

A Psychogeographical Account of PING and the PsyGeoConflux 2003

> By Kate Armstrong

Movado watches, a man shouts. His elbows rest on a black suitcase laid flat over his knees, his ankles hooked through subway stair railings, white socks peeking beneath pant angles. I'm on my way to ABC No Rio after eating French toast at a crowded bistro. It's Mother's Day morning. Women in hats are accompanied by attentive sons. Cobblestones underfoot. Fancy sinks and chairs in windows. Curly blue dog pissing. Cheap original art stacked on the sidewalk, sunlight breaking through now and then. A billboard model hangs across Houston, hipbones like fenceposts in drift snow. From the bank of bodies at the light a fat blue-checked arm punches the air, No kidding I'll show you twenty economists twenty different economists degrees everything not a single one of them's going to agree on how the economy works except for the one thing all of them going to tell you it's cyclical. Across the intersection yellow cab blue car yellow cab gap gap honk is a Dutch psychogeographer map in hand. For a moment his face is still and white in the blur but he's gone before I get to where he was.

I arrive at the gallery. Graffiti and corrugated metal make it blend into the streetscape. The impression of indistinct borders continues inside the decayed white box. The space looks littered by the things in it - images of dead ends, playing cards marking sites on the local city grid, a carved wooden map, distant schematics with strange variables, a bright drift of festival ephemera. In the corner is a shopping cart filled with bike tires and hula hoops and wooden paddles. I learn later it's the props from Toyshop's parade event, Serenade. A festival curator appears, asking, Are you here? A man in a flat hat pushes splintery blocks from one end of the room to the other like a giant arranging stumps in a clearing. People look and linger uneasily like they're on the verge of dispersing but they're here for PING. I start my introduction:

PING is a psychogeographical network experiment that uses a telephone system to



offer a menu of options to callers who access the system using cellular telephones. The choices the caller makes when navigating the telephone system produce directions for physical movement through the city. PING is inspired by a UNIX command which tests for the presence of another computer on a network by sending out a signal and waiting for confirmation that the computer exists. I will distribute a telephone number. You will dial it and walk out and move through the street acting upon directions that the system produces in response to your choices and to your continued existence on the network. I will be back here in 45 minutes if you'd like to return.

I read the number. People pause in monkish concentration entering the number into their phones then we scatter. Gray rain like mist falls slowly through the air, hits my chest and feels cold. I dial my own phone and start east.

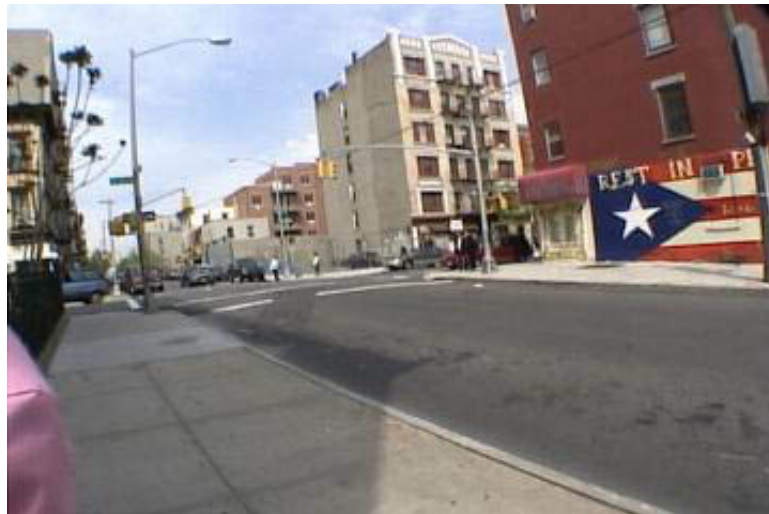
On the corner is a quilted metal cart and a cartoon sign with a pink tongue. The chilly vendor holds his hands in the pockets of his dirty ski jacket and casts his eyes downward to the mound of ice and the bottles of thick liquid in pink and blue but no one's buying. A fat child runs past hooting, not followed, not following.

First off, stop and look around you. Briefly note existing ambient zones. You must ask yourself a question. What is your relationship to your current surroundings? Do you exist? asks the phone. Press 1 to PING me.

Dodge the half-rain under awnings cold beer deli cigarette three young women lean against the glass. One in a puffy black vest, arms bare and round and brown, saying, Don't y'all blow dry? Thank you. Your existence has been confirmed. Locate the nearest intersection. Quickly, without engaging in analysis, decide on a direction in which you would like to travel and begin to travel in that direction. As you are walking, heroically resist incorporation into the milieu through which you move.

Community garden green behind gray wire, an industrial blue cylinder for children tipped on its side. It's gonna go oh yeah it's gonna go, a man trumpets up the street.

Press 1 if you are near a French tabac. Press 2 if you feel more like a flaneur today than you normally do. Press 3 if you find the neighbourhood through which you are moving to be either sad or pleasant or if you are in



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view of a deep pit.

A woman with white hair hangs out a third floor apartment window overlooking a busy intersection. She ducks under a pale garment that floats from the laundry line, chucking grain to the street for the flock of pigeons who pool there. She continues to throw the grain hard, at them, at us.

Turn right at your next opportunity.

