



# DEEP ROUTES

THE MIDWEST IN ALL DIRECTIONS

Compass Collaborators

2012

Published by White Wire

Printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Inc. in Chelsea, Michigan

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# Notes on the Project Called Continental Drift

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## TOURISM

*Wanderer, your footsteps are  
the road, and nothing more;  
wanderer, there is no road,  
the road is made by walking.*

—Antonio Machado, *Proverbs and Songs* 29

The poet offers us an idea: we have no path except by walking; the activity itself makes the path. In reality, for better or worse, many paths do exist; we find ourselves on them all the time. Given the pace of change in our society, it's fair to say that many paths were cut when conditions of life were very different. They are navigating an environment that no longer exists. More importantly, most of the roads easily available to us are made by forces well beyond our control, forces of indoctrination into a culture that does not care about life. Even though they may seem benign enough, most of them lead to catastrophe: the catastrophe of a ruined earth.

Let's call the act of following these ready-made paths *tourism*. Tourism is a path produced for us to distract us from the way things actually work. If I go take the sun on the "Mexican Riviera" on the coast of the Yucatan, I will be offered many touches of traditional Mexican culture, perhaps thatched cabañas and tiled floors, adobe walls painted yellow and blue, and certainly many forms of tequila and lime. I am not likely to go to the other side of the highway to see the undernourished neighborhoods of the peasants who have

come from the rural places to work in the resorts. Nothing at the resort will induce me to ask why the peasants are leaving their villages and farms to live in crummy settlements and do menial jobs. Tourism takes us to a landscape of signs with disappeared referents. These are usually signifiers of difference that have been familiarized enough to become pleasant sedatives. The very real existence of places, cultures, and people is distilled into signifiers that can be exchanged on a market.

Tourism is offered as an escape from the trials, monotony, and anxiety of daily life. It is the antidote for careerism, another path that is being constructed for us all the time, enlisting us into social and economic practices that are destroying our planet. What's important to realize is how thoroughly tourism, as a participatory form of spectacle and consumption, has become the condition of daily life. We don't have to leave home to walk the tourist's path, but ultimately this path of least resistance is designed to keep us from knowing where we actually live. The tourism of everyday life may include signifiers of place but paradoxically, the overall effect is to make us forget that we live in a place, a place called Earth. Forgetting that we live in a place allows our economic system to go about its business of expropriating the world's resources.

Why would we want to take the road that doesn't exist? The road that is only our moving bodies and senses? So that we can find out where we live.

## TERRITORY

*[It] is not a question of communication or something to be rationally understood, but a question of changing our minds about the fact of being alive.*

—John Cage

Continental Drift is a collective and mobile project of inquiry. We aim to explore the five scales of contemporary existence: the intimate, the local, the national, the continental and the global. Within the mesh of scales, we want to understand the extent of our interdependence, how any action we may take has effects on and is shaped by all of these scales at once. We attempt to understand these dynamics so that we can understand the meaning of our own actions, the basis for an ethical life.

For example, consider eating—the heart of culture. We prepare and share food on an intimate level with friends and family. We obtain it on the local level, but it may have traveled across the nation, the continent or even across the globe before it gets to us. That delivery is made possible by the coordination of vast networks of production, labor, transportation and fuel systems, all regulated and often subsidized by national structures, and further moderated by international corporations and treaties. When we learn the details of how our food gets on the table we start to ask: is there a better way of doing

things? Is it right that my food is grown by migrants with no rights, little pay and debasing conditions? Is it right that our food system depends on unsustainable amounts of toxic inputs and fossil fuels? From here we may look for alternative forms of production and distribution or we may have to start creating those alternatives ourselves. Clearly, finding out about our world has implications for our ethical consciousness and will not make things easier for us.

The place where we live is a place where all these scales meet to sustain us: I call this place the *territory*. The territory is a complex phenomenon. Physically it begins as a modest radius around our homes, a space most of us can traverse, if need be, on foot. But our territory is much more than that: it is the matrix for our connection to others and to the earth. Thanks to globalization it encompasses the near and the far. It is the extent of all that is enlisted to sustain our lives: the path water takes to our glass, the path of the waste we produce, the labor of many, many people. It involves these and other concrete things, but is also driven by abstractions. We collectively constitute the territory every day; it is an outcome of our perceptions, our imagination and our actions. Generally we constitute it in an unconscious way, but when we stop to study it we realize that we have agency in determining its form and parameters.

