

Conversations with Sophie Angelis

Sandra Bridie

First Conversation with Sophie Angelis

FIVE66 Café, Swanston Street, Melbourne, June 20 2008

Sandra Bridie: You have had three walks with John Borley so far. So I would like to go back to the beginning and try and get your perceptions before your first trip, your perceptions on your first trip and then we can discuss how you are seeing the whole experience in light of having done three walks now.

Sophie Angelis: I guess prior to the first walk I didn't really know what to expect, I went in with a pretty open mind. The only thing I thought was important was that I have a very bad visual memory, so I get lost very easily, so that was something in the back of my head. I thought I must make sure that we walk in straight lines or walk in a way that I can easily replicate for eight weeks because I have a lot of trouble in ordinary life. So that was something that I said to John when we first met up. So the walk that we created out in the end was generally mostly straight, there were a few detours and curves and bends but we tried to keep it in a straight line. It was interesting, as we were walking along on the first time I realised that I was walking the same way that I usually walk when I go for lunch every day at work.

So it is like an automatic - or 'default' - walk of yours?

Yeah, for some reason I did the same walk, I didn't use it as an opportunity to walk somewhere new, I took the safe and planned route, but then it was interesting in the sense that I was almost taking the same route but with a new meaning attached to it. So it was a recreation of an old experience but it was completely different in the sense that I noticed things that I didn't really notice when I took that walk every other day of the week.

So by walking along the familiar you were defamiliarising it in a way.

Yes, that's exactly right. I suppose it made me realise how disengaged I am when I take that walk normally.

And also for you, if you get lost easily, this process is similar to a skill building exercise, and a peculiar sort of challenge for someone who gets lost easily. It would be fabulous to get lost with John, because then that would break the intended routine or rules of this project. But also for you, by observing what is going on around you, that's how to orientate yourself and not get lost. It sounds like you may be daydreaming or have lots of other things on your mind on your lunchtime walks, whereas the way to orientate yourself is to observe your concrete surroundings.

Yeah, so that was a new experience because I was walking the exact same route, more or less, but I was in that route. I was aware of people. I was aware of what was going on around me. I felt, in a way, more removed from people around me, but more connected to them at the same time. I was observing them, but also feeling I was part of them. Because usually when I am walking at lunch I am, just, frustrated about something at work, or I just want to get away from my desk...

So you are zoned out, consciously disengaged and making a point of it.

Yeah, completely zoned out, which is a bit sad, really. Perhaps it's a coping mechanism, a means of dealing with a nine-to-five office job.

Well it brings into mind this idea of 'mindfulness', where, say, you are having a cup of tea and often during those kinds of automatic events in your day you are quite unaware of what you are doing at the time, but if you isolate that activity and pay it attention, then in a way, rather than taxing you, it is actually relaxing; to take it out of its context and to just observe it. So, the walks in Time and Again sounds like an interesting process, an almost meditative event for you.

Yes that's right, it's a redefinition of routine as well – what's mundane is no longer mundane.

No, it is quite rich in its possibilities.

Yes, it may be the same walk every day, but as you say, being aware of differences and possibilities; that is the difference.

There are so many worlds even within Melbourne, and when you live here perhaps you may think it's unexciting, but I reckon any street you walk down, especially in the city, is like a whole world. It's hard to remember the range of details, the shops, the daily changes and weekly events etc. even in one street. What attracted you to the project, Sophie? Did you see the ad in the mX, because, to me, that was quite vague or coded. As an artist, it looked like the wording for a conceptual art project.

When I was at Uni and doing my first degree it was in Sociology, it was an Arts Degree. The whole idea behind Sociology is looking behind the everyday to try and explain it, patterns in behaviour etc. I like Sociology because it was making something extraordinary and valuable out of the everyday. I saw that in this and that intrigued me, the fact that a weekly walk would be the subject for an artwork. I go for a walk every day, but in this context it would be something that would constitute art, so that really appealed to me. I remember reading the article at about seven thirty or something on the train home, because I had worked back late that night and I saw that applications closed at five, so I thought, oh I will just email anyway. So I did.

Did the fact that the ad had the City of Melbourne logo on it give it some authority for you?

