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Possible rendezvous
art as accident in urban spaces

Darren Tofts

Life defers to art; art defers to difference

McKenzie Wark, Dispositions

Baudelaire situated this figure at the “centre of the world”. For Poe he bathed in the fluidity and flow of the crowd, possessing a “calm but inquisitive interest in everything”. For Benjamin he lived in a perpetual state of “anamnestic intoxication”. Poet of the ephemeral, the accidental and the unexpected, the flâneur’s obsession with becoming lost in the midst of the infinite and complex distraction of the crowd is synonymous with the development of the modern city and the cosmopolitan imagination. While a figure, and usually a male one at that, the indulged and indulgent wandering known as flânerie is in fact a sensibility that strolls in various guises and genders from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, a chimera whose shadow can be found in the Surrealists’ pursuit of la merveilleux in the arcades and boulevards of Paris. Still further into the century it can be traced in the dérive of the Situationist International, and further still into the next century in the hypermediated experiments of unsitely aesthetics. This passage traces and reveals the evolution of how the local pedestrian wandered into the networked era as an always-connected, wireless global nomad.

Contrary to most orthodox readings, the flâneur and the Situationist are not always, or not necessarily mobile. They are often characterized as motionless creatures removed from everyday life, rather than immersed in it. Nor do they excitedly court the small cosmopolitan miracles of unexpected encounter. The opening paragraphs of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) sets the scene for the flâneur as one who is resting after an illness, grateful for and alive to what experience brings to him; deriving “pleasure
even from many of the legitimate sources of pain” (Poe, 1967, 179). With Poe’s textbook on strolling in the city at his elbow, Charles Baudelaire also characterizes the flâneur as a convalescent, whose “returning strength” stimulates the “keenest appetency” (179), electrifying the intellect and the imagination:

…lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything (Baudelaire, 1995, 7).

Convalescence, as a period of waiting, of recovery, finds resonance in the Situationist notion of recuperation, the rehabilitation of that which has been isolated or spurned from society (Marcus, 2002, 5). I want to recuperate the notion of the flâneur as Situationist manqué, as an “eternal convalescent” isolated from the crowd he desires to become (Baudelaire, 1995, 8). From this recuperative, convalescent sensibility we witness the incipient beginnings of the aesthete of the unsitely, a wanderer “in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite” (9); an alternative kino eye on the way “to a ‘possible rendezvous’... without warning to a place he may or may not know” (Debord, 2006, 65).

Détournement, the dérive, the urban psychogeography of the convalescent flâneur. These are the formative architectural and psychological elements of unsitely aesthetics. Baudelaire’s seeker of modernity is looking, no less, for the “fugitive pleasure of circumstance” (Baudelaire, 1995, 12). But rather than simply terrestrial phenomena of movement, flow and distraction, unsiteliness also signifies and presumes the simultaneous mediation of remote sites; the contemporary flâneur, even more so than their predecessors, takes up “residence in multiplicity” (Baudelaire in White, 2001, 36). Timo Kopomaa’s characterization of the “e-flâneur”, the navigator of “variegated” virtual worlds, adds a further level of multiplicity to the terrain of flânerie (Kopomaa, 2000, 20). As a hybrid wanderer through physical and virtual space simultaneously, the term flâneur comes to signify a double inflection being here and there at one and the same time. In this the flâneur flânerie has never been so busy in their long history, having “a multiplicity of engagements”,

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1 With respect to this notion of rehabilitation, Anke Gleber describes flânerie as a “‘walking cure’ against the prevailing melancholy in capitalist modernity—the melancholy to which modern subjectivity is subjected in its periods of waiting, transit, and transition”. *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999, p.60.
in Norie Neumark’s words, “which open up lines of flight, to the rich potentiality of the virtual” (in Chandler & Neumark, 2005, 3).

