

The Legacy of Situationist Psychogeography:  
Its Relational Quality and Influence on Contemporary Art

Joseph Sannicandro  
[Joseph.Sannicandro@purchase.edu](mailto:Joseph.Sannicandro@purchase.edu)

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## Introduction

In the time before the Industrial Revolution, cities were defined by their rivers; the spirit of a city was revealed by the ways in which its citizens interacted with this most important of resources. Imagine how different London would be without the Thames, Paris without the Seine, or New York without the Hudson and East Rivers. The social, economic, and political life of a city revolved heavily around this major landmark, a primary source of transportation, commerce, and shared social space, not to mention drinking water. Following industrialization, however, city life began to change rapidly, and the significance of the river declined, finally superseded by the highway as the principal channel of commerce and transportation. Aqueducts and underground pipes delivered water below ground, unseen, while trains and automobiles delivered passengers and goods. This move from natural to artificial follows the general trend of modernization, and urbanization, one which has alienated us as human beings from both nature and from ourselves.

Many poets, thinkers, and artists were quick to recognize the ways in which industrialization changed the way we live, and reflected both praise and criticism in their work. As technology and its incursions on the social sphere have increased exponentially, our ontological framework has been fundamentally changed with it. Theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin responded specifically to the effect of new technologies on not only artistic production but also on aesthetic concepts that govern our understanding of works of art, while remaining critical of the culture industry that was emerging from it. This critical Marxist perspective influenced the next generation of thinkers, who bore witness to the increasing encroachment of capitalism on all aspects of the social space. Guy Debord, for example, argued that society has become a series of spectacles, commodities having overtaken all aspects of life, and we, the public, have been reduced to a society of extras, passive receptacles who act only the

minimum required for the mechanism of capitalist power to function.<sup>1</sup> Artistic production was radically altered by emerging technologies, as was artistic reception and the governing aesthetic criteria, by changes in technology and by economic structures.<sup>2</sup> Photography, film, and other inherently reproducible media emerged, raising profound questions about the nature of art and calling into question traditional aesthetic beliefs. (cf. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”) By the post-war period, European artists and intellectuals were already questioning the role of art and the artist and what constitutes art in a way that was informed by their views on technology and capitalism.

The situationists<sup>3</sup> in particular saw the way that the landscape itself, primarily urban, was being altered, and engaged in ‘psychogeographic’ research as a means of revealing and combating these attacks. Though they may not have always been interested in labeling an action as inherently ‘artistic,’ the methodologies, icons, theories, and works (of art) left behind have profoundly influenced contemporary aesthetic theorists and artists who continue to strive to understand, explore, and challenge industrial-capitalism’s negative effects on our cultural, political, and social, not to mention natural, environments.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French poet Baudelaire translated the work of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe into French for the first time. Poe’s urban stroller (or, perhaps, stalker,) was instrumental to the creation of Baudelaire’s own take on the modern gentleman, the now famous character of the *flâneur*. First described in his 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” the *flâneur* was in turn an influence on a great many 20<sup>th</sup> century artists and writers. Baudelaire related the figure to the French Impressionists, the first artists in the post-industrial world to leave the confines of the studio for the streets. Walter Benjamin examines the *flâneur* in

*Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* and *The Arcades Project*, while Guy Debord and the Situationist International (SI) were inspired to conduct psychogeographic research as a means of understanding the effects that industrialization has had on our behavior.<sup>4</sup> This articulation of the effect of the modern urban environment on its citizens emotional and psychological lives, and the (purportedly) practical strategies outlined offered by the SI to change this relation resonated further, and have been utilized in various ways by many contemporary artists, though often without the underlying, and crucial, political dimension characteristic of the SI themselves. The radical subjectivity of the psychogeographic map paired with the performative nature of the *dérive* has influenced many important artists and contributed to the progression of an aesthetic theory that reflects modern societies shaped by modern technologies.

### **Psychogeography and the new Urbanism**

Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire both wrote on what has been termed the *flâneur*, the distinctly modern figure of the urban stroller, recognizable to any urban dweller. A concept which many readers instantly connected with due to the recognizable and universal character, the *flâneur* has come to represent the way in which modern man relates to constructed, urban environments. Writing in the 1950's, radical thinkers such as Guy Debord re-appropriated the concept, turning the act of strolling into the distinct, and much celebrated *dérive*, the act of purposelessly drifting through a city in order to understand its ambience.<sup>5</sup> The SI sought to find ways to fuse art and life,<sup>6</sup> and so they considered the *dérive* to be a serious strategy. Though they too were embodiments of the *flâneur*, they did not carry around paints and canvas as did their predecessors from the century prior, but instead their artistic output was focused on subjectivity and constructed situations (hence the name.) In the early years of the SI, much consideration was

given to how future cities should be built, and the *dérive* was one means of discovering which neighborhoods should be preserved once the city was replaced by something superior.<sup>7</sup>

The SI understood the effect that the layout of a city has on its inhabitants, and sought to alter these effects by opening “a channel of communication” between the city and its citizens. Changes in communication technology have further altered, and it could be argued alienated, citizens from each other and from their cities, so creating alternative modes of communication is imperative. The technologies that affect us are not naturally occurring, but instead are designed; the effects they have on us can manifest themselves in positive and negative ways, and though these effects may not be necessarily foreseen, the designs are nonetheless planned. Architecture, urban planning, city layouts, and various aspects of infrastructure can all alter the way we relate to our environment and to each other, as individuals and as a community. Because of this fact, (the artifice of architecture,) it is a fair topic for artists to be interested in, and in fact a necessary one. Artists, whose works invariably become the relics of their culture, recognized the effect that industrialization had on us as a species and responded in various ways. The SI thus paid careful attention to urban planning and emergent technologies. They termed their investigations ‘psycho geography,’ defined by Jorn as “the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviors of individuals.” (Jorn, 45.) Such practices were made necessary by the overly cold and rational urban planning which they perceived as having excessive influence, particularly in post-war Europe. They were reacting to bourgeois culture and politics on the one hand and the *sterile, austere functionalism* of high modernism on the other. ... In the modern city, *Logos* has triumphed over *Eros*, order over disorder, organization over rebels. (Merrifield, pg. 27. Emphasis mine.)

The irrationalism of Freud and Nietzsche thus take practical form with the playfulness of the SI. Play was one of the central tenants of their philosophy, reacting against rationalism, and embracing

*Eros*.<sup>8</sup> As Simon Sadler puts it, “...situationism emphasized the subversive power of “carnivalization”- the opportunity for unofficial and popular elements to playfully invert social and cultural conventions by elevating the everyday and “uncrowning” the elite. “With the disappearance of the exceptional personal performance,” Constant wrote in 1948, “‘genius’ will become public property and the word ‘art’ will acquire a completely new meaning.” Huizinga’s thesis...had a different emphasis, positing that the wellspring of culture, or at least all great culture, was the instinct for play.” (Sadler, pp. 34-35.)<sup>9</sup>

The above quote also illuminates the philosophical influence of Georges Bataille on early situationism. The importance of inverting the social order, the populism of a free activity, and hence it’s disassociation with capitalism, is crucial to the act. It is for this reason that the street is appropriated as the venue for art, as opposed to traditional sights of ‘art’ such as the gallery or the theatre. Debord announced at the innagural meeting of the Situationist International, “that which changes our way of seeing the street is more important than that which changes our way of seeing a painting.” (Sadler, pg. 69.) Their work was not solely artistic, but also was intended to be revolutionary and practical. Denying that such a thing as ‘Situationism’ even existed, they set out to create constructed situations.

A constructed situation is “a sort of gesamtkunstwerk (a total work of art). Each constructed situation would provide a décor and ambiance of such power that it would stimulate new sorts of behavior, a glimpse into an improved future life based upon human encounter and play. (Sadler, pg. 105.)

Sadler’s understanding of what the constructed situation means seems to suggest the importance of transcending the typical mechanisms of consumption. Walter Benjamin makes a similar point in

“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” and Sadler is right to identify that his “dictum- that artistic apparatus “is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, readers or spectators into collaborators”<sup>10</sup>- could almost have served as a situationist motto.” (Sadler, pp. 36-37.)