Yes, I guess it gave it that legitimacy that comes with a well-known name, you know it's been approved.

So you would feel safe rather than potentially taken for a ride. You were on holiday or something when you read the ad, is that right? So maybe you were more receptive to other possibilities.

Yes, I was actually about to go on leave for exams, so perhaps I was looking for something different from the routine of work-study-work-study. Even though this was a new type of routine, that intrigued me as well, the fact that routine can become a different thing.

You were also displacing your lunchtime walk into the morning.

Yes, it's a temporal displacement.

Had you thought about, or did you wonder what was in it for you, out of the project, in terms of product?

Not really, I suppose I was more interested in what would come of it, as the end result of the project. I was just interested to see where it would go. It's almost looking at it from the perspective of an outsider, 'I wonder where it will go?' Whereas I am in it, I am shaping where it is going, but I was interested in it more from the sense of, 'I wonder how it plays out?'

And with the three walks that you have done has there been a sense of progression, it would be interesting to hear if from out of the eight walks there is a point of stasis, where you are over it then you might re-invest in it again later. But currently, of the three times you have done the walk, what are the distinctions you have made between them so far, would you say?

On the first walk I bumped into someone I knew and John bumped into someone he knew and that wasn't planned, so that was an interesting twist and I remember thinking – and it's funny because the person I bumped into was actually someone I work with. I suppose part of the reason why I did this was to examine a part of a routine that I have within my working life and here was a work colleague showing up and participating in it, I was a bit annoyed!

Did he/she join in?

Oh, she said, "Hello," and that was it really. But of course then the next week there was no one there to say hello to. I guess that's one thing this project does and that is to highlight the fact that even though a routine is a routine, it's never exactly the same. You might be wearing the same corporate uniform every day when you go to work (today is Casual Day, by the way, so I don't usually get to wear these types of clothes) but each day is different in a different way if you choose to engage enough with the day.

Yes, happenstance, you can't control that. With this project, that is the great way for the alternatives to happen.

Yes, so the next week when it came time for John's friend to turn up...

Oh, and he tried to orchestrate that again?

Yes, so he called out for him, he called out his name but he wasn't there. And then it came time for my work colleague to turn up, and I looked for her but she wasn't there and I didn't quite have the courage to break the social norm in the way that John did by calling out someone's name.

He's from another country anyway; he doesn't have to worry so much about being recognised.

That's right. And then on the second walk, John bumped into someone else who wasn't there today, but today he bumped into a third person. So he has bumped into someone on each occasion, so that's interesting. It's part of the walk that won't be able to be recaptured.

So what does happen on these walks then? What is the mean for them, what are the events that can't be altered and what is the route?

The route starts off at Flinders Street Station under the clocks and I am always waiting on the top step sitting down and John comes up to say 'Hello'. Then we walk straight down Flinders Street. We turn left at Flinders Lane. We go up Degraives Street. Go left down another street; I can't remember its name. Go up a little laneway that neither of us has been down before. Down another laneway to the left, then back through another laneway to Flinders Lane again. Up Flinders Lane until King's Street, then up Kings Street, right at Collins Street, down Collins Street, back through that little laneway again. Down Flinders Lane and back to the clocks. So that's as much as I can remember, but it's interesting because the recreation of the walk itself has been a joint effort.

Where you are both trying to remember- and you don't have a great memory either - what is John's geographical memory like?

His memory is excellent.

So he has created this project to show this off!

Well I got us lost today, so there was a minor detour, but generally if we feel unsure, or if I feel unsure, I look at John, 'Is it this way, is it that way?' Very rarely does he do the same, but I often feel unsure. Perhaps by the fifth or sixth time I will get it, but I still feel a bit forgetful about it.

And what are you observing?

Well there are fixed things on the walk that we do observe, for instance, there are some fingerprints on a railing for some stairs that we look at each week.

And where is that?

That's coming down the laneway between Collins Street and Flinders Lane; there is a gold banister where people put their hands as they are going up and down the stairs. I have no means of verifying this, but it looks like there is a different composition of fingerprints each time.

So someone cleans it each week at least.

Yeah, someone must. Today there was a big smear, whereas last week there were more smudges. And then there is a bunch of balloons on a tree.

