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The construction of locative situations: locative media and the Situationist International, recuperation or redux?

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Abstract

A trend exists within locative media art of invoking the practices of the Situationist International (SI) as an art historical and theoretical background to contemporary practices. It is claimed that locative media seeks to re-enchant urban space through the application of locative technologies to develop novel and experimental methods for navigating, exploring and experiencing the city. To this end, SI concepts such as psychogeography and the techniques of *détournement* and the *dérive* (drift) have exerted considerable influence on locative media practices, but questions arise as to whether this constitutes a valid contemporary appropriation or a recuperative co-option, serving to neutralise their inherent oppositional qualities.

The paper will argue that there is an identifiable strand of locative art works which through their contingent re-appropriation of situationist techniques can be thought of as being involved in the 'construction of locative situations', and that these (re)applications of situationist practices point to future directions for locative media's artistic engagement with the accelerating ubiquity of locative technologies.

Keywords: locative media, locative art, situationists, location, construction of situations, psychogeography

1 The Situationist International and the construction of situations

1.1 The Situationist International

The Situationist International was a small avant-garde group active between 1957 and 1972. In total the SI had seventy members of which forty-nine were expelled, and when the group was disbanded only four remained. They rose to prominence for their role in the May 1968 events in France,¹ and since their demise have been brought back to popular attention by the likes of Greil Marcus (1989), Malcolm McLaren,² and through the major 1989 Pompidou retrospective.³

In their 1957 founding conference they declared the construction of situations as their entire programme albeit, as befits the declared provisionality of situationist thought, a transitional one (Debord 1957). Constructed situations were to build on the existing practice of the *dérive*, which had its origins with the Lettrists⁴ and the surrealists. The *dérive* was described as a 'passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances' (Debord 1957), and later defined as a 'technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' involving 'playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical

effects' making it 'thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll' (Debord 1957). Debord acknowledged the *dérive* as a rough experiment which foreshadowed the construction of situations, but whereas the *dérive* was a discrete, self-contained event, the intention was that constructed situations would be more pervasive, extending the playful creativity of the *dérive* to all aspects of human relationships (Debord 1958).

The situationists believed that 'a person's life is a succession of fortuitous situations . . . so undifferentiated and so dull that they give a definite impression of sameness' and that 'the rare intensely engaging situations found in life only serve to strictly confine and limit that life' (Debord 1957). To counter what they saw as the banality of everyday life, they proposed actively constructing situations rather than merely passively consuming or experiencing them. Rather than describing and interpreting situations, the situationists would seek to transform them. If, as they believed, human beings are 'moulded by the situations they go through' and 'defined by their situation', then they need the power to create situations worthy of their desires rather than be limited to passive consumers of the situations in which they find themselves.

1.2 The constructed situation

The constructed situation they described as 'the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior pas-sional quality' (Debord 1957),⁵ producing situations which were described as 'ephemeral, without a future. Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else' (Debord 1957). The construction of situations was to be a revolutionary programme in which the 'radical subject demands to construct the situations in which it lived' (Plant 1992, p. 39), one which was to be approached as an experimental undertaking for which situationist techniques would have to be invented. A programme was outlined; it would start with small scale experimentation from which a set of tools and procedures would be

developed, leading in turn to the experimental discovery and verification of laws for the constructed situation (Debord 1957).

However, despite its centrality to the situationist agenda, the practicalities of the actual construction of situations were never fully elucidated. According to Simon Sadler, 'there isn't any evidence that a situation was ever constructed as prescribed', and that the 'program the Situationists set themselves was so ambitious and uncompromising that it condemned itself to failure' (Sadler 1998, p.106).

2 Locative media as a situationist practice

2.1 Situationist influences

The influence of the situationists at both an explicit and an implicit level is evident in locative media. In their influential 2006 paper 'Beyond Locative Media', Marc Tuters and Kazys Varnelis (2006) proposed that locative media can be described as either annotative or tracing, which they equated to the situationist techniques of *detournement* and the *dérive* respectively. The annual New York-based Conflux Festival of 'contemporary psychogeography' makes explicit its desire to re-enchant and reclaim the city through reinventing situationist techniques for the contemporary city with an emphasis on urban play. Festivals such as Come Out and Play in New York City and Amsterdam and London's Hide and Seek, which regularly include locative media alongside less technologically influenced urban interventions, endeavour to ludically transform the city, implicitly drawing on the 'playful-constructive behavior' (Debord 1958) of the *dérive* and the 'striving for playful creativity' (Debord 1957) of the constructed situation. Mary Flanagan (2007) has noted the connection between the urban play aspects of locative media and psychogeography, distinguishing between technologically mediated (locative) urban games which add to the commodification of the city and those which foster critical engagements with place. Numerous peripatetic locative works adopt the *dérive* with varying degrees of commitment to its underlying theory. Works such

