

Research in Context

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BA Documentary Photography & Visual Activism

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From the Lens-Based Image Making research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

‘Cultural Blindness and the importance of the Psychogeographical Drift’

In this essay we would like to discuss the Psychogeography movement of the Situationist International artist movement of the 20th century, its influence and importance within modern day visual artists and activists. Primarily focussing on the ideas and theories of Guy Debord and the significant impact of his work through philosophical, political and cultural change. Then exploring the connotations of Marxism and Surrealism, but also the philosophical link between the Transcendentalist movement of the 19th century and of the 21st Century. Finally, identifying the ideologies of the movement in which have been carried forth into all forms of visual art and activism as we know it today and the precedence of that progress, still now acting as catalysts for change within the current late capitalist climate.

In 1957, Guy Debord, amongst other artists, poets, intellectuals and political theorists formed and curated a movement named Situation International. The Situationist International was a radical movement devout to the dissolution of the systems which govern everyday life. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967, one year before the May 1968 revolution in Paris that shaped a contemporary way of creating art and ways of thinking. Through this political stance on art and consumerism, Guy Debord criticized capitalism and consumer culture that was beginning to take shape in the 1950's, after the Second World War. According to him, capitalism encroaches on our ability to see and feel life as it really is and this is precisely when the spectacle takes place; when real life is replaced by pseudo-life, when industrial production and capitalism force us to think and to act in an automated industrialized way. Through this notion of spectacle, Debord emphasized on the single vision that was imposed to the post-war society. However, the spectacle may also represent mass-media and political propaganda that makes us perceive social interactions in a distorted way. In fact, we see social interactions through the specter of images.

‘The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the non-living.’ (Debord, 1984, p.48). Debord studied and observed that the spectacle actively alters human interactions and relationships, we are undeniably influenced on a daily basis by anything presented to us by use of images, film and

media. These corrupt our own moral fibre and ethics, consciously or not they promote and instil a capitalist constrain and system where we are no more than producers and consumers.

‘The spectator’s consciousness, imprisoned in a flattened universe, bound by the screen of the spectacle behind which his life has been deported, knows only the fictional speakers who unliterally surround him with their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle, in its entirety, is his “mirror image”’ (Debord, 1984, p.218)

Principally, situationist theory expressed an attempt to capture these principles, then critique and create discourse within a modern and advanced capitalist society. This is the stimulus which acted as the driving force behind the Situationist International, with a predominant focus on counteracting the spectacle. An artist led onset whose work was imperative to create rupture amongst the system of consumerist homogeneity and complete cultural blindness. In 1954, Jorn met Guy Debord. Together, along with Michèle Bernstein, they created The Situationist International. This acerbic criticism of the contemporary society, capitalist and economic alienation is illustrated by him.

Asger Jorn is famous for the subversive aesthetics of his detoured paintings. His art is disturbingly paradoxical as, in his view, there was no real situationist art. As a matter of fact, there is no actual situationist aesthetics. There is a situationist way of using art and mass-media.

Paintings like ‘Paris by Night’ (1959) and ‘Big Fuck to the Cardinal of America’ (1962) are irreverent political acts.

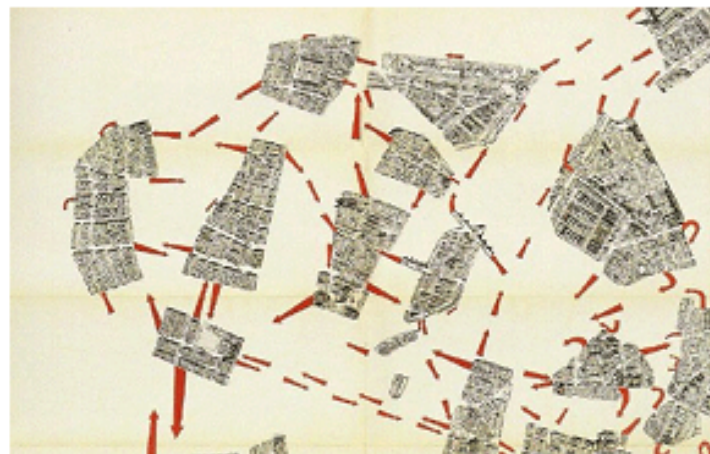


They represent an indictment of capitalist exploitation and capitalism's vices. These disfigurements go along with Guy Debord's vision of post-war society. Both Debord and Jorn used détournement to convey the situationist rebel and nonconformist spirit.

According to Asger Jorn, detourning means modernizing. Thus, 'Souriez Rue froide' (1962) as all his other detourned paintings present a criticism of fossilized artistic institutions. In fact, he mocked the artistic production in the context of the industrialized society of the 1950's-1960's where capitalism had annihilated the unique.

