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Abstract

The scope of art education is often conceived as a field of inquiry. However, the appeal to space as a guiding metaphor for delimiting the boundaries of aesthetic, educational, social and intellectual investigation is often a choice of convenience and is not subjected to critical interrogation. Often, this space is modernist in its conception and apparently provides a seemingly stable framework within which inquiry can occur. This paper will examine the possibilities of rethinking this presumption through a process of critical inquiry based on movement or drifting as its guiding metaphorical structure. The Situationist International, a radical group of artists active during the middle of the twentieth century, developed a form of social intervention that they called the *derive*, which translates literally as "drift." Through this activity, they sought to disrupt and critique the prevailing structures of the modern city through a disruption of its organizing principles. It is in the spirit of this experimental practice that this paper seeks to address two central questions: (a) By "mapping" the discipline of art education, do we potentially limit the range of movement within its parameters? (b) How might inquiry proceed if it were to adopt an attitude of drifting as opposed to one of static observation?

From roughly 1957 to 1972, the Situationist International, a politically and artistically subversive group of artists and intellectuals located primarily in Paris articulated a revolutionary critique of the urban environment. Social change, they suggested, beginning with a critique of the city would be accomplished by the individual creation of "situations" within everyday urban life. Within these "situations" social and political activity could proceed guided only by individual desires, which they believed had succumbed to the restrictive parameters of the city grid. This paper is an examination of the relationship between one of the Situationist's primary critical devices, the *dérive* (translated literally as "drift") and the process of inquiry in art education.

How is the "landscape" of art education constructed and how might critique within this landscape based on the Situationist concept of *dérive* proceed? In efforts to define the scope of art education and to define its disciplinary boundaries, we perhaps unknowingly and uncritically appeal to spatial metaphors. In order to coordinate inquiry, we configure the field of art education by ostensibly providing landscapes or spaces into which teachers and students might enter. However, these can end up being more than simply neutral zones within which inquiry takes place and may become maps dotted with familiar signposts and destinations thus inscribing well-worn paths easily followed by those who arrive later.

By “mapping” our discipline, do we potentially limit the range of movement within that discipline? The Situationists and Guy Debord, their intellectual leader and most vocal advocate, asked a similar question of the spaces of the modern city and they responded with a resounding “yes.” They sought to challenge the hegemony of the modern city by diminishing the social authority of the built environment and locating the power of social organization and change within the movements and actions of the city’s inhabitants through the process of a continuous *dérive* (Debord, 1958; Plant, 1992; Sadler, 1998). Citizens would not be mere inhabitants or tourists, but rather playful, critical participants in the social construction and deconstruction of a shared environment.

The notion of “drifting” functioned in opposition to the overly ordered and controlled cityscapes developed around the rationalist principles of modernist architecture. Metaphorically, through intellectual critique, and literally, through physical wandering through the urban milieu, the *dérive* functions as a means for the individual to transgress the ordered nature of the city grid. It is understood in direct contradiction to the traditional manner of passage through urban space (Debord, 1958). Rather than abiding by the rules of movement presented by the sidewalks and streets or public and private property, the *dériveur* explores and encounters the city as a perpetually swirling field of social and cultural currents that have little to do with the physical parameters of architecture. Drifting offers an alternative means for traversing and experiencing the city, exposing its composition to a continuous critique. The *dérive* as a metaphor can be applied to art education, with the field and its contents representing a landscape for “drifting” inquiry, becoming a site for critical contact, not for passive observation.

Le Corbusier’s City

Architecture, as it came to be understood in the early part of the twentieth century, was a specific target for situationist critique. Modernist architectural principles were set forth in the 1933 Athens Charter of CIAM (Congres Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), which outlined some of the basic tenets of modern urban design (Sadler, 1998). The coordination of city spaces became the primary organizing principle of urban design. The charter stated, “Zoning that takes account of the key functions – housing, work, recreation – will bring order to the urban territory. Traffic, the fourth function, must have only one aim: to bring the other three usefully into communication” (p. 24). The optimism surrounding the possibility of rational city design leading to a perfectly ordered society overshadowed the consequences of such designs on the actual inhabitants of these spaces. Social benefit was conceived as social order. Le Corbusier established the primacy of formal organization as a component of urban design when he wrote in

1930, "Spaces, dimensions and forms, interior spaces and interior forms, interior pathways and exterior forms, and exterior spaces -- quantities, weights, distances, atmospheres, it is with these that we act" (Nuttgens, p. 70).

