and back again. And then Boom! ‘Covid-19’ arrived. People are having unfamiliar time on their hands. Not ‘chronos’, but ‘kairos’ time. Our lives are on a ‘pause’ button. There’s room to breath. Allowing us to build an alternative conversation with our immediate environment. Like the other night when I saw a dog sitting on the side of the road staring at the moon. It was endearing to watch. But these are also uncertain, anxious times. Many of us are harmed by this global standstill. Their lives being financially, mentally or physically disrupted. This ‘Covid’ period demonstrates that our fast forward lives, fueled by values like efficiency, innovation and economic growth, exhausting the Earth’s natural resources, is not sustainable. Capitalism needs a reset. We need a reset. ASAP.

Y—This brings me to another wandering question in relation to ‘Covid’. How to move together in times of a pandemic? Some people being more anxious than others. Some more at risk than others. It’s a wobbly choreography we’re still figuring out and adapting to. Presenting our precarious bodies into the streets is never an innocent act. It can be a dangerous thing.

Y—Actually, can you go back a little? Stop walking. Turn around. I see a traffic sign. What does it say?!

Z—This one you mean?

Y—It says ‘Rampái’. What does this mean?

Z—‘Rampái’ is the Irish word for ramps. Like bumps on the road to slow cars: ‘Rampái’.

Y—I’m loving how this word rolls in my mouth: ‘Rampái, Rampái.’ In Dutch ‘ramp or rampái’ means disaster. An appropriate association. No walk without a risk. No marching without walking. No art without a bump in the road. (*smacks fist into palm.*)

Z—Impactful.

Y—You need friction. A body or movement (Think Black Lives Matter) only comes to life, until and unless an outer force is applied to it. That’s not me. That’s Isaac Newton actually.