The threats posed by functional architecture<sup>11</sup> and urban planning were countered by encouraging the public to take part in their own psychogeographic experiments, and in the construction of one’s own situations. In fact, in the first issue of the Lettrist<sup>12</sup> journal *Potlatch*, in which the term ‘psychogeography’ was introduced in the name of a column, “The psychogeographic game of the week,’ readers were encouraged to write to the editors describing their own psychogeographic experiences.<sup>13</sup> Debord’s collaborator and fellow Situationist Asger Jorn wrote that psychogeography was “an artistic practice carried out in the everyday space of the street rather than in the conventional art spaces of the gallery or theatre.” (Jorn, 69.)<sup>14</sup> Thus the practice is both radically subjective as well as novel in its communal orientation.

The drifts offered a new way of surveying the city, and so a new way of *representing* urban space was called for, hence the Psychogeographic maps were created pg.91 Guy Debord created, with his aforementioned Dutch colleague Jorn, several psychogeographic maps, most notably “Psychogeographic Guide of Paris” (1956) and “The Naked City” (1957.) A sort of Dadaist collage, these maps were made by cutting up a map of Paris and reassembling the pieces based on their drifts through the city. The scattering of the pieces and the surrealism of the map is meant to convey the sense of personal disorientation one experiences while drifting. Although radically subjective in capturing the experience of its creators, the maps could be used by the viewer as a catalyst to navigate oneself through varied ambiances, both physical and psychological.



Debord and Jorn understood the resulting psychogeographic maps, and the *dérive* itself, as a form of *détournement*, a concept fundamental to understanding the artistic output of the SI. *Détournement* literally translates as ‘diversion,’ though it has been argued that a more fitting translation might be “‘rerouting,’ ‘hijacking,’ ‘embezzlement,’ ‘misappropriation,’ ‘corruption,’ all acts implicit in the situationist use of society’s ‘preexisting aesthetic elements.’” (Sadler, pg. 17.) This concept is associated with Jorn’s essay “*Détournement Painting*,” still a strikingly modern text that has clearly influenced contemporary artists.<sup>15</sup> This concept of *détournement*, understood independently of mere painting, is necessary to any nuanced understanding of the psychogeographic maps as works of art. The maps were created by cutting out the areas of Paris that were found to be most interesting, generally neighborhoods discovered by the *dérive*, and generally those that were the least gentrified. They were mapping atmospheric unities, and trying to encourage moving through varied ambiances seamlessly, a way of combating the ‘havenness’ which has interfered with our authentic mode of Being.<sup>16</sup>

The source material for “*Guide psychogéographique de Paris*” was the “*Plan de Paris à vol d’oiseau*,”<sup>17</sup> the most popular and extensive map of Paris available at the time. The *Plan* was published in 1956, and drawn by G. Peltier, and was therefore a work of art itself, and thus capable of being *détourned*. Although all traditional maps embody Cartesian rationality, the *Plan* was a particularly attractive target for the situationists because of its “unconditional celebration of “the Spectacles” of Paris, which it carefully listed.” (Sadler , pg. 83.) These neighborhoods were cut out of the map and rearranged according to their ambience, while red arrows depicted the most common (psychogeographical) ways of traveling from one distinct ambience to the others. Traditional maps, with their Cartesian rationality so despised by the situationists for its cold

calculations and inauthenticity, organize information spatially. Psychogeographic maps rely on a different method of organization.<sup>18</sup> The typologies that order a psychogeographic map are subjective, and can vary greatly. In the case of the two mentioned above, distinct atmospheric unities were carved out of the supposed unity of Paris, a unity which the SI saw threatened and eroded by gentrification. The neighborhoods are often cut out along roads that are heavily traveled by automobiles.<sup>19</sup> In this way the roads have replaced the rivers completely, making islands out of city blocks surrounded by a moat of machines. The SI often said, in explanation of the *dérive*, that roads for pedestrians and roads for automobiles are incompatible. In fact, for the situationists “the rise of the commuter journey by private motor car exemplified the dissolution of the old city.” (Sadler, pg. 25.) The drift has a radically political and subversive character from this perspective, as a way of reclaiming space taken by cars<sup>20</sup>, highway authorities, and urban planners. The city bears not just the scars of gentrification, but also of militarism, and this is particularly evident in Paris. The Champs-Élysées, for example, is nowhere to be found on any of Debord’s maps. It was widened and straightened by Napoleon to enable grand military parades, which also makes marching an army down it easier. The German troops famously marched down in a military parade celebrating the Fall of France in 1940, as did the American and Free French troops in 1944 when they reclaimed the city. More objectionable to the SI than even military parades is the potential for the cities roads to be utilized by the military and police against their own citizens, as during the student riots of 1968.

Debord wrote “The Theory of the *Dérive*” as a way of explaining many of the theoretical concepts which justify the creation of (the) psychogeographic maps. Debord calls into question the underlying premise of traditional maps, which posit a perspective, that of an omniscient viewer,

that never actually exists.<sup>21</sup> Therefore the map is fantastic; as an act of fantasy, it exists purely as a construct of the imagination, and is in this way an art object, if one claiming to be objective. (Cf. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*.) It is organized to help navigate, but Debord knew that the map could be organized instead by various other typologies. Debord therefore disregarded spatial connections and instead organized his maps according to feeling, creating documents that are completely subjective in nature, as well as entirely trapped in a specific moment in time. This was unique and could not be universalized, (not a bad thing in itself,) but the map could still be used as a guide, calling into question traditional, capital-centric, notions held of the organization of space and our behavior in it.

An early example of the *dérive* inspired by psychogeographic mapping was recalled by Debord, in which a friend wandered around the Harz region of Germany guided by blindly following a London Tube map. (Merrifield, pg. 48.) If we take the idea seriously, the unity imagined by a traditional map is in fact imagined, if the criteria for the map is changed. For Debord, his maps represent the feel of the city, and so certain neighborhoods do not belong next to each other on the map, because they do not *feel* next to each other, in life. Additionally, by altering the spatial lay out, the reader is jolted into re-contextualizing and re-examining their understanding of the city, by breaking from routine or calling to mind one's own ignorance. "*The Naked City* brings these distinctions and differences out into the open, the violence of its fragmentation suggesting the real violence involved in constructing the city of the *Plan*." (McDonough "Situationist Space," pg. 65) So although these maps are subjective, they can still be true guides in that they can aid in awakening the follower to the rhythms of the city that may have been masked by idiosyncratic routines and insidious urban planners. They also, as art objects, represent the city at a specific time in its history, as the ambiances will of course change over time, and thus the

psychogeographical map is also something of a time capsule.

The simpler and more elegant of the two maps is certainly “The Naked City,” which has also become the most iconic work of situationist art. Unlike its more complicated predecessor, the source material was the “Guide Taride de Paris,” (1951.) Unlike the magnificent *Plan*, which stressed the various spectacles of the city, the *Guide* seemed to be defined by its arbitrary grid, or “banal indexing,” as Sadler puts it. The image of the fragments is much more interesting, and suggests a body. This personification of the city makes sense, as the situationists had argued that capitalism has claimed the body as site just as it exercises its power on the city. Situationism thus often used the female body as a symbol of the cityscape, as in Debord’s *Memoires*. Aside from its more aesthetically pleasing and sleeker look, the duo also imbued the work with a more meaningful title, inspired by the American *noir* film, *The Naked City*. After being blacklisted, director Jules Dassin moved to France, where he continued his work, including *Rififi*, which won the Cannes Film Festival around the time the psychogeographic maps were being produced. *Naked City* (1948) was an early example of realism in cinema, shot on location and in a documentary style, following a detective searching for the murderer of a young model. The title works on many levels; Debord and Jorn were doing research, not unlike the detectives of the film. But the opening narration from the film perfectly encapsulates the significance of the title.

As you can see, we’re flying over an island, a city, a particular city, and this is the story of a number of its people, and the story, also, of the city itself. It was not photographed in a studio. Quite the contrary...the actors played out their roles on the streets, in the apartment houses... This is the city as it is, hot summer pavements, the children at play, the buildings in their naked stone, the people without makeup. (taken from Sadler, pg. 82.)

