

It's an attitude

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Jesse Shapins is a curator and artist, who is involved in various communities linked to the exploration of the perception of urban everyday life.

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Text assembled by Jesse Shapins

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Jesse Shapins is reflecting on strategies to redefine urban experience through the application of new media technologies and new methods of collaboration. He compiled texts from five independent urban projects dealing with Berlin to rediscover the discipline of psychogeography.

We have heard for years now that urban environments are once again at the center of cultural and social innovation. Derided as they were by Le Corbusier and other Modernist reformers for their chaos, inefficiency, and unnecessary ornamentation, dense and vibrant cities all over the world have been growing rapidly during the past decades, both as tourist destinations and dynamic habitats. In what is an extension and illustration of this trend, fundamental transformations in digital technology have created a new dimension of urban experience that is gaining momentum globally. These changes have reshaped everyday life in the city and given rise to an ever-evolving field of urban arts, fueling the reinvention of the discipline of psychogeography. Originally coined by the Situationist International in the 1950s, it was defined as “[...] the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” The Situationists hoped to escape the numbing spectacle of modern life through practices such as the *dérive*, a playful but attentive drifting through urban space, which sometimes continued for days at a time. New technologies have provided the opportunity for some exciting experiments in psychogeography, creating the possibility of a *dérive* that may never end. What follows is a selection of such projects, all of which will be featured in the interdisciplinary arts festival *Loving Berlin – Woche der Berlin-Liebhaber* (Berlin Lovers’ Week).

The Colors of Berlin

Operating in the border zones between contemporary art, urban design, and ethnographic research, *Stadtblind* is a Berlin-based arts group dedicated to the investigation and transformation of urban life. *The Colors of Berlin* was developed under the premise: "Zu oft wird Berlin blind betrachtet." (Too often Berlin is seen blindly.) The specific objective of the work was to use photography and graphic design to challenge the conventional images of Berlin and instigate a new way of looking at the city. The core platform is a modification of the classic solid-color-fan containing five elements: a theme, an image, color blocks, a text, and a map. It has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Van Alen Institute in Manhattan, and Architektur-galerie am Weißenhof in Stuttgart. It is *Stadtblind's* aim to distance viewers from that which is familiar, to re-frame the familiar in such a way that it becomes unfamiliar, fresh, and worthy of attention. The group presents the common spaces,

"Too often Berlin is seen b l i n d l y."

objects, and surfaces of contemporary Berlin in an unusual manner that encourages viewers to perceive in a new way. It is precisely the everyday aspects of our lives that are most often overlooked; and it is precisely these everyday aspects that most constitute our lived experience of the city. This project provides a good entry point to analyze the impacts of the technologies of digital photography and inkjet printing, two under-discussed new media that have broad-reaching impact. The combination of digital photography and inkjet printing has created the ability to instantaneously capture, view, and print images, enabling a type of documentary photography unimaginable with traditional print film.

Whereas photography in the age of 35 mm was focused upon the single image, photography in the digital era is all about mass groupings. The only limitation to the number of photographs that one can capture is digital memory, which has dramatically shrank in bulk and cost, allowing average photographers to go out and take over 500 pictures in an afternoon without the slightest consideration of cost or storage. The cash-strapped photographer no longer agonizes over a single perfect framing, but instead is liberated to shoot freely. This project illustrates a trend in the arts and broader society: the mass shift towards a D. I. Y. (Do It Yourself) mentality. Even five years ago, there was no consumer printer on the market that would enable decent quality prints at a reasonable price. For the first time in history, the most advanced means for producing content across all media (print, video, audio, online, etc.) is accessible to average people, especially within developed Western nations, but increasingly throughout the developing world as well. The battle is no longer over the means of production, but over the distribution of content.