## METHOD

*Celestin Freinet established the Modern School Movement in 1926. . . . He developed three complementary teaching techniques: (1) the ‘learning walk,’ during which pupils would join him in exploratory walks around town, gathering information and impressions about their community (a pedagogical application of the *dérive* . . .). Afterwards the children would collectively dictate a collective ‘free text,’ which might lead to pretexts for direct action within their community to improve living conditions (local councils were particularly wary of Freinet’s pupils); (2) a classroom printing press, for producing multiple copies of the pupils’ writings and a newspaper to be distributed to their families, friends and other schools; (3) inter-school networks: pupils from two different schools exchange ‘culture packages,’ printed texts, letters, tapes, photographs, maps, etc.*

—Ian Pindar & Paul Sutton, Translator’s Note to Felix Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies*

The name “Continental Drift” conjures the legacy of the *dérive*—translated as “drift”—the Situationist name for a certain performative surrealism of the mid-twentieth century. A *dérive* is an unplanned journey through a landscape in order to provoke refreshed experiences of the environment. Our Continental Drift process may loosely borrow inspiration from this precedent, but has not been modeled on it. Our journeys are purposive investigations, even as we open ourselves to the unexpected. While the *dérive* was a

specifically urban experience, we are intent on going to the edges of urban centers and beyond in order to recognize the ways that cities are always embedded within larger domains. Practicing in small groups, we conjure a territorial intimacy, but the point is to think beyond that as we go.

In his essay, “Theory of the Dérive,” Guy Debord writes about “psycho-geographical attractions,” “antideterminist liberation,” “behavioral disorientation,” “the discovery of unities of ambiance,” etc. The emphasis on an enrichment of perception makes it primarily an aesthetic project, albeit with the political implication of denormalizing a relation to the city. I approached the Continental Drift project articulating an intention, among other things, to make research an aesthetic encounter, i.e., something experienced with the entire sensorium and something that demands expression. But that is not an end in itself. One of the things I like about Freinet’s learning walk is that it is part of a larger process that includes experimentations in communication, exchange and action.

This idea of the drift has proven very captivating to people’s imaginations, and why not make a project that stimulates the imagination? The problem is that the “continental” modifier is often dropped from the overall concept, thus leaving too much room to fetishize the attractions of being cut adrift, if you will, from the imperative to keep larger perspectives in sight. As a metaphorical referent, “continental drift,” denotes a theory addressing the historical position and movement of the earth’s landmasses. The hypothesis that continents drift dates back to Abraham Ortelius in 1596 (making it provocatively coterminous with the era of western imperial expansions, or what we now think of as globalization). The idea was subsequently developed by many people, most notably Alfred Wegener, who in 1912 proposed that present-day continents once constituted a single landmass which split, setting its parts loose to drift slowly across the globe. Only in the 1960s was the notion geologically accounted for with the development of the theory of plate tectonics. The original supercontinent is now called Pangaea and its fragments are wandering still.

The name of our project—conceived by Brian Holmes—invokes the idea of continents in motion to point to the late 20th century phenomena of continental integration and the rise of continental blocks as powerful units in the machinations of globalization (think European Union, NAFTA, APEC, Mercosur, etc.). Our project began in 2005 as an effort to understand these and related movements in a series of stationary (not mobile in the physical sense) seminars at 16Beaver in New York, followed by one in Zagreb, Croatia. In 2008, feeling the need to focus on the vast unknowns of our own region, the U.S. Midwest, and responding to a suggestion attributable to our friend Brett Bloom, we joined a more or less local cohort to take the seminar on the road with the “Continental Drift through the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor.”<sup>1</sup>

Since then Brian and I, joined by many others, have pursued our desire to feel out the extensions of our territory by connecting with a changing roster of participants in ongoing explorations of the Midwest as well as parts of Argentina and China.<sup>2</sup>

Although the word “drift” inevitably directs us toward the Situationists’ *dérive*, I think Freinet’s idea of the learning walk is more relevant to what I am trying to do. I want to learn the nature of the territory in all its expanded dimensions. I want to learn it with similarly inquiring people. I want to make some kind of “text” with my interlocutors. And I want what we make to inform solidarities with the potential to act for change.