It is easy to see why this appealed to Debord and Jorn, and why they would name their beautiful map after such a film. The city becomes personified, a character and a setting, a stage and a space for performance, and relationality, for communication and to communicate with. The city is naked, authentic.

The map itself consists of nineteen fragments cut from the *Guide*, in black ink, which are then spread out, loosely resembling an abstraction of a body, and connected by red directional arrows. “Its subtitle describes the map as an “illustration of the hypothesis of psychogeographical turntables.” McDonough sees a great significance in this fact, and goes on to link the metaphor of the turntable directly to the larger theory of unitary urbanism.

Approached by Debord, the term “*plaque tournante*,” which usually denotes a railway turntable (a circular revolving platform with a track running along its diameter, used for turning locomotives), here describes the function of the arrows linking the segments of the psychogeographic map. Each segment has a different “unity of atmosphere.” The arrows describe “the spontaneous turns of direction taken by a subject moving through these surroundings in disregard of the useful connections that ordinarily govern his conduct.””

The drifter is akin to a locomotive, which is guided by the rails, just as the psychogeographer is drawn towards, or repulsed by, the varied ambiances of the city. It is in this sense that the drifter is communicating with the city. “The Situationists... subject’s freedom of movement is restricted by the instrumentalized image of the city propagated under the reign of capital.” (McDonough, pg. 60.)

One must ask what it was about the modern city that so troubled the situationists. They understood architecture as profoundly affecting social order,<sup>22</sup> for it orders the way we relate to and navigate through space.<sup>23</sup> This notion can be extended to all forms of urban planning. In “Fluid Spaces: Constant and the Situationist Critique of Architecture,” Thomas McDonough explains “that social order... tended to become more and more fascistic,... and reaching its fullest

development... as the triumph of what the SI... called ‘ the organization of life along the lines of a concentration camp.’” (Zegher, pg. 94)<sup>24</sup> He goes on to point out that the “narrowness of bourgeois life was not perceived merely in the abstract sense of its mores and manners,” in the way one might typically interpret a Marxist critique, but rather as “a concrete matter of its spatial practice.” To demonstrate this understanding, McDonough relates Debord’s reaction to a map of Paris showing the movements of a young woman over the course of a year, compiled by an urban sociologist. The map has a clearly visible triangle, which shows that the woman rarely deviated from her idiosyncratic route as she navigated between her school, her residence, and her piano instructor’s. Debord saw this as an example of “modern poetry capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions’ -specifically ‘indignation at the fact that there are people who live like that.’” (Zegher, pg 94. Debord, “Dérive,” pg 1) Here we see that Debord not only sees a material understanding of his criticism of capitalism, but also a sort of aestheticization of the relationship between a city and its inhabitants, even if it is demonstrating a negative manifestation.

The radical reappraisal of architecture and urban planning offered by the situationists is not without antecedents. Sadler specifically mentions the work of Giovanni Piranesi (1760,) Ferdinand Cheval (1879-1905,) and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1786.) Like cities that have grown organically in harmony with nature, the works of these men add to our sense of community and a healthy means of interacting with space. In Ivan Chtcheglov ‘s “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” we see the most poetic vision of the possibility of the future cityscape.

Everyone will, so to speak, live in their own personal “cathedrals.” There will be rooms more conducive to dreams than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but love.

Others will be irresistibly alluring to travelers. ...

This project could be compared with the Chinese and Japanese gardens that create optical illusions — with the difference that those gardens are not designed to be lived in all the time — or with the ridiculous labyrinth in the Jardin des Plantes, at the entry to which (height of absurdity, Ariadne(3) unemployed) is the sign: No playing in the labyrinth. ...

This city could be envisaged in the form of an arbitrary assemblage of castles, grottos, lakes, etc. It would be the baroque stage of urbanism considered as a means of knowledge.

But this theoretical phase is already outdated. We know that a modern building could be

constructed which would have no resemblance to a medieval castle but which could preserve and enhance the Castle poetic power (by the conservation of a strict minimum of lines, the transposition of certain others, the positioning of openings, the topographical location, etc.).

This description stands in sharp contrast to the vision of an architect such as Le Corbusier, whom the situationists especially disliked. Looking back on his plans for Paris, including repetitions of cross-shaped apartment complexes, (see Sadler, Figure 1.8, pg. 24,) one can't help but see its similarities to the failed housing projects of the United States, such the Bronx's Co-Op City, which is a relative success compared to even more disastrous projects in other American cities. This was the type of rationalist and Cartesian zeal for imposing order that the situationists opposed. Looking back now, after comparing Le Corbusier's vision to such disasters of urban planning, I think we can fairly judge the SI to have come out on top of this debate. The rationalist view of the future of urbanism has failed.

The SI considered themselves as the descendents of Dada and Surrealism, as the inheritors of this legacy of challenging bourgeois conceptions of life and art, but also considered<sup>25</sup> their practices to completely supercede those of their forbearers. The 'works of art' produced by the Dadaists were created with the intention of being absurd, of destroying the concept of art by leveling the aesthetic playing field.<sup>26</sup> The Dadaists were attempting to create a radical paradigm shift, breaking away from old, bourgeois aesthetics in favor of expressions which reflected the times. They were intentionally provocative. The SI continue this tradition of provocation, and sought to 'construct situations' as a means of creating new forms of human relations which have been flattened by rationalism, bourgeois values, urban planning, and capitalist enforced primacy of

the image.

Both Debord and Jorn were interested in *the spectacle*, and sought to identify the relationship between an art object, its referent, and its viewer, (the spectator.) The spectator does not determine the value of a work of art, in my view, but rather that great works are capable of consistently opening a space for community. The spectacle itself is a negative term, describing a temporary manifestation around an object, or more accurately an image or appearance, which is not great art, but rather a Thing, in the Heideggerian sense. This concept of triangulation, which is related to Jorn's own concept of *triolectics*, brings to mind Theodor Adorno's works on aesthetics. Adorno argues that all art is fantasy, as it is always trying to represent something, though it is something else, so there exists a tension between that being represented, the work itself (be it painting, literature, music, or whatever) and the viewer, or spectator.<sup>27</sup> Art is fantasy, and can never be what it mimics. This is one more justification for Debord's implementation of a psychogeographic map as a tool, for the objectivity of the traditional map cannot ever be realized.

The psychogeographic map is fragmented, and this is completely acceptable. In this way the SI were absolutely postmodern, unaffected by the lack unity, perhaps abandoning the search for unity all together. In fact by identifying neighborhoods within Paris that are distinct, those cut out to make the collage, they are physically attacking the proposed unity that is 'Paris.' Marxists, though clearly influenced by Nietzsche and irrationalism, the SI were analyzing effects, and not trying to see what could not be seen.

### **Relational Aesthetics and the Situationist International**

Similarly, Bourriaud identifies 1990's performance artists as embodying an aesthetic that is



relational, one that is rooted in the moment and not preoccupied with being material; it is only alive in that it is replicable, more inherently reproducible than Benjamin could have imagined! The trend of inherent reproducibility and loss of aura did not peak with film, as Benjamin thought, but has reached a new height in performance art.<sup>28</sup> Bourriaud describes the work of many varied artists whose works embody a modern dichotomy; they exist only as performances in specific times and places, though as actions they are reproducible. Their work is interesting, and artistic, because these ‘constructed situations’ blur the line between participant, work, artist, and spectator, and raise questions about our social organization. In a certain sense, art has always been made to raise questions about social relations, and Bourriaud is merely pointing out the ways in which our social relations have been affected by new technology. This new understanding of aesthetics that is based on relationality and interactivity, rooted in material and historical realities, as well as social conditions. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud posits an aesthetics for the modern world, one which reflects the changes which have occurred in industrialized capitalist societies. For Bourriaud, this means incorporating new theoretical concepts, particularly as they relate to technology, such as usability, interactivity, play/rewind/fast-forward, and so on. Summarized as *relational aesthetics*, he claims that modern artists, or those working in the 1990’s at least, reject traditional aesthetic notions in favor of work that plays with social relations. In this way art has become about reproducibility and performance, and less about objects and posterity,<sup>29</sup> instead focusing on ‘documentation,’ (since the gallery is still a store at its core.) He reiterates that this documentation should not be mistaken for the work itself, however, which is inherently tied to a specific time and place. He writes that contemporary art is “viewable only at a specific time,” and that the

documentation ... should not be confused for the work itself. This type of activity presupposes a contract with the viewer, an “arrangement” whose clauses have tended to become diversified since the 1960s.” (Bourriaud, pg. 29)