Yellow Arrow

Yellow Arrow is a global public art project that subverts the hierarchy of media power by creating an open forum for communication. The project invites the questions: "When does an object become art? What makes a landmark? Who says what counts?" By collecting and sharing places of personal significance, this public collaboration creates a subjective atlas called dynamic M. A. A. P. (Massively Authored Artistic Project). Participants place uniquely-coded yellow arrow stickers to draw attention to different locations and

**"When does an object become art?
What makes a landmark?
Who says what counts?"**

objects. By sending an SMS from a mobile phone to the *Yellow Arrow* number beginning with the arrow's unique code, one immediately receives a message on one's mobile phone, ranging from short poetic fragments to personal stories to game-like prompts to action. Their website extends this location-based exchange by allowing participants to annotate their arrows with photos and maps in the online gallery of yellow arrows placed throughout the world.

With mobile technology, we are now able to integrate the social potential of networked experience with the immediacy of the physical world. As Jean Baudrillard wrote in response to the student strikes of 1968: "The real revolutionary media were the walls and their speech, the silk-screen posters and the handpainted notices, the street where speech began and was exchanged – everything that was an immediate inscription, given and turned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic. The street is, in this sense, the alternative and subversive form of the mass media, since it isn't, like the latter, an objectified support for answerless messages, a transmission system at a distance. It is the frayed space of the symbolic exchange of speech – ephemeral, mortal."

In a networked age, different communities across the globe have very different access to technology, but mobile phones have become widely available across all social classes. By perceiving a network as something that is inherently a combination of physical, social, and technological components, this project brings these elements together under a paradigm that honors this type of vibrant exchange.

The Commons Berlin

The *Commons Berlin* is a performance documentary that engages two distinct, yet related questions: "What is common? What makes a city unique?" *UnionDocs* is a Brooklyn-based documentary arts collaborative aimed at reinventing the documentary form so that it reflects the multi-dimensional and interconnected nature of contemporary existence. By examining public space, intellectual property, consensus-building language, models of collective living, religion, globalization, and the collective unconscious, this inquiry attempts to paint the broadest picture of the myths and realities of what we share today. A fictional landscape called *The Commons* is constructed where possible alternatives are imagined. *The Commons Berlin* is being produced specifically for the *Rollende Road Schau* (traveling road show) for Berlin's renown theater *Volksbühne*. Primary con-

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cerns include creating an open structure for interactive participation, conducting a critical investigation of the constructions of truth and objectivity, and engaging new audiences in the ongoing conversation. In a time when populations have become increasingly divided, *UnionDocs* has created a series of interrelated programs that put individuals in dialogue with one another.

One of the fundamental debates that has emerged with new media technologies is copyright law. Lawrence Lessig writes: "This rough divide between the free and the controlled has now been erased. The technology that preserved the balance of our history – between uses of our culture that were free and uses of our culture that were only upon permission – has been undone. The consequence is that we are less and less a free culture, more and more a permission culture."

The same digital technologies enable collaborative work on a massive scale, while allowing every document to be stamped with supposed singular authorship. Massive media companies and their squadrons of lawyers have claimed all intellectual property, including common thought that was previously source for public inspiration, as exclusively private. In opposition, a growing global movement has galvanized behind a notion known as *Creative Commons* (CC). Instead of the *all rights reserved* of the copyright cartel, a Creative Commons license guarantees *some rights reserved* and fosters the flexibility of creative exchange.

Hundekopf

Hundekopf (dog's head) is a new project exploring the experience of Berlin's *Ringbahn* (part of the *S-Bahn*, a local city train), which encircles the inner city and is used as a literal vehicle to move between time and place in a fiction-historical narrative structured through SMS text messaging. "Stories [...] are like mountain tops jutting out of the sea. Self-contained islands though they may seem, they are upthrusts of an underlying geography that is at once local and, for all that, a part of a universal pattern," wrote Jerome Bruner in *Acts of Meaning*.

Knifeandfork approaches the urban environment as a narrative space – a human artifact constructed of stories both real and imagined that we collectively engage in telling. So-called pervasive technology is used as a means to expose the city's hidden layers and to create new ones, exploring emerging means of storytelling. Technology encourages stories that are dynamic and nonlinear, mapping closely to the ways in which the human mind and thought process persist: multiple reali-

ties, stochastic storylines, deconstructed time, branching. While the most brilliant of novelists such as Jorge L. Borges and Italo Calvino and filmmakers from Akira Kurosawa to Quentin Tarantino

have hinted at such techniques in the past, there are obvious limitations for passive media to go beyond mere representation of these structures. Games, on the other hand, with their rule systems, interactivity, and role-playing dynamic, have always involved flexible outcomes dependent on the players' choices. Arguably an important evolution of literature in recent history, incorporating these elements gives new media storytelling a game-like feel.

