

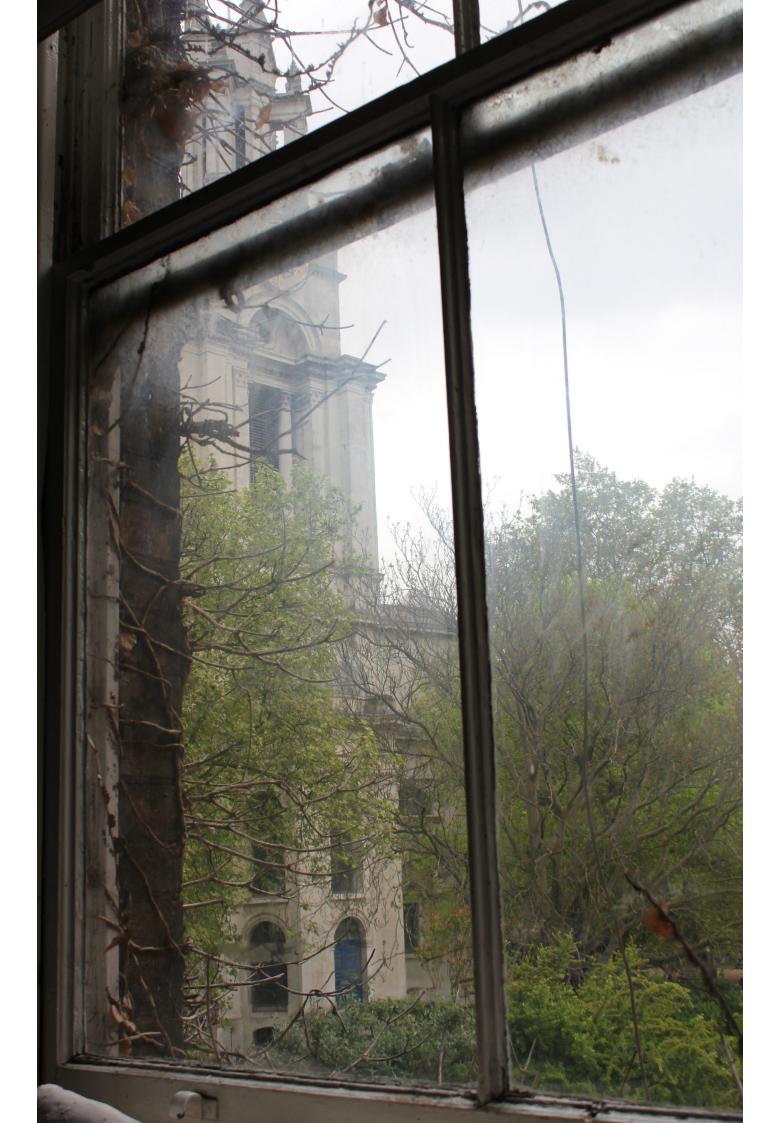
'the psychogeographical games' Limehouse

This text explores psychogeography and the way artists and activists have used and developed this practice to imagine, represent, perform and contest, the geographies of cities. Charting all the practices, histories, and controversies associated with psychogeography would require a journey from contemporary psychogeographers such as Iain Sinclair, Stewart Home, Fabian Tompsett, Patrick Keiller, Chris Pettit and Laura Oldfield-Ford, back to the origins of the practice within post war avant-garde groups such as the Situationist International and the Letterist International and an investigation of the proto-psycogeographical practices that have informed and inspired its development, carried out by figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Louse Aragon, Baudelair, Rimbaud, De Quincy, Poe, Defoe and Blake[1]. This study will be restricted to the marginal historys and psychogeographical activities of a small area of East London. The junction of Commercial Road and Burdett Road, and three adjacent buildings which radiate a magnetic force throughout contemporary British Psychogeography; St Annes Limehouse, Limehouse Town Hall and the Sailors' Mission.

Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos

Limehouse Town Hall is situated between St Annes and the Sailors' Mission and it seems appropriate to start this essay in a dusty office on the second floor of this decaying former Town Hall. The windows are partially obscured by incessant ivy, creating a constant threat of dissolution of the border that separates the inside from the outside as its tendrils bury under the Georgian sash windows bringing with them gusts of cold air from the graveyard below. The building itself is a crumbling former administrative centre and assembly rooms, the previous home to Kropotkin's desk and the National Museum of Labour History, current headquarters of the Space Hijackers, MUTE magazine, ABJECT BLOC and an esoteric mix of artists, theorists, and cultural activists collectively known as The Boxing Club. Former tenants have included the West Essex Zapatistas, WE ARE BAD, the University of Openness and members of the London Psychogeographical Association.

The window looks out onto the western elevation of St Annes Limehouse, an 18th century church designed and built by Nicholas Hawksmoor and believed by the London Psychogeographical Association to be on an important lay line connecting Queen Anne House and St. Annes Limehouse with a mysterious cobbled circle which was the subject of a 1994 LPA leaflet titled 'Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos' (Sinclair, 1997:26).



SMASH THE OCCULT ESTABLISHMENT (May 10th, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich). The Queen and Baron Greenwich (aka Prince Philip) will be making a ritual visit to a site of key masonic importance -the Queen Anne House, Greenwich. The Royal Greenwich Observatory have published their expectation for an annular eclipse on this day ... PSYCHIC WAR in the East End ... What are Ley Lines?... St. Anne's rededicated by former Gresham Professor. St. Anne's, Limehouse was recently rededicated after having over £1m spent on restoring the exterior. Eric Sorensen, chief executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation attended the ceremony at a key site on the leyline... NAZI OCCULTISTS SEIZE OMPHALOS... The election of Derek Beackon as a Councillor on the Isle of Dogs caused shocked outrage across the Establishment. Beackon is a dedicated Nazi occultist. He graduated to the British Nationalist Party after serving his apprenticeship in the British Movement.

LPA 1994 leaflet titled 'Nazi Occultists Seize Omphalos'

Iain Sinclair recalls, in Lud Heat, that he once worked as a gardener in this graveyard and that he and Brian Catlin traced the lines of influence connecting the eight great churches built by Hawksmoor (Sinclair, 1998). St Annes Limehouse is at the intersection of three of these lines of influence. Standing in the graveyard is the pyramid that was originally planned to top St.Annes' tower, which featured on the cover of Sinclair's 1998 Granta Books edition of Lud Heat and more recently has been the site of sex magick rituals organised by the West Essex Zapatistas, an organisation associated with Fabian Tompsett and Asim Butt. Fabian Tompsett is better known for translating some works by the Situationist Asger Jorn into English and under the pseudonym Richard Essex reconvening the London Psychogeographical Association (LPA) in the 1990's. The original London Psychogeographical Association consisted of only one member, the British artist Ralph Rumney, effectively existing in name only (Bonnett, 2009: 45) and on the 28th July 1957 at a meeting in Cosio d'Arroscia Italy the London Psychogeographical Association merged with the Letterist International and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus to form the Situationist International.

Tompsett is himself a former resident of the Town Hall and the top floor once housed the LPA collection of maps. Whilst the town hall has been home to many different strands of artist and anti-capitalist activists it has also had a strong current of technology based experimentation, particularly influenced by Saul Albert one of the founding members of the boxing club. Saul Albert brought the politics of the open source movement to the town hall through the organisation of the University of Openness (Uo). The Uo described itself as, 'a framework in which individuals and organisations can pursue their shared interest in emerging forms of cultural production and critical reflection such as unix, cartography, physical and collaborative research', and suggested that 'Any member may start a faculty to socialise their research with the Uo'. One of the faculties listed in the Uo bulletin was the 'East London Cybergeografical Underground Network'. Which described itself with a similar anachronistic playful style of the LPA.

