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fritz ostermayer

inspirational settings and locations as a booster for text production

i would like to begin my little lecture with the long title "inspirational settings and locations as boosters of text production" with an experiential report. with an experience that goes back decades and which has shaped me and my thinking about art, activism and also poetry as much as few other experiences in the field of creative activities. it was in the late 1980s, as part of the austrian avant-garde festival "steirischer herbst" in graz, austria's second largest city, that a group of young architects organized a city tour of a very different kind. a situationist walk as a psychogeographical experience.

psychogeography investigates the influence of the architectural or geographical environment on perception, psychological experience, and behavior.

psychogeographic research takes place at the intersection of the disciplines of art, architecture, geography, politics, and psychology. the term was coined by the radical left-wing artists' group situationist international, founded in 1957. its chief ideologues guy debord and ivan chitcheglov are considered the main founders of psychogeography. a popular exercise at the time was finding your way around a city with the wrong map. example: get a map of berlin and use it to find your way around london. the goal of such absurd travel guidance: chance as a principle of exploration, discovery and simultaneous getting lost. everything is possible if i exchange the security of an aid to orientation for the uncertainty of targeted non-information. according to guy debord, the exploration of effects of a psychogeographical nature is inseparable from the "concept of rambling (le dérive)". in the situationists' view, urban built space was the visible expression of that cold rational thinking they criticized. every building, such as prefabricated housing estates or shopping malls, transported

a certain image of man and subliminal instructions to the people who lived there to behave in a certain way.

thus, in order to break a behavior conditioned by architecture, psychogeographical strategies are needed. the graz architects used one that had already been proposed by debord. it goes like this: draw a straight line on a city map from a to b, and then walk that route without detour, no matter what obstacle is in your way. at the time, our route from a to b went through downtown graz, was two kilometers long, and there were more obstacles than we would have liked. high houses, a river, old walls and a lot of private land that you couldn't just cross without the owner's consent. deviating from the path was not allowed, detours were forbidden, the shortest path had to be taken. for example, if we were in front of a six-story building, there were three ways to overcome this obstacle. first: ring one of the bells and ask a resident on the ground floor if you could go through the apartment and if it would be possible to leave through a window at the back of the house. second: climb up the facade, climb over the roof and abseiling down the back. third: break a basement window, cross the house through the basement and crawl out of another window. over the two days of our urban walking tour, we experienced all three options. we met friendly residents who asked us with amusement what kind of crazy hike it was and let us cross their home without any problems. we climbed up walls of houses with professional help of two alpine climbers, trembled with fear on the roof and were safely brought back to the ground on the other side by the professionals. and we broke a basement window, leaving a written apology and the money for a new window.

we spent the night in an attic full of cobwebs, sneaked through an apartment full of drunken right-wing corps students in the morning who, in their drunken stupor, didn't know what was happening, and only didn't get into trouble with the police because we were part of an officially sanctioned art action. because in fact we broke several laws: destruction of other people's property, trespassing on private property, vandalism, etc.

the participants did not know each other before this situationist action, but i was not surprised when it turned out that several hikers were authors, at least intending to process this adventure in writing. they weren't just looking for an exciting experience, an adrenaline rush fed by fear of heights, fear of conflict with landlords and the police - that too, but what united them all was the idea of extraordinary topographies as inspiration. they could probably have been inspired by a weekend in a lonely mountain hut or a night all alone in a scrapyard in the no-man's land of an industrial quarter. the architects from graz came just in time for them with their multi-purpose strategy of irritation.

now i am finally where i want to be. in contrast to the writing schools of most of the colleagues present here, the teaching structure of the vienna poetry school is based on concentrated 12-hour classes over the course of a week. the character of the school is thus reduced to absurdity by the brevity of our teaching units alone. likewise, the idea of a classroom or – as a university analogy – a lecture hall. of course, we also have classrooms where traditional writing is taught, but it was already clear to the founding fathers and mothers of our school that a classroom is also there to break out of it, to leave it behind, because new places not only bring new experiences, but also change the way we think about writing. and be it through intense feelings of fear, even panic, as i felt on the rooftops of graz, be it through pure states of happiness, as i felt after overcoming the obstacles.