Where is that? These are curious things to note.

Yes, I can picture it in my head, but then putting it into an actual space is interesting. I think it's on the corner of King and Collins, near the corner.

That's where John bought a kiwi fruit the first time we went on the walk, but the kiwi fruit woman and her stand has been closed on the other walks, so that hasn't been able to be recreated. There were the balloons... there were some paintings in a laneway that are now gone. They were only there the first week, paintings of Venice. There is a bar on Collins Street that we noticed and we always looked at.

What bar is that?

I can't remember the name of it, it's a bar that has got two statues of the Medusa in the entrance, they are facing one another, so it is not very inviting.

So if you bring children into the bar they'll be eaten! Where is the bar on Collins Street?

It's after Kings Street, I would say, perhaps, near Queens Street and there's a big marble lion in the front entrance as well, in between the Medusas is this big marble lion.

Wow, they were really sure someone horrible was going to go in there!

And it has big chandeliers.

Do you think maybe it's a Mafia hangout?

I wouldn't be surprised; it's a very odd place. But I have walked past that place each day on my lunchtime walk and not noticed it, so I notice that every time now, which is interesting. And then when we walk down Flinders Lane we walk past a shop called The Quick Brown Fox which is a clothing store and it's funny, the first time we walked I said to John that I was going to remember that red dress in the window and he said, "I wonder if it will be there next week?" Each week there has been a new dress. John made the observation that it reminded him of the old film 'The Time Machine' where the passing of time was marked by the image of this mannequin in this fashion shop being dressed and undressed in the fashions of the day. That is kind of what we are seeing, each week a new dress is in the window, the dress that you must wear that week or the dress that is most fashionable for that week. So that is interesting to see as well.

So do you try to repeat conversations?

Yes, we have tried. The first conversation and the last conversation are generally similar, especially the first conversation. It's quite funny because we are both very aware of what we are doing, we both know the answers to these questions, we know the outcome of the conversation. So for parts of the walk the conversation is replicated, then other parts are continuations of conversations from last week.

So it would be too boring or just too difficult to abide by a straight replication of each element of your walks?

It would be. I just can't remember what I said. I think I remember reading one time that you only use two percent of your memory or only remember two percent of a day. So we remember certain bits and the parts that we remember we repeat but then the other parts are left to be filled in. They are filled in with even new

conversation or conversation following on from the last week.

So are you having conversations about the form of the project as you go along? About the replicated walk as an object? Are you taking notes at all?

No I am not, I did want to. The first time I wanted to draw a map and I thought to myself after the first walk that I should sit down and draw myself a route, but I honestly couldn't remember the route to draw it.

I might bring along a map when we meet next time, after your last walk, I would quite like to reproduce it in the publication anyway. Also I would like to go around and find these things that you have described and photograph them, so it is like I am following on your hearsay. They are vaguely enough described for that to be an adventure for me.

I wonder if the eight balloons on that tree will still be there.

I would probably have to do that pretty quickly!

Yes, there are eight and they're getting more shrivelled each week.

Does this activity remind you of anything else?

That's a good question...

People I have spoken to have mentioned the film 'Groundhog Day' and it also has the feel to it of a short story idea.

It doesn't bring to mind anything to me; I think it is quite unique in what it is. If it reminds me of anything, it reminds of that kind of looking beneath the surface that, to me, means Sociology that I used to study at Uni. So I like that because it has that element of being engaged with your everyday world and your ordinary experience. So that would be the association in my mind between an aspect of my life and this experience, but in other respects it is quite unique.

I quite like the fact that for the participants, the members of the public involved in the walks, it is the activity and that is it, rather than framing it, which is what the artist or writer always has to do to make it more special than just part of the day. But for the participants such as you, you are living it rather than turning it into something else.

I guess that's a lifting of the responsibility, we are there just to experience whereas I suppose your role is to shape that.

Second Conversation with Sophie Angelis after her eighth walk

FIVE66 Café, Swanston Street, Melbourne, July 25 2008

Sandra Bridie: This is the second interview with Sophie and the interview at the end of the Time and Again project after your eighth walk with John this morning. I was wondering if we should start with you being specific about your walk. I have brought a mobility map of the centre of Melbourne torn out of my Melways and a yellow highlighter, so we can then reproduce this map for the publication. So Sophie, if you could just talk and highlight your way on the map; that would be great.