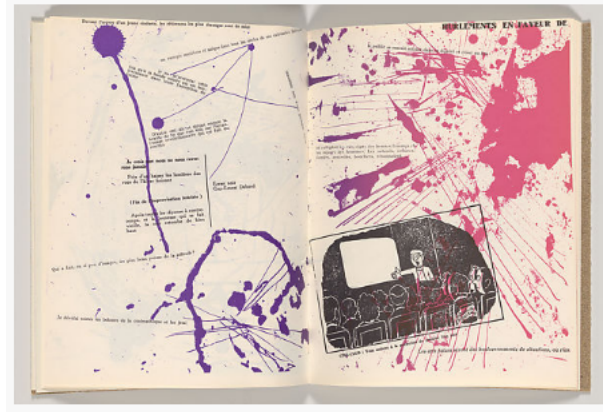
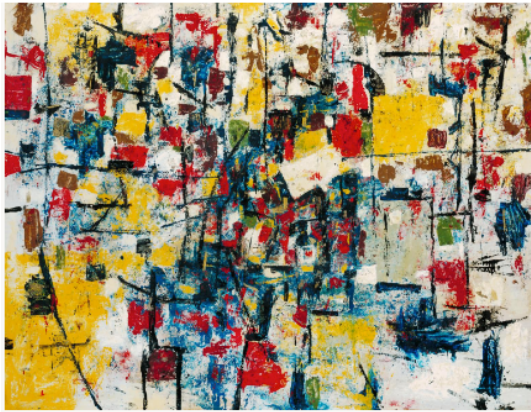
Through his modifications, Asger Jorn also undermined the spirit of the medium of painting. By adding grotesque splashes of paint to amateur academic found artworks, he revalued them/ he devalued them. By applying paint over artworks marked by the conformity of capitalism and by rules, he revolutionized our common interaction with art.

Inspired by architecture and the relationship between human geography and its emotional effect, the artists would wander aimlessly through the city, creating a process which was called a *derive*. This would act as a form of anti-conforming statement, a demonstration of freedom and reconstruction of a place, both physically and metaphysically. This act would involve the reproduction of maps, using fragments of the conventional maps to frame a *derive* and the individual connection to the artist.



The work itself manifests Debord's concept of psychogeography and creating new relations to urban environments, which he defined as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective *psychogeographical* can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.' (Debord, 1955.)

In 1957, the artist Ralph Rumney, empowered and inspired by Debord's concepts launched the London Psychogeographic Society. Rumney, the abstract painter, would use stains and blotches, using mostly primary colours, containing a broken structure of black lines. The shapes and grid depict a quasi-geometric effect and as these traditional forms blur and merge, they create a psychogeographic map of some undefined location or state of mind.



Then in 1959, Asger Jorn was to create a piece entitled 'Mémoires', this was a double page sketchbook, made up of collages and text fragments taken from a variety of sources. Using blotches and drips with brightly coloured paints, a chaotic connection of lines and irregular systems to create vigorous fluidity.

He had divided the pages of the sketchbook into sections, called *structures portantes*, or architectural load-bearing structures, in order to portray Debord's philosophical autobiography as he founded the Lettrist International. Entitled, 'June 1952', the first structure launches with a Karl Marx quotation, "Let the dead bury the dead, and mourn them, our fate will be to become the living people to enter the new life". The text and images to follow were photographs, cartoons, city maps all taken from mass media sources. Each arranges to drift over the page, its curation usurps the traditional sense of reading and the reader is led to wander through the book unconventionally therefore creating a *derive*.

Debord's work and therefore these artworks, echoes the contextual theories of Marxism and the physical influences of Surrealism, in particular Dadaism.

Dada artists felt the war called into question every aspect of a society capable of starting and then prolonging it, including its art. Their aim was to destroy traditional values in art and to create a new art to replace the old. Dada became and international conceptual art movement and eventually formed the basis of the basis of Surrealism in Paris after the war in 1914. It captured all visual forms of art, painting, sculpture, photography and performance. Using these it created

collages, which were contextually disruptive and artistically folly. This resonates in particular with the work of Asger Jorn and the psychogeographical maps created developed afterwards. In relation to Marxism, Debord would argue that his work would be the most crucial social critique since Marx's work. Marx argued that under a capitalist society the wealth is degraded to an immense accumulation of commodities, Debord argues that in capitalism, life is reduced to an immense accumulation of spectacles, a triumph of mere appearance where "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation". Debord would go on to elaborate this argument, that under capitalist society our lives and our environment are incessantly dissipated, and the spectacle is the system by which capitalism tries to hide this. In the spectacular society, knowledge is not used anymore to question or resolve discrepancies, but to appease reality. This is the exact argument that the artists are able to create, that the Spectacle can be used as a mask of a demeaning reality, creating and curating détournements of advertising where instead of the spectacle, the crude reality was represented.

