

A *DÉRIVE* ENCOUNTER IN ESKILSTUNA

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ABSTRACT

Walking a territory with no other previous plan than following those impulses, stimulus, and given conditions that every situation prompts us with triggered the first experiences of an arts based work method named after the late 60s situationist practice of the *dérive*. Theater improvisation approaches, dialogic learning, walking practices, and other social and pedagogy theories on the power of curiosity, and imagination backed up the following six years of experience here presented as hands on session. The *dérive* encounter in Eskilstuna focuses on four central phases: introduction on walking practices, group walk, group talk and poetic translation of the experience (named as *transkating*). By this practice, *dérive* walks can also be experienced as an embodied way of hosting conversations that, by encouraging unexpected encounters, transcend any possible objectives to increase the limits of what is to be created, learned and inquired. Individualities expand by this conversation along with the others, as well as with a time and a place. Permeability and nomadic nature of this proposal fits difficult in its naming as method and in remaining static as unchangeable formula.

DÉRIVE AS AN EMBODIED CONVERSATION. AN INTRODUCTION.

Back in 2012, joined by visual artist Jordi Lafon, I decided I wanted to know what would happen if I organized a group of people (10 at that time), setting a number of walks (twice a week for four months) with the only objective to *dérive*: to walk our territory with no other previous plan than following those impulses, intuitions, and stimulus that every walk prompts us with. Inspired by International Situationist leader Guy Debord and his Theory of the *Dérive* (Debord 1958), I was then already very interested in exploring creative processes that could be improvised out of the conditions of each singular moment. Debord's description of the *dérive* as an experimental behaviour that draws a technique for undisrupted passing through diverse settings (Ibid.) was –and still is– a statement I strongly identify with. Simultaneously, I had been following and reading Francesco Careri (2002) reflections and experiences on the social and individual potentialities of the act of walking as an aesthetic practice beyond the act of going from one place to another, yet a key factor in the developing of our society and the world, as we currently know it. I had a pulse for creating out of what is naturally provided, creating on the move, putting my body into action, trying to listen to what is happening, and what is about to emerge. I related this to the idea of improvisation that I had been practising during my years of doing theatre and that anyone familiar with theatre techniques will quickly identify. Joining some Jacques Lecoq based method sessions gave me a sense of presence and made me aware of how improvisation is, in fact, a powerful place for creation to be born (Lecoq 1997). I soon realized that this pulse I felt was expanding to all of my practices both as an artist and as a university teacher of performing arts at an education faculty. Learning about Gisèle Barret's (1995) idea about what she calls "pedagogy of the situation" put me onto a very significative trail: those *dérive* walks I was so much interested in might also be a way to embody how I enjoy facing my practice, a way to embody my methodology. It was not until I defended my Masters Degree Paper (Marichalar-Freixa 2013), and more concretely not until I later published an academic paper

on this first research experience that I first used the concept of “pedagogy of the *dérive*” (Estrela, Marichalar-Freixa 2015). It was from that moment when I discovered the creative and formative potentialities hosted by research, which then became the third articulating axe of my practice joining the first two I had already been crossing for years: arts and knowledge co-building. This new setting brought me to start developing the basis of my current doctoral studies. These are now focused in researching the potentialities of the *dérive* (both as action and as a concept; body and thought) as a place where to cross creation, learning and research. Furthermore, last reflections while writing this paper make me think of *dérive* as a way to embody conversations along with others, as well as with a time and a place that transcend and therefor expand any prior goals. I take this as another possible approach to my identity as artist, facilitator, and researcher.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

Dérive, wandering, walking with no other purpose rather than enjoying and focusing on the walk has been a part—even the core—of many thinkers, artists, sociologists, architects, and those who coincide in an interest for the unexpected, for creativity, movement, knowledge, territory, and people. Literature on this matter is extensive and traverses years of multiple practices, from the classic world to the most contemporary approaches. As I see it, we are on *dérive* modus when our attitude is that of amazement and strangeness for ordinariness, when we perceive our walking as a way to activate the spaces we cross through, paying special attention to what and whom we encounter, a *flâneur*, thinking back of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Or even better, a *flâneuse*, as Franz Hessel was the first one to consider when describing those women, and not only men, who took the city as a text they read by the act of wandering its streets (Frisby 2004) and therefor engaging themselves into a conversation with the environment. Dada movement and right after surrealists added artistic, political, and social connotations to an aesthetic practice that, as previously mentioned, Guy Debord and the situationist movement identified some decades later as “*dérive*”. Nowadays, Francesco Careri collective Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade in Rome is key reference for those of us interested in the tradition of embodying the unexpected fate of casual encounters and exploring the possibilities to create out of each single situation our environment gift us with. I also understand this attitude of the *dérive* as a way to appreciate a time and a space that at first sight might seem not productive but useless, and that Nuccio Ordine gets right to remark as especially useful exactly because of this uselessness (Ordine 2017). In fact, Ordine’s idea echoes what Abraham Flexner was already actively arguing almost a century ago: the big role that people “who were driven not by the desire to be useful but merely the desire to satisfy their curiosity” (Flexner 1939) played in the history of biggest social and technological innovations.