as Teri Rueb's *Drift*,⁶ Valentina Nisi's *Media Portrait of the Liberties*⁷ and *34n 118w*⁸ (Knowlton, Spellman, Hight) typify projects which offer locative media *dérives*. Christian Nold's ongoing *Biomapping* project implicitly invokes psychogeography as a scientific practice, as it measures its participants' emotional response to their location through combining sensors measuring galvanic skin response with GPS units and mapping the results on Google Maps. Projects such as Social-Fiction's self-declared algorithmic psychogeographical. *Walk* achieve a similar locative result by adopting the instructional sequences⁹ of later situationist *dérives* with the more prosaic technology of pen and paper, illustrating, I would argue, the common purpose of much locative art, whether it employs locative media or not.

2.2 Contemporary relevance

While there is no doubt as to the influence of the SI on locative media practitioners, questions do arise as to what is the nature of this influence. Is it simply a nostalgic harking back to an old avant-garde movement when it would be more productive to consider more recent practices like, for example, walking artists such as Hamish Fulton, Francis Alys or even Richard Long? Does the very mention of the SI draw locative media back into old discussions which add little to advancing the field? It is important not to overstate the influence of the SI on locative media; it is merely one of a rich tapestry of influence but one, nonetheless, that it would be remiss to disavow. I would argue that there is a substantive connection between the two practices. The situationists' spatial concerns and focus on re-appropriating the city for its inhabitants, of becoming active participants rather than being 'passive spectators in their own lives' (Barnard 2004) mirror those of contemporary locative artists. Thomas McDonough (1994) noted that the situationist programme, psychogeography, the *dérive*, *detournement* and most importantly the constructed situation was 'an attempt to change the meaning of the city through changing the way it was inhabited', an ambition, I would venture, shared by locative media. While the influence and application of psychogeography, the *dérive*

and *detournement* have been noted and explored in other places, little has been done to connect locative media to the declared sole objective of the situationists: the construction of situations; and I suggest that it is here where the most productive connections can be made.

3 The construction of locative situations

3.1 Constructing situations

I propose that within locative art there exists a tendency which amounts to a contemporary practice-based articulation of the principles of the constructed situation (Debord 1957) which points to future directions for locative media art. The construction of situations was at the level of practice a lightly sketched concept, and as the promised rules and laws for constructing situations were never developed, and with a recognition that the situationist tag is one which has been widely over-used, I propose that many locative media art projects can be thought of as being involved in the construction of locative situations. Clearly, the conditions under which they operate and their methods and materials differ in keeping with the changing technological and urban conditions, but in the absence of a developed methodology to follow, these projects have an adherence to the key concepts. As such, the claim to a situationist heritage, whether desired or otherwise,¹⁰ is a valid one.

A key tenet of the constructed situation was that it was 'designed to be lived by its constructors' with the aim that 'the role played by a passive or merely bit-part-playing "public" must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, "livers", must steadily increase' (Debord 1957). This definition of the participant in the constructed situation as an autonomous agent within the structure of the work and not limited to enacting a predefined script is key. I will identify locative works which exhibit this tendency, which go beyond a model of the participant being defined by the application in favour of an open model, a set of procedures or a toolkit with which participants

construct their own situation to be ‘lived’ independently of the artist.

3.2 Locative art

I want here to briefly introduce and discuss a number of locative media art projects in the context of my argument. Space doesn’t permit a comprehensive treatment of these works; rather I will treat of certain aspects of the works which I propose conform to the principles of the constructed situation, and furthermore suggest that these works contain characteristics or methodological approaches that have a wider applicability within the field. My proposition is that these situations are constructed through the actions of their participants with each situation being ‘lived by its constructors’ (Debord 1957). These projects are illustrative of a methodological approach toward participation, shared by many projects, which allows a greater deal of autonomy to be ceded to the participant. The projects selected both use locative media and are locative but not technology dependent. However, they share a common approach in that the actions of the participant are facilitated, rather than determined, by the technologies, whether GPS-enabled device or printed map.

The projects I will briefly touch on are Mark Shepard’s *Tactical Sound Garden, You Are Not Here* (Duc, El-Haddad, London, Phiffer, Zer-Aviv), *Joyce Walks* (McGarrigle) and *Walking-Tools* (Stalbaum, Silva).

The Tactical Sound Garden (TSG) toolkit (Shepard 2007a) enables users/participants to ‘plant’ sound gardens in real space in an urban environment. Based on the guerrilla gardening model of appropriating unused urban space for gardening, in effect *detourning* vacant lots and wasteland, the TSG allows users to overlay real space with locational soundscapes which can then be experienced and enjoyed by anyone with a mobile device running the free TSG software. It seeks to create a ‘participatory environment where new spatial practices for social interaction within technologically mediated environments can be explored and evaluated’ (Shepard 2007b). Acting as a parasitic technology, the TSG takes

advantage of the dense wi-fi infrastructure of contemporary urban space, piggy-backing on this network which it neither owns nor has created, turning it to its own uses to provide a creative space available to anyone to build and enjoy these locational sound gardens. In this way, the TSG acts as a classical situationist *detournement* of the urban technological infrastructure to create a playful space within the city.