Bourriaud is focused on the new theoretical concepts underlying contemporary art, and though many of these practices began in the ‘60s, our way of understanding them has evolved greatly in tandem with advances in technology. Much of what he offers is rooted in Situationist theory. Debord put forth the idea that the image has become the “final form of commodity reification,” and Bourriaud and the artists he describes could not exist if not for this formulation. He frees Debord of much of his Marxist leanings by refusing to challenge the problem of commerce in art, at least directly, instead writing that art is “a human activity based on commerce,” whose sole function is “to be exposed to this commerce.” (Bourriaud, pg. 19) He takes great measures to lay out how artistic practice has long been based on relations,<sup>30</sup> on how with modernization this relationality has been brought to a new height. For Debord, the spectacle masked true human relations. The social became dominated by economics, and human relations suffered. Bourriaud believes that artists can re-appropriate this space by making the spectator an active participant, by creating new, authentic, interactive space and social relations through art. “Any art work might thus be defined as a relational artwork,” he posits, but first notes that the society of the spectacle is followed by a society of extras, who find “the illusion of an interactive democracy in more or less truncate channels of communication...” (Bourriaud, pg. 26.) Though a recent work, technology has continued to progress and to grow exponentially, dating even these capitulations.

Not unlike Marx, Bourriaud points out that the ‘society of the spectacle,’ and all commodities, deals primarily with human relations, though these relations are often masked by

‘image.’ He is clearly indebted to Debord for much of his understanding of Marxist concepts. The separation resulting from living under industrial-capitalism is one reason why works that explore relationality have become artistic acts. Bourriaud writes that “this is a society where human relations are no longer ‘directly experienced’, but start to become blurred in their ‘spectacular’ representation.” (Bourriaud, pg 9.) Again drawing on Marx and Debord, he continues to argue that the essence of humanity is its social relations, and talks of life as a game, something the Situationists would have approved of.<sup>31</sup> The Situationist ‘constructed situation,’ which can include many activities beyond those that are psychogeographical, is a part of the game, and Debord saw “‘art being exceeded’ by a revolution in day-to-day life.” (Bourriaud, pg. 19) This understanding is critical to relational aesthetics, as well as to the SI, because it is this blurring of life and art that gives these practices force. Bourriaud reiterates this point, clarifying that the ‘constructed situation’ is “intended to replace artistic representation by the experimental realization of artistic energy in everyday settings.” (Bourriaud, pg. 84)

These Situationist theories have left more of a legacy than the works themselves, and in many ways this is the point. Debord and the Situationists wanted to fuse life and art, not to leave material evidence but to change the way individuals interact and think about the structures which govern our lives. Though the images, such as “The Naked City,” are quite iconic, it is the theoretical justification which continues to influence generations of artists and musicians. Today, the questions raised about technology, urban-planning, industrialization and capitalism, and the concept of psychogeography in general, clearly informs the work of several major contemporary artists, from performance artists, such as Vito Acconci or Sophie Calle, to rock bands, such as the (international) Noise Conspiracy. Because of the widespread appropriation of SI concepts, particularly the *dérive*, it is difficult to argue that these ideas have retained any of their political

significance, if they ever even had any. Regardless of how they have been used, the concepts are still powerful, and retain their revolutionary utility.

## **Legacy and Influence on Contemporary Artists**

Contemporary artists continue to produce works that question the social relations which are defined by industrial-capitalism/modernity, and many artists do still raise the same kinds of questions about how societal structures control or manipulate our behavior simply by steering the way we move and see. Janet Cardiff and Charles LaBelle are two representatives of the various types of contemporary artists whose work can be understood via relational aesthetics and psychogeographical frameworks.

Janet Cardiff is a Canadian installation artist whose work is primarily audio-based. “Her Long Black Hair,” part of a series of sight-specific urban walking tours designed by Cardiff, takes the listener on a walk through Manhattan’s Central Park. The listener becomes more than simply a spectator, but instead an active participant, strolling through the park, observing other people and listening to the narrator’s own experience in the park, following the path of a woman in decades old photographs. The guide makes several direct references to Baudelaire, which makes the connection to psychogeography easier to discern. She also alludes to the story of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, specifically imploring that we “Don’t look back.”<sup>32</sup> A clear genealogy is visible between her retroactive voyeurism/audio-guided *dérive* and psychogeographic practice.

The audio tour relies on re-creating binaural sounds, rendering for the listener a convincing

three-dimensional world. As one walks through the park, one begins to exist in an odd and fantastic space between reality and art, never quite sure if one is hearing a sounds from the headphones or from those actually in the park that day. Cardiff's voice is hypnotic in its cadence and tone, and easily guides us along. The premise of "Her Long Back Hair" is that the narrator found old photographs showing a young woman in various locations throughout Central Park. We do not know how much of the narrative we are given is fictional, which heightens the surrealism of the experience. Cardiff narrates, though never identifies herself as such, her *drift* through the park, attempting to find the exact locations where the photographs were taken. Did she truly find these photographs, or is that her in them? Perhaps someone else? The narrative itself is filled with similar ambiguities. She wonders who took the photographs. A lover perhaps? What was their story, who was around that day, what did they experience in the park, how did their relationship end, are they still together, and so on. Making many allusions to Baudelaire and *Orpheus*, she weaves a stunning narrative that still manages to still open a space for subjective experience. After all, the listeners are still themselves, wandering through the park. In this way, Cardiff has created the audio equivalent of a psychogeographic map; she logs a subjective experience, her own wanderings around the park (which may or may not be sincere) and presents them to others to guide them through there own exploration through constantly shifting ambiances and locations. Though the park is basically unchanged, those who populate it and the events that one encounters are fundamentally different.

Charles LaBelle's work is more easily identified as being psychogeographic in nature. Since 1997, LaBelle has kept a record of each and every building he has physically entered. The project is known as *BUILDINGS ENTERED*. This alone, the idea of entering, or penetrating the building, combined with his personification of the structure, gives the project an erotic tone.

Entering the building becomes a sexual act. LaBelle himself confirms this in his project description, in which he writes that the project is “a modest proposal for “registering the raw material of everyday life and a new ‘libidinal apparatus’ for coping with the modern industrial landscape.” (quoting from Fredric Jameson.) As of 2007, ten years into the project, LaBelle had entered approximately 10,000 buildings, which demonstrates a break from routine. (compare to our triangulated woman.) In an interview with Nuit Banai, LaBelle suggests that “the authentic aesthetic experience occurs in his singular physical encounter with space. It exists in the moment when the artist crosses an unknown threshold--- when space and the body intersect. For LaBelle, this is a kind of erotic interpenetration, which transforms both the world and the artist and leaves neither untouched.” It would be difficult to imagine such rhetoric from a contemporary artist in a world in which the SI hadn’t existed, for just like them, he is also questioning the relationship between space and the body, and capitalisms dominance over both. Some of these buildings are materially documented and exhibited, as *BLDGS ENTERED*, though the drawing is in no way necessary to the project.

Concomitant with *BLDGS ENTERED* is as parallel project, *Territory Covered (Blood Maps.)* When LaBelle moved from Los Angeles to Harlem, NY’s Sugar Hill neighborhood in 2005, he dedicated his work to exploring his new home, producing a series called *Sugar Hill Suites-BLDG* and *Sugar Hill Suites- Territory Covered (Days 1-14)*. Through walking around Sugar Hill, LaBelle sketched hundred of apartments and businesses, and kept careful notes on the routes he walked each day, finally redrawing them, in his own blood, with arrows, notes, and key places, creating both documentation of his wandering as well as psychogeographic map. The 788 watercolor-pencil drawings of buildings he sketched create a temporal portrait of the neighborhood,

trapped in time just as Debord's impression of Paris is trapped in 1957. His maps, documenting his daily walks around Sugar Hill, are clearly influenced by Debord's, though LaBelle adds his own unique style. Similar arrows to those used by Debord make appearances, though here they represent "psycho-spatial movement," (as in *Day 14*) or the singularity and overlap of the beginning and the end (as in *Day 12*.) The splattered blood of *Day 13* may call to mind a page from Debord's book *Memoires*, which has similar patterns and collage of text. Like in *The Naked City* and *The Psychogeographical Guide of Paris*, LaBelle's maps may show two or more areas without connecting them spatially, and only represents subjective connections. LaBelle disassembles the perceived unity of the neighborhood in some ways by breaking it up into distinct unities of his own.