## DIGESTION

*I would say that we have to work into economic theory not only the circular flow of exchange value which is important but also this one-way throughput of matter and energy—the digestive tract as well as the circulatory system—because it’s that that ties us to the environment.*

—Herman Daly, *The Developing Ideas* Interview

One of the developments that has driven the American industrial system of agriculture into far-flung corners of the globe is genetically modified soy, corn, and canola (with many more GM commodities in the pipeline). GM is the quintessential industrial agriculture: it is not just a product, it is a production system that depends on corporate suppliers all the way down the line. By far the biggest-selling “innovation” in GM agriculture is Monsanto’s Roundup Ready corn, soy, canola, and cotton. These crops are engineered to be resistant to Monsanto’s proprietary glyphosate-based herbicide called Roundup. Even though it is the top selling herbicide worldwide, the toxic impact of Roundup is only recently being exposed.

In the industrial GM system, when a farmer buys seed, he pays a hefty technology fee for its use and is also required to sign away all rights to save seed for the next harvest, or to trade, sell, or give it away. For the seed to perform as promised, the farmer must buy the herbicide from the same company. The system takes knowledge and agency out of the heads of the farmers and dramatically restricts it to the labs, factories, and law offices of corporations and banks. The package is sold as a time- and trouble-saving method. The farmer forfeits the study and understanding of delicate ecological balances and more complex methods of protecting crops from pests and weeds through soil maintenance, selective breeding, and crop diversity. Instead, the farmer can spray the herbicide liberally on his field without having to take care that he not damage his investment, and likewise without having to take care for the environment, which includes beneficial microbes, water systems, resistance-evolving weeds, wildlife, and human children.



Significantly, these crops are only cost effective when sown in a monocrop arrangement, which requires petroleum-based synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and petroleum-based machines for sowing, spraying, and harvesting.

How is it that we can engineer a food system, allegedly about sustaining life, which is more than anything else a killing system? How can we pour millions of pounds of toxic chemicals into our environment and not think we will be poisoning ourselves, as well as all that makes our existence possible and palatable?

This is precisely the kind of separation and contradiction that drives capitalism. Capitalism is deracinating: it must separate anything of value from its roots in order to convert it into a sign that can be efficiently circulated and exchanged. It reduces both needs and desires to a system in which the fungible and often proprietary signs of value trump the organic ecology of values. In this deracinated circular flow, the universal equivalent—the sign that makes all commodities exchangeable—is money. Whatever we need and love may have inherent value, but under capitalism anything and everything is reducible to a monetary sign of value. This is efficiently paralleled by informationalism, a paradigm of knowledge in which value is reduced to an isolated register that can be exchanged as pure signs. In these ways capitalism and its companion informationalism are constitutionally deterritorializing.

Continuous with our agricultural system, our food paradigm reduces the value of a food to those elements that can be easily read as quantifiable information. We are trained to think of nutrition in terms of a handful of vitamins and minerals. So we grow acres of corn, which are deemed to be all the same in quality, process them to extract their exchange value as oils, starches, sugars, and materials that can be used industrially for glues and plastics, reconstitute some of those ingredients by adding certain readily identifiable vitamins and minerals—and voila! It serves as food. But it ignores the complex nuances of human digestion, and does so tragically in light of the misery and disease propagated by the “American diet.”

## ORGANISM PLUS

*Darwin proposed a theory of natural selection and evolution in which the unit of survival was either the family line or the species or subspecies or something of the sort. But today it is quite obvious that this is not the unit of survival in the real biological world. The unit of survival is organism plus environment. We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself.*

—Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*

Bateson made this point in a 1969 lecture he called “Pathologies of Epistemology.” Any perceptual or intellectual separation between myself and the environment that sustains me is a grave epistemological mistake



that produces fraudulent and misleading categories. Earlier I defined the territory as the matrix in which all the scales of our existence come together to sustain (or undermine) life. The expanded unit of survival—organism plus environment—may serve as another way of conceiving the territory.

