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The Construction of Locative Situations: Locative Media and the Situationist International, Recuperation or Redux?

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ABSTRACT

This paper will address the trend 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 *detournement* 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 neutralize 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 the SI 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

The Situationist International were a small avant-garde group active between 1957 and 1972. Formed from an amalgamation of the Lettrist International, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (consisting of ex-CoBrA members) and the London Psychogeographic Association's sole member Ralph Rumney. In total the SI had 70 members of which 49 were expelled and when the group was disbanded only 4 remained. They rose to prominence for their role in the May 1968 events in France¹ and since their demise have been brought back to popular

¹ The extent of the role of the SI in May '68 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.

attention by the likes of Greil Marcus^[22] Malcolm McLaren² and through the major 1989 Pompidou retrospective³.

In their 1957 founding conference they declared the construction of situations as their entire program albeit, as befits the declared provisionality of Situationist thought, a transitional one^[10]. 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' ^[10] 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' ^[10]. 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. ^[9]

If, as the SI claimed, 'a person's life is a succession of fortuitous situations, and even if none of them is exactly the same as another the immense majority of them are so undifferentiated and so dull that they give a definite impression of sameness. As a result the rare intensely engaging situations found in life only serve to strictly confine and limit that life'^[10] The situationist solution was to actively construct situations rather than merely passively consume or experience them. Rather than describing and interpreting situations the Situationists would seek to transform them. If as they believed human beings are 'molded by the situations they go through' and 'defined by their situation' then

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 (February 21-April 9, 1989) touring to London and Boston.

⁴ The Lettrist International, one of the groups along with The International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association which merged to form the SI. Guy Debord was originally a member of the Lettrists.

they need the power to create situations worthy of their desires rather than be limited to passive consumers of the situations they find themselves in.

The construction of situations was described as 'the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality' [10]⁵ with the resulting situations being 'ephemeral, without a future. Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else' [10]. This was to be a revolutionary program in which the 'radical subject demands to construct the situations in which it lived' [28:39] to be approached as an experimental undertaking for which Situationist techniques would have to be invented. A program was outlined starting 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 construction of situations.[10]

However despite it's declared centrality to the Situationist agenda the practicalities of the actual construction of situations were never fully elucidated. It was unclear where the constructed situation as an artistic event ended and the 'revolution of everyday life' started. Indeed it wasn't clear what a constructed situation was, how it might be constructed and operate or even how it might be recognized. The situationist condemnation of New York 'happenings' in 1963 as a 'spectacular' avant-garde activity⁶, that is a co-opted event neutralized of any revolutionary potential, was one of their few public pronouncements of what a situation was or in this case wasn't. 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. At least happenings took place'.[30:106]

2. LOCATIVE MEDIA AS A SITUATIONIST PRACTICE

The influence of the Situationists is evident in locative media at both an explicit and an implicit level. The connections have been widely made. Tuters and Varnelis[36] propose that locative media can be described as either annotative or tracing which they equate to the situationist techniques of *detournement* and the *dérive* respectively. The annual New York based *Conflux Festival* [17] of 'contemporary psychogeography' makes explicit it's desire to re-enthrone 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* [6] in New York City and Amsterdam and London's *Hide & Seek* [18] which regularly include locative media alongside less technologically influenced urban interventions endeavor to ludically transform the city implicitly drawing on the 'playful-constructive behavior' [9] of the *dérive* and the 'striving for playful creativity' [10] of the

constructed situation. Mary Flanagan has noted [13] 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 it's underlying theory. Works such as Teri Rueb's *Drift*⁷, Valentina Nisi's *Media Portrait of the Liberties*⁸ and *34n 118w*⁹ (Hight, Knowlton, Spellman) typify projects which take the form of locative media *dérives* offering locationally specific experiences delivered through portable devices. The works can be thought of as augmenting the classical situationist *dérive* through the addition of an additional data layer over real space. Christian Nold's ongoing *Biomapping*[27] project implicitly invokes psychogeography as a scientific practice as it measures it's participants emotional response to their location through combining sensors measuring galvanic skin response with GPS units and mapping the results on Google Maps. While Nold to the best of my knowledge doesn't claim any situationist heritage *Biomapping* is an application of technology that the SI would happily have put to work in their studies of psychogeographical effects. Projects such as Social Fiction's self declared algorithmic psychogeographical *Walk* [35] achieve a similar locative result by adopting the instructional sequences¹⁰ 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.

