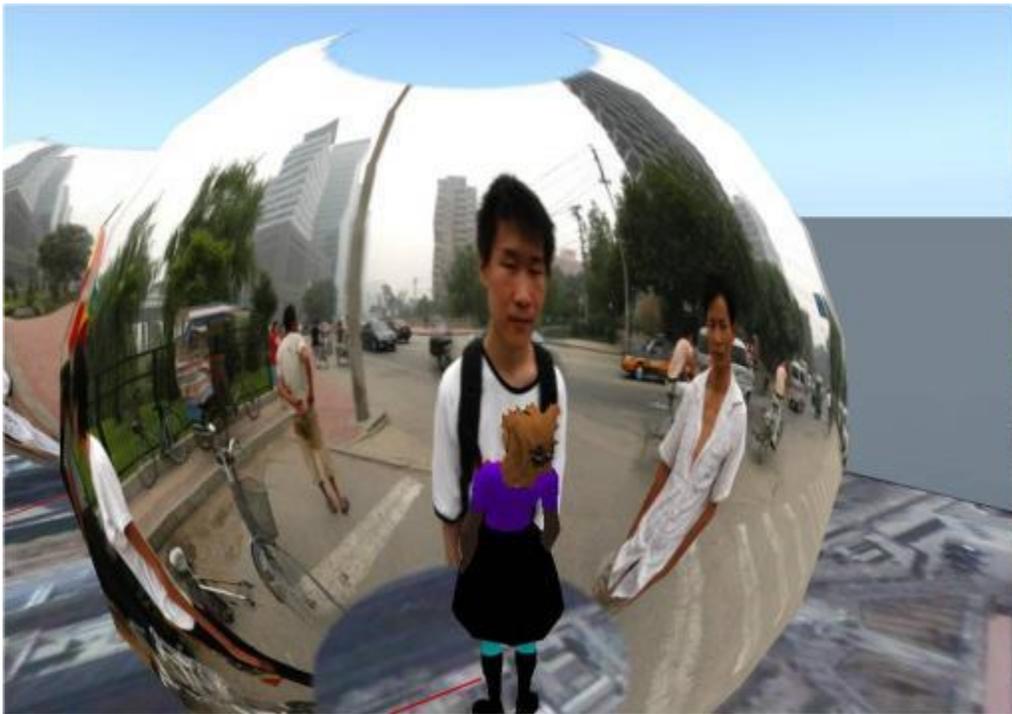


DRIFTING AND IMAGING BEIJING

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Is John Craig Freeman's "Imaging Beijing" a contemporary expression of the Guy Debord's *dérive* theory, made possible in Second Life?

Freeman's overall project and its individual components such as "Imaging Beijing" are analyzed here through Jean Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981), and particularly his notion of the simulation.



In John Craig Freeman's Imaging Beijing, Second Life Installation, © 2008 Maayan Glaser-Koren

While discussing the contemporary American artist John Craig Freeman's *Imaging Beijing* I will evaluate how Guy Debord's notion of the *dérive* is applied to the internet environment while also discussing the ways in which Freeman's work challenges, tests, or confirms the *dérive* as a theory, followed by a discussion of its relevance today. Freeman's piece *Imaging Place* is an ongoing site specific artwork combining photography, video, documentary, 3D software, and virtual reality. The original project started in 1997 when Freeman began to document the locations he visited. Every location was documented and then installed into Second Life in 2006 [1]. These locations are depicted as a platform that merges satellite images of a specific site in the city, panoramic photography, and digital video. *Imaging Places* assembles different places in the world such as *Imaging Wall Street*, *Imaging Belfast*, and *Imaging Beijing*. Freeman's complete project and its individual components, such as *Imaging Beijing* (2007) can be analyzed through Guy Debord's *dérive*

Debord's theory of the *dérive* (1960s) refers to drifting throughout the city (Paris) in a rapid manner without planning ahead. The result is awareness of the environment and the surroundings. The subjects must separate themselves from the activities of daily life and especially from the media for this to be successful. Debord, writing in an era characterized by the soaring popularity of television and the wild proliferation of commercial media and advertising, noted that society itself was being transformed by technology. His *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) describes the emergence of a consumer society and proclaims that the spectacle that is mass media dehumanizes the Western world. Debord's proposed solution was the *dérive*, which was to arouse in subjects an increased interest in the geography of the city.

Debord claims that "in a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." [i] More compellingly, the *dérive* was to create new encounters between people and places that were not otherwise possible and through this allow for positive social change. The intent of the Situationist International Project and its leader, Debord, was to change the confined society of which it was a part [2]. Their goal was to battle against media saturation, boredom, and the capitalist co-option of life. The *dérive* was a situation the project constructed to disrupt social spaces.

