Alternative Cities: Drifting Toward the Labyrinth

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The love between Thomas de Quincey and poor Ann, separated by chance and searching for one another, yet never finding themselves, "through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other..." marks a turning point in the slow historical evolution of the passions. In fact, Thomas de Quincey's real life from 1804 to 1812 makes him a precursor of the derive: "Seeking ambitiously for a northwest passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled in my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys...I could almost have believed, at times, that I must be the first discoverer of some of these terrae incognitae, and doubted whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London."...*The urbanists of the twentieth century will have to construct adventures*.

> — Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s," Anon.,
> *Internationale Situationniste* #3

The derive [literally: drifting] proposed an alternative method of critique in the city and a practical urbanism, "Since the situationist's experience of the derive is simultaneously a means of study of, and a game in, the urban milieu it is already on the track of unitary urbanism."[1] Throughout the 1950's, the situationist's games in and of the city consistently circulated around the insistent motif of the labyrinth. It therefore seems crucial to pursue a reading of their urban practices by considering the influence of this recurring motif. In the essay that follows, the experiments of the situationist's will be positioned within the multi-layered context of the labyrinth.

THE LABYRINTH AND THE DERIVE

The labyrinth, as a technique and a spatial typology, continuously appears and reappears in the work of the situationists. It is enacted as a device to both understand the possibilities of the industrially transformed city and to revolutionize architecture and urbanism. It is, in fact, precisely the coupling of the labyrinth and the derive that will eventually organize a reformulation of urban morphology. The paradoxical nature of the labyrinth — a place of both connection and non-connection, a space of apparently aimless structure, a topology of fear and pleasure — embodies the necessary environment for constructing situations.[2] These constructed situations will become the medium to transform the city. In "Two Accounts of the Derive", Guy Debord describes an encounter in Paris that will elucidate the psychogeographical potential of the city. In his account, the streets of the city suddenly appear as an intricate maze where escape from inside will be difficult if not impossible without psychogeographic clues, "... constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from

certain zones."[3] In the story, Gilles Ivain (G.I.) and Guy Debord (G.D.) have just left a bar where they have encounter, for some unknown reason, hostility from several other patrons. The menacing atmosphere eventually forces them to leave.

Once outside, they both agree that they have never seen an atmosphere so frigid, compared to which the gangsters from the previous evening were mere lambs. Wandering [derivant] still a bit further on they come to the pont Notre-Dame at which point they notice that they are being followed by two men from the bar, in the tradition of the gangster film. It is on this tradition that they feel they must rely in order to give their pursuers the slip; they cross the bridge casually and then suddenly descend to the right onto the quay of the Ile de la Cite on which they run, passing under the Pont-Neuf, until they reach the square Vert-Galant. There they scramble back up to the place Pont-Neuf by means of the stairs hidden behind the statue of Henri IV. In front of the statue, two other men wearing hats come running up — undoubtedly to cut them off at the riverbank of the quai des Orfevres (which appears to be the only exit if one is unaware of the stairs) — and stop in their tracks upon seeing them come into view. [G.I. and G.D] approach and then walk right by the men who, in their surprise, do not budge. [G.I. and G.D.] continue down the sidewalk of the Pont-Neuf towards the Right Bank. Here they notice that the two men have once again begun to follow them and it seems that a car on the Pont-Neuf — with which these men seem to be exchanging signals — has apparently joined the pursuit. G.I and G.D. then cross the quai du Louvre at the very moment when the traffic (which is very heavy at this location) has the right of way. Then, taking advantage of this lead, they hurriedly traverse the ground floor of the La Samaritaine department store, exiting onto the rue de Rivoli in order to rush down into the Louvre subway station, subsequently changing trains at Chatelet. The few passengers who are wearing hats seem suspicious. G.I. is convinced that a man from the West Indies who happens to be near him gave him a signal that he interprets to mean that he is an emissary sent by J. to defend them against the surprising outbreak of antagonistic forces. Getting off at the Monge station, [G.I. and G.D.] arrive at the Montagne-Sainte-Genevieve via the deserted Continent Contrescarpe where night falls amidst an atmosphere of increasing unease."[4]

In the "plot" of this account, the derive is unveiled as an intricate interplay of creation and critique. References to genres of fiction such as tales of adventure or of crime detection are crucial in order to induce labyrinthine effects. Unexpected events elude the predictable; clues are revealed within the maze of the city through its currents and intensities. The streets of Paris have been exposed not only as a topology of fear but also for their "thrilling" aspects. We suddenly understand that the labyrinth is an aimless structure only until one discovers how to interpret its hidden clues for navigation. "The ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of

fissures in the urban network, of the role of micro-climates, of the distinct, self-contained character of administrative districts, and above all of the dominating action of centers of attraction, must be utilized and completed by psychogeographical methods."[5]