Sophie Angelis: I am actually terrible with directions and finding my way around, that's what I first said to John when I met him. We meet at the clocks at Flinders Street Station, (Sophie begins marking the map with her route) then, yes, we walk down Swanston and then we turn left into Flinders Lane, I think. It would be interesting to get John to reproduce this as well and see if he comes up with the same one! ... And then, we walk through Flinders Lane, keep walking through Flinders Lane and then we come to a little alleyway that's not on the map. It's an alleyway that brings you through to 333 Collins Street, it's pretty much a functional get-through space with some beautiful big lanterns on the side, it brings us out at 333, so I think it's about here (Sophie highlights this point on the map).



So just after Elizabeth Street?

Yes, and then we walk along Collins Street for a little bit and then we go through 333 Collins Street, which is actually where part of the company I work for works out of; 333 Collins Street. I like going through there because it is like me reclaiming the work space and making it something that is a lot more enjoyable. So I walk back through 333 Collins Street and onto Flinders Lane again and then proceed along Flinders Lane pretty much just in a straight line, because I get lost easily, until Kings Street. We turn right through Kings Street and then right on Collins again, go straight along Collins, keep going straight at Collins. And now, there is going to be a bit of a problem with the overlap on this map, but basically we go through the little alleyway again, the secret alleyway, turn left into Flinders Lane, go along Flinders Lane, come out at Swanston Street and then back on Swanston Street and back to the clocks. So it's basically a loop.

It's quite a neat circuit.

Yes, and that's because, as I said to John the first time I met him, and we have the same conversation every week, I get lost very easily so we keep to straight lines. Having said that, I did manage to get us lost once or twice on this simple route.

Excellent! Well that would have added some variation to the project. And so, at the end of the walking series what sort of reflections have you got on the project for yourself?

I have really enjoyed it. It will be really strange actually not to – I have to get up at 5.30 every Friday morning to come into the city to meet John at 7.30 – so it will be nice in one respect to sleep in on a Friday morning, but in another respect it will be really strange not to have the routine of the walk. It's just nice to go for a walk, on the most basic level, in the morning. When we were walking one day, John mentioned that it always looks like the city is waking up at that time of the day and it's true, it looks really beautiful. I wouldn't normally see the city at that time of day. It's nice to have an hour of self-reflection and not full of purpose necessarily, there are no deadlines to meet, it's not for any other purpose other than just exploring different ideas, so I will miss that.

So we have just moved tables because it was a bit noisy...

Have you gone through any phases with the walks over the eight weeks? In the first interview that we did after the third walk I was wondering if there might be some flat spots in the experience where you might be a little bit 'over it', where it was becoming a bit predictable. Were there any flat spots or did the walking project maintain its curiosity for you?

I guess, to be honest, yesterday I had the day off work and I am still feeling a bit sick today – I have had a virus for the last week and a half – so today I was a bit, 'oh I wish wasn't going for a walk this morning', because I probably would have taken the day off from work today if I hadn't had to come in for the walk. So for the last two sessions where I have had this virus I have felt, more because of the need to sleep

in and because my body has been a little bit tired, that I have felt, I wish I didn't have to do this today. But the rest of the time I have been quite engaged with it. It's the early morning start, really, more than anything else that leads me to groan a little bit in the mornings, but when I'm actually outside and walking and the city looks nice and quiet and it's a different feeling – it's almost like the city has a mood at different times of the day and I like the city's mood in the morning. I don't quite like it during business hours but it is really nice on Friday mornings.

Are there any events that spring to mind from the eight walks, surprising events or was there a very predictable routine that was set up?

I guess you notice something different each time you had the walk, whether it just be the fact that – and these were things that happened every week but you just didn't notice them – I think in our every day life we must block out a lot of information that we get from observations because I don't think our brains would be able to cope with it, so we just focus on the bare necessities of what we need to get through. But when the purpose of the hour is just to observe or when that is one of the purposes then it is funny how many things come out. But, in terms of things that stuck out in my head, it is more just realisations, I suppose, that are important for me, that I'll remember; the realisation that within a routine there is always the possibility for change. It is just being aware enough to realise it. I suppose having that level of awareness all the time would make you tired as well.