The order apparent in modernist urbanism was a superimposed structure that, theoretically, occurred prior to the influence of human participation within its forms. Conversely, Debord and the Situationists articulated a "unitary urbanism," which proposed that the "form" of the city would result from the social, political and personal interactions that occurred within whatever spaces existed (Knabb 1981; Sadler, 1998). In a direct response to CIAM's charter, Debord (1959) published his own *Situationist Theses on Traffic*. In the fifth thesis of this document, he writes, "Unitary urbanism acknowledges no boundaries; it aims to form a unitary human milieu in which separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved" (p. 57). Furthermore, Debord viewed all inhabitants of the city as potential revolutionaries with the ability to subvert its formal structures and create more fluid ones through the creation of *situations*. "Revolutionary urbanists will not limit their concern to the circulation of things and of human beings trapped in a world of things. They will try to break these topological chains, paving the way with their experiments for a human journey through authentic life" (p. 58). In other words, whereas prevailing modernist principles conceived of buildings as static monuments around which the population would circulate, Debord and the Situationists anticipated a society organized around the fluid, imprecise and ever-changing interactions and social exchanges of individuals.

City Space and the Space of Inquiry

Like the modern city, fields of study are often conceived as modernist constructions. Their contents are coordinated in such a manner that inquiry proceeds in accordance with those structures. In particular, discipline based approaches to the study of art propose a framework that organizes inquiry for the student similar to that of modern architecture. That is, ideas and objects are composed in a certain arrangement, inviting inquiry that proceeds in a coordinated manner through a coordinated field. Canonical constructions of works of art and historical trends also represent a pre-constituted field revealing and anticipating a particular type of investigation. The Situationist critique of the space of the city offers a potentially productive metaphor to rethink these formulations of inquiry.

Urbanization throughout the Twentieth Century has forever changed the contours of the built environment. Planned communities, tract home divisions, malls, and urban renewal projects continue to carve up the social environment. The Situationists carried out, through actions and writing, con-

centrated and relentless critiques of this trend, which they perceived as a process resulting in the total commodification of urban space (Knabb, 1981; Sadler, 1998; Plant, 1992). The Situationists viewed the pervasive process of urbanization as endemic to global capitalist development and therefore their ideas and actions were to be understood as viable critical attacks throughout the industrialized world. For them, social space had been so parceled up, and so artificially ordered that individuals living within these spaces were entirely alienated from social experience. All the components of their lives were commodified, distilled and sold back to them. In other words, not only were material goods intended to improve one's life available for purchase, but to a large extent experience and desire came to be sold through the same process of packaging and advertising. A particular target of Situationist critique was the idea of the vacation package, a product that essentially pre-fabricated experience (Knabb, 1981, p. 64).

This capitalist mode of exchange, one which forever distances the individual from social connection and interaction, is what Debord (1967/1994) described as the "spectacle." "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (p. 12). The commodification of life was reified in the spectacle of the city and Guy Debord along with other members of the Situationist International conducted various interventionist actions, such as *dérive*, meant to interfere with and subsequently disrupt the social control inherent in much urban development.

The field of art education as "spectacle" can be witnessed in the art classroom in many ways. It is apparent in the selection of images displayed in the classroom representing only a limited cross section of almost infinite choices, in the limited range of media and artistic methods that pre-organize the scope and the process of inquiry, and in the articulation of an aesthetic and critical framework focusing primarily on the principles and elements of design. Can the situationist practice of *dérive* offer a means to expand the scope of critical inquiry in art? A more in-depth examination of the practice of the *dérive* might help to address this question.

***Dérive* as Critical Practice**

The critical value of the *dérive* is in its ability to re-construct the urban landscape in a manner more conducive the *dérive*'s passions, desires, and social motivations. The act of drifting opposes the static constructions of buildings, roads and traffic patterns by creating a unique situation within this environment, which the Situationists defined as "A moment in life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of event" (Knabb, 1981, p. 45).

