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From psychogeography to hanging-out-knowing : Situationist dérive in nonrepresentational urban research

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Introduction

‘In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.’ (Debord 1958/2006)

To be drawn by the urban terrain requires openness to what is going on in the city. This is what Nigel Thrift (2011) encourages researchers to push towards: an experimental kind of social science, one that provokes awareness of how the world is framed, how it works, and most importantly, how it possibly could be. In this spirit, this paper probes the present-day potential of the ideas put forth by the avant-garde group Situationists International (SI) in the mid-1900s about studying the emotional geographies of a city by artistic means (e.g. Debord 1958/2006; Knabb 2006; Sadler 1999). More specifically, I discuss the Situationist practice of *dérive* – an open-ended drift in the city – as a new empiricist, posthumanist method of doing urban research (on ‘new empiricism’, see e.g. Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi 2010; St. Pierre 2008, 2014). In this frame, the knowing subject never precedes the event of thinking, but emerges with it. I hence explore the *dérive* as a process of cultivating ‘thinking with’ the urban flow of things, in contrast to what the Situationists considered as gaining objective knowledge of a city’s ‘psychogeography’.

The Situationist critical practice is reworked with nonrepresentational theorization, which conceptualizes the world as fluid and constantly in-the-making (e.g. Anderson & Harrison

2010; Anderson & Wylie 2009; Dewsbury et al. 2002; Latham & McCormack 2004; Thrift 2000, 2004, 2008, 2011; Wylie 2005, 2009). Ontologically, this shift makes it possible to move beyond the Neo-Kantian idea of a ‘detached explorer’, which continues to dominate social science research. The researcher is placed in the world, and she/he is continually *becoming with* the research process, changing along with it. The Situationist practice is therefore rethought by going beyond its inherent subject-object divide and aim for evidence of a city’s ‘true’ character. From a nonrepresentational perspective, the drift takes part in building the city: it takes place within the continually forming urban *assemblage* (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987). Here, ‘building’ consist of architectural action, but also of countless temporary ways of appropriating a city, such as painting graffiti or marking space with sounds. All this makes up the urban fabric: the effectivity of any event emerges in the mingling of different things, in the messy flows of action and ideas. This refusal of a clear split between a subject and its environment calls for the cultivation of *experimentation* to make sense of today’s world in which we are ‘swimming in the sea of data’ (Thrift 2011).

To illustrate my onto-epistemological argument, I discuss a *dérive* in Vilanova i la Geltrú, a small Catalan city in the province of Barcelona in 2017. This coastal town of close to 70 000 residents is known for its laidback character and vibrant cultural life. Different from its neighboring town, Sitges, Vilanova still has very little tourism. The *dérive* in Vilanova was a part of my ongoing research on spatial justice and everyone’s right to the city. In the study, I pay special attention to urban atmospheres and their role in governing people’s movement in public space (on ‘affective atmospheres’, see Anderson 2009). To be able to think with the city and its changing atmospheres, I have linked both reading and photography to my walks (on walking and reading, see Heddon & Myers 2014). Reading theory during a *dérive* brings rigor to the experimentation. Attuning to the city with a concept in mind, and a camera lens as a

frame, directs attention to details that would otherwise easily pass unnoticed. To further my engagement with the city's atmosphere(s), I let my *photo-walk* be inspired by the soundscape of Vilanova (Pyyry 2015). This supports the *multisensory* character of (the event of) photography, and deepens one's engagement with the studied space. The focus is on what emerges during the walk, not on the end-product (of photographs as documentation). In nonrepresentational research, the influence of words, photographs or other representations is not ignored, but they are understood as performative; not as evidence of a separate world 'out there'.

My photo-walks are inspired by young people's hanging out practices, which I have previously done participatory research on (Pyyry 2015). While hanging out, young people form creative momentary engagements with their urban landscape while seemingly doing nothing worth noting. It is from this characteristically non-instrumental involvement that spatial-embodied reflection about one's place in the world emerges. This *hanging-out-knowing* is an ongoing process that takes place in everyday encounters through negotiations responsive to the urban landscape, which one is part of (Pyyry 2016a). It resembles what the Situationists aimed for in their *dérives*: to overcome functionalist city planning that threatened to clear cities from spontaneity, and to know the city from within. The Situationists characterized everyday life as an artistic involvement and wanted to encourage people to actively take part in the performance. This paper is an attempt to bring forth this agenda in a nonrepresentational framework.

