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World Wide Wandering: e-drifting in Paris and London

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This article documents and reflects on a series of ‘e-drifts’ conducted in 2012 through the physical and virtual spaces of Paris and London. E-drifting is proposed as a new form of cultural pathfinding for a contemporary city that is increasingly global, networked and integrated with virtual spaces. The primary methodology—wandering—is understood as a resistant practice that can inform and shape the ways in which we use and inhabit both urban and cyber spaces. Increasingly, our relationship with our physical environment is also determined by our access to, and experience of, virtual and global realms. This article argues that the ‘political inquiry’ that wandering can bring about has to evolve in order to enter and challenge this new expanded space. These ideas are explored through a narrated account of a summer’s e-drifting. This is a practice-based inquiry into the ways in which, in these fluid, dynamic environments, wandering might be reimagined and refocussed in order to retain its potentially resistant qualities.

Keywords: e-drifting, wandering, city, urban, performance, virtual, Internet

Introduction

From mobile phones to wireless devices and GPS systems,

the way we negotiate the urban environment is changing at an unprecedented rate. As James Harkin (2010, p.284) walks through the streets of London with William J. Mitchell, they discuss how 'a whole ragbag of new gadgets and wireless technologies hold up the promise of navigating our way through cities in exciting new ways'. This experience of augmented wandering is characterised by multiple connection points that constantly bring physical and virtual spaces into a formative relationship with each other. As Nicolas Whybrow (2010, p.246) suggests, 'the Internet and electronic media generally have not just facilitated global communication networks but have, of course, become sites themselves'. Conversely, for Mitchell (2000, p.12), the contemporary city has become increasingly defined by its virtual topology through 'simultaneously unfolding, casually intertwined processes of technological innovation, capital mobilisation, social reorganisation, and cultural transformation'. These changes to our social space have taken place both physically and virtually, and the boundary between the two realms should be understood as porous, fluid and unstable.

This article documents and reflects on a series of exploratory journeys conducted in May and June 2012 through various physical and virtual spaces. These 'e-drifts' are condensed into a short narrative and commentary later in this article. I have coined this term to foreground the role of electronic technology in shifting the range and possibilities of cultural wandering. Two capital cities provide the physical dimension of these expeditions: Paris and London. They have been chosen as major cultural and financial centres with a rich history of resistant wandering (Solnit, 2001, p.212). Alongside, and during, several walks in these cities, virtual 'wandering' took place on a desktop computer in a flat in Glasgow, a laptop in various hotels and a flat in North London, and an iPhone that provided constant access to the Internet wherever any urban expeditions took place. The e-drifts used smartphone technology to blur the

spaces between the city and the Internet and attempted to navigate the city as World Wide Web, searching for productive ways to bring virtual and physical realms together.

In the account that follows, I have chosen to avoid a first person narrative in order to experiment with the use of 'e' as an ungendered pronoun. While this is not to deny that in this case the wanderer is male (Deirdre (Dee) Heddon and Cathy Turner (2010; 2012) point out that this is problematically true of most of the famous wanderers of the last century), this approach is intended to respond to the elusive nature of identity in these drifts, suggesting that a degree of anonymity may be possible in moving through urban and cyber spaces. The Internet has now facilitated a new level of anonymity and since the early nineties, the World Wide Web has become the realm of the 'cyberflâneur'; a technological extension of Charles Baudelaire's urban wanderer (Hartman, 2004, p.122). The self does not disappear completely in these drifts but it has the potential to fade into the background as an element of control is granted to the wanderer to choose how they are perceived and where they go. However, it is important to acknowledge that this anonymity, which Keith Tester (1994, p.4) refers to as a 'princely incognito', can be viewed as problematic. For Baudelaire (1972, p.399), the city streets are a backdrop for those wanderers and observers of modern life, whose passion and profession is 'to merge with the crowd'. Like Baudelaire's flâneur, there is a risk that the e-drifter assumes a privileged position that is afforded by the same systems and structures that much of this wandering is intended to challenge. In this sense, the e-drifter risks assuming the position of the 'information elite' (Hartman, 2004, p.123). E-drifting therefore acknowledges and avows a paradoxical relationship to the environments that it moves through. It is conceived as a process of inquiry, not offered as a political solution.