The labyrinth also emerges in situationist's thought as a critical instrument to resist the spectacle. Unmasking the labyrinthine city and actively constructing *new* labyrinths will become one means toward the anti-spectacle. In *The Situationists City*, Sadler argues:

> Debord and Jorn used the plan of a prison workhouse as a damning metaphor for their experience of modernity(Debord and Jorn's illustration of the principle was less sophisticated than the Benthamite panopticon prison later chosen by Foucault, but it made the point well enough, the plans of a nineteenth-century prison workhouse floating through the tortured space of their *Memoires*. Obsessive control, bequeathed by a secession of urban authorities, seemed to govern the most innocent spaces of everyday life, even the Lettrist International's neighborhood pleasure park: "One can discover at a single glance the Cartesian organization of the so-called labyrinth of the Jardin des Plantes and the inscription that announces it: **GAMES ARE FORBIDDEN IN THE LABYRINTH**. One could not seek a clearer summary of the spirit of a whole civilization."[6]

Of course, there is also an effort by the situationists to disentangle themselves from association with the stroll of the flaneur (not to mention the surrealists wanderings) whose journey through the city was guided by *the gaze*; distracted, unconstructive, and ultimately put to use for commodity circulation.[7] The derive depended on ambient space and ambient intensities for navigation through the labyrinthine city. The derive is specifically defined by Debord as a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences. In order to negotiate the labyrinth, one had to engage the subliminal currents and atmospheric effects. In other words, ambient space was much more important than visual or optical space to the situationist's urban practices; ambiences would provide clues about *constructing* their own situations. A clear example is in "Dies Welt als Labyrinth," an account of the proposed but unrealized Amsterdam experiment in 1959. The situationists "joined forces with the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam to organize a general manifestation, both drawing on the museum site itself and going beyond its framework."[8] The proposed event would entail simultaneously constructing a labyrinth within the bounds of the museum and a three day derive within the center of Amsterdam. The urban derive was to provide constant information about how to rearrange the museum labyrinth based on the situations encountered in the labyrinthine streets of the city. However, the micro-derive in the museum was also intended to extend the potential of these urban ambiences specifically because it provided greater flexibility while still in direct relation to urban realities. Most significant are the intensities proposed and imagined: "The labyrinth ... presents itself as a circuit which can vary, theoretically, from 200 meters to 3 kilometers. The ceiling, sometimes 5 meters high, sometimes 2.44 meters may drop in certain places to 1.22 meters ... it brings into play artificial rain and fog, and wind. Passage through the adapted thermal and luminous zones, the sound interventions (noises and speech controlled by a battery of tape-recorders), and a certain number of conceptual and other provocations, is determined by a system of unilateral doors (visible or openable from one side only) as well as by the greater or lesser attractiveness of individual locations; this ends up increasing the occasions for getting lost." [9]

SIMULTANEITY OF THE CITY

In "Dies Welt als Labyrinth," there is a detailed description of how the derive through the city of Amsterdam should be conducted:

> The operational derive around Amsterdam must be related to

the micro-derive organized in this concentrated labyrinth. Two groups, each containing three situationists, would derive for three days, on foot or eventually by boat (sleeping in hotels along the way) without leaving the center of Amsterdam. By means of the walkie-talkies with which they would be equipped, these groups would remain in contact, with each other if possible, and in any case with the radio-truck of the cartographic team, from there the director of the derive — in this case Constant — moving around so as to maintain contact, would define their routes and sometimes give instructions (it was also the director of the derive's responsibility to prepare experiments at certain locations and secretly arrange events).[10]

Contained within this brief outline for an operational derive was the inherent workings of unitary urbanism "fundamentally intended to actualize a new game."[11] This new game entailed re-choreographing the space-time continuum of the city, specifically in an effort to extract the possibilities of a unified urban morphology. Unitary urbanism consisted of making different parts of the city communicate with one another and was founded on the premise that one could create in the city new situations by linking up parts of the city that were separated spatially. In experiments such as in Amsterdam, the situationists were attempting both to reveal the increasing fragmentation of the city and to propose a way to reintroduce unity within this fragmentation. During an interview in 1983, Lefebvre reflects on his involvement with the situationists from 1957 to 1961 and describes the urban circumstances of Paris during the formulation of unitary urbanism.

