

WALKING BACKWARDS (*Birger's Walk*)
Julie Poitras Santos

"Storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost when there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship"
- Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

"You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet."
- Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*

It is said that the workers in the 17th century ropewalk in Karlskrona, Sweden, in the course of a lifetimes' work in the factory, would walk the equivalent of two times around the earth backwards within the expansive yet still limited confines of the 300-meter long building. The traditional process of making rope by hand, a craft and a class of workers largely forgotten in the west but for the mark of a few remaining buildings around the world, required workers to walk backwards like expectant spiders as they spun cordage from clouds of fiber surrounding their bellies. Photographic documents from the 1800s show cavernous spaces and haunted male faces dark with the tar that was used to preserve the ropes. Created for naval uses, the ropes these workers made were critical materials for an age of global exploration and trade.

Walking Backwards will weave together historical narratives collected from rope makers in Karlskrona, accounts of travelers who circumnavigated the world around the same time the factory was in the height of its operation, and fragments from Xavier de Maistre's 1794 "Voyage Around my Room" to create a fictional memoir that introduces a character constrained by place, work and class, but who imagines leaving it all for a life of adventure

and travel. This character, named Birgir, after an Old Norse name meaning "to help, save or rescue," struggles with feelings of otherness within his community and invokes the rhythms of walking as he wonders about escaping these constraints. The character's sentiment, drawn in part from my own experiences of growing up in a small rural town and feeling confined by my origins, leads him to imagine new and unseen worlds.

The work takes the form of a video that braids together imagery from performers walking in the ropewalk and in the surrounding rural landscape of southern Sweden, and draws in close on hands that are making and unraveling rope, along with other imagery gathered from the coastal region. An intimate voice relays the story of longing, conflating the work of imagination and personal memoir for the storyteller as the character dreams of travels abroad. As in a metric poem, or musical score, the sound of walking the hollow wood floor of the ropewalk echoes throughout the film like a metronome serving as both a reminder of the limitations of that space, and of the power of rhythm to overcome limits and birth new ideas.

I have had the ropewalk in my sights since 2013, and this spring I made a short research visit to Karlskrona and was granted permission to enter the ropewalk. While slowly being transformed for tourism as part of the World Heritage Site in Karlskrona, the ropewalk is still largely untouched since the early sixties when commercial rope production ceased. At 300-meters in length, entering the building is like entering a drawing in single-point perspective, the end of the building becomes a clear vanishing point, a horizon. It's a beautiful, evocative space and one that provokes differing perceptions of distance and time. I have met and am in contact with many people in Karlskrona, including freelance curator Torun Ekstrand, Kulturcentrum Ronneby Director Kirsti Emaus and World Heritage Coordinator of culture and leisure, Lena Johansson. As well, workers at the ropewalk have shown me around, relayed history and method.

I am interested in the physical work and human scale of the traditional craft of rope making and how working with the body is a form of memory making. Walking backward involves both retrospection and trust, as one places one's foot in the blind spot behind oneself with each step. I have used rope as both material and metaphor in my work since 2011,

unraveling the material as a performed ritual process in order to think about deep research and creating space for new stories to emerge. I've mapped the forgotten spaces of ropewalks in the town of Portland, Maine. In the work, rope functions as a central metaphor for narrative, made of diverse strands, linear, twisted, textured and textural; it evokes the rich historical relationship between text and textile. *Walking Backwards, (Birger's walk)*, allows me to bring together both notions of unraveling as research and retrospection, and notions of making as a means to move forward in time, creating a storyline.

For *Walking Backwards*, I will return to Karlskrona to further research and refine the narrative, and to capture video with an assistant. During this time, I will also focus on recording sounds from the area harbor and sounds of footsteps in the ropewalk. I plan to work with a group of three performers, signifying three strands of rope that come together to make one. As the narrative develops, I will edit and develop the video in tandem with working with a sound engineer to record the spoken components of the story. In recent work, I have recorded myself and other performers reading aloud to access the intimacy one feels when reading or being read to. Reading is one of the ways we privately access other worlds, and this will create an intimate, interior context for *Walking Backwards*.

Walking Backwards uses the power of visual and narrative storytelling to investigate connections between home and away, longing and the lure of the unknown, and the paired acts of looking back and looking forward as functional ways in which we construct our identities.