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Documentary Photography and Visual Activism (BA)

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Proposal

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Reference list

Fig 1: *Internationale situationniste, no. 1*, Paris: L 'Internationale situationniste, 1958. [Website]

https://monoskop.org/Situationist_International Accessed on: 24/04/22

Fig 2: *La societe du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)* Debord, Guy. Paris: Buchet/Castel, 1967.

[Website] <https://www.burnsiderarebooks.com/pages/books/140940430/guy-debord/la-societe-du-spectacle-the-society-of-the-spectacle> Accessed on: 24/04/22

Fig 3: *Le Flâneur*. Gavarni, P. 1842. [Website] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fl%C3%A2neur> Accessed on: 24/04/22

Fig 4: *The Naked City*. 1957, Guy Debord. [Website]

<https://paulwalshphotographyblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/08/the-naked-city/> Accessed on: 24/04/22

Fig 5: *On the Ones*, Tom Pope, Play. 2019. [Website] <https://www.tompope.co.uk/> Accessed on: 24/04/22

Dissertation Proposal –

In contemporary society where the commodities of everyday life rule the worker and not the worker ruling them, how can you as an artist engage the fast-paced perception of reality to catalyse possible social – political change using methods that involve a sense of play?

Within my dissertation I will be exploring the surrealist inspired nihilistic processes developed by Marxist philosopher Guy Debord that are used to change society through means of modernization and liberation. I have always had an interest in the practices of the Situationist International due to their creativity and culmination of society within a body of work, influencing many avant-garde artists in philosophy and writing but also huge development to my own work at university. Helping me produce works of art that explore the use of chemical exposure photography to document authentic situations and bring together art and photography-based illustration in a contemporary way. In this proposal I hope to show a clear analysis of my own brief evaluation and introduction into the key thinking by Guy Debord, breaking down key points within in his writing that can influence further research into subjects for my dissertation project. The focus will be directed mainly at Guy Debord by introducing not only his writings but some works of art produced from his period of being in the situationist international.

Keywords Include:

Situation

Psychogeography

Play

The situationist international was a large organization formed upon modernist intellectuals containing avant-garde artists, writers, and philosophers, the ringleader being Guy Debord, at the time a French Marxist philosopher who was leaving the letterist international and formed the group the s.i. The situationist international was a group derived from surrealist and letterism concepts, using methods from the dadaists and modernists. Their main concepts being the construction of situations, a moment in time with a specific set of values and rules that engage a sense of play. Other practices include: Psychogeography, Derive, Detournement, Decomposition, Unitary Urbanism.

There is no definitive meaning of a situation due to the large variety of concepts and different practices, the word can be seen in many fields such as ethics, psychology, performance and art: in short as a noun the situation consists of a set of circumstances placed on an individual or collective group of people. The situationist international describe the 'constructed situation' as a "A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events." (Knabb, K. 1958)

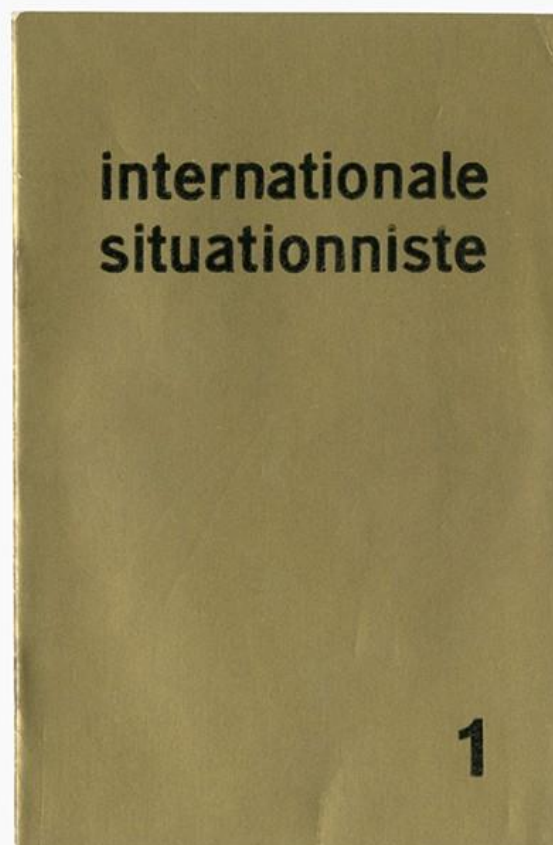


Fig 1: Internationale situationniste, no. 1, Paris: L 'Internationale situationniste, 1957