A 2004 piece by LaBelle entitled *Driftworks* also betrays his debt to the Situationists. A photo-based work made up of compound photos from shots taken while traveling all over the world, *Driftworks* is a record of the artists' drifts creating unities now from pieces of many cities and thousands of photographs (which themselves create a type of unity.) Like the work of Francis Alys, and other contemporary artists whose work can be understood through the lens of psychogeography, LaBelle's work has a clear political subtext which is inherent to the project.

Older pieces, such as those by Sophie Calle and Vito Acconci, also demonstrate a debt to psychogeography and the *dérive*. As Bourrioud describes, Calle's work "consists largely in describing her meetings with strangers." (Bourrioud, pg. 30) In *Suite Venitienne* (1980) she documents a trip to Venice, in which she follows a casual acquaintance whom she met at a gallery opening in Paris after overhearing his plans. She wanders around Venice, hoping to encounter this man, disguised and carrying a special camera so she will not have to look directly at him, and attract his attention, to photograph him. "He's not there," "I have seen him," "What if he saw

me?” the accompanying text relates. Calle’s adventure is itself the art work, embodying both relational aesthetics and situationist psychogeography. The documentation which makes up the ‘work’ to be exhibited consists of her photographs and several type-written journal entries. One can’t help but compare *Suite Venitienne* to Ralph Rumney’s *Psychogeographic Map of Venice* (1957,) a photographic collage recording Rumney’s drift through the city. Her debt to the SI is made all the more obvious.

Acconci’s 1969 work *Following Piece* similarly relies on random encounters to produce a drift which is in turn documented in photographs. For one month, Acconci would leave his home and follow the first person he saw until they entered a place he could not follow (such as a private residence.) As Bourriaud reminds us, the documentation is not to be confused with the work. The art work is itself the act of following. This was a very radical notion when first proposed, and could not have been made for not the influence of the Situationists.

Owing more to Constant perhaps than Debord, contemporary installation artists explore the ways in which we rely on our senses and how constructed spaces play into those perceptions. Artists such as Olafur Eliasson, for instance, can be understood as belonging to this lineage. Most importantly, Eliasson’s work is designed to make us ‘see ourselves seeing ourselves.’ This self-consciousness is quite a radical aim for a work of art. “Eliasson presents perception as it is lived in the world. Because people do not stand in front of his work as if before a picture, but rather inside them, actively engaged, his installations posit the very act of looking as a social experience.” (Loxana Marcoci, Curator, Klaus Biesenbaer, Chief Curator, MoMA, *Olafur Eliasson: Take Your Time*) For example, in *Mirror Door* (2008) spotlights shine at rectangular mirror doors creating a circle of light on the gallery floor. When the viewer stands in that spot the attention of the piece is transformed as the individual becomes self-conscious of themselves in the

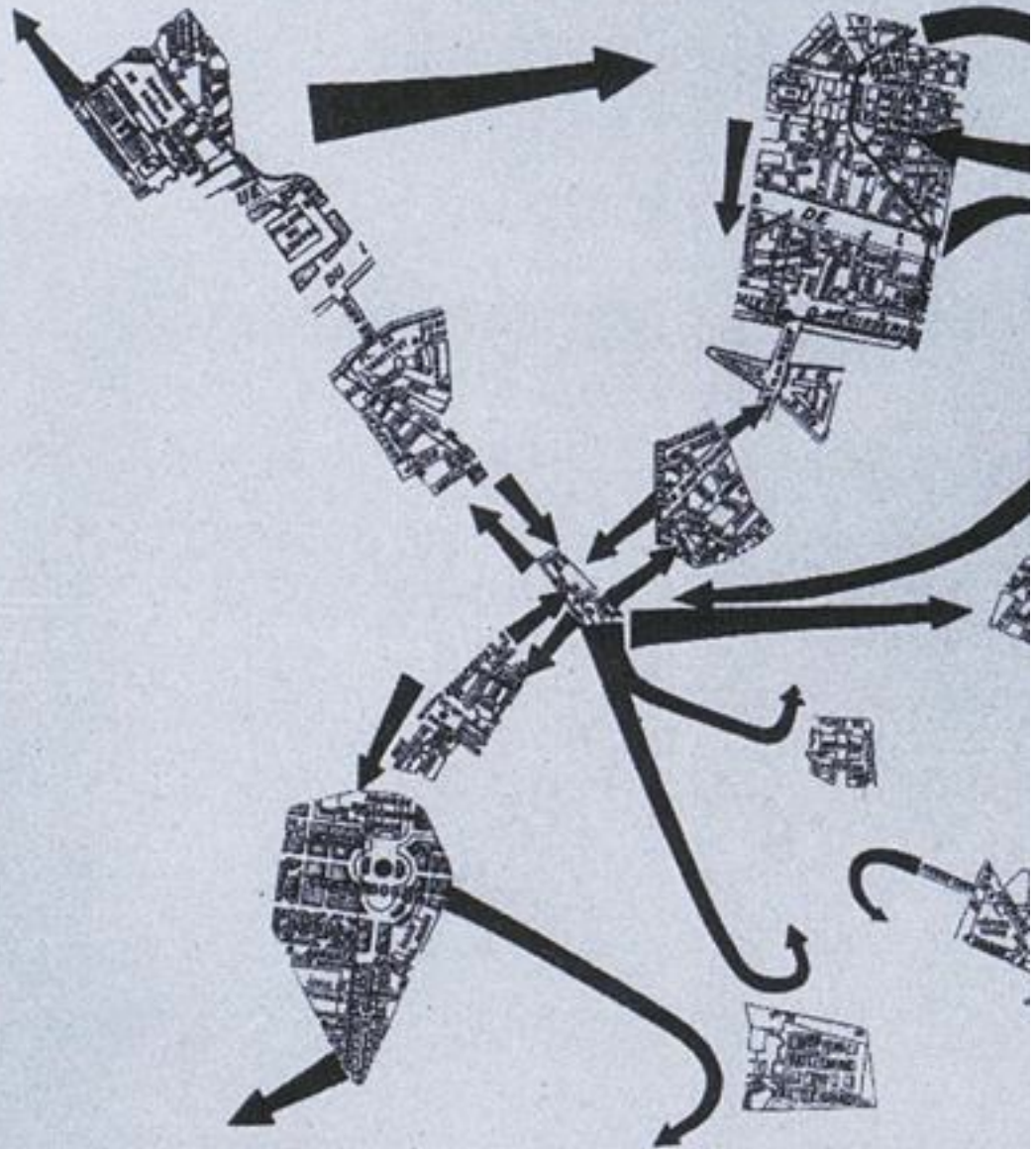


mirror and being watched by the other museum-goers. More personal is *Space Reversal* (2007) in which an opening in a corridor creates a space where the viewer and the immediate surroundings are reflected into infinity, literally allowing one to see oneself. Though not reliant on the blurring of life and art, Eliasson still plays with the affects of installations on perception, and relies on our self-awareness.

Psycho geography, and performance art in general as it has come to be understood, takes place in a world in which art and life have been blurred. The act itself is art, designed to create a situation which breaks the mystical illusion of the spectacle, which has created a 'society of extras,' trapped in passivity. In a world in which "the image is the final form of commodity reification," it is a significant political statement to deny the commodification of art by relocating the art work in a temporal action.



## Appendix- Images



# THE NAKED CITY

ILLUSTRATION DE L'HYPOTHÈSE DES PLAQUES

Figure 1: Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *The Naked City*, 1957.