what is important is the moment of getting involved in a place, even if it is not per se a demanding and challenging place like a dark forest at night or a skyscraper roof in the blazing sun. what is important is the mood in which i am ready to get involved in a new situation, to immerse myself in a new place. a place like, for example, a viennese indoor swimming pool in a wellness spa. there, in 1999, a class led by christian ide hintze on "writing in water – poetry and meditation" took place. with waterproof writing material, a physiotherapist and ide hintze as a teacher inspired by alan ginsberg's meditation exercises.

now it is clear that such a class attracts writers who have a close relationship to far eastern religions and spiritual practices, but possibly also with a penchant for esoteric nonsense. in other words, one could already infer the conclusion of the aesthetic results from the premises of the assignment. one can assume a gentle poetry that finds its salvation in the mysterious and nebulous, shies away from concrete contents and works with clichés of transcendental expansion of consciousness. one could also say: the place, the assignment and the individual biography of the participants already determine the outcome of the class. that's why i would find such a wellness writing experiment far more exciting if transcendence skeptics and non-religious people like me, would expose themselves to this presumed ordeal of "poetry and meditation." but no matter what is the final outcome, not only the being determines the consciousness, but also the place where this consciousness cuddles or rubs.

another concrete site-specific class before my time at the vienna poetry school: "the class in the dark," led by visual artist emil siemeister. here, students worked in a completely darkened room with pens that looked like ballpoint pens, but from which a fine beam of light came out. the students wrote and drew with these luminous pencils on photographic paper, so their actions were not immediately visible, but only days later, after the photographic paper had been developed. text and image disappear at the moment of creation and reveal themselves only when the creative process is complete. the writers operate in a sphere of mystery and exclusion through obscurity and the technique of photographic image development. their texts are no longer only about what they are about, but also negotiate their process of creation. what at first might suggest associative poetry about the dark room topois, from sexual fantasies in the sado-maso basement to the haunting darkness in old german fairy tales, becomes an artistic experimentation far beyond the narrative through the use of luminous pencil and photographic paper. the place and the material determine the path, but the destination is not determined. coincidences come into play, one's own forgetfulness of what i wrote where on the paper 10 minutes ago gets in the way. i still find this class to be a great example of poetic concept art. of course, a room in the vienna poetry school could have been completely darkened for this class, but the

aura of a real dark room could still prove beneficial. or as virginia woolf said: a dark room is a dark room is a dark room.

i am aware that classes in unconventional places and roaming students can only be the exception within the framework of regular university operations. even at the vienna poetry school, they are not commonplace, because they involve a significant amount of extra planning and organization. nor would it make sense to hold a writing class dealing with purely formal and stylistic aspects of poetry in a disused coal mine. the neutral classroom, with no distractions to the senses, is perfect for teaching the poetic craft and its theories. however, for the no less important emotional skills, for the ignition of imagination, daring and boundary crossing, temporary changes of location are of immense importance. or as the situationists once said: it is a matter of recognizing the psychogeographical contours, the fixed points and currents, the entrances and exits as well as the ordering systems of spatial zones. it is about reappropriation and transformation, because the whole space is occupied by the enemy. we live in a permanent curfew.

if you subtract the revolutionary pathos of the situationists, sometimes there remains only an exclusively pragmatic reason for the roaming of classes in public space. or rather for sitting around silently in nature. for example, when it comes to birdwatching, as in one of our classes of 2022, for which we were able to engage the wonderful u.s. author and crazy bird lover nell zink.

what can you learn in a birdwatching class? first and foremost: patience. but also close observation and describing subtle differences. because apart from size: try to describe the difference between a crow and a raven, it's a task for marcel proust. with a teacher with a sense of humor like nell zink, you also learn, that wit and self-irony can be good qualities for unpretentious writing. nell's biggest worry was that no one would sign up for her class because birdwatching is an activity that had to be done early in the morning, but she knew from experience that writers like to drink all night long and not go to sleep until everyone else is up. fortunately, her class was then well attended after all.

also in 2022, when nell zink was already gone, we had – as part of friendship-partnership – a visit from students of the university of art in arnhem. several joint projects were planned, including birdwatching. this time with a literary editor and good friend of nell zink, klaus nüchtern, also a bird freak de luxe.