Debord liked to use the word ambience to describe one's atmosphere and environment, it is how this affects the reactions of the individual that shapes your ambience. In the 1957 manifesto writing on the 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions or Organization and Action' was actually what formed the situationist international shortly after its writing, the pamphlet was published in June 1957 by Guy Debord, mainly expressing the groups view on national leaders at the time, it was a great direct insight into how the group were a political revolutionary organization, ultimately defining their terms and conditions. They believed the world must be changed into a liberatory focussed direction and change the society of which we live and find ourselves confined: being totally against the alienation and oppression of everyday life; trying to make everyone at some point a situationist that will be in the directly lived moment and propose truth to the creation of culture. Potentially breaking through the particularized unilateral moments that have been simultaneously directed for us, waiting for "the inevitable liquidation of the world of privation, in all its forms." (Thompsett, f. 1960) Being able to oppose the spectacle at any given moments.

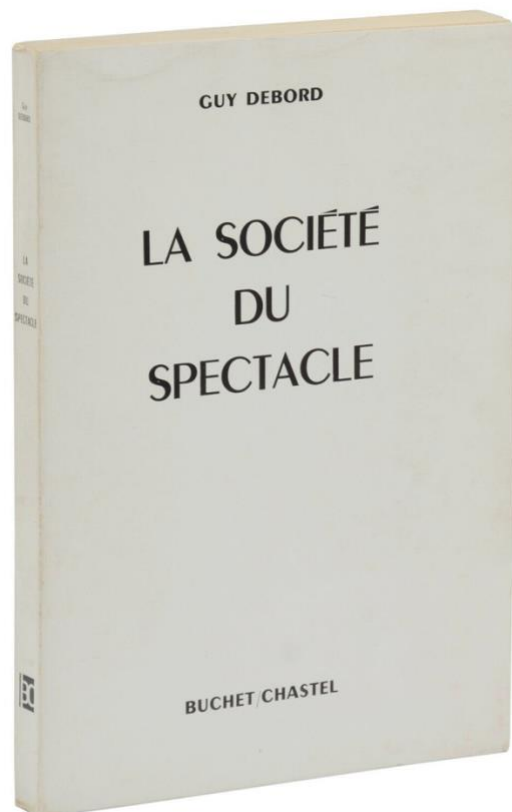


Fig 2: La societe du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle) Debord, Guy. Paris: Buchet/Castel, 1967.

The situationist international produced many outcomes of writings and physical bodies of work or situations that had great effect onto society, the French revolution protests of May 1968 where the students of the youth and workers were pushing for a more democratic and union held party, opposing communism, consumerism, and capitalism. These events were inspired shortly after Guy Debord published one of his most notable works where he gives a Situationist critique of modern society and how advanced capitalism has progressed into the autonomous machine that it has become today. 'The Society of the Spectacle': directs its focus to the degradation of everyday life and how it can individually affect each person at a time. Through the pacification of the masses by using constant focus of appearances blended with commodities of everyday life the spectacle is all around you, these glorified triggers to emotion and the act of seeing. Debord's take on the spectacle is a culmination of ideas ultimately focussed on the mass media and signs being repetitively figured; "what appears is good; what is good appears." (Debord, G. 1967) Leading to a nullification of culture creative moments and total enjoyment of life. However, with this idea of the spectacle you are able to physically see it and realise it to then oppose it in a stronger way. The construction of situations is the primary method to break the spectacle of everyday life. Using this in a contemporary way will help lead me to develop a technique that can create situations within the gallery and or world. Producing a body of work that can take the viewers thinking outside the world and focus it to that given moment, drawing all focus to the constructed situation. Mixing body and land into one directive existence for the individual beholder to look upon.