The *dérive* often took a very literal form. Members of the group

would set out on excursions, on foot, by taxi, by car and so on, throughout the city that lasted sometimes from a few hours to a couple of days. During this process, the goal was to attend to the way that certain streets, buildings, and open areas resonated and appealed to the desires of the drifter and “to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed” (Plant, 1998, p. 59). A great deal of conversation and social interaction accompanied the *dérive*, something the Situationists believed had been diminished in the modern city. The activity represented a type of urban exploration that served to expose the hidden structures of the city allowing for both their critique and their transgression. Essentially, the *dérive* functioned as a means by which to use the environment for one’s own ends.

The final and perhaps most infamous *dérive* occurred during the university uprisings in Paris in 1968 in which the physical constructions/constraints of the city/university were disassembled and reorganized in a literal manifestation of the critical process of the *dérive* (Vienet, 1968). Though Debord was said to have been present at the Nanterre campus during the uprisings, it is difficult to ascertain the Situationists’ direct involvement. However graffiti slogans like “Beneath the paving stones, the beach” (p. 80) and “Live without dead time-Enjoy without restraint” (p. 119) both alluded to the idea of the *dérive* and indicated to the Situationists that at least the spirit of their ideas had permeated the event.

Derive as Tactical Inquiry

The *dérive* is not a strategy for establishing practice, but rather a tactical devise meant to subvert established routines. Michel De Certeau (1984) articulates a clear difference between a *tactic* and a *strategy*. Strategies are initiated and maintained once “a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated” (p. 36). A tactic, on the other hand, is a maneuver made against a strategic position that is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (p. 37). Linking architectural form to inquiry in art education, one can view the structures of inquiry such as disciplined based art education, the Western canon of art history, even state and local achievement standards as strategic in nature. To respond to the hegemony of these formulations, both conceptual and literal, one can adopt the tactical practice of the *dérive*, which does not rely on the presentation of an alternative structure, but rather proceeds with the formulation of its own sort of temporary *anti*-structure. The *dérive* disrupts presumed order not simply by randomly drifting through space but also letting go of the impulse to adapt to a structural system. “[T]he derive includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction; the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities” (Debord, 1958, p. 50). That is to say, *anti*-structure as a foundation for learn-

ing is not the simple denial of form, but rather the recognition of potential located in alternative variations of order. The *dérive* orders inquiry not around rational and/or pre-determined forms, but around playful manipulation of concepts, people, and things that compose the landscape of inquiry.

Play as Tactical Critique

Within situationist practice, play becomes a central feature of critical inquiry. The landscape of art and art education with their forms and constructions become not simply the arena within which knowledge is constituted, but they too become targets of tactical inquiry. The playful/constructive behavior associated with the *dérive* endows it with both idiosyncratic and critical possibilities. To construct in this manner is not simply to give form, but rather to find form, to create *situations*, by making connections between discontinuous spaces and experiences encountered in the process of the drifting. What emerges is a sort of ludic investigation, that is, a playful, spontaneous experimentation within an endless range of possibilities rather than a process of inquiry directed by prior constructions. The "space" of this activity resembles neither a systematically coordinated array of content, nor a simple reorganization of this content, but rather a zone somewhere in between that requires a method of engagement motivated by openness to chance and unexpected encounters.

Victor Turner (1982) describes this ill-defined, but culturally significant space as the liminal. "[I]n liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements" (p. 27). Thus tactical inquiry would take place as a *dérive* within the field of art education resulting in the construction of situations within which unique and unanticipated insights might arise.