The notion of the unsitely, as out of site, as well as unsightly, or not immediately pleasing to the eye, presumes this general broadening of the grid of traversable space usually associated with flânerie. As well it assumes a conceptual widening of the aesthetic potential, or potentiality, of the unexpected siting. Siting implies the dual inflection of that which is simultaneous and coincident. It is remote, out of site, but capable of being cited or referenced telematically. It is sitely, in an aesthetic sense of becoming, in that it could be artifice, accident and/or the inadvertent expression of design, taste or whimsy. In the section on the flâneur in The Arcades Project, for instance, Walter Benjamin quotes from another commentator on the arcades of Paris, Amédée Kermel, writing of the lighting in the Passage Colbert: “I admire the regular series of those crystal globes, which give off a light both vivid and gentle. Couldn’t the same be said of comets in battle formation, awaiting the signal for departure to go vagabonding through space?” (Kermel in Benjamin, 2002, 422).

The state of intoxication associated with flânerie, described by nearly all of its commentators from Baudelaire to Benjamin, brings to mind that prototypical aesthetician of the unsitely, Arthur Rimbaud. The “adept” of “elementary hallucination”, Rimbaud describes in A Season in Hell (1873) the duplicitous double vision of sight and site. In a famous paragraph he describes how

I could very precisely see a mosque instead of a factory, a drum corps of angels, horse carts on the highways of the sky, a drawing room at the bottom of a lake. A vaudeville’s title filled me with awe (Rimbaud, 2008, 234).

Edmund White, in his splendid book on Paris, The Flâneur, described how the dramatist August Strindberg wandered the streets of nineteenth century Paris paranoid, “high on absinthe” and “projecting parts of the drum above the Invalides as Napoleon and his marshals, he felt the ground along the Avenue de l’Opéra trembling” (White, 2001, 39). In a more stylized, sober manner, Salvador Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method attempted to systematize hallucination or paranoid phenomena through the use of “double figuration”, thereby making “the very world of delirium pass to the level of reality” (Dalí, 1935).
The altered, duplicitous perception of the flâneur suggests that site is multiple and ambivalent; it is something in the environment that can be miss-seen as mise-en-scène. As with the “magical sophistries” of Rimbaud’s “alchemy of the word”, the “little miracles” of Strindberg the “seer-drunk-genius” (White, 2001, 39), Dali’s paranoid-critical activity enabled different spectators to see different images in the same painting; producing an ambivalent co-existence of the possibility of a thing and its opposite (artifice/accident, presence/absence, difference/différance). Or something suggestively and entirely other, as in one of Amédée Kermel’s visions of the street in his “Les Passages de Paris”: “The gas lamp illuminating it looks like a coconut palm in the middle of a savannah” (in Benjamin). It is this rich yet undecidable irresolution of opposites that distinguishes unsitely phenomena.

In his *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*, McKenzie Wark describes Situationist architecture as a kind of Utopian space, “an imaginary enclave within real social space... a result of spatial and social differentiation” (Wark, 2008, 22). Michel Foucault’s “heterotopia” immediately comes to mind, which he describes as a “counter-site” capable of “juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault, 1967). This is helpful in conceptualizing the unsitely in territorial and relational terms, in that Foucault privileges space over time, describing “our epoch” as one “in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites”. However the differing aspect of both Wark’s and Foucault’s spatial ecologies needs to be broadened to include temporal contiguity, the bringing together of two dislocated, heterogeneous sites in time via mediation as a “single time”, thereby constituting a manifold complex, a “virtuality” in the Deleuzian sense (Deleuze, 1988, 83).

Australian artist Maria Miranda has coined the term unsitely aesthetics to capture this aporia, the co-habitation of unsitely (small, unspectacular) and unsightly (beyond normative artistic taste or doctrine). The notion of site/sight presumes encounter with public spaces beyond the white cube of the gallery, but also the “paradoxical multi-sitedness and situatedness of the work and its reception” (Miranda, 2009, 44). As a formation defined in relation to contemporary media art practice, unsitely aesthetics extends the notion of public space into the distributed, networked and increasingly mobile space of the Internet. The flickering différance of sightly/sitely assumes that the relational and distributed nature of the space which constitutes the work, as well as the dislocated temporal conditions of its
reception. As Miranda has suggested, the “emphasis for unsitely is the use that artists are making of the internet, in the actual world” (48).