Dreaming of a ludic city: the Situationist movement

“Living critique means the setting up of bases for an experimental life. [...] Such bases cannot be reservations for ‘leisure’ activities separated from society.” (Sadler 1999, 121)

The Situationists International was a group of artists and social scientists that desired to both understand and change urban space through playful practice. They echoed the ideas of Henri Lefebvre (e.g. 1968/1996) – once closely linked to the group – who called for the recognition of cities as places for imagination, exploration and cooperation of people. The Situationists dreamed of cities that would welcome transformation and lively urban culture, instead of spaces being rigidly designed for specific uses and movement. They believed the city shapes its dwellers, and therefore promoted for surprising and thought-provoking urban spaces. In an ideal city, the architecture would itself instigate the creation of new situations (see e.g. Constant’s New Babylon; Sadler 1999).

A democratic city, from the Situationist perspective, would allow for chaos and diversity. Indeed, democracy can be argued to stem from this turbulence. Overtly functional urban planning makes people politically passive, since everything is conveniently designed for them: through routine daily practices, people take part in the re-production of the dominant urban rules of behavior (e.g. Stevens 2007). Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens (2007) talk about *tight* and *loose spaces* when they describe how power and privilege are reinforced by urban planning. Tight spaces, such as shopping malls, cater to a specific audience and function, even though they may seem to welcome everyone. These spaces can become less tight via creative acts (Pyyry 2016b). Thrift (2011) remarks that phenomenological encounter is mass-produced within the *security-entertainment complex* we currently live in: we are hooked by designed ‘authentic experiences’, such as customized holidays or extreme sports. In a world of never-ending experience production, we are encouraged to be curiously searching for the new – often by means offered to us through consumption. This resonates strongly with Guy Debord’s

(1967/2004) analysis of the invasive forces of the ‘spectacle’ within which we live. The Situationist agenda, with its urge to disturb the taken-for-granted urban order, is then very much relevant in today’s political climate of project-oriented everyday life.

To respond to the threat of functionalist urban planning, the Situationists passionately promoted playfulness in the city. For them, play was both political and intellectual. With this agenda, they drifted in cities on their *dérives* in the spirit of Charles Baudelaire’s *flâneur* who casually walked the streets of Paris in his spare time (see Jenks 1995). But, rather than settling to be mere spectators of urban life, the Situationists wanted to change the urban architecture and explain the city’s ‘psychogeography’ via lived experience. The goal was to create situations, moments in everyday life that would awaken a person to pursue his/her ‘authentic’ desires. In these situations, one would feel life and adventure, and be liberated in everyday life. As Simon Sadler (1999) points out, the Situationists probably draw their inspiration from Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism and his ideas of life as a collection of situations that need to be negotiated. They took Sartre’s ideas further by deliberately constructing situations and ambiances in the city. Already in his ‘Theory of the *dérive*’, Debord (1958/2006) was aware of the paradoxical nature of the Situationist endeavor of seeking to discover a fixed form of the city while playfully rethinking it through practice. Debord was drawn to systematicity, and wanted to make a distinction between *dérive* and other forms of journey or stroll through the city. The aim, organized spontaneity, was connected to a fetishistic, even militaristic, desire to possess the city (Sadler 1999, 81). The *dérive* was to be both active observation of how things stand, and imagination of a future Situationist city. Staying open to the changing atmospheres, or ambiances of the city was key to understanding its psychogeography.