John Craig Freeman's artworks emphasize the notion that in our Western contemporary society we are still influenced by the media and therefore do not pay attention to our surroundings. He claims that he uses the *dérive* because "it is a subversive act which calls into question the constructed social order of the city. It is my intention to do the same in the social spaces of the Internet." [ii] Is the experience of the *dérive* the same in the virtual world as in the Situationist's European city? In order to answer this question, I will examine if Freeman's claim is possible throughout the use of Second Life.

In Freeman's *dérive*, which is performed throughout the use of the virtual world, participants encounter his work through an avatar that takes the role of the *dérive*'s psychogeographer. This allows for a new awareness of the terrain. For example, in *Imaging Beijing*, one's avatar enters the city through satellite images and experiences it through panoramic documentary photographs. *In Imaging Beijing, the avatar's dérive starts from a satellite image of the disc of the earth. On earth there are rotating enter signs that indicate the cities on the map to which the avatar can teleport.*

China's capital city, Beijing, is represented by a satellite photograph from a Google map showing central Beijing and translated into virtual reality. On this platform are sixteen spheres, inside of which are panoramic photographs taken by Freeman during an actual visit to Beijing. On the platform are four each of red dates and paths connecting the spheres to the platform that indicate a location on the grid. Clicking any of the dates opens a blog, which includes Freeman's real-life documentation, stories, and photographs from the day he experienced in Beijing.

The idea that Beijing is represented by Google satellite image relates to Debord's notion of the spectacle. The spectacle can be the mass media, the consumer society, commodities, the consumption of images, spectacles, or contemporary capitalism and its effect on modern society. Therefore today's technology, for example, Internet Web sites, satellite images, and virtual worlds, are part of the spectacle. However, if *Imaging Beijing* is a spectacle, then how can it be a subversive art piece? In the essay *Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle* (1997), Best and Kellner suggest that virtual reality, computers, and multimedia are the new stages of the spectacle. They propose that there are two kinds of spectacle: an interactive spectacle and a pseudo spectacle. The first "is one that the individual herself has created." [iii] It can be one's Web site and chat room. The latter is created by "corporate

forces that themselves construct the spectacle in which one is merely a part," [iv] for example, television shows and radio talk shows that can monitor and control an individual's participation. Consequently, Freeman's *Imaging Beijing* is an interactive spectacle because it was created by an individual and is limited to the participants' experience.

The notion is that *Imaging Beijing*, as an interactive spectacle, is enhanced by narrations from a Beijing resident, Peter Guo. When an avatar stands in the center of each sphere, the audio narrative begins with Guo discussing his memories and childhood anecdotes from his life in Beijing. In a way, this is a point in virtual space where cyberspace, the real world, and the virtual world become one. For example, entering into these spheres provides one the experience of using a first perspective view of the actual location - a panoramic photograph, providing the sensation of being part of that location. Then, the experience is enhanced by real sounds such as Guo's voice, and the environmental sounds, contained in the audio clips. Moreover, Guo narrates the story in English and then in Mandarin. All of this creates a realistic sensation, a sense of knowing Beijing, its residents, and its atmosphere without physically being there, which results in a simulated *dérive*.

The *dérive* is a way to inhabit space. According to the Situationist International, the best place to perform the *dérive* is in an urban space. Participants in the *dérive* separate themselves from their daily activities such as jobs, media and leisure and are drawn out by the attractions and encounters in the city. Additionally, the more people who participate in the *dérive* as a group, the more likely they will conclude that the experience was rich. In addition, the *dérive* holds the idea of the psychogeography.

Debord's notion of psychogeography attempts to create a new awareness of the modern city and the urban landscape. According to Debord, it is a detailed study of how specific geographical environments affect the emotions and the behaviors of individuals.

Freeman's work interrogates Debord's notion of psychogeography and the *dérive* within new cyberspaces. *Imaging Beijing*, according to Freeman, expands the concept of the *dérive* on two different levels. He states: "There is the level that occurs in the field on location, such as in the Hutongs of Beijing. I am testing whether immersive media is capable of capturing and representing the experience of the urban drift and the resulting emergent situation. So there is a quasi-documentary side of the work." [v]

The second level, which extends the notion of the *dérive*, according to Freeman, is "at the delivery of the work as a new form, whether it is online or in an exhibition. This puts the avatar or audience in the role of the psychogeographer drifting through the virtual world. It is still an image, but one that you can navigate, explore, have adventures and social interactions in." [vi] In other words, the avatar navigates by walking into the spheres. Each sphere is different and includes different audio narratives by Guo. In addition, the sounds that surround him in the Hutong neighborhood enhance the sense of the exploration and adventure to navigate the spheres.