Identity on the Internet is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. On one hand, the defining condition of Web surfing is to reveal very little about oneself. The Internet can be understood as 'a safe space where we are free to perform identity' (Krotoski, 2010a), or a laboratory for experimentation on the self that is removed from our 'real-life selves' (Turkle, 1995, p.180). On the other hand, the Web has been conceived as an 'echo chamber' that ultimately functions to close down our possible selves as 'we consume information and make decisions about which services and products to trust by selecting the information that confirms our beliefs, that makes us more like us' (Krotoski, 2010a; see also Gilbert, Bergstrom and Karahalios, 2009). Furthermore, multinational data companies constantly build-up profiles about individual Web-users. As Eric Schmidt (2010), Google's CEO infamously stated, 'We don't need you to type at all. We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about'. This Orwellian provocation exemplifies a pervasive culture of data gathering and storage that governs the everyday use of the Internet.

'World Wide Wandering' is a tentative, exploratory journey into this landscape. The e-drifts discussed were conceived as an attempt to subvert or move against the powerful and omnipresent systems of the city and the Internet. They aspire to the condition of resistant cultural practice in the tradition of Fredric Jameson (1991) and Hal Foster (1985), who understood art as a means of struggle and contestation that took place within the systems that they critique. For Jameson and Foster, resistance was a more credible approach than the transgression of postmodernity, which for Jameson was a profoundly economic condition; a 'cultural dominant' that is inextricably linked to late capitalist society, and through which all forms of contemporary political art must articulate their position (Jameson, 1991, p.4). E-drifting is therefore intended as a performative intervention into the systems and structures

of the Internet and the city. This is a 'relational' or 'situational' model of urban exploration that aspires towards 'a form of ongoing renegotiation or, indeed, troubling of its chosen sites' (Whybrow, 2011, p.30). The aim is to identify connections, to draw comparisons and to explore the potential of wandering as a resistant cultural act that can move within and between realms.

E-drifting uses wandering as a way of engaging with social spaces that is more active and 'hands on' than the 'disembodied' wandering practices developed by Baudelaire (Heddon, 2008, p.112). As such, this model is offered as a contribution to the emerging field of 'mobile methodologies':

Perhaps it is not enough to imagine that a nuanced understanding of an increasingly mobile world will be gained by simply passing through it and observing in the mode of the flâneur. Unlike the more localised world of Baudelaire's Paris, the types of mobilities connecting disparate populations and parts of the world—physically and virtually—are many and various and there is a growing feeling that we have not adequately attended to the range of techniques and their intersections that we could employ to better understand a world constituted in movement (Fincham, McGuinness and Murray, 2010, p.2).

Aiming to develop more active 'techniques' for understanding and engaging with this dynamic world, e-drifting is conceived as an active process of experimentation, interrogation and intervention. Although the flâneur has endured throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, this is a mode of engagement with urban spaces that has been continually problematised. Although e-drifting adopts the role of the incognito artist 'on assignment in the realm of consumers' (Benjamin, 1999, p.427), the central argument of this article is that the use of

technology may offer a range of opportunities to expand and develop established forms of urban wandering.

Cultural pathfinding

The Internet can be understood as a defining feature of an increasingly 'chaotic' social environment (Bourriaud, 2001, p.14; McNair, 2006). Nicolas Bourriaud (2009, p.143) suggests that we are now caught beneath a 'continuous downpour' of cultural production, through which 'individuals move about within a veritable rain of forms, images, objects, and discourses'. Aiming to avoid getting caught in this rain, Bourriaud introduces the figure of the semionaut; a contemporary artist who is no longer content with inventing new forms, but rather seeks 'the invention of paths through culture' (2001, p.18; 2009, p.53). Applying this pathfinding objective to the systems and structures of the World Wide Web, a resistant Internet practice might be identified that forges a progressive political route through a saturated virtual landscape.