> In the course of its history the city was once a powerful organic unity; for some time, however, that unity was becoming undone, was fragmenting, and [the situationists] were recording examples of what we had been talking about, like the place where the new Bastille Opera is going to be built. The Place de la Bastille is the end of historic Paris — beyond that it's the Paris of the first industrialization of the nineteenth century ... it's the Paris of the bourgeoisie, of commercial, industrial expansion, at the same time that the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie takes hold of the Marais, the center of Paris ... So already the city is becoming fragmented. We had a vision of a city that was more and more fragmented without its organic unity being completely shattered(and we thought that the practice of the derive revealed the idea of the fragmented city(The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively.[12]

Lefebvre continues by arguing that while the derive was a kind of narrative — the drifters would wander in a direction in the city, recounting ambiences and situations along the way in the form of a narrative — there was a desire to incorporate a "synchronic history .. That was the meaning of Unitary Urbanism."[13] Simultaneity was introduced as an explicit goal of the derive, the instrument toward Unitary Urbanism.

Returning to the detailed description of the operational derive through Amsterdam, we can see specific suggestions of how simultaneity might be achieved. First, both groups of situationists engaged in their separate derives were to be equipped with walkie-talkies to facilitate contact with the other derive taking place at another location in the city. Minute by minute, the movements of all the characters involved in *the game* could be accounted for and the ambiences they encountered could be relayed. This fundamental condition of the derive was crucial; encounters relayed by one group directly influenced the trajectory of the other group, suggesting directions and movements from spatially remote points. Also, the communication between spatially distant places constructed situations liberated from proximity and sequence. The introduction of simultaneity into the derive provided a means to usurp the spatial organization of the city by laminating onto an apparently fixed (and

fragmented) order situations that were spatially remote but tempo-rally simultaneous, uncovering a completely new and different way of ordering the city. Communication through walkie-talkies also kept the groups in contact with the *arranger* — the director — of the derive. The arranger played the role of Ariadne, keeping track of the drifters position within the labyrinth as well as defining routes and escapes. The arranger was part of the larger cartographic team that partially choreographed the game but also was to produce *surveys of the terrain* being described and experienced by the drifters. This team was moving through the city as well, tracking the derives and, more important, setting up events or experiments with specific space-time coordinates. Each experiment was intended to tempo-rarily transform a place within the labyrinthine streets of Amsterdam, intensifying the experiences of the derive. These *constructed situa-tions* were defined as "a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events."[14] So, simultaneity was to be accomplished in three ways: by communication independent of spatial proximity and orga-nization; through the arranger monitoring with clock and map the space-time grid of situations being encountered; and, finally, through the staging of temporary secret events as interventions into the spatial structure of the city at certain key locations. For the situationists, simultaneity was a key device in achieving unitary urbanism. The importance of experiments such as the one proposed for Amsterdam lie in the potential to draw up an account of the newly interpreted morphology. These surveys would reveal the alternative city embed-ded within the labyrinth, and ultimately, lead to the construction of architecture and urbanism that would someday realize the full potential of their psychogeographic observations.

MAPS OF INFLUENCE

Debord described the situationist experiments that took place - especially in the 50's — as partial realizations "(in comparison to the complete construction of architecture and urbanism that will some-day be within the power of everyone."[15] He specifically includes the possibilities of both the derive and map-making as a partial means to accomplish this ultimate goal, " the production of psychogeographic maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete insubordination to habitual influences."[16] Again and again in *Potlatch* we find particular locations in Paris recommended for visits and setting-off points for derives through the city. Michele Bernstein in "Square des Missions Estrangeres" describes a strange, empty and enclosed garden in the Square des Missions Estrangeres and comments that it may be used for "receiv-ing visitors, for being stormed by night and for other psycho-geographic purposes."[17] Another example can be found in "An Intelligent View of the Avant-garde at the end of 1955," which contains both recommended visits and places with in Paris to avoid under any circumstance. Recommended places include "... Butte-aux-Cailles (the Labyrinth); Aubervilliers (at night); ... the Europe neighborhood (memory) ... "[18] These suggested derives are direct attempts to transform the city by uncovering for others particular situations within the city that would serve to awaken the masses "to the conditions that are imposed on them in all domains of life, and to the practical means of changing them."[19] For the situationists, the means to discover and propose alternative cities will emerge out of a careful analysis of the possibilities hidden within the existing order of the city: " The exploration of a fixed spatial field thus presupposes the determining of bases and the calculation of directions of penetra-tion. It is here that the study of maps comes in — ordinary ones as well as ecological and psychogeographical ones — along with their rectification and improvement."[20]