A group of majikians in the late 80s in East Berlin after discovering classified KGB documents on psychic frequencies, created a secret Chaos Magic society which was to develop a database of the psychic frequencies And begin a process of testing these frequencies amongst the urban populations of the world. Initial phases were in were in ex military bunkers in Dusseldorf in the underground techno-trance scene. In this laboratory they began defining new methodologies of subjugating the human thought process by psychic frewuency interference. Over the years they have refined this process to bypass the human sences and directly impact the individual psyche, enabling stimulation, depression. chaotic thought. Unfortunately this group disappeared from the underground and the last 10 years of research is unavailable and the level of advancement is unknown. although segments of this secretive society have made appearances on the east London cybergeographical underground network. The reasons this secretive society has made contact with the psychocybergeographical underground networks is due to its increased interest in utilizing wireless technologies as its preferred mode of expermentation on humans and sees the east London semi chaotic networks as an ideal laboratory for unannounced, undocumented and non-disclosed meetings:

stay tuned to this space

Uo faculty of psychic interference of the faculties For a proletarian intervention

Whilst this organisation never existed beyond this statement, it significantly represents an interest in the growth of wireless networks and the relationship between psychogeography and digital space. Another example of a psychogeographical approach applied to digital space was the publication in 2002 of 'A Collection of E-Mails around 11/9/01'(evol, 2002) by evol Psychogeographix. On inspection evol Psychogeographix is yet another pseudonym for Asim Butt. Closer examination of these emails, collated from various architecture emailing lists, provide a psychogeographical mapping of the spatial and psychological ambience that arose in the immediate atmosphere post 9/11. From a Cyberpsychogeographical viewpoint, physical space has been overlaid with digital space and whilst they have different material and spatial properties, psychogeography must make all contemporary spaces the subject of its investigations.

Jack the Ripper is probably psycho-geographical in love

Crossing the road from the Town Hall is the former Sailors' Mission, built as a hostel for Sailors. The building subsequently became a notoriously rundown hostel for the homeless and a squat before being converted into luxury apartments. The Sailors' Mission was the secret location of the 4th conference of the Situationist International (SI), held between 24-28 September 1960. The Psychogeographical Games were organised as a playful part of the conference and Guy Debord, who five years previously had attributed the term 'Psychogeography' to an 'illiterate Kabyle' (Debord, 1956:5), was in attendance. The meeting posed the key question 'To what extent is the SI a political movement?' (SI,1981a:66) The psychogeographical techniques developed by Debord and the Situationists went hand in hand with a radical revolutionary politics that aimed to transform the banality of the capitalist city and the every day life of its inhabitants. But the Situationist fascination with the psychogeographical potential of Limehouse can be trace back even earlier, to the proto Situationist group l'Internationale lettriste. As the site of the old China Town Limehouse had been the subject of an article, published in potlatch, and titled 'Limehouse Nights in the 1930s' within which an anonymous author recounts becoming a 'safe guide'; 'I gained a reputation as a safe guide (unpaid), who was always ready to conduct one, or at most two, persons through the mysterious precincts of Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields' (mcdonough, 2009). The article opens with a brooding sense of loss for the impending demolition of Pennyfields, the row of slum housing and shops that formed a 'buffer' between the shabby respectability of the High Street and the 'rabit warrens', labyrinthine alleyways and Oriental underworld of Limehouse Causeway. 'London's Chinatown is threatened with extinction. That labyrinth of squalid streets, mysterious passages, and shuttered hovels a mile or two east of Aldgate Pump is doomed. The planners have been told to go ahead. By the end of the year much of Pennyfield will have been demolished to make room for blocks of flats. After that, it is only a question of time before the rest of it will vanish like an opium smoker's dream'. The article was printed alongside a letter to the Editor of the Times, dated 13 October 1955, signed by Michèle Bernstein, Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman, which objected to the demolition of Limehouse's China Town in the most tong in cheek aristocratic tone;

Dear sir,

The Times has just announced the projected demolition of the Chinese quarter in London.

We protest against such moral ideas in town-planning, ideas which must obviously make England more boring that it has in recent years already become.

The only pageants left are a coronation from time to time, an occasional royal marriage which seldom bears fruit; nothing else. The disappearance of pretty girls, of good family especially, will become rarer and rarer after the razing of Limehouse. Do you honestly believe that a gentleman can amuse himself in Soho?