Journey metaphors already permeate this article: 'drifting', 'exploring', 'pathways', 'routes'. But these spatial and temporal movements are something more than merely metaphorical. For Bourriaud (2009, p.51), 'the immigrant, the exile, the tourist and the urban wanderer are the dominant figures of contemporary culture'. The latter of these characters, the urban wanderer, is described by Whybrow (2010, p.3) as an 'archetypal figure [who] continues to have currency in the twenty-first century as the embodiment of the city's transiency'. It follows that because the urban environment is constantly shifting, any intervention into this space must also take place 'on the move':

Thus, wandering represents a political inquiry into the city. It is writing on the move and a critique of the urban, understood as the matrix of the scenarios in which we move (Bourriaud, 2009, p.100).

These pedestrian practices therefore have a potentially 'resistant' quality—'to habit, to capitalism, to rules, to expectations' (Heddon, 2008, p.104). To wander is to constantly change, to move beyond boundaries, and to move in line with, or in opposition to, the various trajectories of modern life.

As a resistant cultural practice, wandering has a number of influential precedents, from the *flânerie* of Baudelaire (1972) and Walter Benjamin (1999), to the disruptive *dérives* of Guy Debord and the Situationists (Debord, 1958). Recent challenges to these established models of urban exploration have identified a field 'dominated by the better-known names of male artists', and a picture of the multiple practices of 'walking women' is now beginning to emerge (Heddon and Turner, 2010, p.14). The diversity of walking practices discussed by Heddon and Turner in their series of interviews with female artists illustrates the importance of avoiding generalisations in this field (2010, p.21; 2012, p.235). Likewise, Phil Smith (2010, p.112) observes 'a shaky matrix of explorers and walkers; too incoherent to be a community, too liquefacted to tolerate definitions for very long'. Nonetheless, Smith identifies a common concern in much of this work: 'the quotidian re-making of space' (Smith, 2010, p.112). Wandering, in this sense, can be understood as an everyday performative practice that can tangibly affect its immediate environment.

Debord and the Situationists circumvented the prescribed routes of the twentieth century European city by drifting along its 'psychogeographical contours' (Debord, 1958). Building on this ethos of consumer resistance, the e-drifts

discussed below aim to enact a virtual *dérive* along the byroads and boulevards of the information superhighway. As argued by Aleks Krotoski (2010b), 'our courses through the Web—that seem at first random—are actually determined by what we want to know and what we want to hear'. In attempting to resist the systems and structures of the Internet, it is important that this self-determining process is recognised, if not avoided. These journeys into cyberspace therefore attempt to venture into unknown territory. This is an active process of experiencing the physical through the virtual, and the virtual through the physical.

Resistant Internet practice

The utopianism that accompanied the advent of the Internet has long since been challenged. For example, Keith Piper (2010, p.279) explains how 'the "founding fathers" of Cyberspace very much replicated the social and economic interests of the enfranchised white status quo'; and the relational space of the Internet has been recognised as explicitly gendered, argued as both 'deeply embedded in masculine codes and values' and as 'close to the core qualities of femininity' (van Zoonen, 2002, p.6). There is a rich history of resistant Internet practice in which the dominant ideologies of cyberspace have been challenged, eroded and shifted. According to Piper (2010, p.280), 'transgressive behaviour has been a feature of Cyberspace since close after its inception'.

As with any site that is governed by hidden systems of power, the Internet is a fertile ground for resistant cultural practices. Mitchell (2003, pp.3–4) discusses a 'new architecture of the twenty-first century' in which 'electronic information flows, mobile bodies, and physical places intersect'. If the Internet is now the defining social force of

the twenty-first century—an omnipresence in our daily lives—the question of potential resistance inevitably arises. Just as Jameson (1991) and Foster (1985) were sceptical about the possibility of the cultural act taking place outside the systems of capitalism, today's realm of contestation is that of the virtual and its increasing impact on our physical environment. Mitchell (2000, p.12) explains that 'new technological systems are complex social constructions', and argues that as a result, 'we must understand our emerging options [and] choose our ends carefully'. Ultimately, we are not destined to accept the system as it currently manifests itself. Rather, we should be searching for ways of testing it and utilising it; 'our job is to design the future we want, not to predict its predetermined path' (Mitchell, 2000, p.12).

