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Introductory Drift

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[1] Confronted with spaces more than ever gridded and pre-arranged, mapped from the google universes to the nano-th degree, and already (over) saturated with the intentions of others, the contributors in this issue take up the general theme of drifts and drifting. The responses to our initial call range widely across genres (scholarly essays, fiction, nonfiction, film, accounts of performances), terrains (urban, rural, psychological, virtual), structures of feeling, and modes of locomotion from the pedestrian to the spectacular (a semi-truck). Several essays deliberately follow in the steps of the Situationist psychogeographers, such as Phil Smith and Clive Austin's playful *dérive* around Exeter, England, or Jim Miller's more sober-minded drift in downtown San Diego. Others chart a different trajectory as in Dianne Chisholm's account of Ellen Meloy's nomad raids on the nuclear-wasted desert or Casey Clabough's elegiac retracing of the Warrior's Path.

[2] In the spirit of Walter Benjamin, (who advised travelers to foreign cities to learn to **lose** their ways), drifting, in this issue, becomes something akin to a non-logocentric way of mapping and understanding the world. The literal map serves as an abstract representation for a space of seeing, while drifting understands spaces through epistemologies of doing. Drifters resist traditional cartography's abstractions and tidy analogies, inventing tactics for appreciating places as something more than literal spaces or pieces of real estate. The drifts described in this issue play through various socio-spatial settings, translating and transforming them. Cultural invention occurs not in following the map, but in veering away from it to invent epistemologies of doing—often on the fly.

[3] One drift, not at first apparent in the initial call, is the defense of the poetic, most obviously in Rose Lucas's essay. Although written as a review of Mary Oliver's work, Lucas's relaxed eloquent defense of wandering drifts away from that more pragmatic goal. Jim Miller's main character in the excerpt from the novel *Drift* also defends this *dérive*-poetics with the added dimension of disrupting the supposed inevitability of cities and other created spaces. He explains,

He hated much of the gentrified downtown, but he realized that many of the old things he loved had started in the same way as these new places. The bright lights and the hype brought out the crowd and Joe refused to give up on the crowd. Even in the midst of the most calculated theme park zone, he thought, was the potential for a newness that superseded commercial intent. You have to learn to be surprised by the place you know, Joe thought, to find wonder and poetry in the street outside your door, to unlock the residual dream in the streets. He bumped into a light post and told himself to stop thinking.

The character's analysis moves the poetic away from linguistic ornamentation to cultural criticism, as an epistemology-of-wandering overtakes Joe's mind and leads him to bump into a street-light-post—humorously suggesting to the reader the disjunction and discontinuity between literal landscapes and psychogeographic mappings.

[4] Thomas Zummer, in his review in this issue of Alan Sondheim's *The Wayward*, examines this "writing [of] poetic allusions . . . reflected and mediated by the tacit reflexes of the performative act of reading." For Zummer, Sondheim's poetic performance illuminates the theoretical dimension of drifting "where time and tense are undecideable, adrift," Sondheim's book is "astonishingly beautiful and moving"—moving in every sense of that word.

[5] Taken as a whole, this issue's articles and media works might be considered as markers or benchmarks that, according to Phil Smith, a Situationist jester wandering around Exeter in the film *Drift*, trace out a *dérive*, a detour without goal or horizon undertaken with a desire to (re/dis)cover the liveliness usually effaced by commodified art objects, architecture, and urban spaces. With Smith as tour-guide, one sees none of the tourist sites, and instead finds quirky details in an otherwise unexceptional urban space.

[6] These markers, much like the heart pendant Phil Smith finds hidden next to a benchmark, connect the drifts with what some call the largest art movement ever in the world, letter-boxing and geo-caching. One person or group hides a small box in a public place, (something that is not entirely legal) or even a tiny container (a micro); visitors find clues to its location online. They visit the site, carefully avoiding *Muggles* (a code-word used by letter-boxers for those not involved), and open the container. Inside they find a record of all the other visitors, who have each left a message with a personal stamp, and they also find a stamp that stays with the letter-box; the visitors stamp their own journals to record the transaction. They also find small (otherwise worthless) trinkets and exchange one of theirs for one in the container (or not). The whole endeavor shares much of the charm involved in a number of the experiments described in this issue. It suggests how public spaces might contain fleeting utopian aspirations and charged exchanges outside structures of commodification.

[7] Commonly defined by its lack of an obvious purposeful direction, the practice of drifting would seem to be a vestige of another time and place, one whose temporality differs markedly from our own radical time-space compressions. One thinks of a 19th-century Dandy walking his turtle along a Parisian Boulevard, a heroic Kerouac-esque road trip without explicit destination, or the globe-trotting of the lost generation. The leisureliness of the drift suggests a kind of physical enactment of the cognitive process of speculation in which time and knowledge as commodities are wastefully suspended and refigured as intellectual play. And when the commodities themselves become part of the game? They might just drift out of our lives to be replaced by the story of their departure. This is the premise of Nancy Nisbitt's experiment in de-acquisition, "Exchange." Nisbitt highlights and disrupts relations between consumerism and increased surveillance technologies through tagging each item she trades with a RFID microchip, so as to question the "limits and liabilities" of this technology and the ways in which it reduces individuality and community to piles of consumer data.