“Curiosity, which may or may not eventuate in something useful, is probably the outstanding characteristic of modern thinking. It is not new. It goes back to Galileo, Bacon, and to Sir Isaac Newton, and it must be absolutely unhampered”, as Flexner continues (Ibid.). As educational philosopher and social activist Maxine Greene many years later masterly communicated, curiosity and imagination are key factors to develop that creative thinking every learning process should bear within (Greene 2000). Setting a time and a space to do nothing else but getting engaged in whatever happens to emerge is in this sense a multi coloured opportunity to explore the creative potentialities of the useless and to experience from an embodied perspective how this singularly affects each one of us. By *dérive* walking, we perform this time and space in form of ongoing conversation with all the symbolic contents that every talk brings within (Gómez 2011). Freire’s dialogical learning theories focused the transformative dimension of conversation in the power of words (Freire 1970). The *dérive* method I here propose expands this conversation space to a symbolic realm enhanced by its poetics (Bachelard 1964) that understands our individuality in an ongoing relational process along with others and our environment.

WORK METHOD. THE HANDS-ON SESSION

The mixture of my role as artist, university teacher and doctoral student, brought me in 2016 to be part of the founding of international arts based research net Beyond Text. Joining peers with a long record as researchers, and discussing my practice and research with them, allowed me to start thinking of *dérive* as that arts-based research method, that I had until then been applying in diverse settings, and that I am willing to keep sharing and discussing at this PIN-C edition.



Figure 1: Walking and spending time together

The idea of an ongoing poetic space for conversation is what triggers my proposal for this encounter in Eskilstuna. My interest here is to transcend again any prior objective so I can inhabit a time and space for conversation that I can still not imagine and from there to open new possibilities for creation, knowledge building and research thanks to the power of encountering others. Therefore, this hand-on session is an invitation to join an hour *dérive* walk, journeying through Eskilstuna, so that we can afterwards share and

discuss what this situation has made for us possible to emerge. As a background, we will be focusing on what I intentionally want to highlight as “spending time together by joining a *dérive* walk”. What happens when we set ourselves into a *dérive* walk with a group of people? What does emerge? What does this performative action originate? All of these are questions that invite us to transcend the idea of the objective, so that we focus on listening and creating as any good theatre improvisation exercise demands.



Figure 2: Talk sessions help us to reflect on and co-create upon previous walks

The hands-on session will be divided in four main parts: Framing of the encounter, walk, talk, and a poetic translation of the experience that I have started to call *trans(k)ating*. We will firstly meet so that I can frame the session both from a theoretical and practical setting. We will thereafter get ready for an hour outdoor nightwalk through the streets of Eskilstuna, which will be fully organized upon the conditions faced at that very moment such as final number of participants, weather, group motivations, and others. After the walk, we will be gathering to share experiences and put them into conversation. We will face this talk also as a *dérive*, facilitating spontaneous participation and encouraging flowing along each contribution. We need to understand the whole session as a *dérive*, which does not solely apply to the walk. Therefore, focusing on where the whole session will have brought us until that moment, I will propose closing up with a creative and poetic exercise I am recently working on, and that I name *trans(k)ating*. Mistyping translating as “transkating” brought by fate to connect the nurturing setting for learning that translation processes bring within, with the urban art of skating and the poetics and symbolism of its practice. This supposed the beginning of an exciting exploration and collection of exercises that I thought would positively enhance the limits of the conversation. In these exercises, participants are asked to transform their lived process into a form of expression that might be previously planned or suddenly improvised. For example, for this hands-on session, I can be thinking to ask participants to transform their Eskilstuna *dérive* experience into a poem, but the situation might change this idea so that we end up skating along another invitation to transform it into a trace on the snow. The group talk and the *trans(k)ating* exercise are not only an

opportunity to access participants experiences and gather data for any research purpose, but are above all a key part of collective making experience through a conversation that flows between language and poetics, consciousness and the unconscious. This work method has been inquired and explored from an artistic and pedagogical approach, but has still no empirical findings in terms of scientific research as this is still ongoing.