Such rhetoric recalls many of the anti-capitalist positions of twentieth century Europe. Michel de Certeau (1984) argues that despite the technologies and mechanisms of ruling ideologies, society has an ability to manipulate these constructs from within, a series of quotidian 'ways of operating' that 'constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organised by techniques of sociocultural production' (de Certeau, 1984, p.xiv). Through 'reappropriation' of the urban space, 'users' are endowed with the agency to transcend the discipline of ruling ideologies from within. For de Certeau, one of the key means by which the urban space could be 'reappropriated' is by walking:

Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'. All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity (de Certeau, 1984, p.99).

De Certeau proposes a 'rhetoric of walking' comprised of 'a series of turns (tours) and detours that can be compared to "turns of phrase" or "stylistic figures"' (1984, p.100). Equating the use of language to the composition of a path, de Certeau suggests that, like language, this is an art which can be understood through styles and uses (the symbolic and the actual). This art of spatial practice manipulates a constructed order that establishes a 'proper meaning' of the urban space (1984, p.100).

Applying this tactical subversion to the virtual spaces of the Internet, we might ask, what 'art of spatial practice' might allow us to manipulate the 'proper meaning' of the internet? E-drifting is an attempt to address this question, as tactics of wandering are extended into the virtual realm. Informed by the wandering practices of pre-internet eras, e-drifting aspires to a contemporary Situationism. The e-drift attempts to move through and between realms, searching for productive cultural exchanges and recognising these spaces as dynamic and interconnected. This is an attempt to answer Bourriaud's (2009, p.107) question, 'how can one become the explorer of a world now covered by satellites, a world whose every millimetre is now registered and surveyed?'

E-drifting is an exploration at the edges of established modes of resistance. Speculating on the future of the intersection between the virtual and the physical, Mitchell (2000, p.15) suggests that 'digital telecommunications networks will not create entirely new urban patterns from

the ground up; they will begin by morphing existing ones'. Adopting this position, e-drifts use existing models, such as flânerie and détournement, in order to morph them and to find ways of applying them to a radically different urban pattern that is now irrevocably networked. With this agenda in mind, the account that follows summarises a summer's e-drifting in Paris and London in May and June 2012. The narrative attempts to capture a tentative, exploratory and experimental 'pathfinding' that was conducted in the tradition of Bourriaud's 'semionauts' (2009, p.53; 2001, p.18).

World Wide Wandering

E found that early attempts at wandering through Paris and London were frequently thwarted by the irresistible pull of the iPhone Maps application. How could e follow the psychogeographical contours of the city when the multinational data gatherers had been there already, rendering the streets and boulevards hopelessly knowable and searchable? Leaving the technology at home seemed disingenuous, a desperate nostalgic hankering for a bygone age before mobile Internet. The city was no longer accessed through physical routes alone, and e had to find a way to embrace this pandemic augmentation of the urban landscape.

Attempting to find the epicentre of the predictable city, e types 'places to go in London' into Google and picks the first unfamiliar location—Little Venice, where the Grand Union and Regent's Canals meet to the north of Paddington. Alighting from the Underground at Warwick Avenue, e wanders along the leafy streets and, as the sun sets, the sound of a six-piece blues band heralds the final hours of the Canalway Cavalcade festival—a fortuitously celebratory opening to a week's e-drifting.

E drinks overpriced lager from a plastic glass and watches Chinese lanterns float away into the clear sky. Over a Tannoy, the wry compère announces a procession of illuminated narrowboats; an annual tradition that is cynically undercut by e's judgemental use of a Rightmove application to ascertain local property and boat prices. Now, with the knowledge that e's Glasgow flat is worth little more than the smallest of these vessels, the whole affair takes on a new light and a charming pageant becomes a grotesque parade of affluence.

Later, in a far less glamorous flat in Willesden Green, e trawls the Internet for other Little Venices and stumbles across the website for the Department of Architecture at University of California, Berkeley, where Professor Charles C. Benton blogs about his foray into kite aerial photography. E uses Benton's photographs of the 'Little Venice' of Parc de la Villette in Paris as a real-world hyperlink, and, two weeks later, finds the exact location of the spot where the kite camera captured a freight boat passing one of Bernard Tschumi's follies on the Canal de l'Ourcq.

