

Nine essays on the photographic *dérive* (a working draft)

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Walking. In an unfamiliar city we walk with the photographer down streets that may be remarkable or unremarkable, fine thoroughfares or simple side streets. We turn corners, this way or that, at random, without plan, following visual impulses and desires, as though the eyes and the legs were in direct contact with one another in circumvention of the rest of the body. We walk down streets and turn corners and cross squares or circumnavigate them and head off down new streets, always looking, pausing only to raise the camera to the eye in a moment of stasis, to carefully frame something fleetingly seen, carefully frame it for posterity, then move on, the legs putting themselves into motion again, walking the eyes down streets and around corners. All day, until the legs tire and the eyes burn, and finally the whole body is fatigued and disoriented and thoughts begin to meander through the mind as if of their own accord. Defences are down, impressions flow in, he no longer remembers which area of which city he is in, or even how he got wherever he is let alone how he is ever going to get back. Wide open to the city around him he records and records, picture after picture, until finally tiredness overtakes him completely and he has to turn around, find a way back to wherever it was he might have started from. That morning, yesterday, in a different place entirely... so much time has passed that time has stopped passing: places, days and impressions merge into one long duration in which he has to find his way, return, but to what... perhaps to nothing other than a bed, somewhere, so that he can rest his eyes for a while, in preparation for the next bout of walking.

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Walking is the precondition. Walking through a city is for our photographer both a question of taking a stroll and an act of defiance and protest. It is both a pleasurable activity and a method of critique: for as he wanders the streets as a 21st century flaneur, enjoying chance encounters with unexpected sights, he does not forget that he also a 21st century 'dériveur', who takes unplanned routes and encounters multifarious, for him previously unknown, uses of urban space. Similarly to Guy Debord, theorist of the *dérive*, he is interested in overcoming the intended ways of moving through a city: the thoroughfares and the underpasses, the streets that seem to quite naturally follow from others, the sights and landmarks — who knows, perhaps even nowadays the green cycle paths. He ducks into unprepossessing side streets, takes short cuts down alleyways or across desolate expanses of tarmac, only to find himself somewhere quite unforeseen, entering a new and unknown quarter of town. On these unplanned byways through lesser known districts of enormous cities, he takes note with his camera of how a city's inhabitants use its structures in ways that no amount of planning could have foreseen. He zooms in on their bricolage, their ad hoc

adaptions that are already attaining a permanence. He pays attention to the traces people leave on their immediate surroundings, to their attraction to the unfinished, their compulsion to leave their own mark, to their personal negotiations with and annexations of the designed environment, to the gathering of things that have meaning for them, grafting them — with staple gun, twine, zip tie, and the almost proverbial gaffer tape — onto the planned cityscape. To be present, to feel ownership, to make useful the inutile, to utilise ill-considered givens, to adapt instead of being adapted. He loses himself, this street looks like another, or else this area looks completely different and suddenly he have lost any trace of what might have been his bearings. How to find the way back — does he even want to find the way back? By circuitous detours or, at a loss for solutions, by retracing his steps. But the same streets approached from the opposite direction at a later hour of the day may perhaps not be the same streets, but are rather transformed by the people who make use of them, milling, rushing, getting from their A to B, strolling apparently without purpose, tinkering with something on a balcony, arranging something in a window.

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Our photographer dares to assert that everyone can be an activist. In the sense that the inhabitants of these sprawling cities say no to passivity in everyday life. They adapt their surroundings to their needs: they take many small steps in asserting individual will.

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In his *Theory of the Dérive*, Debord states that, “In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.” For our photographer these are vortexes of encouragement, of desires — both internally, and externally in the zones, currents, and human usage of the city — which encounter each other in him as he walks; the environment evokes, his own desires project, reflect back — an inextricable, undecidable mutual process: a vortex, in which he might lose himself, in which he perceives or believes he perceives desires and emotions layered and embedded in the psychogeographical contours through which, at walking pace, his vortex rages. The competing impulses in our photographer’s approach crisscross, intertwine, accompany one another towards the fringes and the terrains vagues, come apart again: on the one hand the pleasure of the stroll, on the other the urge to enter those zones which the urban geography may discourage. If he is “fixated around new habitual axes”, as Debord maintains the *dériveur* may become, it is on areas where he finds time figured in the urban landscape, where it materialises as bricolage, construction, and demolition. Where the same street approached from

the opposite direction at a later hour of the day may look like a different street in a different city, or simply remind us of a street we once walked down, and in the end it does not matter which city he is in, what matters is the materiality of the street, the nature of its human imprints, the ways in which the people who live there have made it their own, the marks they have left on their corner of the city.

