

A few words on a course taught at Master of Fine Arts at HKU

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The world as we know it now was unimaginable in December. It might well be that the world we know now will be almost unimaginable in upcoming December. Confirming all clichés about times of crisis also being times of opportunity, we, Expodium, have indeed experienced this course as an opportunity to deepen our practice. Not only because the main idea behind the offered course proved impossible in times of serious lockdown – a series of collective performative walks in various Utrecht neighbourhoods just went against all quarantine logic; But mostly since those conditions confronted opened up a space of collectively redefining walking practices beyond the realm of the physical and into the symbolic and the imagined as meta-loci for further conceptualising walking as an artistic research method. Walkers are the practitioners of the city, as cities are made to be walked. Much like Rebecca Solnit, we believe a city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and that perambulating is the act of speaking that language.

That been said, ambulatory practices go way beyond the factual kilometers one takes on foot, or a description of the surroundings one walks in. When Guy Debord formulated his *psychogéographie* he also included the practices of *détournement* and *dérive* alongside it. In his view psychogeography “could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.”¹ Turning ideological messages around [an easy going adaptation of *détournement*] and daring to drift outside the order of the day [an as easy adaptation of *derive*] both invite walkers to critically confront the world around them. Walking therewith becomes a tool to question our lives, and a lens through which to look at the city.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist_International

Fuelled by this, we study (and invite others to do so with us) through practices of walking as a trial and error and under the contract of deviating from normative tour guides. We do so in order to understand what walking does to our bodies and minds, as subjects and as social beings. We, at the same time attempt to 'read' the city as we 'read' ourselves. Walking thus becomes a deciphering tool, a decoding mechanism of all merely invisible or forgotten 'things' – inside and outside of ourselves.

For this course we would depart from these notions and add layers: we were to work towards "compiling a self-activated Utrecht lexicon of sounds". In four sessions we would - as a group - visit four Utrecht neighborhoods that each symbolize a characteristic of our city, of any city: malleability, migration, gentrification and cities as metaphors for expulsion. The students would - in turns - welcome us in a neighborhood and after a curated walk everyone would be free to roam the neighborhood to record, existing or impromptu, sounds. Edits of all the sounds would compile a sonic lexicon for contemporary cities, as heard in Utrecht.

And then COVID-19 forced us to move online. It forced some students to retreat to homes out of Utrecht, or even from the course. We first tried adapting: inviting all students and ourselves to google street walk the second neighborhood of our schedule and work from that virtual walk onwards. The detours students found for themselves in e-walking Overvecht went way beyond what we had imagined: from searching for glitches in the google recording system to hacking the operas after which the streets are named. We - Expodium and MaFa students - talked long that day to conclude we drafted a new way; it would deviate, it would consist of detours, it would be personal, it would exist outside of reality but intrude it, it would, in short, be a lexicon of walking encompassing all forms of movement; it would transpond walking from a mere physical act to its conceptualized prospects.

And so the students started working on their individual strains of study under the overriding theme of walking. More than before we found ourselves entangled in a process of encouraging conceptual drifts while musing on ideas brought on the table, as we were dealing with highly varying (direct and distant) approaches to the concept of walking as an artistic research method. Our collective library and the first completed walk, served as a backdrop to what we might call armchair traveling: the

students took us to 'places' we had not imagined to see, and allowed us to get to know them in ways we had not even dreamt of.

We invited all of them to pick a reference from our combined library (and beyond) and spread them throughout this website as a relational stimuli to their contributions.

These quotes and visual references show the various approaches of 'marking time' when many days feel like 'groundhog days', on the one hand, and of finding a justification for fluidity and co-existing realities on the other. The same might - generally - be said of the students' practices which we discussed extensively in two rounds of one-to-one meetings, and two groups meetings. Many returned to previous works and revisited their ideas while others embarked on new territories of research.

The contributions of the students presented on this section of the website offer some hints of those spaces of thinking and making stirred towards an open ended process rather than merely offering closing statements and finalised outcomes. But these could change again. Of course. The notion of the detour as the central element to walking wouldn't allow otherwise, nor diminish the study to static points and forms. Rather, it marks this semester with a semi-colon. For it might well be that the world as we know it in December was unimaginable now.

Expodium (Friso Wiersum, Nikos Doulos, Bart Witte)