I would suggest that of greater significance is the participatory structure of the work. Locative media sound works offering locationally specific sound are not uncommon but they are usually unidirectional, locating sounds created by the artist which can then be experienced by a public in designated locations. The TSG is, most importantly, structured as a toolkit, that is a set of tools which enable participants to plant a sound garden, to locate sounds in space which can then be locationally accessed by others. It does not specify or describe other than in these very loose terms how this might work or what it might be used for. In this sense the TSG goes beyond a typical locational artwork, as it affords participants the means to create their own vision of the project, to build on the structure of the project but to imbue it with their own meaning which may differ or go beyond those of the artist. In this sense, I suggest that works produced with the TSG have a shared authorship between the artist and the author of each individual sound garden. Thus the role of participants exceeds that of passive actors into what Debord called ‘active livers’ of the project. I would claim that the project is involved in the construction of locative situations, and furthermore that these situations are accurately described by Debord’s criteria for the constructed situation.

You are Not Here (YANH) presents itself as a urban tourism mashup through which visitors can visit Gaza through Tel Aviv and Baghdad through New York. Participants use a double-sided map which when held up to the light overlays the map of Baghdad over New York and is used as a guide to ‘visit’ Baghdad’s tourist sites in New York. Each tourist site is marked with a sign giving a number to call to access an audio guide to the location in question. *YANH*, with its

deceptively simple format, thus reframes the locations it visits through over-layering them with political questioning and forcing a consideration of the real connections between the citizens of both cities at this mundane everyday level, suggesting that it is no longer possible to consider Baghdad as distant and unconnected. While *YANH* has been represented as an urban game, this is serious play compared to many locative media tag games. I would consider it as an analogue iteration of locative media being locational-specific, with locations marked physically rather than virtually. I would also argue that *YANH* constructs situations with minimal rules of engagement, leaving participants to their own devices to live the situation or not.

My project, *Joyce Walks* (McGarrigle 2007), is a participatory locative artwork which allows participants to remap routes from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to any city in the world, producing walking maps which can then be used as the basis of a generated *dérive*. The project is an extensive project which has been more fully explored elsewhere (McGarrigle 2009). For the purposes of the argument here, it will suffice to say that *Joyce Walks* is essentially a locational artwork in which the locations are uniquely generated with each iteration, with the result that each individual walking route created is unique even when multiple routes occur in the same city. *Joyce Walks* explicitly adopts the situationist technique of the *dérive*, reworking it into an algorithmic generation of routes based on a *detournement* of the classic modernist text. It is designed to avoid what Debord identified as the 'limitations of chance' and its 'inevitably reactionary effects' (Debord 1958). Its approach reworks the traditional algorithmic approach to the *dérive*, but differs from the traditional situationist *dérive* (at least in declared intent¹¹), as it doesn't seek to explicitly map out the psychogeographical contours of the city (Debord 1958), being more concerned with providing a methodology for the construction of contingent, ephemeral situations which may indeed involve the 'discovery of psychogeographical pivotal points' (Debord 1958) but which are primarily situations the practice of which is

determined by their participants/creators. Each Joyce Walk is a spatio-temporal event contingent on its own unique conditions and can be thought of as acting as a framework through which situations may be constructed.

Stalbaum and Silva's *WalkingTools* also points to this new direction in locative media through supplying not the work itself but a set of open source software tools for cell phones allowing users to transform a standard cell, *detourning* the device and reframing it as part of the locative artist/activist's toolkit for peripatetic projects. In this way *WalkingTools* creates the conditions and the means to construct the situation rather than the locationally specific parameters.

Other enterprises such as *Common Sense*,¹² which provides locative tools for citizen-monitoring of air quality, *Urban Tapestries*,¹³ which provided a framework for geo-annotation of place, and *mscape*,¹⁴ which offers a toolkit to create locative games, work in a similar vein by placing an emphasis on participant autonomous creation, but differ in that they have a more clearly defined objective and are thus less open-ended.

4 Future situations

4.1 Recuperation

Central to the SI theory of the society of the spectacle was the idea that the spectacle had the power to co-opt or recuperate almost anything and that this power could neutralise even the most radical ideas¹⁵ and practices through incorporating them into the spectacle. It has been suggested (Home 1991, Sadler 1998, Bonnett 2006) that this approach leaves no path other than that of total opposition encapsulated in the famous SI slogan '*Ne Travaillez Jamais*' ('Never Work'). If any oppositional activity which falls short of total opposition becomes part of the spectacle, then almost anything, even fluxus happenings (Sadler 1998, p. 106) or anti-globalisation protests (Bonnett 2006), can be dismissed as 'spectacular' activity.

