

# UP

PROJECTS



In response to:  
*Companion* - a walk led by Alexei & Katie Schwab

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We met outside a closed restaurant late on a Sunday morning. We'd come together for the last in a series of walks, based on Nicholas Saunderson's *Alternative London* (1970) an encyclopaedic sub-cultural guide to living in London. Led by twins Katie and Alexei Schwab, the walk plotted a journey of winding and intertwined, linking and looped, fragmented and achronological ideas. It revealed how lived experience is shared and disseminated in the city today and how this is not a straightforward process or single narrative. The experiencing of a city has to be multivalent, shaped by encounters with the words, thoughts and feelings of others.

The development of communication technologies was a thread tugged throughout the walk, unravelling how technology has shaped our lives as well as how it has been represented to us, and how nations have used it to present themselves to the world - from the BT tower to Lucienne Day's fabric designs that offer a vision of post-war British progress. At each of the walk's stopping points, Katie read aloud fragments of text - concrete poetry, prose poetry, fiction and memoir - by female authors. At the start she had told us the women she was quoting, but when she read the texts they were left unattributed, echoing the way that phrases and the words of others might recur to you, half remembered, while walking the city.

It's easy to find where you want to go when you are guided by Google Maps, following the progression of the blue marker until you practically bump up against what it was you were looking for, head down, without taking in much of your surroundings. It may be more efficient, but is harder to make discoveries by chance, to have your course changed through serendipity. Being led through the city by somebody else is a luxury. They take care of the directions so that you can see the city around you in a new light. It is even better to have a companion who wants to share with you their expertise and research or the recalled words of others.

Today, we are always accompanied by technology. We walk around all the time with the internet in our pockets and hardly think about it. Our devices, these conduits that make the internet always available, offer us an inexhaustible guidebook containing all the world's knowledge and advice, but also endless scope for connection, to find alternative communities, no longer bounded by physical space. We are always in this sense out of step, always living in alternative spaces, the one that we are physically present in, and the other, geographically distant, connected through flows of information and communication. It was interesting to hear that the planning for the walk took place on Google Maps and Street View as Alexei and Katie were not in London and geographically distant. This technology, as well as helping us to navigate the places we find ourselves in, allows a way into spaces remotely.

The anonymous building that we started the walk outside was the site of Cyberia, the world's first Internet café, which opened in 1994, the year that the first web browser was launched. The cafe was founded by Eva Pascoe, who envisioned it as a women-only space, although this ideal was abandoned when the first customers were predominantly male. Cyberia was established as a social space that aimed to make the internet more widely available at a time when computers were confined to offices, a realm for government and academia. Reflecting back it seems like a moment of utopian possibility, when the Internet had not become the banal, monetised space we accept it for today. The economic factors shaping the use of online space can to an extent be compared

to the way that spaces in the city and the kinds of behaviour allowed there are shaped and valued by commerce. Nearby is the Procter Memorial, a piece of protected land on the edge of Tottenham Court Road dedicated to being an open space for the use of the public for ever, in memory of Robert and Esther Procter. The Procters were a London family of cheesemongers who once had a store on Tottenham Court Road. In 1945 the last V2 rocket to fall on London destroyed a church and at least five houses in this location. The empty space between a Cafe Nero and a Starbucks could be neatly infilled, were it not for the generosity of this memorial. We stand in the small open space, beside some benches, bollards, and a bin, and crane our necks to look up at the Fitzrovia Mural created in 1980, which in peeling household paint depicts the characters of Fitzrovia, including a vampiric property developer, expressing the anxieties of the time, from the rise of computerised work to the lack of free space, urban gentrification and dispossession. At the bottom of the wall there are some shabby shrubs, which disclose the smell of fox, reminding me of the invisible others inhabiting the space, also making the city their own.

At times it was hard to hear Katie over the sound of passing helicopters and traffic, but this resonated with the fragments of texts that described the invasive sounds of the street entering a private interior. Communication technology breaks down the boundaries of the interior realm, letting in other realities, blurring domesticity with the public. The texts were full of the devices of communication - the typewriter, the telephone, television, video, the newspaper, the books and magazines, some radio station, fax - opening up to other locations. The weaving together of female narratives, exploring domestic city interiors, was crystallised when we stepped inside Heal's department store. Initially a mattress maker, Heal's created parachutes during World War Two, which led to the establishment of the fabric arm of business after the war, for which Lucienne Day and Barbara Brown created now iconic designs, such as Day's Calyx an affordable furnishing fabric for the Festival of Britain in 1951. Here Katie read texts over the top of, and in competition with, the in-store piped music, her words adding more narratives to jostle with those being told to sell the Heal's brand. This included extracts from Dodie Smith's autobiography. Dodie had worked as a shop assistant at Heal's and was the mistress of Ambrose Heal who designed a wardrobe for her. This illicit legacy is now recognised with the Dodie furniture range, which an eager shop assistant ushered us to see.

Reading another's text aloud, feeling someone else's words in your mouth, navigating their punctuation with your breath, is to inhabit someone else's thinking, collaborating on its meaning for a while. The texts inhabited spaces alongside us, opening doors to other rooms, to other interiors, but also opening us to encounters. To the possibility of finding synchronicity, feeling closer to the city through affiliations and shared sympathies with others. That acknowledgment - I am not alone in feeling this - is to be accompanied.

I felt this echo of companionship from a bed of geraniums, that I spotted as we walked on from Heal's department store. Sat inside, Katie had read Geranium, a concrete poem by Mary Ellen Solt. The words had sharpened my eyes to the plants brutal reds and pinks on green. Plants in the city have a rootlessness. Propagated and brought from elsewhere to bloom, they show their colours to impress and brighten the municipal beds or corporate window boxes for a while, before being ripped up to make way for the next colour scheme.