In relation to that of representation and to photography, specifically of documentary as a part of the psychogeographical drifts and derives taken by these artists, John Tagg writes and articulates this point further;

'Focused in specific institutional sites and articulated across a range of intertextual practices, it was entirely bound up with a particular social strategy: a liberal, corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crisis through a limited programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restricting the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and resecuring the threatened bonds of social consent.' (Tagg, 1988, p.8)

In May 1968, Paris was revolting, thousands of students were part of the revolutionary protests, they tore up the streets using paving stones to build barricades against armies of police officers, they discovered that in fact the paving stones had been placed on top of sand. This ignited and influenced probably one of the most distinguished Situationist International artworks, which was a graffiti piece.



The phrase "Sous les pavés, la plage!" ("Under the paving stones, there is a beach!") was seen written on walls, streets and signs. This phrase would become a rallying cry, an advocacy for the dismantling of the social system in order to live free and unregimented life. The Situation International were key influences and leading forces that drove the activists of the revolution, conducting and enforcing very real cultural and political action and change. They also provided detailed guidelines for future activists and artists to follow and develop. A relevant example would be that of political activists Extinction Rebellion today, who still use similar techniques and key aspects of Situationism to create discourse.

In relation to art and literature of the 21st century, the theories and influence of the Situationist International can be seen throughout a wide-spread array of practitioners and activists, specifically in the work of Rebecca Solnit, who takes the situationist practise and theory of psychogeography and redefines the confines of our highly advanced consumerist society. Relaying the importance of meandering through the urban environment as we know it now, creating clarity from the spectacle through retrospective and indexical analysis whilst walking. She writes;

‘The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were traveling rather than making. And so one aspect of the history of walking is the history of thinking made concrete — for the motions of the mind cannot be traced, but those of the feet can.’ (Solnit, 2001, p.11)

The significance of her notion of walking, reverberates not only the situationist philosophy but also the transcendentalist from the 19th century, who believed that society and its institutions, particularly organised political parties, corrupt the purity of the individual. The embodiment of self-reliance and that of naturalist practices necessitated a connection to environmental and emotional awareness which directly correlates with that of the psychogeographical theories. Henry David Thoreau an essayist and activist, who was one of the founding members of the movement wrote;

“At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure-grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure

only,—when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the public road, and walking over the surface of earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds. To enjoy a thing exclusively is commonly to exclude yourself from the true enjoyment of it. Let us improve our opportunities, then, before the evil days come.' (Thoreau, 1862, p.8)

A pre-capitalist ideology which illustrates a detailed and accurate representation of the world we know now, a direct connection with the notion of the spectacle and its incarceration. Which also directly relates to the writing of Robert Macfarlane, and that of maps and the modern psychogeographical derive. A 21st century author whom gives affirmation in the form of maps and environmental realism, within his writing he embodies the notion of psychogeography and its importance in modern day society, exposing discourse through storytelling and creating awareness through literature. In one piece of work in particular, forging a new map based off the natural landscape, creating a *détournement* of the map as we know it today, manipulated, urbanised and digitalised.

“When I think of this map – when I think *in* this map – I see the landscape in grainy CCTV splices, in images of direction, destination, purpose; vehicle brake-lights at dusk, the hot breath of exhausts. The road atlas makes it easy to forget the physical presence of terrain, that the countries we call England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales comprise more than 5,000 islands, 500 mountains, and 300 rivers. It refuses the idea that long before they were political, cultural and economic entities, these lands were places of stone, wood and water.” (Macfarlane, 2007, p.11)

The natural landscape and the environment are those who have suffered greatest in the hands of a capitalist and economically driven society, this has transformed the way in which we perceive the places we inhabit. We are conditioned to consume and to roam only the metropolitanized and culturally appropriated districts that govern us. The turmoil bestowed by our defective and utopian society has resulted the degradation of our ecosystems, over-population, mass consumerism and anthropogenic climate emergency. The severity of our situation is buried in the blind spot of the spectacle, it is essential to our survival and progression to carry forth the ideologies of Guy Debord and Situationist International, especially in the form of the psychogeographical derive. It is through visual art, artists collectives, radical movements and activism that we are able to reiterate and cultivate this clarity.

Figures -

Fig One: Jorn, A (1959) *Paris by Night* [Digitally Generated Image]

Fig Two: Jorn, A (1962) *Big Fuck to the Cardinal of America (Defiguration)* [Digitally Generated Image]

Fig Three: Chtcheglov, V. (1953) Psychogeographical Map [Digitally Generated Image]

Fig Four: Rumney, R. (1957) *The Change* [Tate Museum]

Fig Five: Jorn, A. (1959) *Mémoires* [Illustrated Book] The Met Museum.

Fig Six: Unknown (1968) '*Sous les pavés, la plage!*' Graffiti [Digitally Generated Image] Paris, France.

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