We hold that the so-called modern town-planning which you recommend is fatuously idealistic and reactionary. The sole end of architecture is to serve the passions of men.

Anyway, it is inconvenient that this Chinese quarter of London should be destroyed before we have the opportunity to visit and carry out certain psychogeographical experiments we are at present undertaking.

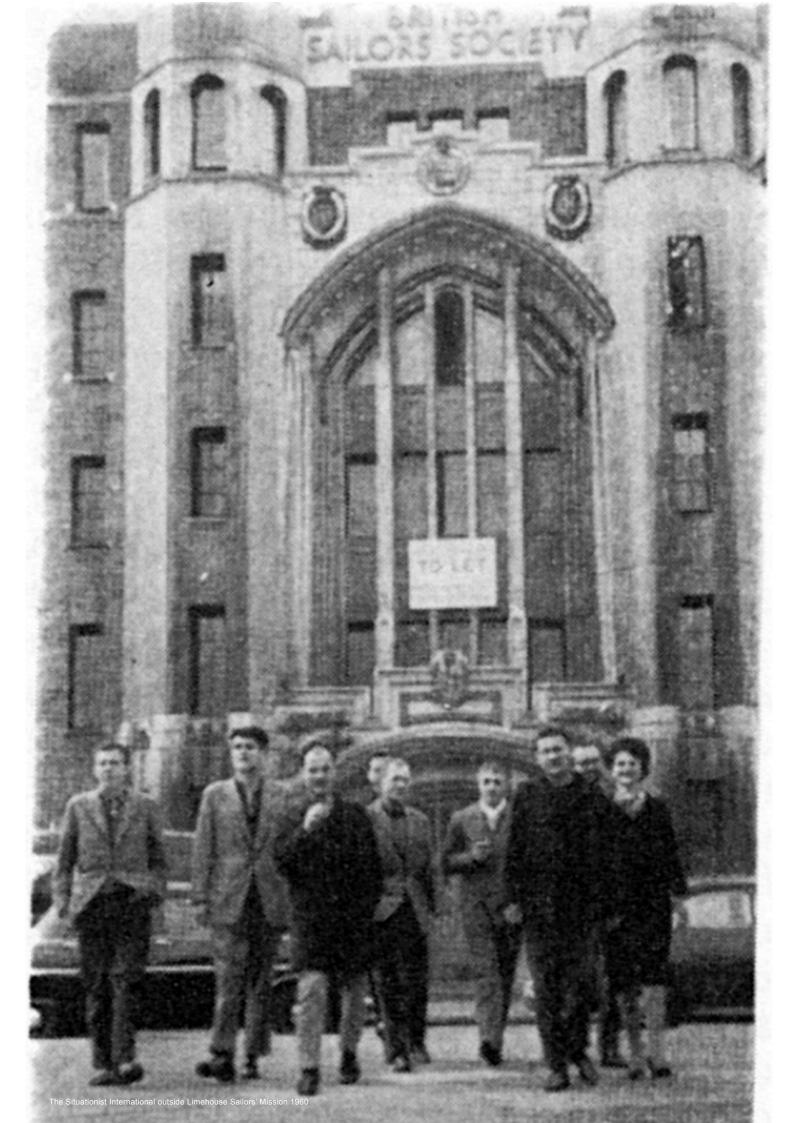
Finally, if modernisation appears to you, as it does to us, to be historically necessary, we would counsel you to carry your enthusiasm into areas more urgently in need of it, that is to say, to you political and moral institutions.