Psychogeography, it has a broad range of subject matter, there are numerous thinkers across philosophical, historical, cultural, economic, and artistic fields who each had their own distinctive opinion, after researching a selection of theorists and writers I came across a timeline of growth. The word psychogeography was a latent term in the early 19th century that was developed through to the 20th century and is still being debated now. Originally the term refers to a flâneur: a French noun that means to wander aimlessly through the urban environment; definitions include idler, loafer, stroller, saunter, in any case the flâneur is the urban explorer observing everyday society as it passes him by. (Miner, B. 2021)



Fig 3: Le Flâneur. Gavarni, P. 1842

The first idea of a flâneur originated as a literary figure in the 1840's, a short story by American writer Edgar Allen Poe: 'The Man of the Crowd'; in this narrative story a man sits at a café and in a very astute way observes each passer-by that comes into his environment, when an older gentleman arrives the man gets a "craving desire to keep the man in view – to know more of him", it is when he sees the man later again and tries to capture his attention but does not succeed and is completely ignored – the onlooker and bystander – are the same person. (1840, p. 511)

Although Poe doesn't actually mention the word flâneur, it became culturally popularized by German philosopher Walter Benjamin in his unfinished book the 'Arcades Project', adopting this concept from earlier works by French poet Charles Baudelaire, who many consider as the first modernist in his book 'The painter of Modern Life and Other Essays'. Unlike other writers at Baudelaire's point in history, he saw the flâneur in a positive light, an artistic person who is able to make distinctions between the relationship of individuals and their environment around them. Someone who is able "to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" (1863, p. 9) Benjamin

on the other hand saw the flâneur as an almost detective like figure, someone who is capable of observing in a very acute detail the factors of urban life, from every street to every face, they are almost set out to break a code and discover meaning behind their urban geography – the flâneur to Benjamin was also a means to elucidate the modern capitalist culture which at the time was advancing more than ever.