OTHER CASE DESCRIPTIONS AND EVALUATION OF WORK METHOD

As I describe in the introduction of this paper, the basis of the work method I am presenting here was born out of a very first experience in *dérive* walks, which also meant the founding of Deriva Mussol, the artistic proposal I have been engaged in for six years now, along with aforementioned Jordi Lafon. Since then, Deriva Mussol is the framework for me to embrace a wide range of walking practices as a way to explore endless possibilities for creation and learning in contemporary contexts. I will be hereunder shortly describing this first case, and consecutively a more recent one. Even though these two cases were thought as long-term experiences (they extended to four months or more), they pursued the same will of transcending the objective, and are good examples of how *dérive* can expand encounters in multiple forms and is not a given formula that I feel I have to follow and repeat.

Thus, that first case of random walks we performed twice a week for four months brought us to embody those theories on *dérive*, improvisation, conversation, and poetics and to transform them into a public walk performance and a Master’s Degree Research Paper. From a phenomenological case study perspective, my first concern in that very first research experience was to identify the characteristics of what was happening during those first months of walking along with a group of ten people, all of them current and former students from my university. The analysis of the personal field diary I was keeping record of, and the interviews all of us members did to one another got me to the conclusion that what I was naming “*dérive*” was defined, yet facilitated, by a set of interrelated factors. Namely: it was linked to intrinsic motivation and curiosity; it was permeable; it developed bonds between participants and between them and the territory; it remained unfinished, as in a present continuous; it prompted personal changes; it fostered awareness and new perceptions; welcomed uncertainty; played the adventure of the unexpected. As for the emergences of this analysis and experience, these factors provided scope for me to interpret them as a way of understanding learning processes based on an adventuresome, situation sensitive and artisan pedagogy which echoed my first references of Lecoq, Barret, and Greene, and furthermore broadened them with Richard Sennett contributions (Sennett 2009). Concerning participants, the experience itself let to the emergence of their own creative interests, and brought to the surface their

singularities, what we all decided to narrate in a performative format. All of this originated new learnings and motivations; participants stated that this experience had made them aware of their relation to the city, the connection to themselves, the potentialities of body and movement in terms of increasing relations, the way they grew experience, as well as the diversity of singularities hosted by each one of us. For me, it grounded the basis of future *dérive*-based actions and research studies such as my current Doctorate. Documentation on this is provided by two online videos on the experience (Deriva Mussol first *dérives* performance, and Deriva Mussol first participants interviews).

As for the second case, I would like to point out the set of *dérives* we organized on 2016 for a group of people that after some time together we all agreed on naming Caminants (Walkers). The setting was as usual, a group of people, and some months in front of us to find out what would happen, emerge, and originate spending some time together on the move. Besides some university students, and some regular Deriva Mussol followers, this proposal also engaged other people from the city who had heard of us for the first time and a group of participants that were at that time dealing with a mental health diagnostic and who their institution had encouraged to join us. In this case, the experience was not analysed under a research study, but from a practitioner evaluative point of view. Just like I had also been observing in other one day sessions like the one I will be performing for PIN-C, Caminants confirmed the importance of that first list of interrelated factors I identified in my Master's Dissertation in order to make *dérive* possible, and therefore facilitate a favourable landscape for emergence and origination of its potentialities. As can be seen in an online video (Caminants documentary), this experience also facilitated the emergence of each participant singular creativity, which in this case was made public via a paper publication instead of a performance (see Caminants publication also online under referred link). As I have observed in this and other similar experiences, participants who are less likely to face uncertainty, to feel intrinsically motivated, to feel comfortable and supported by the group, and to take the responsibility that an open participatory context demands are also less likely to enjoy *dérive*, and get easily frustrated. Therefore, being sensitive to the atmosphere of the group, and to the real motivations of its participants, taking care of their needs helps, and enjoying creating by improvising out of any given situation are crucial skills that anyone engaged as facilitator for this kind of sessions will need. It is in this sense that, besides allowing us to co-construct knowledge, talks allow us to identify how is the group and each of its members living the experience, and which are the emergences that are an emergency we should pay special attention to. Number of participants and my performance ability in each specific session are also key factors of bigger or less success. However, I must say that even when a *dérive* fails, the experience of

this failure is still a great opportunity for learning, creating and researching, as each situation, whatever it is, is a big source of inputs. We just need to exercise our capability to see and appreciate that parallel world which lays underneath what we take as ordinary.