James Hans (1981) provides a description of play that closely aligns with the intentions of situationist critique as it is conceived as a *dérive*. Hans suggests that play "is a *structuring* activity, the activity out of which understanding comes" (p. x). Play, within this framework, is not simply an enhancement of or diversion from everyday activity, but rather is understood as a constitutive element of social production and subsequently an activity associated with both the construction and the critique of meaning. Indeed Debord spoke of "industrially transformed cities" as "centers of possibilities and meanings" (Debord, 1958, p. 51) and clearly viewed the *dérive* as a method for locating and establishing new ones. Reflecting situationist ideas, Hans writes,

The role of play is not to work comfortably within its own structures but rather constantly to develop its structures through play. It is through play that man [sic] adapts to his changing world, that he [sic] constantly challenges and changes the rules and structures by

which he lives. (p. 5)

The *derive* represents a disruption of order and is intended to open up the social field to ludic rather than rational inquiry, yet this is not where their critique would end. As a result of this activity that one could create what the Situationists referred to as “psychogeographical” maps (Knabb, 1981; Plant, 1992; Sadler, 1998). Psychogeography presented the urban landscape as an integrated, changing, and fluid construction based on the social interactions, the behaviors, and the unique desires of the city’s inhabitants as opposed to traditional maps that present the city as a set of spaces and roads organized around a fixed set of coordinates.

Implications of Drifting in the Art Educational Landscape

Historically, the scope of the art educational landscape has been identified and coordinated. From the picture study movement of the early twentieth century, through efforts to locate “free” expression as a central component of art education to more recent attention to discipline-based inquiry and visual culture, attempts to articulate the field have developed around particular notions of inquiry. These conceptions did not formally define the boundaries of art education, though they did provide various frameworks that served as navigational guides. Systems devised to clarify do not necessarily specify the particular content, yet the resemblances to modernist structures of urban design are apparent. In most cases, the student enters a field distributed and guided through these structures. Conversely, the field made available in the *dérive* is not delimited by any pre-given structure, nor is there a presumption of a particular path, but rather movement would be based on the psychogeographical attractions that the student encounters as they drift through the content of the curriculum.

Inquiry within a “drifting” framework takes on a different quality than that proposed by a static one. Content is not transmitted in a unidirectional manner with the inquirer responding to the material presented, rather content would present itself in unanticipated ways that become apparent through the process of *derive*. Inquiry becomes both a narrative and a performative process emanating not from the stable position of observation and response, but from the fluid position of engagement and reaction responding to the idiosyncratic and unique perspectives of the drifting inquirer as they come into contact with diverse information and experiences. This process perhaps more closely resembles a continuous research project reflecting the particular experience of the researcher as they proceed through the material under investigation whether that be their own artwork, the artwork of others, or even the everyday life of the inquirer. Inquiry in art becomes an integrated event within the continuum of lived experience endowing it with the potential, as the Situationists had hoped, to become a site for social critique

fully implicated into the everyday life of the individual.

Tim Brennan (2001) exemplifies the spirit of drifting as a form of aesthetic research in his artwork. He describes his walking performances as "manoeuvres." "They exist in a region between traditions of performance art, the historical tour, loco-descriptive poetry, pilgrimage, expanded notions of sculpture and plain old pedestrianism" (p. 49). Brennan sets out on the streets of London while reading a particular text sometimes to himself, sometimes aloud, and sometimes asking bystanders to read. By manipulating the experience of walking through the act of reading and the content of the text, he acquires an alternative conception of the space of the city altering expected notions of time, space, and language. "Through walking one can come to understand place as a built environment of texts, and within this context each walk I produce exists as a manoeuvring through the politics of space and time as language" (p. 49). The entire experience represents both a form of active inquiry and a sort of expanded notion of sculpture. It makes apparent to the inquirer/walker/artist the world as a completely integrated, endlessly flowing, always layered experience where intention and knowledge are always understood as interpretive processes. "Manoeuvres," Brennan writes, "are not interventions but are rather open to the intervention of everyday life" (p. 50). Art making guided by this philosophy asserts itself into the broader culture not as a discrete object to be interpreted, but as another text that alters and is altered by contact with infinite other texts.