People with cell phones circulate nearby, are they listening to PING? Some are. A hipster with a poststructural blouse grabs her companion saying, Hey hey you're supposta give a description of Debord. A visual description. She presses the phone into his hand. I watch him listen for a minute, then he is saying, A sandy little fellow who walked around with a tourniquet.

If you are in an extended indistinct border region between different unities of atmosphere, please press 2.

The computerized woman whose voice I chose to narrate PING sounds different now than she did during production, a bit distant, like she's struggling to keep it together. Her voice cracks over the lines as though from age or duress. Occasionally she mispronounces words, somehow never quite saying them the same way twice even though she is a machine. Particularly the foreign words in her script like tabac and derive. I forgive her because she's working on the fly with dirty signals. Look, a tabac! There actually is a tabac! A woman with electroclash stylings shouts from the corner to her friend, who lags half a block behind with the cell phone they're sharing.

I traverse a Chinese festival in a sunken concrete park. Holiday Falun Gong, says the yellow banner sign phosphorescing in the flat light. Parade acoustics, atonal music, a rapt, stone faced crowd. Three women in pink pantsuits dance onstage in front of microphones. Their musical number is cracked by a bleeting car alarm. The music stops a moment later when the women fall to the ground.

If you are thinking about composite building materials such as steel or particle board, press 3. Gangland architecture, press 4. Subterranean catacombs, press 5. Animal sonar, press 6.

I am thinking about the grizzled man in a red T-shirt who'd seized upon me at the opening

party, all pissed off, asking, What so I can't even see your artwork if I don't have a cell phone? And how smoke from a clove cigarette had hung in the windless night outside, making me think of a perfumed tent, but I press 6 and am directed south and east, which takes me to Attorney Street and leads me under the Williamsburg bridge.

I crossed underneath this bridge yesterday at Wilfried Hou Je Bek's event can .walk will compute. We'd been travelling on a third right first left algorithm after listening to an orientation and tasting some pancakes from the minimalist nomadic cafe by the Providence Initiative for Psychogeographical Studies. At the gallery a transgendered psychogeographer who'd proposed to "determine the Master-Charge ratio of the quantum gift particle" through that day's computational problem circulated through the crowd in a flowing red gown handing out small printed squares.

I pass a halal market where a grid of red and black chickens in small cages blocks a storefront window, suspicious eyes pressed to glass. Nearby a man in a gold velvet baseball hat embroidered with the word Clench lingers against the wall of a brick building. There's no traffic here, but the sound of cars crossing onto the bridge is amplified by the lacy steel ramparts that span overhead.

I wonder briefly if people will respond to the request to leave descriptive or audio traces of things that contributed to their psychogeographical experiences with PING. Later I find several messages, including a description of a mannequin that wears a transparent plastic baby mask and the ambient voice of someone creepily droning, The party is over, come inside, there were too many DJs.

The streets are wide with unclear directional flow and space for alternate passages through parking lots and into the projects. A gardener wearing zookeeper green leans on a rake in front of one square foot of perfect grass.

If you know what is meant when it is said that the city is a special instance of repressed desire, press 1.

Pulled in an inexorable ray toward the river I cross the FDR on an elevated bridge. Traffic flows in a cross current beneath me. Graffiti on an abandoned turquoise concrete amphitheatre says Fart.

If you feel that the geographical form of automatism is an instructive pleasure, press 2.

City pleasurecraft bump along the river. A flat black barge with a cargo of sticky yellow powder past slides north. I smell creosote and roses. I press 2.

When I turn off the phone I think of how perceiving the system from this side is different from constructing it, like the gap between a map and a walk. My menu now seems a little strange, baroque, with culdesacs I hadn't known were there. I'm surprised because I'd thought I'd made a sleek central system that would stand in contrast to the iteration of the street, but instead it's another messy layer of sound and feeling and I like it.

Back at the gallery I meet some PING participants like a woman with a tattoo of a hand around her neck and a New York Times reporter who carries a skateboard. A poetry event has started inside so we stand under the eaves of the gallery whispering definitions of psychogeography into the reporter's ear and watch him make notes on his pad.

When people disperse I move along bathed in the pink light of roasted ducks in Chinese windows. I pass an open gate where a woman from some historical society sits at a card table handing out information about a civil war cemetery. I go in. It is a large green gap in the center of a block that looks like an empty lot except for the lateral row of soft stone slabs embedded in the perimeter wall. From this side you can see a door that would open to a twenty foot drop and a ring of purple fireweeds. I think of another description of Guy Debord left in the PING system, Hairy, wistful, touched with green, downtrodden, and forgotten.

That night at the closing party I stand in a dark space filled with belted wooden vats and talk to an urban planner in capri pants about how Verizon installed WiFi modems into their payphones this weekend though in the meantime I've read they're having problems with theft. We watch the DJs photograph each other with slow exposures leaving traces like traffic on film. I speak at length with one of the festival curators about the state of independent radio and have a conversation with a British lecturer about whether geography has always been about mental perception. A photographer from Minneapolis standing at the bar shifts his weight so his

heavy bag rests on a stool next to him like a lady friend. People are tired, passing out cards and contact materials and sighs and promises and looking ahead to PsyGeoConflux 2004.

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