

Walking Home

An interview with Clare Qualmann and Rong Bao

CQ

Could just tell me a little bit about yourself and your artwork? You are just about to graduate from the Royal College of Art, right?

RB

Yes. I have studied both in China and America, and in London. I spent three years learning public art in China, and then I studied fine art in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the US. And I just graduated from the Royal College of Art, in sculpture.

CQ

We met because you were part of the [walkative society](#) at the Royal College. I led a walk for the student society. I was really interested to see work that you were sharing on social media called 'Rong Bao's Walk Home Project', I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about it and what inspired it?

RB

The beginning, and the main reason for this work is that during COVID there was a very strict flight policy, and super strict quarantine policy in China. If I had gone home during COVID I would have had to quarantine for at least a month, at some points up to two months, depending on the place I was going to. For example, in Beijing at many points flights could not land directly. You had to land in another city and then quarantine for two weeks first, and then travel on to Beijing and quarantine again when you arrived there. And in some places, after you go home, you have to self-quarantine yet again at your home for another two weeks. Everything in the whole world during COVID was really crazy and the flight tickets are so expensive. So, I didn't go home for three years, and a lot of students were joking around on the internet saying, 'oh if we can't take a flight home, then why not just try to walk home?'

I decided to use the street view in Google Map and Baidu map to walk home, virtually rather than for real. I mapped a route that would take me from England to China and then I captured the street view images of each step of the way and made it into a video. I wanted to visualise the way, work through what it would be like even though it is impossible to actually walk along that route.



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— 包蓉走路回家计划 —

Image: Liulu Zhang

CQ

I'm fascinated by the process of doing this! It must take absolutely ages? Obviously doing the walk itself would take a really, really long time. But the virtual process of following the Google map, going back and forth to reference between the map and street view to work out where you're going must have been very time consuming. How long did it take?

RB

It took a month to make this piece. Actually I didn't do it manually - I found people help me to write a programme – to automate from the mapped route to the street view images and to capture them in sequence. I set the frequency for image capture, because capturing every frame from street view would be too much. For example, if I want to navigate from the Royal College in Kensington to the Battersea campus, I could limit the Google Street View capture to one hundred images, enough to show every step of the way.

I worked with Google to get access to the street view API, which enables you to capture static images in batches for locations/routes that you specify. Even with this programme, it is still a

very complicated job, because for example I had to chop a really long road image sequence into maybe a thousand smaller image sequences and cross check the latitude and longitude to ensure accuracy and see if there are any missing images that I need to manually download and add.

CQ

That sounds amazing. It's really fascinating to hear the way that you are using that that technology and pulling it into your artwork. Now the work exists as a video, do you have plans to exhibit it, or publish it? I know that you have shared extracts on social media.

RB

I just showed this work in an exhibition in Beijing (May-June 2023), in a group show called 'Up in the Air' at Spurs gallery. It's produced in an edition of five, and one of them was sold to a Chinese Art Foundation, the Art Algorithm Capital Foundation.

They collect walking related works, including Marina Abramovic, so I was very pleased about this. But I am always looking for other opportunities to show it.

CQ

It struck me, when I saw your work, that there's been a flurry of artists projects recently that involve a long walk home. Most of the ones I know are in Europe. But that's probably because I've got a Eurocentric knowledge of walking art. I'm thinking of artists including [Bram Arnold](#), [Claudia Zeiske](#), and [Andrea Vasallo](#), all of whom live in the UK but who have walked home to Switzerland, Austria and Italy – the places that they were born or are 'from'. There is also the British-Iranian artist [Sara Zaltash](#), who has been planning a walk to Iran. Thinking about these works made me wonder if you have considered actually doing your walk? Is that something that you would like to do?

Rong Bao's Walk Home Project

RB

I don't know, because I think one of the really powerful things about this virtual walk is that I can't do it? Although I think the actual long walks in those examples are fascinating, I want to focus on the split between the real and the virtual; and that really resonates with the privilege or lack of privilege that different people have in the world in relation their freedom of movement.

The next project that I am working on addresses this as well. It's inspired by a project called '[Out of Eden](#)' by Paul Salopek. He traced human migration from Africa to Asia and to America on foot, photographing for National Geographic. He's walked from Africa to China, and on to South America following both ancient and current migration routes. I am planning to use Google maps to trace his route, following exactly the paths that he took. I'll make a video collage

of the street view images that echo his work. I think this will be an interesting juxtaposition between the images taken by a person on the ground, and the semi-automated imagery from google.