Yours faithfully,

for l'Internationale lettriste

Michèle Bernstein, Guy-Ernest Debord, Gil J Wolman

Through out 'The Bulletin of Information of the French Group of the Letterist International' better known as Potlatch (Coverley, 2006:85), the term 'Psychogeography' appeared inconsistently as a playful provocation. However, as the Letterist International merged to form the Situationist International, Debord gave the term a more theoretical articulation. Defining it in International Situationniste #1 as, 'The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.'(SI, 1981b:45) Psychogeography is the attempt to understand the effect that the built environment has on people's emotions and behavior, and this is key to understanding the Situationists reimagination of the City. What emerges is an image of the city as a series of ambiences that can be studied. Debord defined two useful tools to carry out this study, the Derive and the psychogeographical map. The derive, translated as a drift in British psychogeography, was described as, 'A mode of experimental behavior linked to



the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences.' (SI, 1981b:45) In effect the drift is an aimless stroll or walk in which the walker breaks out of their usual routines and allows themself to be guided by the particular emotions and ambiences of the built environment. The results of such a drift could then be used to produce a new form of cartography, the psychogeographical map, which rejects traditional Cartesian mapping in favour of techniques that better reflect the emotional context of the drift. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn gave an indication of how this new cartography might be expressed when they produced the 1956 'Guide psychographique de Paris' and the 1957 'Naked City' (Sadler, 1999). These maps attempted to represent the disorientation and fractured experience of their Paris drifts by scattering pieces of the map and linking them with military style arrows. Fundamental to these practices was an analysis of alienation. Marx, in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, had highlighted the process of human alienation from the products of their own labour. In the post war economic boom and reorganisation of Paris the SI, together with other thinkers such at Henri Lefebvre, witnessed the expansion of alienation into everyday life. The sanitisation of city space was a form of alienation of the cities inhabitants from the city streets, as Debord himself noted, 'The modern commodity had not yet shown what could be done to a street' (Debord, 1991). The Situationists represented the city as a site of contestation. The militaristic overtones of 'Naked City' are not by chance. In the collective imagination of the Situationists, they were engaged in a battle against the alienating colonialisation of the city streets. This battle was particularly apparent in the clearances and gentrification of the working class districts of Paris [2]. The battle against the alienation of the streets is the origin of the two strategies employed by the SI during this period of glorifying the old working class parts of Paris , such as Les Halles, whilst constructing a 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' and drawing up designs for a revolutionary transformed Situationist city[3].

Invisible Rods of Force Active in this City

A map of St. Annes Limehouse appears in Iain Sinclair's Lud Heat. The map dematerialises Limehouse Town Hall, the Town Hall rendered as a negative space between a row of memorial slabs and Limehouse cut. However, Lud Heat has played an important part in materialising the Town Hall as a Key site in London's psychogeography. Iain Sinclair himself has become synonymous with London psychogeography and since the 1970's his output has been prolific. His book Lud Heat has had a seminal and lasting impact on subsequent psycogeographers. The drift is a central element of Sinclairs practice and he has written that, 'Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself'(Sinclair, 1997:4). Lud Heat also presents an alternative mapping, an alter-cartography of the City in the form of the



maps and diagrams produced by David McKean. The London that emerges out of this poetic literature and mapping is however very different to the outcome of the Situationist studies. Central to the book's reimagination of the city is the map titled, 'The 8 great churches: the lines of influence the Invisible Rods of Force Active in this City' (Sinclair, 1998:18). The Map charts a series of alignments linking all 8 churches built by Hawksmoor with other significant sites within the city, such as the Greenwich observatory and the British Museum. In this map the city itself is dematerialized leaving behind only key sites of power and the flows between them. The sites are linked through the text to ritualistic murder, both in the past and the present. Through this reimaged geography, London is presented as a city built upon a masonic energy grid of occult power through which the past maintains a hold over the present[4]. The redemptive possibility of a radical future transformation of the city suggested by the Situationists is missing in this brand of psychogeography. However, Sinclair does produce a radical transformation in his reader's imagination of the City. The City itself is not transformed but our way of experiencing and relating to it is. The ordinary and everyday is imbued with magic that calls to the reader to re-engage with the city, exploring its mysteries and hidden histories. Notably, the map also includes both Iain Sinclair and Brian Catlin's houses, either arrogantly elevating the writer and his artist friend to significant nodes of force in the city or anchoring the map to a personally subjective and poetic rendering of the city.