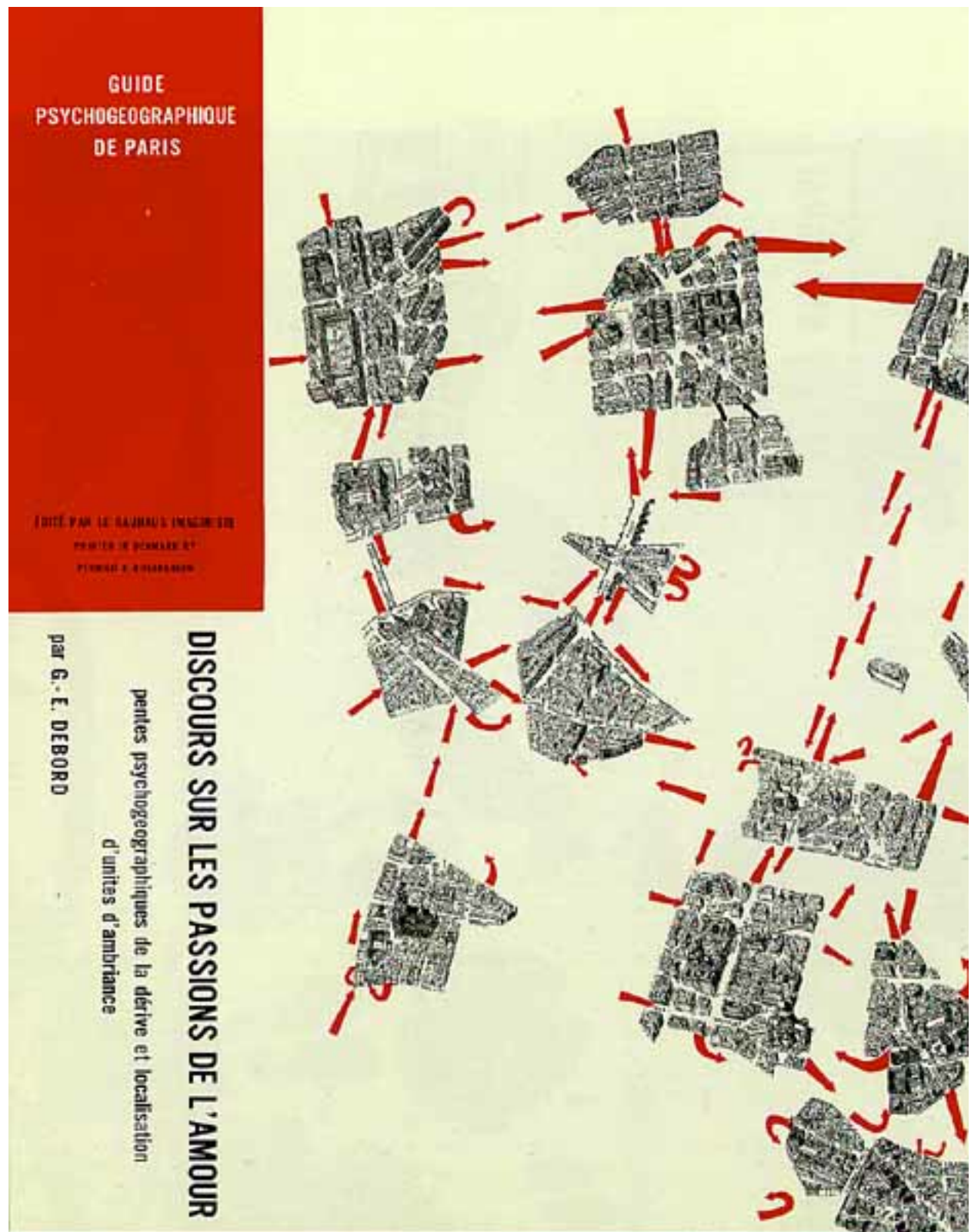


Figure 2: Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, The Psychogeographic Guide of Paris, 1957.







Figure 3: Guy Debord, Life continues to be free and easy, c. 1959.

In this piece, Debord *detourns* his own work, adding a collage of text, a postage stamp, and hand colored figures over a portion of *The Naked City*.

HUI

le public se sentait atteint dans sa dignité

on entendait les cris aigus des bonnes femmes et  
les injures des hommes. Les salauds, ordures,  
fumières, assassins, bouchers, résonnaient

Figure 4: Guy Debord, a page his book *Memoires*, 1957.

# Sugar Hill Suite - Day Territory covered Nov. 9

Spider-Man Araphel

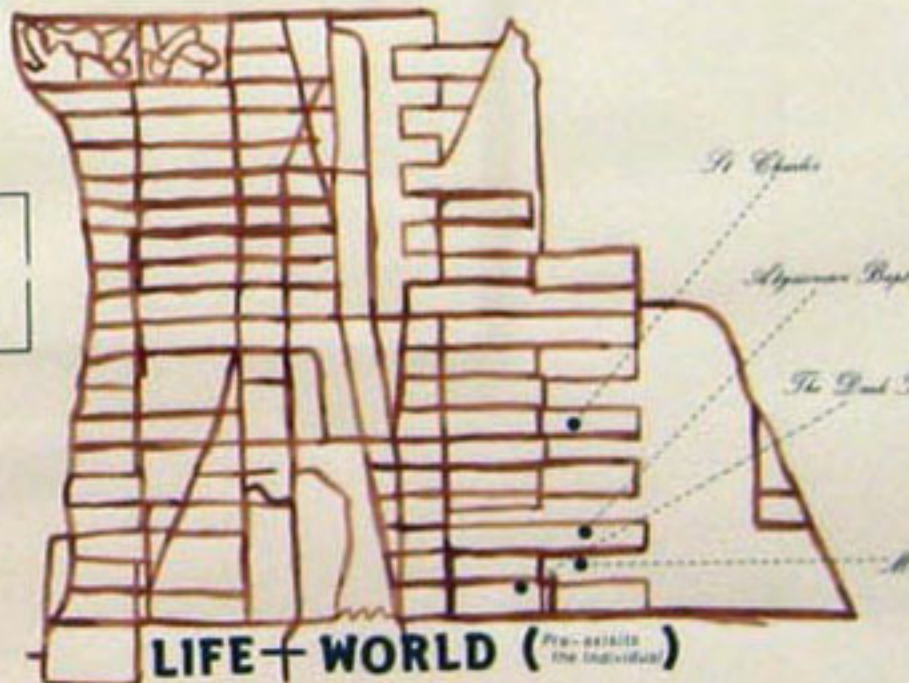
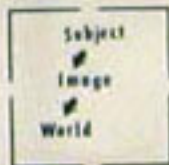
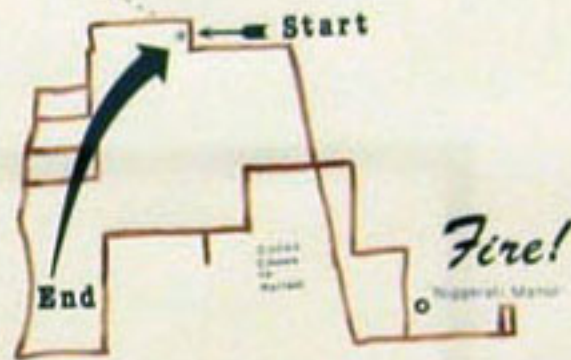


Figure 5:  
Charles LaBelle  
Territory Covered- Day 12, 2005-06  
Blood and Letraset on paper  
17" x 14"