The derive instrument, published in *Internationale Situationniste #1*, was used to help explain the initial uncertainty of the derive; an

aspect of situationist wanderings that was used by others to compare their experiments with the surrealists journey. The situationists argued that the derive was something completely different and that "Chance plays an important role in derives precisely because the methodology of psychogeographical observation is still in its in-fancy. But the action of chance is naturally conservative and in a new setting tends to reduce everything to an alternation between a limited number of variants, and to habit. Progress is nothing other than breaking through a field where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favorable to our purposes. We can say, then, that the randomness of the derive is fundamentally different from that of the stroll ..."[21] The derive instrument is used to compare the relatively unpredictable trajectory of each ball with the initial uncertainty of the derive. However, just as the instrument allows one to eventually *determine* the position of the balls upon arrival and the curve constructed, the derive must also eventually lead to an objective account;

> The lessons drawn from the derive permit the drawing up of the first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city. Beyond the discovery of unities of ambiance, of their main components and their spatial localization, one comes to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses. One arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence of psychogeographical pivotal points. One mea-sures the distances that effectively separate two regions of a city, distances that may have little relation with the physical distance between them. With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experimental derives, one can draw up hitherto lacking **maps of influence**, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is not worse than that of the first navigational charts; the only difference is that it is a matter no longer of precisely delineating stable continents, but of chang-ing architecture and urbanism.[22]

These maps of influence were articulated in various forms and through numerous venues: suggested derives, written or verbal accounts, surveys and renovated cartographic descriptions. Regard-less of their manifestation, the essential role of the practice of the derive and the "knowledge and calculations of their possibilities"[23] was to understand the intensities of labyrinthine space in order to *construct new labyrinths*. It is in these constructed labyrinths that:

> space in its entirety will thus submit to the most unexpected influences, and one can imagine that a similar process unfolds simultaneously in infinitely diverse ways in a multitude of spaces, whose number is as variable as the links created between them. One arrives, then, at the image of an immense social space which is forever other: a dynamic labyrinth in the widest sense of the term.[24]

NOTES

[1] Anon., "L'urbanisme unitaire a la fin des annees 50," *Internationale Situationniste*, no.3 (Paris, December 1959), pp. 11-16, trans. Knabb as "Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950's" in Andreotti and Costa, *Theory of the Derive and Other Situationist Writings on the City* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani / Actar, 1996), pp. 83-88.

[2] For more on the labyrinth as a paradoxical spatial typology, see Michel Serres, "Language and Space: From Oedipus to Zola", in *Hermes*, ed. Josue V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 39-53.

[3] Guy Debord, "Theorie de la Derive", *Les Levres Nues*, no. 8 (Brussels, December 1956), reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* no. 2, trans. Knabb as "Theory of the Derive", in *Theory*, p. 22.

[4] Guy Debord, "Deux comptes rendus de derive", *Les Levres Nues*, no. 9 (Paris, November 1956), trans. Knabb as "Two

Accounts of the Derive", in *Theory*, pp. 30-31.

[5] Debord, "Theorie de la Derive," p. 22.

[6] Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 50-51.

[7] Walter Benjamin, "Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris", in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 158.

[8] Anon., "Die Welt als Labyrinth", *Internationale Situationniste* no. 3 (Paris, December 1959), in *Theory*, p. 96.

[9] Ibid., pp. 98-99.

[10] Ibid., p. 98.

[11] Ibid., p. 98.

[12] Henri Lefebvre,"Lefebvre on the Situationists," ed. and trans. Kristin Ross in *October* #79 Winter 1997 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press), p.80.

[13] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

[14] Anon., "Definitions," *Internationale Situationniste* no.1 (Paris, June 1958), pp. 13-14, trans. Knabb as "Definitions," in *Theory*, pp. 68-71.

[15] Guy Debord, "Introduction a une critique de la geographie urbaine," *Les Levres Nues no.* 96 (Paris, September 1955), trans. Knabb as "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," in Theory, p. 20.

[16] Ibid., p. 20.

[17] Michele Bernstein," Square des Missions Estrangeres," *Potlatch* no. 16 (Paris, 26 January 1955), trans. Gerardo Denis, in Theory, p. 52.

[18] Anon., "An Intelligent View of the Avant-garde at the end of 1955," *Potlatch* no.16 (Paris, 24 November 1955), trans. Denis, in *Theory*, p. 58.

[19] Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," in *Theory*, p. 21.

[20] Debord, "Theory of the Derive," in *Theory*, p. 24.

[21] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

[22] Ibid., p 26.

[23] Ibid., p. 26.

[24] Nieuwenhuys Constant, *New Babylon* (The Hague: Gemeentemuseum, 1974), in *Theory*, p. 168.