the dutch students were accompanied, among other friends of our school, by their lecturer maartje smits, no birdwatcher, but hobby beekeeper, which pleases me no less. maartje wrote a paper for her students, more: a philosophical appetizer, from which i would like to quote now, because it sums up the circumstances and consequences of new place explorations as perfectly as poetically. quote maartje: “despite of what the word may allude to, birdwatching is far more than the observation of birds. it is the act of looking for them, the celebration of the moment of recognizing a sound and naming that what was already there, after which one continues to look for more. there’s no result except the pleasure and frustration of the activity“.

another activity of the dutch guests was directly related to the situationist idea of psychogeographic urban exploration by getting lost: this is what maartje smits called the experiment: get lost, which only had one precondition for its success: cell phones as a means of orientation were forbidden. and maartje also wrote a text about it, which grandiosely short-circuits e.a. poe with guy debord, in order to draw attention to the productive paradox of chance through calculation. maartje, thank you for these wonderful lines:

“how will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is unknown to you?’ edgar allan poe declared, ‘all experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely.’ poe is consciously juxtaposing the word ‘calculate’, which implies a cold counting of the facts or measurements, with ‘the unforeseen’, that which cannot be measured or counted, only anticipated. how do you calculate upon the unforeseen? it seems to be an art of recognizing the role of the unforeseen, of keeping your balance amid surprises, of collaborating with chance, of recognizing

that there are some essential mysteries in the world and thereby a limit to calculation, to plan, to control. to calculate on the unforeseen is perhaps exactly the paradoxical operation that life most requires of us.”

there is no better way to summarize the goal of shifting teaching from the classroom to strange, foreign, inhospitable, but also beautiful and happiness-inducing places: recognizing the role of the unforeseen ... recognizing that there are some essential mysteries in the world and thereby a limit to calculation, to plan, to control.

last year the great american writer, subculture activist and theorist peter lamborn wilson, better known under the pseudonym hakim bey, passed away. under this nom de guerre, bey wrote his well-known poetic-anarchist manifesto "taz: the temporary autonomous zone" in 1991, which is also very useful for our purposes of various teaching activities due to the considerations and thoughts on changes of place, even the founding of places. since by taz, he means a situation in which ruling laws and orders are temporarily and locally suspended. authorities lose their power and new, unpredictable encounters and common experiences become possible. of course, hakim bey is concerned here with spaces of possibility for the creation of new social and political orders; he is as concerned with unconventional guerrilla tactics as he is with non-violent resistance. bey's ideas have found their way into the action forms of squatting, flash mobs, reclaiming the streets, and artistic interventions in public spaces. the key terms of his thinking speak for his anarchic creativity, which can also be used for new localizations of poetry classes – the key words: ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism, creative chaos, magic, pleasure and networking.

we had cow-whispering classes high up in the mountains, on an alpine pasture with the writer, alpine herdsman and dairyman bodo hell. and we had a writing & drinking class in the danube wetlands with the poet and musician ernst molden called "wine writing – the intoxication of poetry, the poetry of intoxication". we had an erotic poetry class in a brothel and a morbid poetry class in a cemetery with the austrian pop star voodoo jürgens. it was supposed to be a hauntological ghost search and a tribute to the great austrian poet h. c. artmann and his black humor.

all these symbolically charged locations not only intensify our imagination, they also trigger zones within us that the situationists wanted to be explored as inner psychogeography. in the best case even surveyed as maps of our state of mind. to stumble through one's own ego with such a psycho-city map, to lose oneself in oneself, appeared to debord and his colleagues as a purposeful method of escaping social alienation: liberation through self-alienation. but from here we move into a terrain of philosophical trapeze stunts without a net, in a temporary autonomous zone of speculative madness in the immediate neighborhood of the writings of antonin artaud. and from him it is not far to alfred jarry and his pataphysics of imaginary places. but you can seek them out anywhere, you just need a little imagination and a slight craziness. so why not a class of shipwrecked people on an island that doesn't exist?

from greek historian diodorus (he lived in the 1st century b.c.) there is one of the most beautiful sentences about the job specification of a poet in our world. diodorus writes: "the task of poets and storytellers is to visit the mythical creatures on the islands, the dead in hades and the unborn on their star."

i think these fantastic places would have pleased even a notorious feel bad guy like guy debord. thank you for your attention.

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