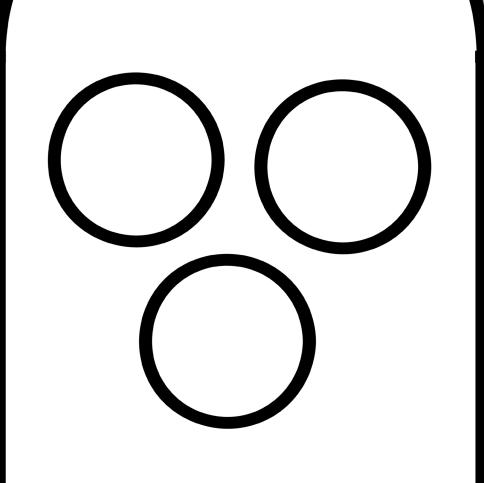
Limehoue Town Hall occupies a central position between St Annes and the Sailor's mission and the LPA ideologically feeds from both the language of the left Marxism of the Situationist and the imagination of occult London. The particular form of language used in the LPA's leaflets and flyers raise the spectre of a proletarian black mass in opposition to the masonic power that inscribes itself as hidden forces within the landscape. The proletariat is cast in a class struggle in which the secret occult powers that flow through the city are the site of contestation. To be subverted and harnessed by the proletariat, for the proletariat, by ritualistic acts. The LPA's texts read as a provocative and unsettling mixture of both the occult and the Marxist tendencies and have been dubbed Magico Marxism (Bin, 1996:120)[5].

The triangulation of three buildings, St Annes Limehouse, Limehouse Town hall and the Sailor's Mission, sketches out the key tropes of contemporary British psychogeography. The radical left-Marxism of the Situationist International, the occult influence of Iain Sinclair's Lud Heat, the unsettling mixture of both the occult and the Marxist tendencies of Magico Marxism (Bin, 1996:120), and the transmigration of psychogeography into cyberspace.

Death to the Gods of Mount Olympus

Laura Oldfield Ford has described Barry Squiggins as 'a bit tasty on the pavement'[6]. A reference to his fighting capability. Squiggins was born and bred in Limehouse and had been a member of the Boxing Club at Limehouse Town Hall, when it had actually been a boxing club, prior to its take over by the current collective of artists and activists who continue to use its name. Fabian Tompsett met Barry Squiggins in The Star of the East, a Pub on the opposite side of Commercial road to St. Annes. 'Initially interested in what had become of the Town Hall, Barry became a regular visitor to the space. Hanging out in the map room and attending the frequent parties that were held at the town hall. Through this liaison, Barry discovered psychogeography and being an autodidact educated himself in its history and traditions'[7]. Having no time for mysticism and the Occult Squiggins set up his own psychogeographical group, aligning it closer to the politics of CLASS WAR[8] and naming it WE ARE BAD. From 2005 Laura Oldfield Ford and John Wild organised a series of drifts under the name the Savage Messiah Collective that in late 2005 merging with WE ARE BAD and the poet Robin Bale, designer of the groups sinister hooded figure logo. When Fabien left the town hall he passed his workspace on to WE ARE BAD. From 2006 WE ARE BAD organised anti-gentrification drifts around Kings Cross and Hackney, carried out a psychogeographical study of the Olympic Zone, attacking its blue fence with posters and raising the slogan "Death to the Gods of Mount Olympus". These activities brought Laura Oldfield Ford, one of the most significant contemporary female psychogeographers to a wider public through her Savage Messiah Zine[9].

WE ARE BAD



PLEASE HELP MAKE US BETTER

With the announcement of the victory of the London 2012 Olympic bid, on the 6th July 2005, cleaning up and gentrifying working class areas became a governmental priority. Working class pubs were converted into gastro pubs, the Spurstow arms, the Cat and Mutton, the Pembury Tavern, Clapton White Hart. Shops that served the needs of the working class were closed down; Spirit's Jamaican food store and Tony's Café on Broadway Market. Rents were rising, squeezing out anyone on a low income not already in social housing, a process WE ARE BAD labelled Class Cleansing. New Labour had replaced the concept of class with the concept of community. The language of meritocracy was revived, a return to the deserving and undeserving poor. Robin Bale was particularly vocal on these issues and WE ARE BAD rejected community, arguing for a restatement of class. WE ARE BAD rejected meritocracy through a celebration of those labelled undeserving and antisocial, ASBO's and Alcohol Control Zones were considered spatial weapons in the class cleansing of inner city London[10]. This was the climate and context of the development of WE ARE BAD's brand of psychogeography.