*Melbourne/Rome* is the blandly provisional name I have given to an experiment in unsitely aesthetics. It is deliberately non-descript in order to see the work as an almost didactic engagement with the *process* of conceiving, performing and documenting an unsitely aesthetic. Taking its starting point from the Situationists’ use of maps, I wanted to use the experience of physically walking through the streets of the immediate and embodied city in which I live (Melbourne) and map it on to a virtual journey through a remote city. A set of personal preferences established the guidelines and principles for determining the latter: the last international city which I have visited (Rome), where I stayed during that time (the Campo dei Fiori), and the exploitation of an essential difference between the two sites (the definitive grid structure of the Melbourne CBD and the labyrinthine tangle of streets that circumscribe the Campo dei Fiori). The idea was to see what might happen in the way of sitings in one city and mark anything of conspicuous interest on the map. The contrast of the topographical characteristics of each city was chosen as a variable, an algorithm that allowed for the possibility of rendezvous, of potential co-ordinates.

I chose the legal and corporate section of the Melbourne CBD for obvious reasons, in that it was as far from the local, residential and community vibe of the Campo dei Fiori as Melbourne is from Rome in geographical space and time. I partitioned a selected grid of Melbourne streets roughly comparable in scale to the area around the Campo dei Fiori I was familiar with. Then using tracing paper, I assembled a manifold palimpsest of both areas so that a siting in one city could easily be mapped on to an equivalent coordinate (relative to the shared grid) in the other (see Figure 1).
Then, using the Streetview function in Google Maps, I traversed the equivalent co-ordinate in Rome in the hope of possible synchronicities: a synaesthetic quality of the network that transposed the locomotion of walking to the scanning of the eye over the screen. This was a kind of virtual take on the dérive. It was weirdly suggestive of a kind of perambulation that could make sense in the world of atoms and friction, especially with respect to its connotation of drifting (see Figure 2). The spectral phasing of the screen as the Streetview algorithm creates the illusion of movement along the street. It then resolves itself into a clarity akin to the physical sensation of pausing in front of a specific something.
As an analogue of pounding the pavement around Melbourne in another city, it was pleasingly complementary as a vector that connected unsitely spaces of flow. A series of annotated findings of this experiment constitute the second part of this essay.

The idea behind Melbourne/Rome was a kind of Oulippean “potential” art of happenstance in urban space; a space-time in which something that might or could be art finds you, or could become art through fabulation, combining the various sitings into a narrative. The superimposed maps constituted a kind of aleatoric interface, a dialectic of chance and choice similar to a John Cage prepared piano: you can play it, but you can’t control what might resonate from its operations. An early working title for this project was in fact Atelier aleatoire, a preposterously Francophile appellation for a work that has nothing remotely to do with France. However the idea of conceiving, executing then documenting a process that may or may not yield results was suggested by the convergence of the traditional notion of the studio (as a place of design, planning and practice) and contingency. Most artists, of course, talk of being courted by chance as much as inspiration in the studio. I wanted to modify the inflection to incorporate the very notion of the studio as an effect of chance.

The studio, as a virtual object in space and a contingent process in time, was an emergent property of the provisional mapping of the pre-defined and partitioned streetscape. The
actual negotiation of its embodied layer, the streets of Melbourne, was random, in the spirit of *flânerie*, of simply going where the dérive takes you (fortunately, too, the Melbourne CBD is graced with myriad laneways, alleys and cul de sacs, many of which are not even named). The *atelier aleatoire* is in this sense less a thing than a rhythm that blends and hustles the ordered and the random into a kind of dance.