In many ways, the Situationist research practice was performative and nonrepresentational. In

this, it was also different from Lefebvre's (1992/2004) 'rhythmanalysis', in which the city was to be studied in a more detached manner to grasp the repetitive capitalist production of time and space. Compared to rhythmanalysis, the emphasis in a *dérive* was more on practice than theory. Both aimed at revealing the idea of the fragmented city. As the rhythmanalyst, also a person embarking upon a *dérive*, would need to let go of one's plans and be guided by the urban landscape. Only this way, it would be possible to know the city: there was no isolation of the city for the sake of reductive analysis, it was to be studied in all its complexity. In the *dérive*, emphasis was on reflexive engagement. It was impossible to plan a *dérive*: it had to be played, felt, and created in the moment. Yet, although they did aim at social transformation through involved creative and experimental practice that linked different parts of the city, the Situationist agenda rested on politics of representation (slogans, banners, art, mapping, cinema etc.). At times, the Situationists linked photography to the *dérive*: Ralph Rumney's 'Psychogeographic map of Venice' is a collection of photographs from a psychogeographic drift (Sadler 1999, 79). The Situationists acknowledged that their research was dealing with the changing emotional geographies of a city, but nonetheless aimed for narrative and representational data. The idea of a photo-walk is to perform the *dérive* as a combination of encounters that somehow move the researcher, and hereby generate hanging-out-knowing – in contrast to producing 'data-as-evidence'.

Getting in touch with the city: a sound-inspired photo-walk in Vilanova i la Geltrú

It is Friday evening before dinner time. The old town glows in the spring sun, which helps the plentiful graffiti art, and numerous Catalan flags claim the streets with colors. I am following the city with a camera, this time focused on Vilanova's vibrant soundscape (on 'soundscape',

see e.g. Foreman 2010). The camera catches these passing sound-making subjects:

‘skateboard – garbage truck – dog barking – teen laughter – electro pop – high heels – bicycle bell – scooter’

I performed photo-walks in Vilanova i la Geltrú to think about spatial justice and how it is manifested in the formation of urban atmospheres. Much like the Situationists, I wanted to understand the subtle cues of the landscape, and how different movements and ways of being are either welcomed or not. This is in line with Thrift’s (2011) proposal of probing what is going on in today’s engineered societies. This can be done by thinking beyond representation: by sensing, re-cognizing, and re-conceptualizing the world we live in. To arrange what we already know but cannot see, Thrift sketches a social science that very much resembles the Situationist call. For them, change would stem from critical engagement with the city in everyday life. And, to engage critically means that theory and practice need to get in bed together.

As Mark Paterson (2009, 777) notes, our walking bodies are simultaneously perceivers and producers of space through dwelling with it, the body is ‘a sensorium in action’. By ‘dwelling with’, I refer to affectual bodily engagements with the rest of the world through *both* active involvement *and* habitual immersion (on *dwelling*, see Pyyry 2016b; Ingold 2000; Joronen 2013; Rose 2012). Here *affect* points to felt but non-conscious and non-intentional changes within and between different bodies (human and non-human) (Anderson 2014, 85). This type of research is a nomadic, attached, non-linear and multidirectional process in which action and understanding are always connected. Attention is paid to the emergence of things, to the transitory elements of everyday life. In a photo-walk, theory and practice are thus inseparable, and the research works through encounters of them (and much more). Reading and note-taking

are elemental parts of a photo-walk, stimulants served as snacks with coffee when taking a break from walking. It is quite like Debord (1958/2006) described: a successful *dérive* consists of letting-go and following the lead of the city, while simultaneously keeping in mind one's (psychogeographical) knowledge.

In a photo-walk, photography is connected to drifting in the city, so that attention is directed to fleeting and often obvious elements of the everyday. The point is to see familiar spaces and things 'with new eyes'. Numerous things affect the performance of photography, not only visual cues but sounds, scents, hopes, memories, or frustrating conditions – perhaps an empty stomach or a rolling stone in a shoe. I refer to a 'performance' to emphasize the event of photography itself, rather than treating the photo-walk as 'a preparation of objects for future contemplation' (Ingold 2000, 198). By choosing to follow the sounds of the city in Vilanova, I aimed to both focus my attention better, and let go of the idea of photography as a visual method (see Pyyry 2015). Opening to the soundscape in movement supported engagement with the urban space. Focus was then on the trans-subjective experience of the walk, not on any 'end-product'. Sound-walking is often presented as a creative phenomenological tool for attending *to* a landscape (e.g. Drever 2009). My desire was to think beyond the borders of things, to become *with* the landscape. It must be noted that 'sound' is just one possible guide on a photo-walk, other options include following scents or colors.