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Whenever travellers attain the goal of a foreign country, they are faced, even when able to speak the language, with the challenge of comprehending the foreign culture — of comprehending its historical depths, culinary refinements and peculiarities, or simply understanding the details of everyday comportment and decorum. There is a point at which one aspect or another of that foreign culture looms as a conundrum and remains so, unsolved in the mind of the traveller. Japan enjoys a reputation for being the largest of these conundrums, for being particularly inscrutable. In the *Empire of Signs*, which both is and isn't about Japan, Roland Barthes writes, regarding being surrounded by an a language he doesn't understand, "I live in the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning. *How did you deal with the language?* Subtext: *How did you satisfy that vital need of communication?* Or more precisely, an ideological assertion masked by the practical interrogation: *there is no communication except in speech*. Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity." It also happens that somewhere on his journey through Japan the photographer loses his copy of the *Empire of Signs*, and (Japan) must be left to signify as it will, just as he deliberately puts aside the idea that Japan is inscrutable. He puts it aside and carefully observes his own reactions to the places he is unfamiliar with. He insists that we do understand and know something about foreign places. For what is the visual medium of photography but a way of comprehending some of those many types of signifier that are in excess of speech, what is it but a figuring as signs of signifiers mediated by the consciousness that looks back at them — with the eyes of course, yet even with the whole body, as it moves through the city and orients those eyes in relation to the richness of an unfamiliar signification. He dares to have an opinion, even about supposedly inscrutable Japan.

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Our photographer's visual pleasure is at one and the same time also his critical approach. With it he stumbles upon and documents the very human activity which undermines the economic system which has structured the urban space. For while Debord notes that "The economic management of travel to different places suffices in itself to ensure those places' interchangeability," and "The same architecture appears everywhere as soon as industrialization begins", our photographer's

pathways along the border between strolling flaneur and striding *dérivé* serve in fact to let him uncover those places where local cultures work against the westernised building styles of capitalist enterprises, the same architectural language appearing the world over, regardless of what local earth gives it foundation. That sense of the interchangeability of cities into which his tired legs and eyes lead him, that sameness everywhere, is the foundation on which the local people graft their responses, the bricolage and mark-leaving that attracts his camera. The photographs, moments of his own practice in space, are simultaneously of the practice of others in space. In looking at the practice of ordinary people adapting their city to their own needs, he opens up the space in which he, walking by, undertakes his own practice. “What this walking exile produces,” De Certeau notes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, “is precisely the body of legends that is currently lacking in one’s own vicinity; it is a fiction, which moreover has the double characteristic, like dreams or pedestrian rhetoric, of being the effect of displacements and condensations. As a corollary, one can measure the importance of these signifying practices (to tell oneself legends) as practices that invent spaces.” He dares to invent, to assume, to involve himself in the narrative of urban invention that fascinates him, becoming the eye-witness of the interpretation of his own eyes — aware of the deceit, yet insisting on its continuing link to both the bare and the bricolage-adorned facts of the built environment in the streets he walks down. Invention upon bricolage, legend upon legend, photo after photo. Narrating the distinctive moments that made up the human essence of the city that day. Or again, as De Certeau remarks, “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.”

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Speaking of Tokyo, Barthes notes the absence of street names and thus the uselessness of a map. Instead people often give directions by drawing the route: “(The inhabitants excel in these impromptu drawings, where we see being sketched, right on the scrap of paper, a street, an apartment house, a canal, a railroad line, a shop sign, making the exchange of addresses into a delicate communication in which a life of the body, an art of the graphic recurs...).” Stories which cut across accepted demarcations of the urban space, inventing it afresh, leading the stranger through a legend of the city.

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We might say that rather than attempting to negotiate unfamiliar signs, rather than making assumptions about what kind of ‘reality’ might be ‘hidden’ beneath a ‘surface’, rather than extrapolating on the basis of logical argument, our photographer takes the unfamiliar as an opportunity to invent through observation on the basis of his own physical presence — if he assumes, it is to say that the logic of looking beneath the surface is the great assumption. His understanding of a place, perhaps even of place in itself, takes the form of an observation of his own desires, fears, and hopes, in a specific place at a specific time, a mutual reaction between place and person. The

environment in the photographs is a reflection of the photographer's personal vision (in all senses of the word), as much about his own interpretation of their signification as about the signs themselves. And yet, that environment looks back at us, a richness of signification always in excess of one person's vision. His click of the camera is not final, it is a moment in a story that cuts across cities, seas, borders, day and night. Each photo is perhaps not remarkable in itself but as part of a story, able to be shuffled from position to position, telling one truth and then another.

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What our photographer brings back from his walks in the city is the very opposite of a mapping. But also, what he captures — and/or shapes, his method hovering somewhere between documentation and fiction — makes legible moments and acts undertaken in the city space which may soon disappear from the fabric of the city. As De Certeau says, “Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. ... These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.” Our photographer is focussed on, precisely, practice — the legibility he creates is bound up with the framing he undertakes, yet in spite of this precision they are not so much documentation of the spaces but rather concerned with the photographer's presence in them, so that his photos are not simply traces but have their own gestalt, giving the bricolage practices he walked past and which may since have disappeared a new duration in form.

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