I listened to our first interview this morning before I came here of your observations after the three walks you had done then, so it is fresh in my mind, but you said that you don't have a great geographical memory or sense, you don't have an innate internal compass and so the project was quite challenging. It seemed that the things that you could remember observing on your walks were less locational and more observational details. So there were these details like the smudges on the banister, there were eight balloons somewhere on your walk that were gradually shrivelling, another observation was the changing of the dresses each week in the dress shop The Quick Brown Fox. So with those three details that you discussed last conversation with me, could you talk about any mutations there over the following five weeks?

It's funny, when you were saying that I was seeing them in my mind, but for the first time in eight weeks the banister was wiped clean of fingerprints today.

That's fitting, I guess!

Yes, it was. John and I both looked at it and there was not a single print on it. So that was nice, it was a clean slate.

So are you more clear now about where that was. Because last conversation it just seemed to emerge as an image surrounded in a haze.

No, it is the 'golden banister', coming out of 333 Collins Street, entering Flinders Lane.

So 333 Collins Street is an address that you have set to memory, is it?

Yes, because part of my workplace works from offices there and I have had to go down there for work a couple of times. And then the balloons were there today, they were very shrivelled. I think they are on the corner of King and Collins, actually on Collins Street where there is a fruit stall. And then the dresses in the dress shop, what colour were they today? They were black today; they are usually black or red.

Did they change each week, did it seem like the shop had a principle of changing the dresses regularly?

Yes they did. Generally the colour themes were either black or red. Also, each week we walked past an ad for Tattslotto, and the lottery this week was six million dollars but last week it was fifty million. So obviously between this week and last week someone has got lucky and won the fifty million. So, it was going up each week and this week it went down, that's funny.

And do you personally have an interest in lotteries?

No.

So there wouldn't be any reason necessarily why you would observe the stakes.

No, I think it was actually John who pointed it out to me, so every time we walked past we would notice it. I should have bought a lottery ticket and split it with John to see if we might have come up on the sign.

Did you feel like you got to know one another through this projector, or was your relationship very circumscribed to discussing the project and not much else?

We got to know each other a little bit. Towards the end of the walks, I was a bit more comfortable with there being silence and not necessarily talking. Usually I am not very good with silences, I like to fill them up with talk, so towards the end I was more comfortable in silence. I suppose I don't know all that much about John and he probably doesn't know all that much about me. We know bits and pieces of each other's lives, like the fact that I am married to someone from the UK and I am going to the UK soon. I always feel obliged to tell people from the UK that my husband is English – 'I know about you people, my husband is from there'. I don't know why I have to tell them, but it's almost like telling them, 'I am going to like you because I am married to one of your countrymen'! Yes, so there are little tid-bits. I guess John probably knows me in the way that I might know someone who I met for a few hours at a party one night, that is probably the extent of each other's knowledge of each other's lives.

So your conversations didn't open up to a more familiar territory, you had a sense of the conversation being confined more or less to discussions around the walks rather than opening up to something else?

I think I talked about my life more than he talked and did about his, possibly. Like, I got my driver's test in the middle of these walks so I told him I was going for my test, and then that I passed my test and then

I told him that I had a job interview and then I told him that I had got the job, and now I told him that I am quitting. So I was keeping him up to date with stuff, but I think that is just me, I am generally quite a talkative person, and perhaps also not being comfortable with silences, and being comfortable with talking about myself in most situations. And John is very easy going and a good listener, I suppose. So it was quite easy to talk about myself.

What was your sense with him about how the project was going? Was there any comparative chat?

Well, I asked him a few times how it was going because I was curious. I was curious to see where he walked with others and he said that the walks intersected sometimes but no one knew that they intersected except for him. This was quite an interesting idea.

So John wasn't giving you contextual information about the project at all, character sketches of the other participants, etc?

No, not at all. I was asking him out of curiosity and he was answering my questions but not in any great detail. Like, today I asked him if I was the first person whose walks had ended and he told me I was the fourth.