It is natural that locative media art practice would seek to connect to the Situationists as an influential avant-garde movement whose spatial concerns and focus on re-appropriating the city for it's inhabitants, of becoming active participants rather than being 'passive spectators in their own lives' [1] mirror those of contemporary locative artists. The situationist program, psychogeography, the *dérive*, *detournement* and most importantly the construction of situations was according to Thomas McDonough 'an attempt to change the meaning of the city through changing the way it was inhabited' [24]. 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.

2.1 Spatial Production

The situationist analysis of space is closely tied to the theories of the social production of space developed later by Henri Lefebvre¹¹. Lefebvre proposed that space cannot be considered as an empty neutral container in which objects and people are situated [21:68] but rather space is a social product, defined by a complex set of interrelationships resulting in a multiplicity of

⁵ I will reference here Ken Knabb's Situationist International Anthology due to it's wide availability but in doing so I acknowledge that it is a contested anthology (McDonagh, Home) See McDonough's *Rereading Debord, rereading the Situationists* for a summary of his disputes with the anthology

⁶ *L'avant-garde de la présence Internationale situationniste* no. 8, January 1963.

⁷ <http://www.terirueb.net/drift/index.html>

⁸ <http://www.valentinanisi.com/liberties.html>

⁹ <http://34n118w.net/>

¹⁰ second right, second right, first left, repeat

¹¹ For an account of Lefebvre's association with the Situationists see his interview with Kristin Ross in *October* 79 [29].

interconnected and overlapping spaces which influence, and are influenced by, each other [21:86-87]. For Lefebvre it is the actions of inhabitants (spatial practice) which produces the spaces of the city, but while spatial practice reflects the habits and customs of a city's inhabitants it can also act as a coercive force which dictates the range of acceptable practices[21:73]. It has been argued that the enactment of pervasive, ubiquitous and locative technologies in urban space have brought about shifts in spatial production with space being automatically produced [38] by what Amin and Thrift call the 'haze of software' of the contemporary city [37:125]. This in turn raises questions [11] about human agency in these software produced spaces where the ability of an individual to effect change, or to even understand the background processes of production, on these automatically produced spaces is strictly curtailed.

I suggest that locative media art's agency emanates from the temporary, ephemeral and hybrid spaces it produces which disrupt, interfere with and renegotiate these dominant spaces of the city and that this process can best be described through the application of situationist theories of the construction of situations.

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 construction of situations[10] 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 procedures and laws for constructing situations were never developed, and with a recognition that the situationist tag is one which has been widely overused, 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 otherwise¹², is a valid one.

A key tenet of the constructed situation was that it was "designed to be lived by it's 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" [10]. 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 favor 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.

¹²I 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.

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 which I submit conform to the structures for the construction of situations 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 it's constructors' [10]. These projects are illustrative of a methodological approach toward participation, shared by many projects, allowing 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 *WalkingTools* (Stalbaum, Silva)

The Tactical Sound Garden (TSG) toolkit [32] enables user/participants to 'plant' soundgardens in real space in an urban environment. It is based on the guerrilla gardening model of appropriating unused urban space for gardening, in effect *detourning* vacant lots and wasteland. Similarly 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' [33]. 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 it's own uses to provide a creative space available to anyone to build and enjoy these locational soundgardens. 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 which offer 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 three dimensional 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 soundgarden. 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 constructed situations are accurately described by Debord's criteria for the constructed situation.

You are Not Here (YANH) presents itself as a urban tourism mashup [12] 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 which is used as a guide to 'visit' Baghdad's tourist sites in New York. Each tourist site is physically marked with a sign giving a number to call to access an audio guide to the location in question. YANH with it's deceptively simple format thus re-frames the locations it visits through overlaying 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 like Shepard's Tactical Sound Garden YANH constructs situations with minimal rules of engagement leaving participants to their own devices to live the situation or not.