Moving with the sounds of young people's laughter, I arrived at the town square, Plaça de la Vila. The square was busy: kids playing football, doing cartwheels, playing tag, scooters shooting past me and yo-yo's flying in the air. Adults were having drinks with friends in the surrounding cafes. It was loud and I could feel the pulse of life running through my body. I walked around the square photographing the beautiful old buildings, birds flying past palm

trees, and the running children. Yet, the soundscape and the connected movements kept pulling me towards the ground: roller blades, scooters, skateboards, and footballs inspired the event of photography indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

After the reflexive encounter with the smooth surface of the square (and the roller blades, scooters, skateboards and so on), I sat down thinking about human dwelling as a process of ‘joint-participation’ with the rest of the world (see Massumi 2011). Tim Ingold (2011, 44), who I was reading at the time, makes a remark about the ‘detachment of people from the ground’ due to paved surfaces. In Vilanova, however, the marble streets seem to invite people to engage with the city. The old town is mostly pedestrian, so it is safe for children to run around. The smooth surface makes roller blading, skateboarding, and scooting easy, and provides access to people moving with walkers or wheelchairs, as well. The marble then takes part in the creation of a welcoming urban atmosphere. On rainy days, the streets get slippery. This can be scary, but also inviting, since it is possible to slide on the shiny marble like it was ice. Sensing the city in movement with my camera brought forth reflection that may have otherwise escaped me. This reflection emerged from engaging with urban space, from dwelling with it. The reflection is geographical, i.e. spatial-embodied. It is then not knowledge *of* a psychogeography of a city, but a process of knowing *with* the city. Through our feet we are in contact with the world, even when we do not leave a mark of doing so. We take part in the rhythms of the city, continually becoming with the urban landscape.

During the walk, I felt the Catalan history of open public space vibrate in Plaça de la Vila and its surroundings. The square seems to call for gathering. It is, of course, impossible to name all

the affecting elements – this is the challenge, and strength, of nonrepresentational research. Often, the things that make up much of everyday life do not reach the threshold of consciousness. But, they can be sensed as a kind of *circumstantial palpability* (McCormack 2017). The ambiguity of an affective atmosphere requires bodily attention: one has to let the city lead and pose questions, to act as a co-researcher in the *dérive*. In retrospect, the emerging pro-independence atmosphere was palpable here already in the summer and autumn of 2017. Catalan flags and banderols (Figure 2) enlivened the space, and this is where people later gathered in large crowds to strike, and celebrate the October referendum vote. In nonrepresentational research, representations such as nationalistic symbols are understood to have productive power, just as honking car horns or clanking kettles did when people took to the streets in Catalonia. Rather than telling stories that lie behind them, representations act and take part in the unfolding of life. All big changes originate from numerous small events, which have taken place without much attention. Sometimes, a change can be ‘felt in the air’ when the form of it still escapes comprehension and description (see Anderson 2009).

Figure 2

Although not the focus of this paper, the photographs produced in the walks are not discarded as useless. What is challenged is the priority of them as the means of sense-making or as evidence of a world that once was. They are often dreams of possible cities, and as such, they can be understood as co-researchers in the study. Engaging with these imaginations is an event of *becoming with the data* (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi 2010). Looking at the photographs from the Vilanova *dérive* transport me back in time to think with the encounters that affected the study. But these time-travels are never linear, since there is no going back in a turbulent world that is continually re-created. Instead, going back is a journey of moving forward with the past.

The photographs, as such, cannot be considered as evidence of any particular event. They are re-presentations, closely connected to what was, and constitutive of what is becoming. The photographs are alive: they act and take part in the research process even as I am writing this paper. New things emerge, and we change together to form something that could not have been outlined in advance. The Situationist city and its study are re-mapped and imagined again, and again.