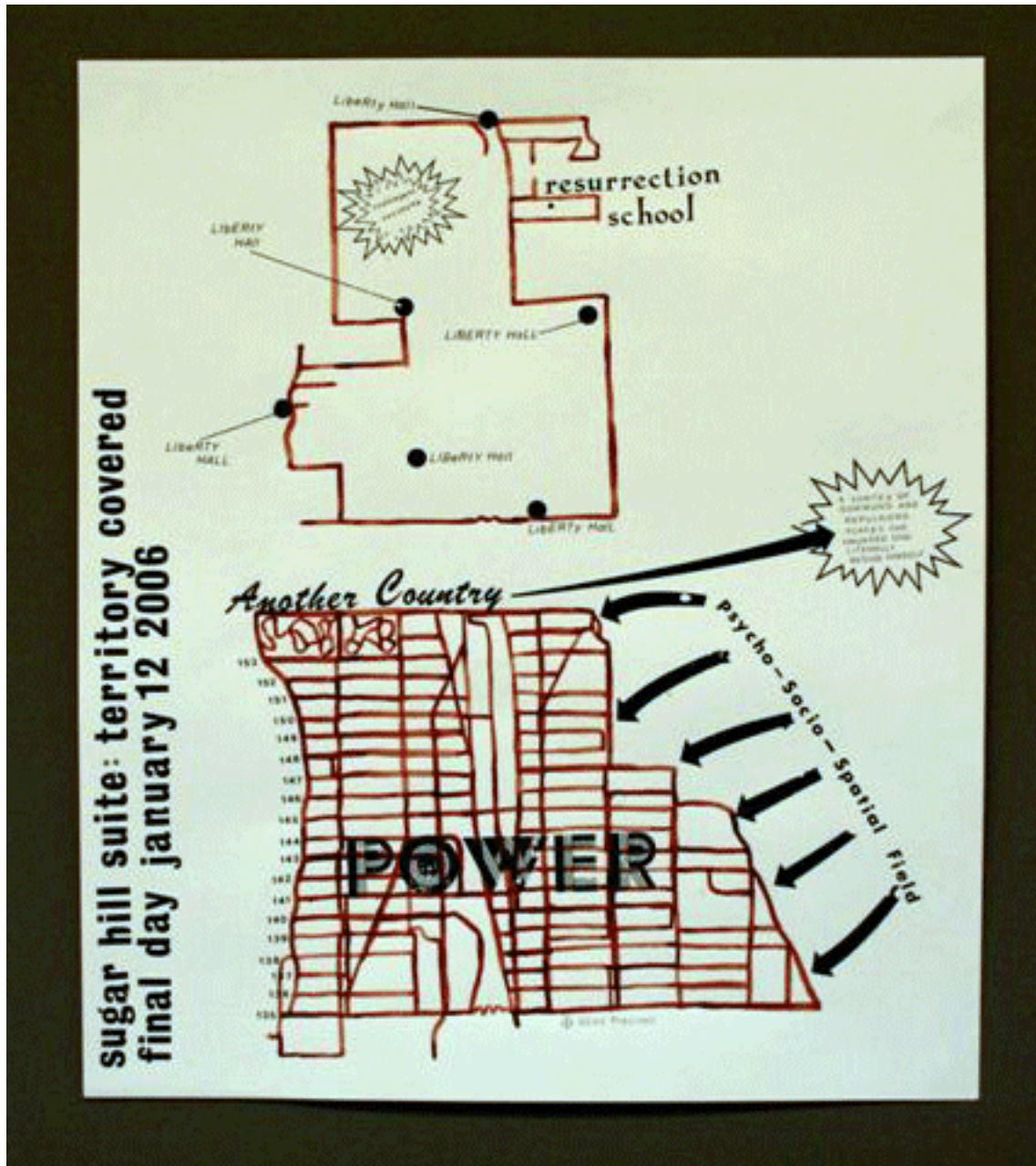


Figure 6:  
Charles LaBelle  
Territory Covered- Final Day, 2005-06  
Blood and Letraset on paper

17" x 14"

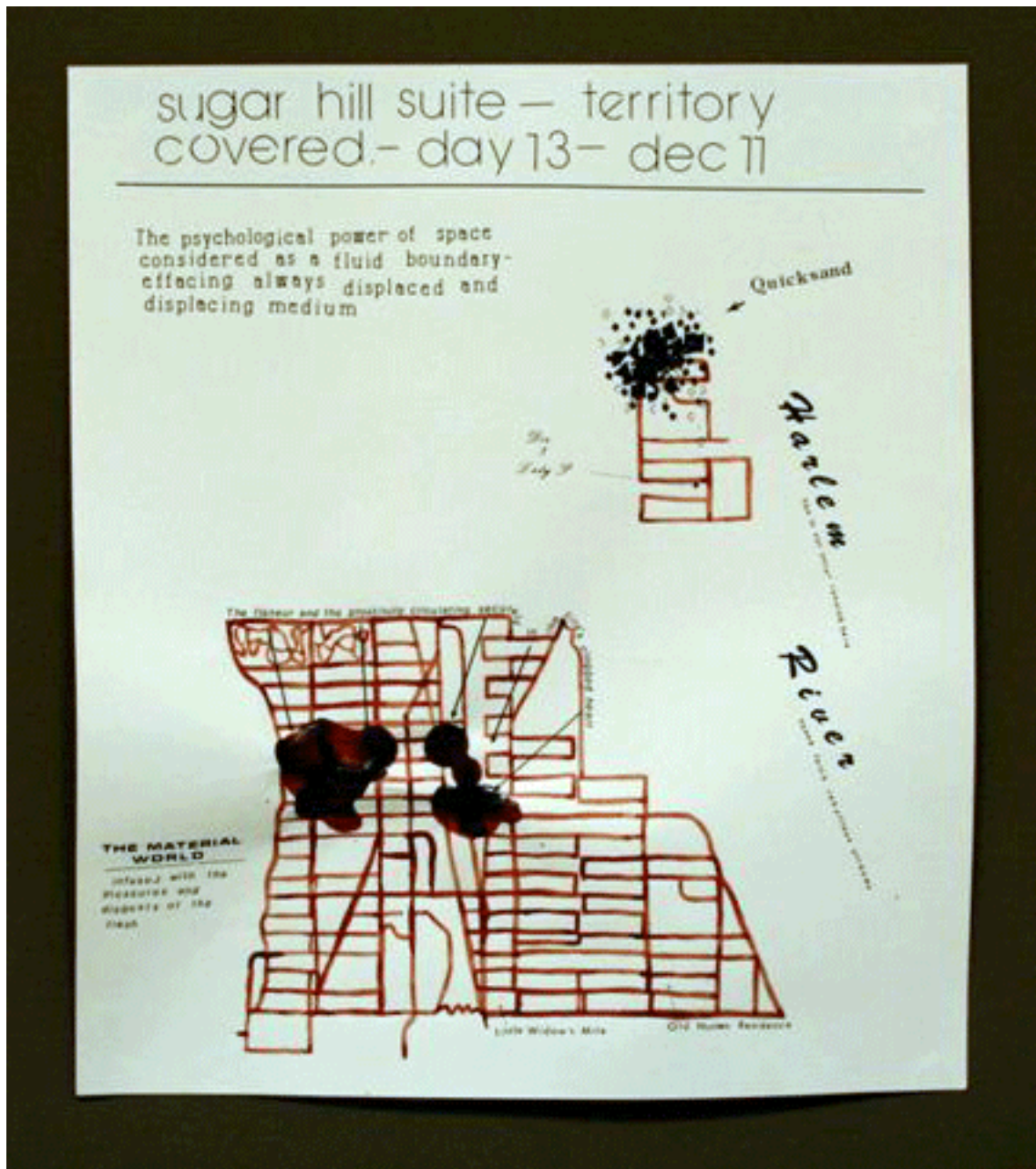


Figure 7:  
Charles LaBelle  
Territory Covered- Day 13, 2005-06  
Blood and Letraset on paper  
17" x 14"



Figure 8: Janet Cardiff, Her Long Black Hair, 2005.





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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, in "The Crisis in Culture," writes that mass society and mass culture were both recent developments caused by new technologies, and analyzes the effect these have had on politics and art. Furthermore she argues that the concept of 'society' itself is a result of Modernity.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud points out, for example, how the birth of Marcel Duchamp's first 'ready-made' coincided with that of the motion picture. "For the first time... art no longer consists in translating the real with help of signs, but in presenting this same real as it is." (Bourriaud, pg. 112.)

<sup>3</sup> The Situationist International was not founded until 1957, and so it is technically incorrect to label those to-be Situationists doing psychogeographic work prior to then as such. I will follow the example of Simon Sadler, however, in labeling them 'situationists' with a lower-case 's' for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>4</sup> Essentially this boiled down to becoming inebriated on red wine and wandering drunkenly around the city. These *derives*, as they would come to be called, became the subjective experiences on which future works of art would be based.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin's writings often seems to embody a similar spirit of wandering, particular "Hashish in Marseille" (1932,) which can be found in *Reflections*. In it, Benjamin walks around Marseille while intoxicated by hashish, and muses on the nature of the city and modern life, drifting from café to café.

