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Walkshop and soundshot – a *dérive* and participatory performance

The walkshop

My current practice-based research draws upon the relationship between psychogeographical theory and creative writing methods. I am interested in the relationship between walking and ideation, and how embodied experience of place informs creative work: the formal possibilities that walking and psychogeography offer contemporary writing, and ways in which narrative form can be used to represent or respond to place.

Walkshop: individual *dérive* and information capture

Participants meet centrally and are given a set amount of time to walk individually around campus (5-10 minutes, depending on schedule).

Participants *dérive* or drift, driven by their own individual curiosity and interpretation. Prompt cards with randomly-generated directions help lead the participants away from established or habitual routes.

Psychogeography offers ways of re-examining place and our relationship with it. Psychogeographical exercises encourage the walker to question what they see and the paths they usually take: to reject routes, disobey signage, and follow their curiosity. Through attentiveness, the *dérive* or drift¹ establishes itself as other than a casual stroll or a means of travelling from one point to another.

Turn to your left. Walk straight on.

→ **First left**

→ **Second right**

Keep going straight as far as you can.

Since its earliest Lettrist and Situationist forms², psychogeography has employed devices and ‘catapults’ to break habitual patterns of walking and, by extension, being. In ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’³ Chtcheglov rails against the ‘mental disease’ of ‘banalization’, of a society ‘hypnotized by production and conveniences... Presented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen a garbage disposal unit’⁴. Chtcheglov’s answer is to radically reconstruct society from the ground up, challenging the urban environment through transformable, shape-shifting architecture and the development of districts designed to correspond to ‘the whole spectrum of diverse feelings’⁵, from the Bizarre to the Sinister. In this new society, ‘[t]he main activity of the inhabitants will be CONTINUOUS DRIFTING’ with the aim of shifting individuals from their apathy through ‘total disorientation’⁶.

Walk in the direction you are facing.

→ **At the end of this street, flip a coin: if heads, walk on; if tails, walk back to the previous junction.**

→ **First left**

Repeat directions.

Total disorientation may not be possible in the space of a two-hour seminar, but by integrating dérives into creative practice, one can defamiliarise place and find new ways of experiencing, and thus seeing, the everyday. This is the thinking behind my incorporation of psychogeographical exercises into my own writing and my creative writing teaching. Disrupted walking methods and dérive -based exercises present possibilities to all creative and site-specific practices: for recent examples, see Wrights & Sites’ *A mis-Guide to Anywhere*⁷ and Clare Qualmann and Claire Hind’s *Ways to Wander*⁸.

The soundshot

As a writer and tutor of creative writing, I am often presented with the expectation that writing is a solitary, internal process. Author readings focus on the delivery of finished work to an audience: the creative workshop, while a communal, participatory experience, can be an ordeal for the self-conscious student. As a tutor, I strive to find ways of making the act of creating and sharing text as painless as possible, and often use performance-based approaches to help deliver this. I am particularly interested in how the act of participation can be shaped to assist students, and other nervous writers, to gain confidence with sharing their work, using their voice and ultimately, performing to an audience.

Soundshot: collage of interpreted sound, performed by the participants

At an agreed time, all participants stop walking and mark their location on a map of the campus. They then write down every sound they hear in the following 60 seconds.

Participants reconvene at an agreed location. They perform a soundshot of the campus by reading simultaneously from their recorded notes, creating an ephemeral, site-specific collage of interpreted sound.

Building upon some of my existing ice-breaker exercises, I devised the ‘soundshot’ element of this workshop when working on a single day in 2015 with an interdisciplinary group of postgraduate students. The day consisted of a series of *dérive*-based exercises in Canterbury, designed to encourage sensory exploration, observation and interpretation of place. The soundshot replaced the usual plenary discussion at the end of the day: rather than asking the students to speak individually about the experience or share any draft creative work, I asked them to offer their observations all at once. The students had worked in small groups and as individuals. For the last exercise, each participant noted down found sounds within an identified location and timeframe.

Gathering together back on campus, participants stood at a point in the room which they felt represented their location in the town. All read aloud their notes, raising and lowering their voices according to the volume or type of sound transcribed. This shared reading became increasingly performative as individuals embodied sounds, vocalised noises and transposed the soundscape of a busy Saturday city centre to an anonymous seminar room. At the end of the soundshot it was clear that the participants were experiencing the adrenaline and buzz of performance, speaking with great animation about their own and each other's delivery as well as the material shared. Moving and speaking together had not only helped with group identity and bonding, the act of participation had become a form of shared aesthetic experience.

For the *Art of Participation* forum I developed the original soundshot into a two-part workshop: a *dérive* with a sixty second, site-specific sound transcription, followed by a collaborative performance of the soundshot. Participants drifted on the University of Kent campus, following their curiosity or prompted to wander by random direction cards.

After five minutes of walking, stop. Make a note of your location on the campus map. This is the location of your soundshot.

Spend some time inhabiting this final place. Listen carefully to your surroundings. Close your eyes. Be still. Tune in.

At the agreed time, write down EVERYTHING you can hear, however garbled or fragmentary: snatches of conversation, song lyrics, announcements, footstep sounds, birdsong, machinery noise etc. Record onomatopoeic renderings of sound (e.g. cluk-cluk-cluk of heels on pavement, the fuuuuuugh of a bus putting on its brakes). Do this for ONE MINUTE.

Make your way as directly as possible to the agreed place.

At the agreed time participants gathered on the outdoor labyrinth to perform the soundshot, the chosen site serving as a stage for the creation of a site-specific sound collage.



participants begin gathering at the Kent labyrinth to perform the soundshot

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¹ Guy Debord, “Theory of the Dérive” [1959], in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62-66.

² See Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).

³ Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism” [1953], in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 1-8.

⁴ Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism”, 4.

⁵ Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism”, 6.

⁶ Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism”, 7.

⁷ Stephen Hodge et al, *A mis-Guide to Anywhere* (Exeter: Wrights & Sites, 2006).

⁸ Clare Qualmann and Claire Hind, eds., *Ways to Wander* (Axminster: Triarchy, 2015).

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