Exploration and navigation are part of the *dérive* that occur in Freeman's work as well as with the Situationist International. Furthermore, there are more similarities between the theory of the *dérive* and *Imaging Beijing* that Freeman applies to his work. First, the subject of both the *dérive* and *Imaging Beijing* is the modern city. Second, in both *dérive*, the navigation starts in a specific place, be it a street in Paris or the Earth disk in *Imaging Place*.

Finally, the *dérive* deals with chances of social engagements, unique conversations, and new relationships. When one drifts through a city, one encounters a large number of people, and therefore there are many possible encounters. The same happens in Second Life, where other avatars access the same place simultaneously. The virtual world allows people from all over the world to connect through the form of their avatars. The unfamiliar creates the opportunity to develop new relationships that will start with a chat. Furthermore, Freeman encourages the use of more than one avatar. This is because avatars can share their online experiences with other avatars they meet and add comments on his work. The same is true for the *dérive*, the more participants, the more objective the conclusion.

According to Freeman, "Like all good *dérive*, one must be willing to become lost." [vii] In *Imaging Beijing*, there is a feeling of losing one's sense of awareness, especially when entering the spheres. The avatar merges into a panoramic photograph of a real location in central Beijing. Thus, as the avatar merges with the location and the surroundings, a sense of true direction is lost. Moreover, because of the fusion between the avatar and the photograph, there is a sensation of mixed realities. The panoramic photographs, the sounds, and the audio narrative are real. The mix takes place when the avatar merges with those elements. Thus the lines between the realistic and the photographed landscapes are blurred. It becomes, according to the American philosopher Richard Kearny, a *pseudo-world* where "the line between the imaginary and the real has been abolished." [viii] This elimination of the boundaries among the real and the imaginary result in a simulated experience.

The simulation is a term that the contemporary theorist Jean Baudrillard discusses in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Baudrillard claims that modern values can no longer be applied to current society and are considered dead. The existence of simulation, implosion, and hyperreality are the inability of the consciousness to distinguish between reality and fiction [ix]. This is partially due to the virtual world's ability to blur the lines between the two. Thus hyperreality also relates to simulation, which is the process of replacing real with virtual. By using virtual reality according to the theorist Sherry Turkle, we "blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation." [x]

Simulation is the reason why *Imaging Beijing* does not translate to the real experience of drifting in urban space. However, Freeman is not trying to do so. He simply investigates whether the *dérive* is possible in Second Life. *Imaging Beijing* is a semi-simulation of Freeman's real *dérive*, made specifically to install in Second Life. Thus the avatar only experiences one view of the urban city, as it appears in the eye of the artist creating the virtual installation.

To conclude, Freeman has already acknowledged in his project *Imaging Places* that he is inspired by the ideas of the *dérive*. He is not trying to replicate the *dérive*, but he uses the geography in such a way as to develop "new practices for the Internet." [xi] He has succeeded in bringing the technique of the psychogeography into Second Life with *Imaging Beijing*. The avatar is a psychogeographer, drifting through the satellite images of Beijing, and it experiences the Hutong neighborhood by entering into and merging with the panoramic photographs contained therein.

However, the navigation—the drift—is done by sitting at home in front of the screen. There are no real dangers that one encounters in a real *dérive*; the avatar cannot be injured by walking on the virtual platform. This is different from Debord's notion of the *dérive* where risks are part of the drift in the modern city. Because there is no risk, sitting in front of the screen makes the participant a spectator, which is the opposite to the intent of the *dérive*. The participant using his avatar is not getting out of the house and being drawn to the city's possibilities.

Furthermore, he is being seduced by the interactive simulation and is therefore engaged in a new stage of the spectacle. Then again, the avatar still navigates through virtual space. It is a mix of spectator and navigator. Could this be the next step in the evolution of the *dérive*? Does this suggest that the spectator/navigator must participate in a particular way in order to have a more random encounter, and thus a “*dérive*”? And if so, does this work reflect back on Debord’s original theory of the *dérive*, suggesting that in the city, as well, the spectator/navigator has a degree of agency and responsibility? These questions are difficult to answer because in some ways *Imaging Beijing* is a spectacle.

References and Notes:

[1] *Second Life is a 3D virtual world that developed by Linden Lab. It is a place where Second Life users can interact with each other through their virtual resident an avatar.*

[2] *The Situationist International is an avant garde artists’ collective from the 1960s in France.*

[i] *Guy-Ernest Debord, Theory of the Dérive (1958). trs Knabb Ken.*

[ii] *John Craig Freeman, personal communication.*

[iii] *Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas. Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle, 1998.*

[iv] *Ibid.*

[v] *John Craig Freeman, personal communication.*

[vi] *Ibid.*

[vii] *Ibid.*

[viii] *Richard Kearney, In the Wake of Imagination (USA: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 302.*

[ix] *Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 126.*

[x] *Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen Identity in the Age of the Internet (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 192.*

[xi] *John Craig Freeman, personal communication.*

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