In the early phase of activities the drift was reinterpreted as a form of direct action. Ambience is constructed and reconstructed through the actions and interactions of its inhabitants. As such a group of walkers can actively create and construct ambience. WE ARE BAD attempted to create an ambience that was explicitly hostile to the 'yuppies' and 'hipster' gentrifiers. Stickers, posters and graffiti were used to increase underlying tensions and oppose gentrification. 'TODAYS GATED COMMUNITIES TOMORROW'S GULAGS!' declared one wall outside a Gated Community in Wapping, Tower Hamlets. 'DESTROY CARTESIAN RHETORIC' in a labyrinthal brutalist estate at Elephant and Castle, whilst close to Broadway Market in Hackney was scrawled, 'YUPPIES!!! Hands off our houses! There's plenty of space for you in the THAMES GATEWAY! GET OUT OF HACKNEY!!!. The posters and graffiti had a psychotic, schizophrenic style and tone and featured the sinister WE ARE BAD head. These tactics were considered by the group as a form of psychological class war in which the ambience of an area was the prime site of contestation in the battle against gentrification. Alongside these forms of direct action more artistic strategies were employed, the most enduring being the production by Laura Oldfield Ford of a Zine to accompany each drift. These were personal, subjective and inspired by the literary psychogeographical tradition whilst rejecting the Occult reading of space in favor of a vision of class contestation. Robin Bale would imbue the drifts with a poetic but no less provocative air through invocations and incantations at key sites. John Wild followed a line of enquiry suggested by the East London Cybergeografical Underground Network, exploring the invisible geographies of electro magnetic communications networks and data tracking. The Kings X drift organised on Saturday November 17th 2007 exemplifies how these strategies worked together. Squiggins had been a squatter in the Kings Cross area and was becoming increasingly frustrated with what he saw as the destruction of one of the cities most important liminal zones. Oldfield Ford produced a study of the area that later became Savage Messiah Issue 8. A launch for the Zine was organised at Hausman's Bookshop on the Caledonian Road and invites to the event contained the following call:

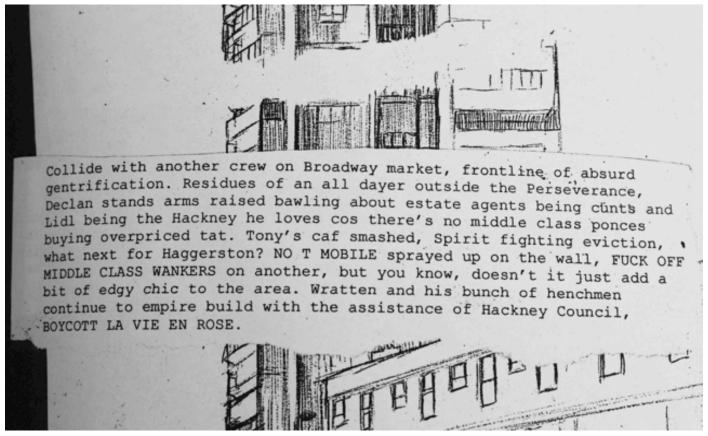


WE ARE BAD posters on the Olympic perimeter fence

SAVAGE MESSIAH CALLS FOR AN INVASION OF THE ST.PANCRAS EURO TERMINAL!!! MASS TRESPASS KINGS CROSS TO HACKNEY WICK!!!!!!! Bring balaclavas, jemmys, ladders and ropes. Take a look round the new euro terminal, great coffee shops and places to hang out! Why not relax in the new champagne bar or browse in some of the great new retail developments?"[11]