A work that certainly influenced my thinking on the design of the event was Wark’s 2002 book *Dispositions*. *Dispositions* is described by its publisher as a kid of diary that “tracks the secret passage of free time and free thought through the spaces of everyday life lived increasingly in the shadow of the satellites”. It is a more thoughtful, meditative, even self-conscious take on the dérive, of the “art of walking in crowds” in the age of the aphorism and the mobile GPS (Wark, 2002, 6th April, 2001). Though, that said, it is no less attentive to the incurable distraction of the crowd than the *flânerie* of Poe and Baudelaire:

4.45 PM EST
North 42.37514°
Elevation 188 ’

14th April 2001
West 071.114920”
245 ’ Accuracy

Looking up from the notebook. Lost for a moment, lost to context. Mind and muscles in that context of the notebook and the pen. There is no text, only context.

The museum guard, in a neatly pressed uniform, shoes shined. He sits in a red chair a few inches from the wall. He gently eases his head back until it touches the wall, and closes his eyes. He sits that way, legs folded and turned, for some time. When he wakes, he sees me looking at him, and smiles. Exchange of smiles. Both arriving for a period at this point.

Wark’s project partakes of unsitely aesthetics in that his dérive is assembled through the mediation of his immediate location on the streets of New York City by the virtual, panoptical gaze of a hand-held Global Positioning Satellite. To signify the virtual confluence of different experiences and definitions of space, *Dispositions* is unpaginated, each entry (as in the excerpt above) catalogued in terms of date, time and latitude and longitude. Wark’s experiment in unsiteliness is at odds with the spatial organization of the book form itself, which seeks to impose a certain kind of order that is linear and sequential.
The consensus among scholars of Debord and his followers is that no actual situations were ever staged, well at least not in the name of Situationism. They remain conceptual, potential, like Fluxus event scores awaiting their performance, their manifestation at another time and place. Perhaps *Melbourne/Rome* is such a vector of time and place, an emergent property of the outcomes between ordered and random conditions. With Asger Jorn’s notion of the “event” in mind, Wark describes its aesthetics and its politics as a “block of time and space that varies, deforms, morphs, but that happens in time and may not happen again” (Wark, 2008, 19).
Melbourne/Rome

... a set of coordinates that give your position here with respect to there

Dick Higgins

Do you see, Madam, a narrative in these apparently unrelated episodes?

Mr. Neville, The Draughtsman’s Contract
Near Circle Alley, Melbourne

A palace of light and truth. The *Sancta Sedes*, the Holy See, arbitrator of truth and light in the name of the crucified Christ. The architecture of power and administration, the Word and the Law. Congregation of the Holy Office. D for Dominican, the Catholic order responsible for conducting inquisitions and trials at the request of the Roman Curia. And the accused, the controversial friar of Nola, interrogated for seven years, imprisoned in dungeons of the Tor di Nona. Cardinal Bellarmine’s repeated calls for his Dominican brother to recant fell upon deaf ears. D for deaf. On the 17th February, 1600, he took his final breath amid the flames. D for death.

An archive of numerous features, the *puncta* of architectural memory. A fearful symmetry of holes and filled cavities. Bolts tidied up with an angle grinder. The holes, something *that has been*. The fugitive trace of a commemorative plaque, ripped from the wall, perhaps by a souvenir hunter. But more likely an act of casual malice. Now simply the suggestion of a life once lived, who lived *here*, engraved into the judicial face of the business end of town. Or died here. The site of a Masonic Lodge from the 1910s, a Friendly Society of Odd Fellows; the marks not holes but signs, a mysticism of welcome and protection from persecution. Perhaps bullet holes, puncturing burnished granite in a calculated manner that would seem to contradict haphazardness, fury or a casual drive-by. A gangland execution with a steady hand. Another name for the Inquisition.

A face in the grip of some obscure transcendence. Ecstasy and agony fused into a distorted visage. Perhaps only half glimpsed, as he averts his gaze from the image of Christ shown to him by the inquisitors. Naked and topsy-turvy, silenced with a wooden stake through the tongue. The smudged insult of a broken nose, administered during the long walk to the stake. The resignation is strangely beatific, a calm defiance captured by Ettore Ferrari in his 1889 monument to heresy in the Campo dei Fiori. A rictus or a smile? The anticipation, *in extremis*, of imminent knowledge of higher truths, pursued during a lifetime of Gnostic discipline.
References


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