

Drifts

Andrew Bracey's work for Artranspennine 08 shares a number of concerns with the practice of *dérive* - drift - as formulated in the 1950s by the Parisian avant-garde group the Situationist International. Whilst this term finds its most comprehensive definition in 'Theory of the *Dérive*', written by the group's leader Guy Debord, I want instead to quote the British artist and former member of the SI, Ralph Rumney. Reflecting on his (rather brief) time in the group, Rumney described the practice as follows:

Dérive - it's a French word that's become pretentious now, there's been a sort of sacralisation of it - it basically means wandering, but as Debord defined *dérive* it was going from one bar to another, in a haphazard manner, because the essential thing was to set out with very little purpose and to see where your feet led you, or your inclinations ... You go where whim leads you, and you discover parts of cities, or come to appreciate them, feel they're better than others, whether it's because you're better received in the bar or because you just suddenly feel better.

What this definition might lack in theoretical rigour, it perhaps makes up for in historical accuracy: the SI were notorious drinkers, Debord once boasting that whilst he may 'have written much less than most people who write', he had 'drunk much more than most people who drink.' It is without doubt true that the group's explorations of their native city were conducted as much through its bars and cafés as they were its streets and boulevards; discovering new ways to explore urban space, hoping to discover flashes of a utopian future in the fragments of a decaying, post-war Paris.

It was from 'data' accumulated in such practices that the Situationist architect Constant Nieuwenhuys formulated his '*autre ville pour un autre vie*', New Babylon. This speculative, ambulatory city would move across landscapes, designed to be

infinitely malleable to the whims of its inhabitants, whose lives, freed from the means-ends rationality of capitalist economic relations, would instead be structured around the concepts of desire and free play. Whilst the socialist principles that lay behind New Babylon are perhaps now less fashionable than they once were, as is its optimistic utopianism, the shockingly modern visions that Nieuwenhuys articulated in the many models and sketches of the city remain evident as a nascent current within contemporary architecture. Will Alsop's formulation of a 'Supercity' in the northern counties of England is perhaps one such inheritor of the architectural legacy of the SI: dissolving the traditional municipal boundaries, Alsop's vision links the towns and cities from Liverpool to Hull to form one continuous, futuristic metropolitan sprawl encompassing the whole transpennine region. Whilst these plans, as with New Babylon, remain largely imaginary, it is this fictional city (and perhaps its plausibility) that Andrew Bracey's work for ATP08 explores and interrogates.

The Supercity is part of the process of the North re-imagining and re-purposing the fabric of an industrial past into a form more suited to contemporary economic needs. The fruits of this process can be witnessed in the dramatic changes to the city centres of Leeds and Manchester, the vast amount of building work transforming their horizons, the skyline punctuated with cranes. But as Bracey's work reveals, there is a disconnect between theoretical projections such as the Supercity and urban space as it is experienced on the ground: the unitary vision of the town planners dissolves as the process of redevelopment churns the fabric of the city; the perfect space that the computer-generated models promise does not translate to street level. It is in those places that the shifting plate tectonics of economic and social change have left no longer 'fit for purpose' that this disjuncture is most obvious: pubs, currently closing at a rate of more than fifty a month, being one such example.

As with the Situationist *dérive*, Bracey's practice necessitates the exploration of the urban environment in such a way so one's subjective impressions of that landscape are altered: in finding new places, the unexpected within the familiar, one finds new ways of apprehending the whole, new ways of thinking and being in what one thought one knew well. Drifting between the different pubs in the transpennine region has by definition pushed the artist outside of the routine of the day-to-day, but where Bracey's practice differs from its Situationist antecedent is in the nature of its relationship with the spaces that it explores. Where the Situationist *dérive* is concerned primarily with the experience of those engaged in the practice, and as such leaves the urban environment fundamentally untouched, Bracey's work physically intervenes in those spaces, changing the experiences of those he shares them with. However, whereas from the perspective of the artist the works cohere, from that of the person who picks up one of Bracey's paintings in a pub there is no point of access to the work as a whole. The individual works hint that there might be a larger pattern, but this remains inaccessible: the bread-crumbs trail cannot be

followed. The necessarily partial nature of this experience is itself a reflection of the fragmentation of these spaces. To the drinker, the paintings are more questions than they are answers, and meaning becomes distorted as when the world is viewed through the bottom of a pint glass.