This is problematic and potentially destructive, even at this remove from the SI, for artists who wish to reconsider situationist techniques, not in a nostalgic or anachronistic way but as approaches to

contemporary conditions. It is for this purpose that I have tried to elucidate the connections between the SI and contemporary locative media art practice and propose that there exists a tendency within locative art which can be legitimately described as the ‘construction of locative situations’. Locative media art has a role to play in developing critical spatial practices and in *detourning* emergent locative technologies so that they evolve as participatory tools; tools with possibilities for creation rather than additional channels for passive consumption, and I believe that a critical framework for the consideration of locative art can be developed through a consideration of situationist theories on the constructed situation.

I set this analysis against a background of ubiquitous computing where the much-vaunted post-desktop scenario of urban computing is now widely available through devices which actually fit in your pocket. The resulting wave of commercial applications is clearly informed by locative media art with products such as Clicmobile’s *Soundwalk*¹⁶ iPhone applications which locatively overlay Paris with fictional narratives uncovering the ‘real’ Paris. Similarly heritage guides are going locative with projects like the GPS-enabled Berlin *MauerGuide*¹⁷ following the annotative model of locative media art. Add the plethora of augmented reality applications to the mix and it is clear not only that locative media art has been a key influence on these developments, but that its future lies not in the paradigm of delivering a relatively static data set locatively¹⁸ but, I would suggest, in ceding more autonomy to the participant in an enabling framework which I propose is closely aligned to the SI’s construction of situations. This leveraging of situationist techniques is not about historicising contemporary practices but about realising the unfulfilled potential of constructed situations, a practice perhaps best suited to the hybrid spaces of the UbiComp city.

4.2 Situationist nostalgia

My purpose is not to advocate a nostalgic reinterpretation of the Situationist International. As Guy Debord said, ‘avant-gardes have only one time,

and the best thing that can happen to them is, in the full sense of the term, to have had their day’.¹⁹ So to claim locative media art as the inheritor of the situationist mantle is, I would suggest, largely irrelevant; the situationists have had their day, whereas locative media’s time has yet to come. It is important, however, for a new art form to recognise its influences, to pay its dues where necessary, and when techniques and approaches are borrowed or re-invented to fully recognise their origins, purposes and application. In gaining a complete understanding of these techniques and the theory driving them, they assume their full potency and become powerful allies in their new application. It also serves to insulate the practice against charges of *recuperation* or dilettantism, and through recognising a commonality of purpose asserts an independent existence, standing on the shoulders of giants rather than languishing in their shadows.

Notes

- ¹ The extent of the role of the SI in May 1968 is disputed; certainly there were situationists involved and situationist slogans and graffiti were widespread in Paris, but there is little agreement on the significance of their part in a broad-based movement.
- ² Former manager of The Sex Pistols, who claimed the UK punk movement to be influenced by the situationists and who was a member of King Mob formed by expelled British situationists.
- ³ ‘*Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps. A propos de l’Internationale Situationniste 1957–1972*’, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (21 February–9 April 1989), touring to London and Boston.
- ⁴ The Lettrist International, one of the groups which, along with The International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association, merged to form the SI. Guy Debord was a member of the Lettrists.
- ⁵ I will reference here Ken Knabb’s (2006) *Situationist International anthology* due to its wide availability, but in doing so I acknowledge that it is a contested anthology—see Home (1991) and McDonough’s (1997) *Rereading Debord, rereading the situationists* for a summary of his disputes with the anthology.

- ⁶ <http://www.terirueb.net/drift/index.html>.
- ⁷ <http://www.valentinianisi.com/liberties.html>.
- ⁸ <http://34n118w.net/>.
- ⁹ Second right, second right, first left, repeat.
- ¹⁰ I am well aware that for many locative artists such a claim is an irrelevance, but it is my position that locating these practices within an art historical framework can inform current practices and suggest future directions.
- ¹¹ There exist few examples of *derives* which actually undertook a structured psychogeographic analysis of their routes.
- ¹² <http://www.communitysensing.org/>.
- ¹³ <http://urbantapestries.net/>.
- ¹⁴ <http://www.mscapers.com/>.
- ¹⁵ See Sadie Plant's discussion of recuperation as reverse detournement (1992, p. 75-80)
- ¹⁶ Soundwalks create audio tours with an alternative flavour such as Bronx hip hop tours and are now releasing locative tours for the iPhone; <http://www.soundwalk.com/>.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.mauerguide.com>.
- ¹⁸ What Jeremy Hight calls 'the bowling alley conundrum'.
- ¹⁹ From Debord's film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* quoted in McDonough (1979).
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