From psychogeography to ‘knowing with’: hanging-out-knowing

‘In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.’ (Debord 1967/2004)

So, how to get behind the spectacle? How to think beyond representation in urban research? If one walks in the city looking for *evidence* to answer a research question, there is always a danger of narrowing one’s perspective, of stiffening reality – however wisely the thinking process may be formulated. It also problematic, because one assumes a separate reality that lies behind the data, a static world that can be observed ‘from the outside’ through representations. A world that once was is envisioned as knowable. This is the problem of a ‘detached’, individual knower (St. Pierre 2008). From a posthuman perspective, we are never separate from data, so we cannot ‘collect’ it. We do not only produce data – data produces us, and in the process, something ‘else’ emerges. This something may not be anything we can verbalize, yet it can play a key role in the research. Mauro Englemann (1967, cited in Thrift 2000, 213) points out, ‘Positivism holds – and this is its essence – that what we can speak about is all that matters in life.’ By focusing on the process of doing fieldwork rather than on ‘collecting’ data, value is given to what unfolds and emerges in research encounters. Thinking, then, is understood as

a relational and multidirectional event in which sensing and reflection always happen with the world (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari 1991/1994). Fieldwork is a process of productive spatial-embodied engagement, that is, dwelling with the world.

The walk in Vilanova inspired reflection about mundane things that affect urban life: access to spaces and participation as a generative process of making a home for oneself in the city. Much of this reflection cannot be verbalized as it happens in the form of sensing with the changing atmospheres of the city, by going with the feeling. The perspective can be broadened by means of participatory research (see Pyyry 2015). Doing theory makes it possible to conceptualize some of these intensities, and to stay critical of the conditions of the photo-walk – while being connected to the city through these same conditions. The present is then both the actual city there and then, and the unfolding of the virtual: a thousand plateaus of possible becomings (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987). The strength of the photo-walk is in going beyond binary oppositions. This sort of ‘and-and’, instead of ‘either/or’, relations make up new empiricist posthuman research, in which the researcher invents inquiry in doing and gives up the sacred validating concept of science: systematicity (St. Pierre 2014). To be able to do this, the researcher must take pleasure in not-knowing, to start anew, always in uncertainty. Indeed, this was the underlying idea of the Situationist *dérive*.

In following the city with a camera in a state of focused disorientation, the researcher is sometimes carried away by an event of reflexive encounter. This trans-subjective experience resembles what Jane Bennett (2001) calls ‘enchantment’, an event of simultaneous immersion and disconnect with the world (see Wylie 2009). Enchantment is a passing moment of intensity that can usually be only detected when it is already gone. This is why it is difficult to capture with words. Enchantment differs from the ‘wow’ effect of entertainment as it is often prompted

by ordinary, everyday things. Enchantment makes common things feel strange, even surreal. It alters the conditions of being: something happens *in-between* things, and new knowledge emerges. This encounter is an effective and generative event of relation that inserts energy to the photo-walk. Enchantment stimulates thinking in the form of questioning the taken-for-granted. It whips up a ‘gut-feeling’ about life. This idea disturbs the notion of a coherent, free and creative thinking subject, who feels and expresses its ‘inner self’. A human subject that emerges in encounters of ‘knowing with’ is located in the circulation of affect, within the movement and sensation of the situation and relations. Therefore, subjectivity should be understood as a *geography*: as fields of affecting through which reflection and invention are produced (Thrift 2008). This understanding is at the core of what I have conceptualized as hanging-out-knowing (Pyyry 2016a).