Searching the Web for information about the follies, e mostly finds drawings and plans, strikingly detached from the landscape, alongside photographs of the bright red structures taken from below, framed by nothing but clear blue sky. On foot, sauntering along the canal on the warmest day of the year so far, the park feels very different. The follies are distinct from their environment, but they also have a clear relationship with it. E moves over bridges, across well-kept greens and up stairs—the whole site is a huge adventure playground. At the same time, e has never been in a place that feels so tangibly designed. People literally flow along the pathways, parallel and perpendicular to the waterway. This is the architecture of human behaviour as much as landscape, a clear reminder

that most of the wandering that is done in the city was planned in an architect's studio.

The same is true, of course, of the nineteenth century shopping arcades made famous to urban wanderers by Benjamin. E walks the length of one of these—Le Passage Choiseul—the following day and finds locked doors, boarded up windows and 'to let' signs. Perhaps this is a more direct example of the impact of the internet on the urban environment, as the explosion of e-commerce draws its strength from the closure of local independent businesses?

Leaving the manmade waterways of the Canal de l'Ourcq behind, e traces the route of the Canal St-Martin above ground towards the Seine. Surrounded by monumental architecture and urban order, the river offers a very different experience of wandering through the city. Here, the Gothic splendour of Notre-Dame and the vast architectural grandeur of the Louvre are juxtaposed with something more mysterious and untameable in the murky depths of a defiantly natural entity: the urban river that contains both 'the real and imagined threats which unruly natural features represent to the civilised contemporary city' (Donald, 2012, p.222).

Standing on a bridge over the Seine, e uses an augmented reality programme to display information overlaid on the physical city. Recognising the shapes of buildings and monuments, a series of labels are generated that indicate the location of various tourist attractions. E is looking for an indication of where to go next, but there are no clear signs. Underfoot, the river ripples in the sunlight. It is notably absent from the virtual data. This is the first point in e's journey that the physical seems to shut out the virtual. Perhaps that is why this whole e-drift has continually been drawn to water and guided by its routes. E

stays on the bridge for a long time, trying to get a sense of the life of the river. The need to walk diminishes as the water moves things and people past this vantage point.



View of the Seine from Pont Neuf, June 2012

Returning to London, e spends some time staying on a houseboat in a floating community near Tower Bridge. For better or worse, e has missed the spectacular flotilla organised for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, but there is still plenty of evidence of celebration in the days following the event. In the mornings, e sits at a picnic table that was hauled out of the River Thames and given a new home on the bow of the boat. No online furniture store could have provided such an efficient delivery service.

Drifting along the South Bank, e stumbles across a world food market behind the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Eating a delicious Serbian kebab, e reflects on the global marketplace that has contained and defined this entire summer excursion: Google's multinational corporation, operating from data centres in America, Finland and Belgium; exchange of cultures, traditions and products—the Chinese lanterns; London's allusion to Italy's grand canals; the passage to France afforded by the Eurostar; the Jubilee celebrations of the Commonwealth. Clearly, the global spaces of London and Paris extend far beyond their

geographical boundaries.

Moving through virtual and physical spaces over the course of these e-drifts, another realm had moved into focus, located in the prevalent processes of cosmopolitanism and globalisation. Beyond the intersection between the Internet and the city, the rest of the world had asserted its constant presence. Journeys through this worldwide space could now take place both electronically (via kite aerial photography) and corporeally (via a delicious kebab). While these drifts raised far more questions than they ever could have hoped to answer, this seemed to validate this line of inquiry: to explore the connections between the physical and the virtual, to ask how we can work with and through them both to better understand the world in which we live. The next phase of the e-drift may have to reach further into this global realm.

Technological resistance

These e-drifts have only scratched the surface of what is available to supplement and enhance the experience of urban wandering, but by accepting and acknowledging the use of Internet search engines and mobile technology in pedestrian practices, it may be possible to develop a form of resistance that operates through and within the systems of the Internet, rather than attempting to transgress them. The e-drifts narrated above have attempted this in four key ways: subversion, supplementation, avoidance and expansion.