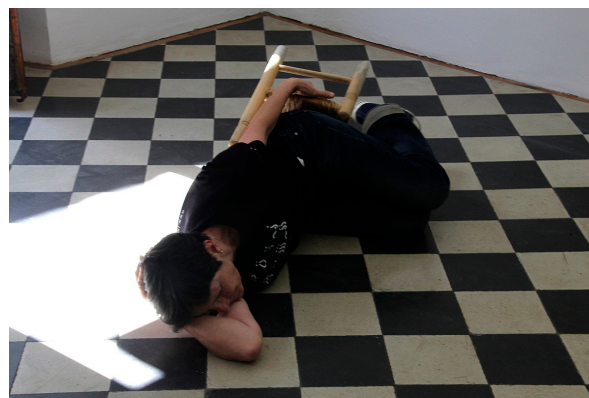


Figure 3: Participating in *Caminants* reactivated Montse's passion for performative arts

FINAL DISCUSSION AND WORK METHOD CONSEQUENCES

Theory references mentioned until this point keep echoing as an ongoing framework that still resonates in my daily practice and that keeps growing. Beyond my Deriva Mussol practice, I have been expanding this work method to my artistic creative processes as well as to my university role as teacher. As an example for this, I will mention on one side the performative action *Cada dia importa* whose creation was based upon a series of open sessions, which were both rehearsal and final performance, process and finality, like the *dérive* (see online *Cada dia importa* documentary). As on the other side, I want to remark my 2016 Arts Didactics university group of students who supported me (not without critical moments) in going through an academic module completely based on the *dérive* as methodology. This experience was framed in a series of actions I am also engaged in together with other three action-arts and research women colleagues with who I am exploring the limits and boundaries of high education institutions under our performative project *Desbordar la universitat* (Overflowing University). It was in the frame of this exploration that the methodological *dérive* with this group let to the reflection of how *dérive* powerfully “emergences emergencies” (as I have noted in previous section as an advanced result of this expansion). A video on this experience is also available (see online *Emergències* documentary).

All of these practices are currently expanding to my doctoral studies. At this very moment, I am elaborating some first questions focused on the potentialities of *dérive* as a setting for conversation that connects us to others and to the environment enhancing our possibilities for learning, creating and researching thanks to participatory encounters that run away from any previous planning and focus on improvising out of the situation. This interest hosts a “nomade” perspective

(Schenck 2009) that constantly pushes me to move from one place to another searching for new voices and encouraging unexpected findings. The above description of my practice and its relation to exposed theories draws a first set of hypothesis which place *dérive* as a powerful form of nomadic conversation that: enhances individual creativity by being in relation with others and the environment, performs and embodies this same conversation so that it can be observed and analysed bringing to light the elements of dialogic processes, encourages critical thinking and questions old fixed dynamics, among others. Its own nature makes this work method sometimes difficult to grasp and control. The dimension of the links and connections that constantly develops, its longitudinal character, its never-ending possible *transkates*, and its refusal to get fixed as a formula can reach supersized quotas. As a method, I take it as successful when participants end up connecting *dérive* with their own fields and interests, or when some unhidden phenomena that affects the whole situation emerges through the encounter. In this sense, arts-based methodologies are an important asset in any scientific research, as it might reveal what has always been there, but we did not even took the chance to listen.

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- VIDEO MATERIAL:
- Caminants documentary (upcoming subtitles in English) <https://vimeo.com/191385995>
- Caminants publication (original version, in Catalan) https://issuu.com/derivamussol/docs/caminants_pdf_publicaci___final
- Deriva Mussol first dérives performance <https://vimeo.com/65165172>
- Deriva Mussol first participants interviews (short version, upcoming subtitles in English) <https://vimeo.com/240368826>
- Deriva Mussol first participants interviews (long version, in Catalan) <https://vimeo.com/66626406>
- Emergències documentary <https://vimeo.com/201040943>
- Cada dia importa documentary (original version, in Catalan) <https://vimeo.com/240361401>
- OTHER LINKS:
- <http://www.derivamussol.net>
- <http://www.osservatorionomade.net>