Sufficiently provoked, a police van was stationed outside the bookshop throughout the Launch. What actually took place was even more complex. Squiggins had photocopied old maps, stretching back to the 1800s, of the Kings Cross area. Circular routes were plotted onto each map, starting and ending at Hausmans bookshop and following old streets, paths, alleyways, and tramlines. Gathered participants were divided into four groups of 6 or seven people and each group given one of the maps. Bale began the drifts with an invocation[12], marking the four points of the compass on the pavement outside Hausmans with Special Brew; Libations to the good dead, the bad dead, Dionysius, and Us. The drifts began. Each group tried to stick as closely as possible to the routes on their maps, taking them over fences, into building sites, through buildings and ultimately into conflict with the sheer scale of construction and reorganisation of the area. During the drift John Wild transmitted a pirate radio signal constructed from the location data collected by tracking his own mobile phone. The data was read out by an anonymous computer generated voice and broadcast back into the streets of Kings Cross via speakers mounted outside the bookshop.

Ultimately these strategies failed to halt gentrification and may have inadvertently had a counter productive effect, as Laura had already pessimistically observed in Savage Messiah Issue 7.



Excerpt from Savage Messiah Issue 7

Tensions within the group started to emerge around political and artistic strategies, culminating when WE ARE BAD were invited to participate in a Late at the Tate event at Tate Britain, Friday 2 January 2009, and Squiggins refused to take part. Laura Oldfield Ford brought the London Psychogeographical Association and WE ARE BAD together for a final joint drift around the Olympic Zone on Saturday 21st February 2009, under the title "A Drift through the Ruins".

Returning to Limehouse Town Hall a new group, CODED GEOMETRY, is holding its inaugural meeting. This group believes that the global reorganisation of production has brought into being new forms of space and a contemporary psychogeography cannot ignore the emergence of digital and hybrid spaces. CODED GEOMETRY insists that, 'a FUTURE COMMUNISM must demand the seizure of the means of production of physical and virtual space by the creation of a cybernetic dictatorship by the proletariat'.[13] I can't help thinking that Limehouse's game of psychogeography isn't over yet.



WE ARE BAD poster montage commissioned by MUTE magazine

Notes

- 1. For a more historical overview of psychogeography see, Coverley, M (2006), Psychogeography, Pocket Essentials, Herts, UK.
- 2. A more in depth study of the SI's relation ship to old Paris can be found at D, Pinder, 2000, Old Paris is No More, Geographies of Spectacle and Anti-Spectacle'.
- 3. A wider discussion about the SI's plans for a Situationist City can be found in, Simon Sadler, The Situationist City.
- 4. For a more comprehensive overview of the relationship between Paris and London Psycogeographical cartography see. Duncan Hay, Transforming Psychogeography: From Paris to London, Published: October 18, 2012.
- 5. For a more in depth discussion of Magico Marxism see. Bonnett, A, 2009, The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography, Theory, Culture & Society, Vol.26(1), pp.45-70
- 6. Laura Old-field Ford talking about the origins of the WE ARE BAD / Savage Messiah Collective at a Rough Trade East on February 15, 2012
- 7. Ibid
- 8. For a more comprehensive overview of CLASS WAR see, Home, S, 1991, The Assault on Culture, AK Press.
- 9. Laura Old-field Ford's work deserves a more in depth discussion, particularly in relation to psycogeoraphy and gender. However this text is focused narrowly on the collective vision of WE ARE BAD.
- 10. For a more in-depth view of Robin Bales argument against Alcohol Control Zones See Bale, R, I Know thee not, old man: The Designated Public, Critical Cities v3. P 347
- 11. Savage Messiah Issue 8: Kings Cross to Hackney Wick Invite available online at:-http://rupture.co.uk/KingXdrift/savagemessiah8.htm
- 12. For documentation of a similar Invocation by Robin Bale see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocw0dYc-deg&feature=player embedded#at=205
- 13. Statement of the inaugural meeting of CODED GEOMETRY, 1st May 2014, Limehouse Town Hall.

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