In a photo-walk aiming for hanging-out-knowing, it becomes possible to belong and flow at the same time: the experience consists of multiple attachments and is not human-centered. Hanging-out-knowing is an invention of new worlds, rather than discovery of ones that already exist. It is an event of playfully open joint-participation in which the knower (‘subject’) and the city (‘object’) are linked in a shared movement. This way it differs from other modes of participatory observation, e.g. Clifford Geertz’s (1998) ‘deep hanging out’, or visual ethnographies that aim for representation (e.g. Bates 2013; Kusenbach 2003). Although the methods may appear similar, the underlying idea in a *dérive* that aims for hanging-out-knowing is different: to re-cognize the orderings of everyday life by letting the world ‘speak back’ to theory. In hanging-out-knowing, there is no ‘data’ in a traditional sense: it is post-phenomenological (see McCormack 2017). Nothing is gathered or collected. Rather, the data consists of diverse co-researchers that continuously pose questions to the human researcher, and push the work towards unanticipated concepts (see Deleuze & Guattari 1991/1994).

Hanging-out-knowing is an event of becoming with the landscape in a complex, non-linear process of ‘dwelling with – enchantment – reflection’. Here, the Situationist *dérive* is re-conceptualized as a playful-constructive encounter with urban space, one that is emergent and ongoing, escaping fixed points and calculation. Although inspired by young people’s ways of dwelling with the city, hanging-out-knowing as a research method is always concept-driven. Reading and writing do not only follow fieldwork, they are an elemental part of its assembling. Hanging-out-knowing is then a post-phenomenological tool for bringing theory and practice in touch.

This shift from disconnected stages of research and ‘data-as-evidence’ to ‘knowing with’ calls for imaginative geographical inquiry. It entails a claim that academic research practice should carve space for alternative knowledge(s), and produce new means of association by re-thinking the familiar. Emphasis here is on artistic methods that create disturbing, and/or inspiring micro-atmospheres, which draw attention to the fleeting of the everyday. This type of inquiry often produces more questions than answers, yet stimulates thinking and supports ethical ‘dwelling with’ – since to be awoken by questions, verbal or not, always opens one’s horizons.

Concluding thoughts

In the *dérive*, the Situationists linked action and understanding by studying the city in improvised movement. For the Situationists, knowledge was connected to lived experience and change would stem from everyday practice. They saw functionalist urban planning as a threat to spontaneity and wonder – and for people’s right to the city – and aimed to shake the restrictive urban order with imagination and play. The *dérive* was a way to reclaim the city

from the controlling powers and resist urban indifference. The idea was to provoke emotional reactions by going against designed urban routes and routines in order to create situations that would intervene with the ‘spectacle’. In this respect, the Situationist agenda is more than relevant today. Curiosity for the new – supported by the constant experience production – may well be the *tight space* of our time, since it covers up the possibility for enchantment, and any radical re-thinking of the world.

In this paper, I have re-visited the Situationist practice by discussing a sound-inspired photo-walk that took place in Vilanova i la Geltrú, Barcelona. The experimental mode of photo-walking resembles both the *dérive*, and young people’s hanging out practices. While hanging out, young people probe the limits of everyday life by playfully questioning urban norms and rules. In this spirit, I have sketched photo-walking as a multisensory method that does not produce ‘data-as-evidence’, but supports thinking with the city by directing attention to often overlooked aspects of urban life. The Situationists made a distinction between the city and its explorer. In contrast, nonrepresentational photo-walking is a process of becoming with the city, a performance in which the researcher is part of the urban mix, moving with the rhythms of the landscape.

Encounters in the city produce reflexive moments of re-cognizing the world, which are provoked by the inspiring experience of enchantment. I refer to this spatial-embodied reflection as hanging-out-knowing. This kind of knowing becomes possible through dwelling with, that is, through being affectually engaged with the city. Hanging-out-knowing is practical, and often escapes verbal description, but can be approached, and deepened, by theorization. Hanging-out-knowing is not only knowledge of what is, but also of how worlds are felt and what the future could be. An effective way to tap into this realm is to combine reading, writing, walking

and arts-based methods, such as photography, that make space for re-cognizing the urban order. A photo-walk is then not just a tour of the city, but active dwelling with it: reading and going back to walking, reading again, writing some, and then walking with different concepts and ideas. On a photo-walk, the researcher celebrates encounters that reveal the potential of the city. Even when it is not clear what is encountered, there may be a sense of something vital taking place. This feeling is important, since it can take the research to unforeseen territories.

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