CQ

I find that fascinating – it's making a lot of ideas fizz for me! I think this work really addresses a sense of longing for home when you are away and you can't go back, which is quite a distinctive thing from COVID. But it's also quite a distinctive thing for a lot of people who move around the world and are restricted by the cost of travel or by their migration. Visa and bordering regimes prevent a lot of people from being able to visit home or go home at all. While in the UK we are living in a political context where borders and migration are more controlled than ever, the virtual world is opening up unprecedented opportunity to see what every single street looks like between the Royal College of Art in West London and Beijing in China.

RB

Yes, there's a very interesting point, as I shared at the beginning, the reason I made this virtual walk is because there's no border control; I can just fly around to go where I like, anywhere I want online which I can't in real life. But there's also the tricky issue that Google maps is not allowed to be used in China; the whole of Google is banned. I was able to use an alternative – Baidu maps – once I reached China. But as I worked on the project and put the images together, I discovered that China is not the only country that doesn't have Google Street view coverage. All through parts of Afghanistan there are large empty stretches where there is no data. They don't say that Google is banned, but the API database report returns zero images. The virtual border isn't necessarily announced, but it does exist, and I think that's very interesting to bring those two things together.

CQ

I wanted to ask you about some of your other work as well – you make with very diverse media and I was really struck by your sculptural work; beautiful, funny inflatable, brightly coloured sculptures that jiggle and shake and flex and move. I wanted to ask you specifically about one of the works titled 'Futile Ascent' which is a conveyor belt with a steep upward trajectory and a box marked fragile that tries and fails to go up it. You can hear a smashing sound as it turns over and gets flipped repeatedly by the conveyor. A second version repeats the same format but with boxes of COVID medicine, as they align they do start to climb, but then they fall back down again and fail to progress. It struck me that there's quite a strong connection in these works to walking or not walking, trying to walk, or trying to get somewhere.

Futile Ascent 1.0 Fragile

RB

Yes, at the beginning, I felt like all of my work was totally different, but as the body of work grows, I realise they are all sharing a main connection. I want to use humour to subvert things. I like to think about dysfunction and failure, and to use tools and materials in unexpected ways. For example, the Google map isn't designed to be used like this; to walk from London to Beijing, and the conveyor belt-machine is meant to lift the goods up. And my inflatable work has a vision to be really over the top; to be hilarious. I hope they make people think about just letting go, laughing, collapsing, releasing. It's very hard to describe using language, but I think that's my main attitude towards the world, and I hope people can see a different angle, get a different perspective when they see the work, flipping the 'normal' around into a new light.



Alien Babe Number 2, 2023, PVC fabric, vibration machine, toys, foam clay
Photo credit: Yuhao Chen



Alien Babe Number I, 2023, PVC fabric, vibration machine, toys, ceramic
Photo Credit: Kaihao Luo

CQ

I guess there's a human instinct to anthropomorphise things. Or actually to anthropomorphise everything. So, when I see your conveyor belt that doesn't work or can't work and the box that just can't get up the hill, there's a really strong sense of identification with that failure or that challenge. It's funny, but it's also quite poignant and uncanny.

RB

Yeah, it is. Thank you.

CQ

Finally I wanted to ask what your plans are next? You mentioned the collaboration on the migration routes project – are there other things developing? Will you continue to work with walking and mapping?

RB

I think so, I've been travelling for several years now, and I think I will keep going, so my whole life is sort of like moving, walking towards another place, then learning to live in that new environment, and then walking on, moving on again. So those experiences make me, as well as inspire my work.

Going forwards I plan to play with a new feature of the Baidu map. They've introduced a function where you can see previous photographs of each location so you can see what a particular street looked like in 2020, in 2015, as far back as their database goes. So right now, my work is about the distance I can travel, making a really long journey from one point to another point, but this new project would be about travelling through time. My proposal focuses on a smaller geographical location and I want to explore looping back in time to it in different ways.

CQ

That sounds great, I love the idea of a walking time machine!

RB

Yes, I'm excited to work on it – and if you know of any opportunities or spaces that would be interested in this please let me know.

CQ

I'm going to leave that in so that readers can maybe share their thoughts as well!
Thanks so much for sharing your work with me!

Rong Bao

You can find out more about Rong Bao's work here: <https://www.baorongstudio.com/>
And follow her on Instagram here: <https://www.instagram.com/rongbaobaobao/>