[8] The goal of turning surveillance technologies to progressive ends also underlies Tilson and Freeman's "Imaging Place" projects. In a variety of settings—from the Miami River to the US-Mexican border—they use interactive digital tools to document sites that "for political, social, economic, or environmental reasons" are "contested or are being displaced" by processes of globalization. Through these forms of "electronic witnessing," Tilson and Freeman seek nothing less than a redefinition of public space and citizenship in an electronic age.

[9] Another kind of witnessing—this one decidedly low-tech—informs Doreen Piano's photo-essay on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Armed only with her car and a digital camera, Piano documents the ways in which the beleaguered citizens of New Orleans are "rewriting Katrina" through public displays, spontaneous shrines, and graffiti performances, inscribing on this devastated landscape rhetorics of "uplift and crisis."

[10] Among the ruins of cities, decaying waterfronts, endless webs of paved roads, drug-induced wasted days, and other allegorical scenes of fallen modernity and the post-apocalyptic, the idea of drifting appears as incongruous as a flaneur in Death Valley on the one hand and, paradoxically, as the only appropriate critical epistemology for traveling through them.

[11] A number of the art and performance pieces described in these essays—including those at the Conflux psychogeography conference, reviewed here—aim to dislodge and re-engineer our habitual frames of reference (John Wylam's drifts through Amsterdam's cannabis cafes shares this goal). They suggest that we must actively, intentionally cultivate receptiveness to drifting. Indeed, we may well need to (re) learn *how* to drift. For Catherine D'Ignazio this shift in optics is precisely what is required. Throughout her description of art and performance works done in Boston, she advances a poetics of the liquid state against more conventional understandings of place as stable, solid, contained. In each of the four case studies she analyzes, place is conceived as mutable, contestable, leaky. From this perspective, places and people become unstuck, flow into one another, creating alternate possibilities for temporary encounters and new understandings of community. For D'Ignazio, such encounters are a precondition to developing a politics of liquidity which does not assemble or subsume socio-cultural excess/difference under a shared or prearranged socio-political territory (however progressive) but commits itself to drifting fluidly among spaces, positions, possibilities. Rather than bearing witness to *what is* or creating memorials to protest *what has been*, these works are oriented toward elaborating the future potentialities of place; they are what D'Ignazio, quoting Elizabeth Grosz, refers to as "experiments in future living" designed in "the anticipation and welcoming of a future in which the present can no longer recognize itself."

[12] In contrast to D'Ignazio's unapologetically avant-garde trajectory, Dianne Chisholm's analysis of radical environmentalist Ellen Meloy's work reminds us that spaces—however fluidly conceived—are also always marked irrevocably by the traumas of the past—in this case the history of American nuclear testing in the Western desert, "the most bombed place on earth." The irruption of this traumatic history into the placidness of Meloy's everyday life in the desert occasions a radical ontological estrangement, a "seismic ethical disturbance, a crisis of de-subjectivization wherein her desert-loving self disintegrates into the critical derangement of 'one' who can no longer reconcile the ethical extremes that she encounters on her native turf." This psychic breakdown prompts Meloy to undertake a series of nomad raids across the desert,

ones designed to de-stratify discrete territories of official jurisdiction and to decode “official, off-limit test sites, ground zeros and nuclear war-monuments into living and evolving desert ecologies.” In distinction from a photo-documentary approach in which military violence is rendered as the aesthetic sublime or poignant eyewitness testimonials from the “downwinders,” the victims of government testing, Meloy’s radical schizoid displacements produce a post-sublime, post-humanist meditation on ecocidal dwelling that Chisholm calls deep nomadology.

[13] Drifting understood as radical ontological displacement also informs Holly Baumgartner’s Levinasian analysis of the films “Vanilla Sky” and “Mulholland Drive.” For Baumgartner, the undecidability and indeterminacy of these films—explored through the concept of the waking dream—stands for the characters’ unwillingness to confront lives of overwhelming pain and guilt, and, by extension, a refusal to confront the burden of existence itself. These perplexing films thus make visible “the intricacy involved in the processes of real life being,” and this is their value. The films trouble spectators with the unresolved gap between the film’s posited realities and their own; the collision between these two realities creates an opening for viewers, an entryway that “beckons us to alternate pathways of thinking about the ethical itself.”

[14] While the pieces here resonate with radically distinct ground-tones or structures of feeling, they all invite encounter—calling us to suspend and remake habitual ways of knowing and being. And they share a goal of critically reinhabiting multiple locations to find there alternative histories and pleasures, and to leave traces of other more liberatory intentions.