<sup>6</sup> The SI are clearly an important influence on Bourriaud's *relational aesthetic*, and performance art in general, as their actions were dependent on inter-subjectivity and relationality. One can also see the influence of Dada and Surrealism on the SI's own theoretical grounding.

<sup>7</sup> The actual planning of such a city is most clearly embodied in the work of the Dutch Situationist Constant, whose *New Babylon* embodies the utopian city of the future.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of playfulness, though often associated with childishness, also comes up in Benjamin,

and is considered as a positive ideal. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps like early ancient Rome, denigrates the arts and play, and even childishness, as being negative and frivolous pursuits. Cf. Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture.”

<sup>9</sup> In light of today’s climate of mass communication technology, democratized social media, web 2.0, and so on, Constant’s claim takes on an interesting meaning. How can we apply this idea to current fights over intellectual property rights, or increased occurrences of “sampling?”

<sup>10</sup> Sadler takes this quotation from “The Author as Producer,” pg 213-216, printed in *Reflections*. Again, this quote seems all the more potent in today’s world of wikis, youtubes, and blogs.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, again in “The Crisis in Culture,” brings up the example of a Church. She writes that the artistic beauty of the Church is unrelated to its function as a building, which is merely to shelter, and could be accomplished without the grand embellishments. Therefore these elements must have a purpose beyond utility.

<sup>12</sup> The International Lettrist was one of the movements which preceded the SI.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Shaw & Tjebbe van Tijen, “Literary Psychogeography,” taken from the world wide web, March 15, 2008, from <http://imaginarymuseum.org/LPG/Litpsy91.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Thus Brecht’s hopes for theatre have been realized in a certain way, by transferring the act of performance to the masses.

<sup>15</sup> The pseudo-anonymous British graffiti artist and up-and-coming celebrity Banksy comes to mind, as well as *Adbusters* magazine, and the culture-jamming Yes Men, among others.

<sup>16</sup> I’d like to propose what is perhaps an etymological coincidence, but regardless is nevertheless quite illuminating. *Dérive* comes from *deriver*, which means to drift in French. The English word ‘derive’ is in fact itself derived from the French *derivez*. The two words, *derivez* and *deriver*, are no doubt etymologically linked, and I think their meanings philosophically overlap in a rather poetic way. We derive thoughts through a process similar to that of the *dérive*, drifting through the metaphysics of the mind the way the SI drift through the psychogeography of the urban environment. “We don’t come to thoughts/ Thoughts come to us.”- Martin Heidegger, “The Thinker as Poet.”

<sup>17</sup> “Bird’s Eye View of Paris”

<sup>18</sup> New technologies have changed the ways in which we organize information, and in some ways the SI have predicted these new typologies that are used to sort data. Computerized databases have changed the way we think, and are quickly replacing printed databases, that are both rationally organized and inefficient. (Not that the SI were in favor of increasing efficiency, necessarily.) In a manor of thinking, psychogeographic maps, organized by ambience and subjectivity, preceded these changes, and with GPS technology and computer databases, we can envision even more revolutionary forms of psychogeographic maps organized not around spatial and objective truth but by shared feelings and subjective experience. Try to map the internet, for instance.

<sup>19</sup> This is easily tested by conducting a drift of ones own. Take a walk around any urban environment, crossing the street when able based on traffic lights and car traffic, or simply observing how the perceived unities change as one approaches and crosses major roadways, or how one’s path is completely obstructed by them. The work of Francis Alÿs, in which he walks around a city with a dribbling can of paint, is an interesting example that demonstrates how automobile traffic can directly influence our own routes.

<sup>20</sup> The automobile most completely embodies the objectionable aspects of Modernity and Capitalism; they are ubiquitous, wasteful, machine powered, non-eotechnical (to quote Will Self.)

and inauthentic as a result.

<sup>21</sup> This was true until recently, it could be argued, with satellite and plane mapping technology. Despite these new developments, or even the advent of airplane aided mapping prior to World War II, the map is still an act of fantasy in that it assumes an omniscient viewpoint.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas McDonough argues in “Fluid Spaces” that this belief was inherited by the SI from Georges Bataille. (contained in Zegher, pg. 94)

<sup>23</sup> Simon Sadler draws a similar conclusion from looking at advertisements for modern French apartments. He goes on to note on page 28 that

the picture summarizes the preoccupations of French modernization: the process of “privatization,” identified at the time by Henri Lefebvre, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Edgar Morin in people’s desire to retreat from the public realm into the domestic sphere; and, paradoxically, an obsession with “communication” that characterized the open plan of domestic space just as surely as it did the free flow of automobile traffic.

This trend of course has only continued.

<sup>24</sup> This calls to mind Michel Foucault’s classic examination of the prison, *Discipline and Punish*, in which he traces the genealogy of the prison and demonstrates how insidious the human sciences have been in transferring the efficient order of the prison into schools, work places, and other controllable social organizations, effectively transforming all of society.

One may also think of Heidegger’s rather infamous comparison of industrial slaughterhouses and the concentrations camps. He meant to imply that it is only a short step to go from the organized killing of animals to turning these techniques on each other. If I may extrapolate from this, there seems to be a parallel in their thinking.

<sup>25</sup> In so far as the SI could be considered to consider anything. It is impossible to make such unifying statements about such a disparate group of playful gentlemen. However, much of the theoretical foundation of the SI can be traced back to “Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau,” written in 1953 by the 19-year old poet Ivan Chtcheglov. Released in an abridged form in *Internationale Situationniste* #1 (Paris, June 1958), under the pseudonym of Gilles Ivain, this was the earliest situationist reappropriation of the legacy of Dada and Surrealism, and also of the derive. Sadly, he was a very troubled youngman, and was committed to a mental hospital after being arrested for attempting to deconstruct, physically, the *Tour Eiffel*, that hideous monument to rationalism.

<sup>26</sup> The clearest example of this is given in Heartfield and Grosz’s scathing criticism of Kokoschka in “Der Kuntlump.” Often regarded as being in fact ‘anti-art,’ that which they produced destroyed the value of ‘artificial’ objects whose importance is raised above men. One can appreciate Kokoschka’s plea to avoid damaging works of art, but it is easy to agree with Heartfield and Grosz’s criticism (though they were a bit harsh) that Kokoschka was exalting an object over the workers’ lives. This political concern over the aesthetic/spiritual is typical of a Marxist view, and the genealogical connection to the SI is clear.

<sup>27</sup> “A condition of the work of art is that it exists in a state of perpetual non-reconciliation with what

it mimics or reflects." [Pg 327, Donald B. Kuspit, Critical notes on Adorno's Sociology of Music and Art, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring, 1975), pp. 321-327.]

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche would of course, rather ironically considering how the postmodern artists have embraced him, dismiss the vast majority of postmodern, and even modern, art, because they do not demonstrate a suitable amount of hard work, a criteria laid out explicitly in *Human, All-too-Human*.

<sup>29</sup> This notion, that there is aesthetic value in something merely surviving, is related to Roman ideals of grandeur, permanence, and is very much a Western ideal. One sees a very different view of aesthetics coming from the East, and even from the ancient Greeks. I would argue that in many ways, 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in aesthetic theory, such as fusing art and life, the primacy of the performance, and so on, are manifestations of a greater understanding of the philosophies that underlie Eastern aesthetics.

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps making for an interesting re-reading of Marx's "The Fetishism of the Commodity."

<sup>31</sup> On that note, I'd like to add that I am certain Debord and co. would have approved of *parkour*, a movement which happens to have originated in Paris. *Parkour* is an activity which has much in common with the Situationist *derive*, except it is more active and playful. Participants treat the constructed environment, generally urban, as an obstacle course, or playground of sorts. This playfulness would appeal to the Marxist perspective as well because it is entirely free, transforming the capitalist constructed landscape into something subversive.

<sup>32</sup> "Who are we trying to kid," writes Bourriaud, "that it might be helpful and beneficial to stage a return to aesthetic values based on tradition, mastery of technology, and respect for historical conventions?" Pg. 84