Okay, well that's a nice position to be in.

Yes, right in the middle. But then I thought, he must go for eight hours of walking a week, that's a lot of exercise.

He is probably losing weight during this project, and getting fit!

In our first meeting, you said that one of your interests that drew you to this project was that you had studied Sociology and that the project linked in with the sociologists interest in the wealth of nuance and variation behind the seemingly banal appearance of the 'everyday'. Did that perception still open up things for you over the full eight weeks; were you observing new things as curiosities?

I don't know. When I started I think Sociology was forefront in my mind but as we progressed I thought about it less and less. I suppose I stopped trying to analyse it as much and just enjoyed it more for the walk, for the chance to be still inside myself and just observe. I do yoga once a week and I find that principle of being still and observing is very difficult to translate into everyday life.

But you were trying to apply it to this experience.

And I find it difficult anyway, I am uncomfortable with silences; that kind of thing, but towards the end I was starting to be more comfortable with silence, like today we walked from Flinders Lane on the way back, to Flinders Street. I don't think we said anything. That's about five minutes and I didn't notice that we hadn't said anything, which was nice.

Now I am going back to our initial conversation quite a bit here, but you were talking about the defamiliarisation process of relocating a lunchtime walk to first thing in the morning. By doing this you were defamiliarising yourself more generally and observing the difference. But today, are you saying, that if you kept on observing these details at the rate you were doing this at the beginning then that would be very taxing. But also, of course, there is only a certain space for things to be unfamiliar, and you have repeated this walk eight times. So there it become a process of adapting to a new routine so I can image it would be easy to once again find yourself in a fugue-like state in these morning walks as you did in your lunch-time walks along the same path. Did you find that?

A little bit, I suppose, towards the end.

And that sounds partly attributable to the fact that you have a virus.

That I feel like I have been hit by a bus or something! But definitely in the last couple of weeks I have been a bit less alert, but like you say I don't know what percentage that is due to the fact that I am just not feeling very well and I am not thinking very clearly. I am making a lot of mistakes at work and things like that, not functioning.

It will be interesting to see what resonance is left after this small domestic scaled adventure in a month or so's time. Are there any particular images that have struck you other than the ones we have discussed?

Yes, there is a building. I don't know where this building is, I can only ever see it in the distance but it is an absolutely beautiful building. I can see it to my left as I walk along Flinders Lane.

So it is on Flinders Lane?

No, I can only see it off in the distance, it might even be near Crown – it's that far away. I don't know the name of it, but it is this beautiful silvery blue/grey building that is shaped, it goes like a rectangle until about three quarters of the way up where it curves in a little bit and the top part has a little bit of a red part in the middle of it. It is just an absolutely gorgeous building especially when the sun is coming on to it in the morning.

Has it got mirrored windows? So it has been built quite recently?

Yes, it's a contemporary building and it just looks so beautiful in the morning. I didn't notice it before, until John pointed it out one day. The other day I was walking in the city and I noticed it and I thought, that's 'John's building'. So that's nice, so even after this is over, if I see the building I think I will always think of it as the 'John building'.

Has this experience entered your unconscious at all, in dreams or beyond that?

No, not that I remember anyway.

I don't know whether I asked you if you were anxious at all before the project?

No, I was interested and curious; I think would be the best way of describing it.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

I think it will be interesting to see what John has made of it and what the others have made of it. I am looking forward to seeing the product. And also the other walks, I am really curious to see where all the other walks have gone and also if I have remembered ours correctly. John has a better visual memory than me so he will be able to confirm.

It looks quite straightforward on the map.

Yeah, but it doesn't feel straightforward in my head.

It feels like it's got more curves in it?

Yes, more to it than the highlighted lines are portraying. Because I am remembering all the bits and pieces, like the balloons and the banister and the painting and things like that. There are paintings in 333 Collins Street; they are sometimes there, sometimes not. Today they were there.

How come?

I don't know. I think it must be a public art space. The first week there were paintings of Venice in there and then we had nothing and then today we had paintings of the Australian landscape and there was a sign saying, Public Art Gallery by an artist.

So there's another thing for me to observe if I try to trace your walk from these notes.

But I have really enjoyed the whole thing.