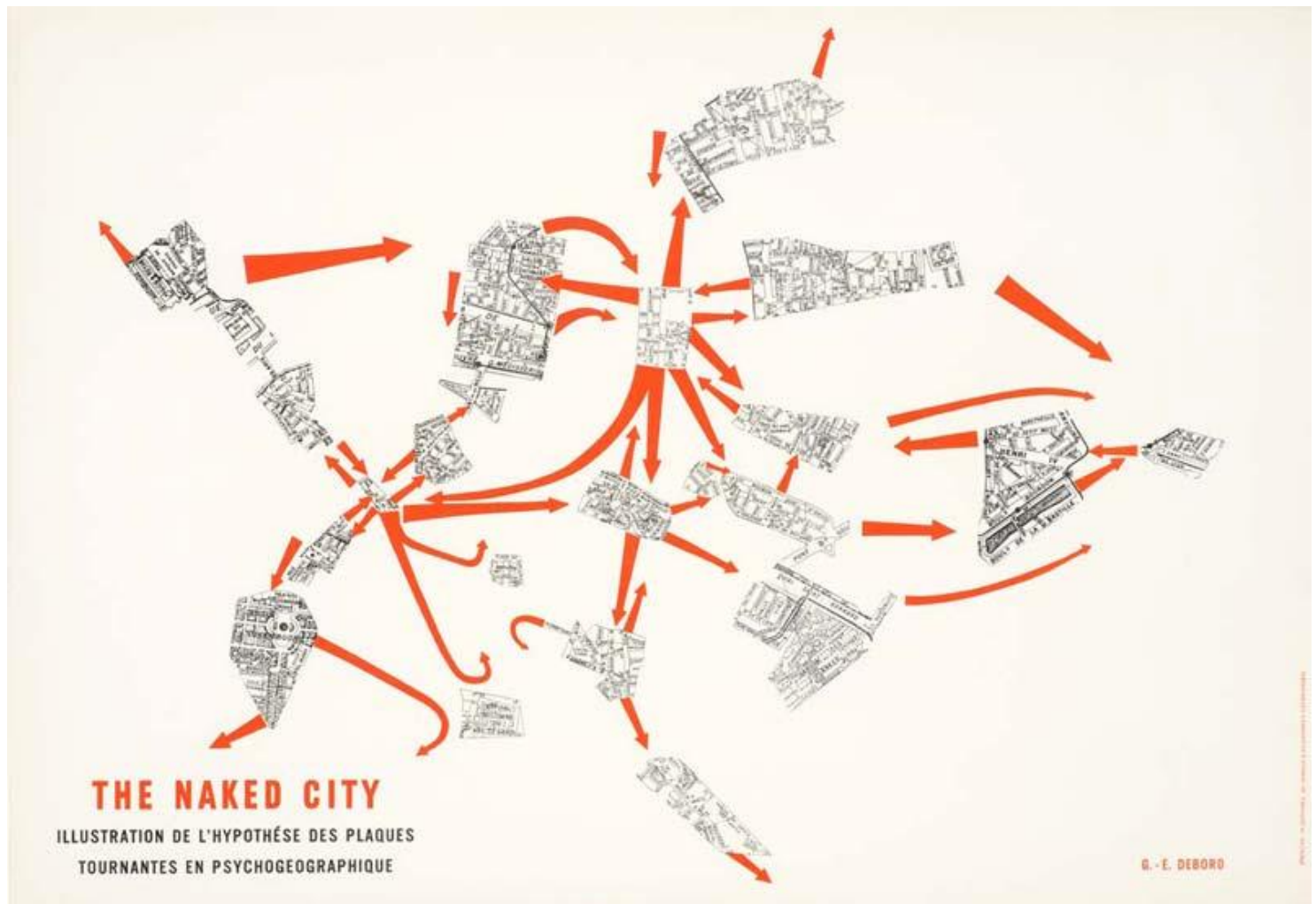


Fig 4: The Naked City. 1957, Guy Debord.

This concept of the flâneur in relation to psychogeography started off as the gentleman stroller but had since been developed into a means of stepping out of society and its pull of everyday life. The word psychogeography first came into fluctuation around 1953, drawing heavy influence from Baudelaire and Benjamin it was developed by the Letterist International. Later to be acquired by the Situationist International ringleader and creator of the organization: Guy Debord; in his essay 'Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography' defined psychogeography as "the study of the precise

laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.” (1955, p. 2) Debord set out this inventive practice to create playful ways that one person can explore through an urban environment, using the word *dérive* to describe “a mode of experimental behaviours linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.” (Knabb, K. 1988)

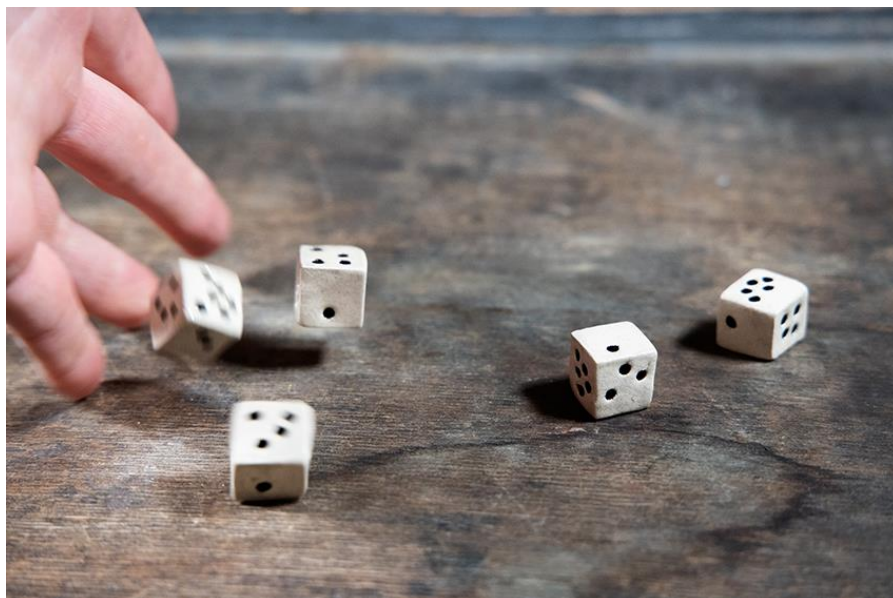
Debord’s most famous piece of psychogeography was a *dérive* through Paris city in which he creates a metagraph of the urban environment: ‘The Naked City’; Paris and London being the centre points of psychogeography. The red lines give the work a sense of direction with the briefly shown visual imagery of maps taken from magazines and works of illustration, taking one piece and using it for another. Debord believed that in constructed situations people do not react by using their subjective response of previous situations but will react emotionally due to their environment’s ambience, giving way to a newer way of thinking in a contemporary art manner by mixing body and land into one culmination of concept and consideration.

