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The City, Naked

- Stephanie Snyder -

The revolutionary transformation of the world, of all aspects of the world, will confirm all the dreams of abundance.

— Guy Debord, 1955

For this special issue on urbanism, Art Lies commissioned me to investigate *The Naked City* and to condense my findings into a modest piece of text. Fulfilling, as Debord states, “all [my] dreams of abundance,” Art Lies simultaneously afforded me the opportunity to invite three contemporary artists to study and respond to *The Naked City*, each producing an original work for publication. Responding to the male-dominated milieu in which *The Naked City* was created, I invited three women artists, all of whom richly explore the “mapping” of real and psychological space in their work: Sutapa Biswas (London), Beth Campbell (New York) and Molly Dilworth (New York). Their works are discussed in the following text, and are reproduced in the following pages.

Created in 1957 by Situationists Guy Ernest Debord (1931–1994) and Asger Jorn (1914–1973) and exhibited in the *Première exposition de psychogéographie (First Psychogeographic Exhibition)* that same year, *The Naked City* is a graphic reorganization of Paris—consisting of isolated sections of the city connected by a network of swooping directional arrows describing the authors’ attractions and repulsions. Though maplike, *The Naked City* is not a map but, rather, a diagram of psychogeographic terrain. In this revolutionary document, Debord and Jorn recorded (first on foot and then graphically) their experience of the few remaining areas of Paris that they felt had escaped destruction through modern bureaucratic development.

Reorganizing Paris as an aesthetic/political space and as an organ for change, *The Naked City* proposed the rejection of utility in favor of a radical new experience of everyday life. The diagram’s vigorous, cinematic flow (inspired, in part, by Jules Dassin’s 1948 film of the same title) was designed to incite the average “imbecile”—Debord’s term—toward a richer psychological and emotional engagement with the city through the interrogation of ornament and personal history. *The Naked City* embodied the Situationist agenda to instigate the delirious resurrection of a vital, agonistic citizen body. In 1955 Debord wrote, “There is nothing to be expected until the masses in action awaken to the conditions that are imposed on them in all domains of life, and to the practical means of changing them.” This radical collective awakening was activated across the urban surface, on foot.

To walk is to think, to think, to walk. *The Naked City* elegantly recorded a Situationist *dérive* (drift), the peripatetic investigation commonly misunderstood as a kind of random wandering. The *dérive* was, in fact, a

rigorous, time-consuming means of awakening one's emotional and political desires, conducted in public space and directed toward social experience. It was the experiential core of the Situationist's "new urbanism," a program to discharge the imaginative agency of the city in offense of intellectual degradation, and the subordination of civic culture to the demands of the automobile and technology in general.

A *dérive* was typically a boisterous affair, sometimes lasting for days, the communal experience invigorated by fatigue, alcohol and argument—a dialectic of the self as the circulatory potential of the city and architectural ornament—akin to but far more antagonistic than Baudelaire's conception of the solitary, introspective *flâneur*. The Situationists did not seek the feeling of being "alone in the multitude." They saw themselves as the beginnings of the new public (a re-public) and the cartographers of a new exemplary, libidinal terrain (ergo their comparison of the city in relationship to the textures and contours of the female body).

Two years before the publication of *The Naked City*, Debord described the role of the new psychogeography of which the *dérive* was an essential part: "The production of psychogeographic maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions, can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete insubordination to habitual influences (influences generally categorized as tourism—that popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit)." (*Les Lèvres Nues* #6, 1955).

In reimagining *The Naked City*, New York artist Molly Dilworth speaks to the ecstatic potential of an invigorated civic psyche. Dilworth transposed satellite maps of the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles with communications patterns from telecommunications networks and other invisible forces. Dilworth's hypnotic patchworks suggest the multi-spatial and temporal geography involved in locating and describing oneself in the contemporary city—the virtual "abundance" that is often conceptualized and experienced as a raw nostalgia for place. Dilworth's maps chart dimensions of proximity and invisibility in relationship to a vision of the psychogeography of the global city as a distorted and extended mind space.

New York artist **Beth Campbell** explores psychogeography in terms of competing cultural forces, considering the potential of rigorous self-examination—in relationship to dogma, popular culture and personal history—while both positing and questioning the possibility of resistance in the face of "habitual influences" as described by Debord. Campbell's diagram blossoms with a kind of delirium; thoughts convolute like vines above a conceptual net of associations, toward, as Campbell states, "an alternate route." Campbell crosses words with a poetic, almost nonsensical sensibility, thwarting both the marketplace and the institution.

Debord's particular branch of the Situationist movement exploded out of Romanian poet and artist Isidore Isou's Lettrist group, one night, in the wake of a disagreement over Charlie Chaplin. The schism happened at the premiere in Paris of Chaplin's film *Limelight*. In the glow of a glamorous marquee, Debord and his companions denounced Chaplin as a sellout, "Have a quick death, we promise you a first-class funeral!"

A filmmaker himself, Debord collaged sound and image in disjunctive forms designed to break the numbing,

mediating effects of mass entertainment. London artist Sutapa Biswas' painting of a dreamy, luminous environment full of chandeliers evokes a psychogeographic mise en scène, speaking to Debord's passionate relationship with film. Biswas' mysterious environment suggests the fantastical and somewhat menacing space of the beast's castle in Jean Cocteau's film *La Belle et la bête*, melded with imagery from her nighttime walks on Portobello Road in London. Biswas presents the city at night, alive with possibility—envisioning the utopian yet sybaritic qualities of revolution.

Perhaps it's not surprising that Biswas, Campbell and Dilworth are also searching through the fantastical for insight and criticality. Neither the Situationist revolution nor the radicalism of the 1960s prevented global capitalism from jeopardizing our individuality and our sanity. In contrast to artists such as Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, who literally altered the terrain, manifesting their psychogeographical pursuits with earthmovers, chainsaws and heroic material gestures, contemporary artists are reeling in the expenditure of their critique, exploring a more tempered space and engaging in an open conversation about the overwhelming question of contemporary subjectivity.

The undead specter of Debord's enterprise looms in these works—travels through them like connective tissue. Such works bring the question of the “self in society” back to the conversational space of the table and the quiet of the studio, albeit for a rigorous and languorous conversation. Perhaps this signals a return to a classical, sympotic civic model. Nevertheless, Debord must remain at the table, urging us out the door at every turn, urging us to embrace the radical, unmediated desires through which we come to know how we are—and how we could be.

Beth Campbell, *Entangled We*, 2008; graphite and colored pencil on paper; 18 x 24 inches