A first-person perspective makes the reader simultaneously the narrator, a central character, and even the creator of the story. As a result, the reader thinks, participates, and feels for the artwork, becoming emotionally involved with the story and ultimately its outcome. It's about actively acknowledging the role of audience perception: in *Hundekopf*, the reader's identity – whether a German accustomed to the *S-Bahn* from a daily commute or a visiting American seeing the city for the first time – is not at all arbitrary, but an essential element of the piece. With wireless devices we can incorporate the unique perspective of the reader at a particular place at a particular time, letting physical reality (visual, auditory, olfactory) make immediate the sensory experience of an event in the narrative.

Together, these elements create a storytelling environment that is extremely vital: *Hundekopf* invites us to experience the city as verbs, not nouns. A feature of the cityscape, though it might be objectified and cataloged by postcards, understood by a caption or label or expectation, is in fact an invitation to act and imagine. Location-embedded narrative acknowledges history as an active thing, a persistent framework for re-experience. The artistic and even soteriological goal is to let the actively creative mode of consciousness inspired by the context of the piece drift permanently into our everyday motions through the city.

Berlin by Chance

Whether a native or tourist, one typically only knows pieces of the vast area called Berlin, as personal patterns or routes substitute for a real exploration of the city. *Berlin by Chance* is about fooling these patterns and experiencing the vastness of the city. *Glowlab*, a Brooklyn-based arts lab focused on psychogeography, was founded in 2002 by Christina Ray. Given the emergence of new technology, *Glowlab* projects interpret traditional Situationist practices with mobile phones, wi-fi, GPS, and computer algorithms to promote the collective evolution of the field. For *Loving Berlin*, Gesa Henselmans, founder of *Posttourismus Büro* in Berlin, will be collaborating with *Glowlab* on the project *Berlin by Chance*.

Anyone who wants to join *Berlin by Chance* receives an expedition route sent by a random generator. Explorers are asked to collect impressions of their journey and reinsert them into the system afterwards. A communal, psychogeographic cartography of the city develops as these impressions accumulate. To paraphrase *Glowlab* contributor Kanarinka: psychogeography is about rethinking the omnipotent perspective of the map, where everything is generalized so as to be indistinguishable, and looking instead at the specificities of maps produced by actions and impressions of the transient realities of place. The algorithms of this project inevitably produce unexpected experiences of the real city. The participant's actual encounters in the live city are the primary element, and the virtual capability of the Internet serves as a reference point and space for documentation.

Conclusion

All of this work embraces the democratizing potential of new media, is fueled by collaborative structures, embodies a growing global community, displays an open and playful engagement with commercial culture, focuses on real world experiences, and utilizes the city as the ideal stage for interaction. Whereas the artists of the past focused upon the individual production of *works*, these groups and their projects illustrate a shift towards artists developing collaborative platforms that expand the artistic process into the public realm and open channels of creativity. Today, perception is the ultimate battlefield for power. In an age of pervasive mediation and the ever-decreasing production value of

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material goods (especially in the more industrialized nations), the conceptual space of immaterial valuation is the sweet spot for all those seeking change. Advertising and political propaganda aim directly at manipulating perception, going to any length of trickery to convince the individual of their message. Truth, never a genuinely solid concept, is now more fluid than ever. It is the aim of these projects to challenge the assumed truth in pervasive messaging and mainstream meaning. Perhaps they seek a change in their underlying pursuit of an old objective: revolution. Revolution not in the traditional sense of overthrowing the state, but in the steady, yet widespread transformation of perception. They are critical by nature, seeking to invigorate questioning. It is a new practice of a subtle politics of liberated thought. ♪