

How to Play a Landscape: This Is How We Walk On the Moon

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This is How...

In *This Is How We Walk On the Moon* (2007), a 27-minute video by Johanna Billing, a group of four young musicians are given a sailing lesson just off the coast of Edinburgh. Startled by being suddenly on the sea and placed in joint command of their own small vessel, the four attend carefully to directions given by an encouraging instructor on the fundamentals of sailing. The soundtrack to the video, an extended cover of Arthur Russell's song by the same name, gently encourages them:

This is how we walk on the moon
Each step is moving
It's moving me up
Every step is moving me up

Though the four aspiring sailors are all adults, the situation comes across as a sort of pedagogical exercise similar to those of the early stages of education used to build self-esteem and encourage teamwork. The lesson is punctuated by fleeting handwritten statements that mark the chapters in the process like timekeepers: "Turning, Turning, Turning, Turning"; "Leaving the Waterfront"; "The Romance of Water"; "It's Clearing Up Again." In a similar way, on the sailboat, the instructor's often enigmatic statements provide a sense of encouragement without any determinate sense of direction that could be prescriptive: "We're moving a little bit, but not enough to bother us," "It's better to move backwards than to move forwards and leap."

These gentle words of encouragement remind one of a common practice used in more progressive models of early education in which the process of learning is considered to be an affirmative process of self-discovery. By offering a child the means of confronting one's own nature in the absence of any prospect of looming authority, it suggests a manner of being in which knowledge and curiosity interact in a way that makes dealing with the world more like playing (in both the childlike as well as the musical sense). But insofar as the sailing lesson in *This Is How We Walk On the Moon* is a learning exercise, rather than return the sailing students back to younger years of education, the situation moves them laterally, just off of their normal course in the city where they live. In a sense, they are not learning to be who they are as much as they are learning to navigate where they are.

And indeed, the project began when Billing, after listening to a number of bands from Edinburgh whose music was based around seafaring themes, observed that many of the musicians who wrote and performed this music had little or no actual relationship with the sea in their daily lives in spite of their living in a coastal city. She then coordinated the sailing lesson as a way of reclaiming a relationship that before only existed as a stylistic allusion. But in this reclamation, something else takes place as well when the musicians are placed in direct contact with the object of their artistic work, the prospect of an open sea, and the challenge of learning to navigate a floating instrument, something that also begins to speak about music, freedom, and form.

... to Play an Instrument

Borrowing both the title of the work and song from Arthur Russell, one can't help but to see *This Is How We Walk On the Moon* as a kind of dedication to Russell. And in fact, Russell himself—who, when he was alive, would go to see the Hudson River every day—also felt a strong kinship with water. In “Wild Combination,” a recent documentary on him, the music critic David Toop says “one of the interesting things about Arthur was that he was able to use this sense of oceanic formlessness, but he was able to make his own shapes from it.” For Russell, it was as if water signified an expansiveness and fluidity that he was looking for in both his music as well as his relationship to playing it.

It is no coincidence that the aspiring sailors in *This Is How We Walk On the Moon* are all musicians. As an object placed in the unsteady hands of four musicians, the sailboat becomes both musical instrument and collective work—the collaborative object of this four-member band of amateur musicians trying to get it right. And in fact, when producing and arranging the music for *This Is How We Walk On the Moon*, Billing chose specific string instruments for their relation to the physical sounds made by the boat. Likewise, while the sailboat is not literally a musical instrument, it produces a sort of song for the players—a lyricism—in that it parallels the struggle to navigate the “oceanic formlessness” of collaborative artistic work.

The instrument is always the gateway, the channel, the medium through which any musical expression is possible, and to be sure, in order to play an instrument, one has to first learn how. But one could also argue that what a musician really wants to play—the *real* instrument—lies somewhere just beyond (or prior to) its physical form, and somewhere in the sensibility of the person that wants to play it. And in this sense, it is not so much the instrument that one needs to learn as it is one's own sensibility.

How do we then start to think about fluid and lyrical forms of collaboration that can work directly from the original desire to provide or express this transmission at its inception, from its very source, and at the moment of inspiration? A documentary approach would tell the story of this original desire from the side. And while this approach might often remain trapped in the role of presenting information, it still suggests a possibility for some sort of union or overlap: an expressive form that can also reflect upon why and how it is made, in which the landscape of its inspiration is carried over to that of its transmission.