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## &lt; KNOWLEDGE CIRCUIT

## Palpate Urbanism: Conflux 2006

by Alex Terzich

According to its organizers, the Brooklyn-based creative group Glowlab, Conflux is not a conference, but a festival for contemporary psychogeography. It's a fitting description, as the slant of the event reflects the performative nature of psychogeography—an activity that uses human beings as the tool for urban analysis. The four-day festival comprised games, tours, actions and celebrations, all centered in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. Even the lecture series was very un-conference-like, held in the murky ambience at the back of a bar called *The Lucky Cat*. It was an apt setting for writer and mapmaker Denis Wood to discuss the origins of psychogeography.

The Conflux festival can be seen as an antidote for the cartographic disembodiment prevalent in an age of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). While today's urban planners and map makers typically engage the environment from an office chair and a GIS interface, psychogeographers at Conflux and beyond spill into the streets. Where one practice is built upon a tradition of tools—compass, clinometer, camera, computer and so on—the other measures the city with the intimacy of the body. As Denis Wood noted at the beginning of his presentation, "There's another instrument in this room and I am it."

With this introduction, Wood invoked the urban drifts and emotional cartograms of Guy Debord—French philosopher, founding member of the Situationist International and guiding spirit of the Conflux festival. In the 1950s, Debord and other Situationists developed a psychogeographic practice built around the *derive*—experimental walks through the city executed without predetermination. They became transients without destination, resisting even the contours of the ground; their resultant paths were read as a pure register of urban attractions and repulsions operating on the emotions. Two well-known maps—*Guide Psychographique de Paris* and *The Naked City*—drawn by Debord and fellow Situationist Asger Jorn chart the preternatural slopes of mid-century Paris, and are touchstones for a contemporary generation of psychogeographers. At Conflux, works ranged from the orthodoxy of the *Ignorant Walking* project, where participants were encouraged to drift through the city "using chance and their surroundings to guide them," to projects that inflected the intangibility of psychogeographic practice with new forms of external instrumentation: Gertrude Berg's *Waste Carrier* is a wearable trash receptacle which she uses to draw out the culture of trash disposal in her Bushwick neighborhood; with his *Clusterings* project, Kurt Bigenho materialized the culture of drifting—typically done in small groups of two or three—through the construction of an inflatable planchette whose collective wearing points the group through the city in unscripted ways; and Caroline Woolard's *Have a Seat* seat transforms an everyday stop sign into a site for new urban perspectives, leaving traces of the psychogeographic legacy across parts of Brooklyn.

The focus of Wood's talk was not simply to reiterate the contemporary significance and diffusion of Situationist tactics, but also to expand our understanding of psychogeography's origins and to posit its development in plural terms. What is conventionally thought to be of singularly Continental birth, in fact emerged in parallel out of the geography and psychology departments at Clark University in the mid-1960s. Working at the time without any awareness of Situationist practices in France, a core group of academics at Clark—including David Stea who was influenced to a great extent by Kevin Lynch's research on urban legibility at MIT—created a new hybrid discipline, offering the first university course on psychogeography. One of the students in that early psychogeography course was Denis Wood.

The paradigm Stea brought to the new discipline was informed by Lynch's work on urban perception, commonly known through his 1960 text *The Image of the City*. The technique Lynch employed, and which figured prominently in the work of Wood and others at Clark, was to solicit mental maps from a city's inhabitants and synthesize the information into distinct perceptual representations. Though it shared the name psychogeography, it was an approach that in many ways diverged from the work of the Situationists. Wood notes, "Though Lynch and the people whose responses he recorded did walk around the city, they did not *derive*." The information was culled more strategically, with tape recorders, questionnaires and a brief hope that, Wood says, "we could just slice heads open and inspect the maps lying there."

There were, however, notable similarities between the work at Clark and that of the Situationists. This is especially visible in aspects of Wood's doctoral project—published in the 1973 dissertation *I Don't Want To, But I Will*—where he sought to better understand the geographic dissonances that emerged when correlating perceptually-based mental maps to the dimensional avidity of commercial maps. Accompanying a group of American teenage tourists on their first visits to London, Rome and Paris, Wood gathered—with some reluctance—their cognitive maps of the cities. He coined an effective technique for rendering psychogeographic displacement:

"I gridded up a commercial map so that I could assign grid coordinates to every feature on each of the kids' maps. If their maps were structured like the commercial maps, the grids I would get by connecting the coordinates on the kids' maps would resemble the evenly spaced, right-angle grid I'd drawn over the commercial map. It was easy to see that the kids' maps not only didn't much resemble the commercial map, but that they varied widely among themselves. They also changed with experience, in most cases growing more like the commercial map. Looking at these grid transformations, as I called them, I had the feeling that I was looking at the very surface of the kids' mental maps. And as Debord had, when contemplating the psychogeographic relief of Paris, I too reached for a topographic metaphor."

Working without any awareness of the parallel activities in Europe, the rendered slopes of Wood's grid transformations clearly resonated with Debord and Jorn's representations of a city's palpable magnetisms.

Wood ended his talk about the two psychogeographies by noting that "if Situationists and Clark psychogeography measured different things, they both measured human things." And at the time, they measured them with human means, by walking, looking, talking. Wood admits he would have welcomed a computer to automate the process of drawing the hundreds of grid transformations that appeared in his dissertation. His comment raises the question about how digital media figures into psychogeographic practice. While there's a pronounced analog-bias to several Conflux projects, it's been argued that Situationist psychogeography is a critical precursor to the locative media movement, a set of practices that use technology to augment the engagement with place. In their essay *Beyond Locative Media*, Mark Tutters and Kazys Varnelis track the development of locative media as it emerged "over the last half decade as a response to the decorporealized, screen-based experience of net art, claiming the world beyond either gallery or computer screen as its territory." Locative media places artist and audience in the world, in much the same way that psychogeography inverted the distance and emptiness of desocialized maps that divorce us from the land. And where psychogeography measured human things, Tutters and Varnelis argue that locative media is "fundamentally tied to discourses of representation centered on a human subject, privileging the experience of the human in space and time."

Perhaps the best example of a locative media project with distinct psychogeographic origins is Christian Nold's *Bio Mapping*, where GPS and galvanic skin response allow participants to superimpose geographic and biometric data.



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