My project *Joyce Walks* [25] 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[26]. 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, resulting in each individual walking route generated being unique even when multiple walks occur in the same city. *Joyce Walks* explicitly adopts the situationist technique of the *dérive* reworking it into a 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 it's 'inevitably reactionary effects' [9]. It's approach reworks the traditional algorithmic approach to the *dérive*. but differs from the traditional Situationist *dérive* (in declared intent at least¹³) as it doesn't seek to explicitly map out the psychogeographical contours of the city [9]. Rather it is more concerned with providing a methodology for the construction of contingent, ephemeral situations which may indeed involve the 'discovery of psychogeographical pivotal points' [9] but which are primarily situations the practice of which is determined by their participant/creators. Each walk is a spatio-temporal event contingent on it's own unique conditions and can be thought of as acting as a framework for the construction of situations.

Silva and Stalbaum's *WalkingTools* [39] also points to this new direction in locative media through supplying not the work itself but a set of opensource software tools for cell phones allowing users to transform a standard cell phone, *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

¹³there exist few examples of derives which actually undertook a structured psychogeographic analysis of their routes

locationally specific parameters which can be used to enact an event. As with other projects of this type the work can be thought of as existing in two discrete modes which combine to form the greater work. The first is the framework, in the case of *Walkingtools* sharing resources, expertise and experience to enable artists to create their own cellphone software for locative interventions without having specific programming skills. The second is the the specific works created using the framework both by the project's initiators and the user/participants. In this fashion the work can be considered a participatory work in which the role of participants goes beyond that of passive actors in a scenario created by the project's authors to one in which they in effect create the work rather than merely activating it.

Other enterprises such as *Common Sense*¹⁴ which provides locative tools for citizen-monitoring of air quality, *Urban Tapestries*¹⁵ which provided a framework for community based geo-annotation of place and *Mscape*¹⁶ which offers a toolkit to create locative games, work in a similar vein by placing an emphasis on participant autonomous creation. However these projects have a more ambiguous relationship with their industry sponsors with the suggestion that there exists a deterministic relationship between the application and the research imperatives of the development of new technologies.¹⁷

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 neutralize even the most radical ideas¹⁸ and practices through incorporating them into the spectacle. It has been suggested (Bonnett[3], Home[19], Sadler[30]) that this approach leaves no path other than that of total opposition encapsulated in the famous SI slogan *Ne Travaillez Jamais*¹⁹. If any oppositional activity which falls short of total opposition becomes part of the spectacle then almost anything, even fluxus happenings[30:106] or anti-globalization protests[3], can be dismissed as 'spectacular' activity.

This is problematic and potentially destructive, even at this remove from the SI, for artists who wish to build on the legacy of the Situationists through applying their analysis, reinventing their techniques or even experimenting with the construction of situations, 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

¹⁴<http://www.communitysensing.org/>

¹⁵<http://urbantapestries.net/>

¹⁶<http://www.mscape.com/>

¹⁷See Anne Galloway's dissertation discussion [16:168] of the Mobile Bristol project for the inherent issues of this type of projects.

¹⁸See Sadie Plant's discussion of recuperation as reverse detournement [28:75-80]

¹⁹Never Work

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 construction of situations.

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 are clearly informed by locative media art with products such as Clicmobile's *Soundwalk*²⁰ iphone apps which locatively overlay Paris with fictional narratives uncovering the 'real' Paris. Similarly heritage guides are going locative with projects like the GPS enabled Berlin MauerGuide²¹ following the annotative model of locative media art. Add the plethora of augmented reality iphone apps 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 locatively²² 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 realizing the unfulfilled potential of constructed situations, a practice perhaps best suited to the hybrid spaces of the ubi-comp 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. A historical project certainly cannot claim to preserve an eternal youth protected from blows'.²³ 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 artform to recognize its influences, to pay its dues where necessary and when techniques and approaches are borrowed or re-invented to fully recognize 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 recognizing a commonality of purpose asserts an

independent existence, standing on the shoulders of giants rather than languishing in their shadows.

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²⁰ Soundwalks create audio tours with an alternative flavor such as Bronx hiphop tours and are now releasing locative tours for the iphone <http://www.soundwalk.com/>

²¹ MauerGuide www.mauguide.com

²² what Jeremy Hight calls the bowling alley conundrum

²³ From Debord's film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* quoted in McDonagh *Rereading Debord, rereading the Situationists*

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