The final keyword is the act of ‘play’ within art, although play could possibly only be associated to children having set out activities of creation that can influence further thinking and consideration of concepts. Play can be seen as a tool within art to allow for the means of directly focussed creation and enjoying the act of it. Debord set out psychogeography with the group ideas of an effect of a series of games, directing a situation using the rules that would direct you for a game. Ultimately enforcing a sense of play into their situations as they explore the urban environment. The act of play is about enjoying the leisure of the act, not the pleasure of the outcome itself. A situationist game developed by many thinkers would be *dicing*; a game where you leave the decisions of others and yourself up to the spontaneity of the dice. Developed by Luke Rhinehart in his book ‘Dice Man’ he coins the term ‘Dicing’, an example could be a dice that contains camera instructions for how you will set up the

photo. (Rhinehart, 1971) Using this technique, you are ultimately leaving other surrounding bodies to decide your fate for you, taking the photographer out of the initial situation leading up to the moment of exposure.

A contemporary artist that uses a strong sense of play is documentary photographer and artists Tom Pope. I had the chance to meet Pope and talk to him about his work, he engages in acts of play that are physically seen live by the audience, creating a performative piece but one that contains a set of guidelines or rules allowing for direction of the situation but not limited to its own rules, still leaving room for random exploration. Like Reinhardt Pope uses dice to invent games for himself and others around him. Pope uses the dice to navigate his surroundings, so if he rolls an even number he turns left, and the latter being an odd number. 'On the Ones' can be seen as a contemporary development of the situationist international as you are partaking in a game of events that takes you away from life and presents with individual ambiances of life.

The random spontaneity of Pope's work is a key value to touch on in my dissertation due to having an idea of chance, using the guidelines of a situation to create the event but not let it be directed by its own existence, allowing for unpredictability within the work. This act of creative chance allows the artist to let the work create itself in a way, mixing the subjective intention of the artist alongside invention of chance. An act that I will look further into my dissertation, discussing deeper into the idea of chance and how it effects the events of play within constructed situations.



I felt this proposal only touches on very borderline concepts within the keywords and theories present, opening introductions to methods of practice that can easily be accessible but difficult to understand, perhaps creating a contemporary manifesto would help my dissertation. Using old writings from previous artists and then developing that theory in today's society. The methods being ones of psychogeography, culminating unitary urbanism within the fields of art and photography is the challenge. Creating something that engages the viewer in a direct sense and focusses them onto the situation, not the spectacle. Hopefully, being able to educate the viewer and also get them to question their own existence within the spectacle.

The relationship of the spectacle and the situation is difficult as you cannot truly not live without the spectacle nowadays due to how much larger it has become, being totally focussed on capital, to oppose the spectacle in a contemporary way could only become to let go if it completely or find ways to indirectly escape the spectacle and observe it when its strongest.

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