First, in the contemporary city, the 'psychogeographical contours' that Debord and his contemporaries were drawn by can be followed into virtual, as well as physical, realms. While many of these routes are predetermined, they can

also be subverted by creative uses of technology. For example, when e uses an augmented reality programme to find spaces in the city where tourist information and commercial systems are absent, this is to subvert the intended use of such technology. This is subversion in the tradition of Phil Smith's (2012) counter-tourism: non-threatening but non-conformist.

Second, there are times when the use of technology can significantly supplement the experience of urban wandering. Like the vast sign systems of the city traversed by de Certeau and his contemporaries, the Internet deals in vast quantities of information. Our ability to access this information has skyrocketed in the last decade. When e searches the Web for information about Tschumi's follies, this provides a collection of images, statistics and diagrams that supplement the experience of visiting the site. This information significantly changes the way that the Parc de la Villette is perceived and experienced.

Third, these e-drifts have continually been drawn to anomalies in this vast information cortex. In this way, they have consciously avoided the prescribed modes of using and inhabiting virtual and physical spaces. In the case of these particular e-drifts, this avoidance was frequently exemplified in a psychogeographical connection to water. Canals and rivers offer a different type of space that lies outside both urban and cyber space, and yet provides routes through these spaces. In the midst of a dynamic urban environment that perpetually stages itself for hordes of visitors, rivers offer an alternative experience that highlights the contemporary city's relationship with nature, 'rising and falling in response to weather conditions or tidal flow, prone to breaching the boundaries imposed by humans, and in constant flux' (Donald, 2012, p.213). Rivers resist technological systemisation and as such, they are an attractive feature of the e-drifter's route.

Fourth, e-drifting allows the expansion of previous wandering practice into a wider, global realm. With mobile technology, we are never only in one place, as the physical locations mentioned in this account of a summer's e-drifting attest (Paris, London, the Grand Union Canal, Regent's Canal, Paddington, Warwick Avenue, Glasgow, Willesden Green, UC Berkeley, Venice, China, Parc de la Villette, Le Passage Choiseul, Canal de l'Ourcq, Canal St-Martin, Notre-Dame, the Louvre, the Seine, Pont Neuf, Tower Bridge, the River Thames, the South Bank, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, America, Finland, Belgium, Italy, France). Ranging in scale and distance, some of these places were physically visited, while some were present through virtual connections and affordances. This expanded realm is often neutralised or ignored, but e-drifting aims to reconcile the global with the local, recognising its impact and influences.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a new form of cultural pathfinding that develops existing models of wandering for a new context. The contemporary city is now global, networked and increasingly integrated with virtual spaces. In this fluid, dynamic environment, wandering should be reimaged and refocussed in order to retain its potentially resistant qualities. Bourriaud (2009, p.100) understands the urban as 'the matrix of the scenarios in which we move'. In the contemporary city, these scenarios include the virtual and the global, and the 'political inquiry' that wandering can bring about has to be able to enter and challenge this new expanded space.

Of course, this is only a starting point. If the e-drift has a future it has to keep up with technological innovation, embracing the increasing augmentation of urban spaces. There are many forms of technology already available which

have not been used in these particular e-drifts. For example, elsewhere, GPS tracking has been used creatively to find new modes of 're-coding' the city (Bissell, 2013). In many ways, the e-drift has the potential to employ mobile technology more creatively and more effectively.

Furthermore, the e-drift has the potential to mobilise on a global level. As John Urry points out, the development of mobile communication technologies has facilitated a transformation in modern economic and social lives as 'people, machines, images, information, power, money, ideas and dangers are "on the move", making and remaking connections at often rapid speed around the world' (2007, pp.5-6). As the e-drift develops, it will inevitably enter further into this global realm of mobilities.

Urban and virtual spaces will continue to change and develop through a formative and integrated relationship. As a result, the environments that these e-drifts have moved through may change considerably over a relatively short space of time. To keep up with this dynamic environment, e-drifting will therefore constantly develop new methods. Continual change is the defining characteristic of the contemporary city and because wandering takes place on the move, it remains one of the most effective methods of political inquiry. The e-drift offers a new model of wandering for a global, networked society.

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