Mapping the *Dérive*: Creating Alternative Fields of Inquiry

Unlike Brennan's maps, traditional maps represent a system of coordinates, roads and passages that anyone could read in order that they might locate where they are or where they are going within a defined field. Maps resulting from the *dérive*, however, do not represent the movements or directions of the drifter, but rather the social, psychological, and political effects of the spaces themselves and the encounters that were experienced. For the Situationists, the process of map making was not to record location but to "cultivate an awareness of the ways in which everyday life is presently conditioned and controlled" (Plant, 1992, p. 58). By adopting a playful attitude when carrying out the *dérive*, this awareness can potentially expose hidden manipulation within urban form since the motivation for movement is governed by the presumed irrationality of play and not solely by rational organization. It is within this irrationality that the Situationists believed social critique and ultimately revolution would erupt. It is also in this spirit that the following student art projects were conceived.

In a course entitled "Concepts and Creation in the Visual Arts," I designed the final art project around the concept of the *dérive*. The students were from all disciplines across the University of South Carolina, so the idea

of drifting inquiry seemed appropriate to integrate and address the wide array of experiences represented by this diverse population. Each student was asked to consider his or her daily experience on the campus, the routines they followed, the sidewalks and paths they frequented, and the people with whom they typically had contact. Reflecting on this information, each student was then asked to examine a particular space on the campus through an art installation or performance inserted into that space to provoke a response from others who encountered this intervention and to open the space to critical attention. While some pieces were static installations, others took on the more mobile form associated with the notion of the *dérive*. The following were two particularly successful works.

Wearing a yellow biohazard suit, reading aloud from his English syllabus, and simultaneously feeding the local squirrel population, one student critiqued the perceived distance between the professors and the students in the process of disseminating knowledge. With the peanuts representing "nuggets" of information being antiseptically distributed from the safety of the suit, the student performed this distance. At the same time, any student who asked what he was doing was read a passage from the syllabus and given a peanut, a small piece of knowledge. As this performance proceeded, the multiple texts that composed the space, the library, the classrooms facing the space, the students and instructors passing through, and his own personal text all intermingled and for the duration of the performance. This action reconfigured space to align more with his individual thoughts and experiences. It provided a site for both his own inquiry and the critical attention of the bystanders, shifting the space momentarily from that of prescribed passive location to active critical site.

A female student chose as the site of her inquiry, the men's restroom. Beginning with the notion that this is a thoroughly masculine inscribed space, she set out to critique this configuration by inserting herself as a disruptive addition. Additionally, she planned to insert the feminine "text" of sewing to further open the space to unexpected social collisions. Sitting in the restroom next to the sink with a needle in her hand attached to a large spool of red thread, she asked each person as he entered if she could have the label from his underwear to sew into the tiny quilt that she was working on. The performance continued for about an hour in which time she was able to construct a small piece of cloth composed of perhaps twenty tags. With this piece, the space of the bathroom was disrupted, exposing the masculine texts that both proceed from and sustain its composition as a not simply an architecturally discrete location, but as a textually defined social space.

With each of these works, inquiry began and proceeded not from a particular image, or concept, or map that I presented to students and within which they were asked to respond, but rather from their own experiences as

participants in the academic and social spaces of the institution. Through these projects the students and I were able to, at least for a moment, disentangle the multiplicity of interconnected texts that compose the space of our shared experiences. As with the *dérive*, we did not set out to prove or find anything in particular, rather the artwork proceeded as constructed activities open to the infinite chance encounters that constantly pass through and define our field of experience revealing hidden texts subjecting them to critical inquiry.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper is not to define a methodology for inquiry, rather it is meant to privilege critique as its intended goal. It proposes a process of inquiry that is never complete, never totally resolved and always on the move in which inquirers "play a game of their own designing, against a backdrop they have designed themselves" (Nieuwenhuys¹, 1960, p. 10). It does not presume a defined field and offer a way in, but rather assumes a complex open field and proposes a manner of passing through. The *dérive* is indeed paradoxical. It delineates a path, but resists inscription, it reveals and perhaps conceals simultaneously. It opens inquiry to unforeseen collaborations, while at the same time remaining resolutely personal. At its core, critical inquiry conceived as drifting inquiry dissolves the distinctions between art and life and locates art as a critical act in the midst of, not as an extension of or reflection on, social experience.

Notes

1. Constant Nieuwenhuys was an architect member of the Situationist International who proposed, in his visionary architectural project, New Babylon, a physical manifestation of situationist theory.

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