The ongoing question is how to redefine the territory in a way that encompasses our interdependence. It entails a deep study of the environment itself: an inquiry into the joints and ligaments between organisms, an inquiry into the processes that unify us. The question is how to grapple not only with the concrete attributes of these relations, but also with the constitutive abstractions. It is tempting to conflate the territory with the intimate and the local scales because of their immediacy, but then we have omitted all the ways that we participate in the larger scales of our existence: the national, the continental, and the global. The question is how to identify our roles within all the scales, which have a tendency toward abstraction. How shall we grasp the abstract in the concrete and the concrete in the abstract?

Developing the concept of a comprehensive phenomenon he calls “mind,” Bateson frames relations of the concrete and the abstract as “eco-mental systems.” In the same lecture he elaborates:

*When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise “What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,” you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.*

In the end, the question is how to reterritorialize in ways that restore a coherent understanding of the values and detriments inherent in our practices. How do we constitute a territory that acknowledges the augmentation of ourselves by our environment? And then, how do we care for that territory? How do we constitute a territory that bears the marks of caring instead of the marks of wanton exploitation that we see all around us?

## SITE/NONSITE

*Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories.*

—Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement,” *Artforum*, October 1972

I like this quote for reasons I will explain in a series of detours. I found this statement while searching for a different statement by Smithson. In my original, misremembered, citational destination, Smithson observes that

because the artist is not in control of the value of the artwork, the artist is performing alienated labor. This idea has provoked me since I encountered it some twenty years ago. If we look at the artist as one who contests presumed values, isn't it a contradiction to posit her as alienated from the value of her own labor? Do we confuse a specific quantifiable value with meaning? In other words, if artists are not adequately in control of the monetary value of their work, don't they at least have some agency in determining notions of value in the field of meaning?

The story of artists trying to sort this out unfolds over many decades, to the point where many of us aspire to practice an intricate, processual, and research-motivated version of art that resists evaluation by the prescriptive team of institutions and markets. The French artist Francois Deck talks about working in the moment "before value."<sup>3</sup> To me this means deferring that supposed endpoint of all efforts in our culture—the point where value is conferred and, conforming to the logic of capitalism, can be separated from vital activities in order to be circulated monetarily or culturally. This is the force of alienation that potentially ambushes our every endeavor. I've come to see Continental Drift as a project inviting me to continually suspend the moment of value. I pursue it as a way to open up intense and problematic spaces of perception, or, to operate in the moment *before value*: an extended moment in which exploration of the territory connects me to vital and urgent questions about our collective existence.

Since my ruminations began, I have found the Smithson reference I was looking for:

*The artist sits in his solitude, knocks out his paintings, assembles them, then waits for someone to confer the value, some external source. The artist isn't in control of his own value.*<sup>4</sup>

Here I think Smithson is referring to value as an amalgam of monetary equivalence, institutional validation, and value-laden meanings. The artist's isolation under conventional conditions of production denies her agency in the determination of value. The ability to approximate the value of one's own work, artistic or otherwise, is what opens the possibility to affect the fundamental values and priorities of collective life. Indeed, in the same passage Smithson goes on to say,

*. . . art is supposed to be on some eternal plane, free from the experiences of the world, and I'm more interested in those experiences, not as a refutation of art, but as art as part of that experience, or interwoven, in other words, all these factors come into it.*

The desire to interweave art with experiences beyond art's normative province is a desire to escape fraudulent categories. Separating the practice of art from other experiences of the world is tantamount to separating the organism from its environment, an epistemological move that drives us into pathogenic quarantines. Art is not the only "profession" that forces its practitioners into positions catastrophically isolated from broader experiences of the world. Positions we must call fraudulent, as they perpetuate the misconception that we can separate the circulation of value from processes that connect us to each other and the earth.

The organization of knowledge into disciplines has accomplished dazzling things. But the deforming of disciplinary investigation into careerism inhibits access to the comprehensive perspectives so urgently needed as we confront unprecedented social and ecological dilemmas. Disciplinary foundations can still be productive, but only if we develop the means to build connections between them.

The process we call Continental Drift is an attempt to penetrate disciplinary boundaries. I am an artist pursuing a collective form of self-education about the forces of production and consumption that shape our present and future—forces decidedly outside the traditional prospectus of art. Most significantly, anyone can do this. Art does not have to be the starting place. In fact, the idea is that anyone can and should step beyond their prescribed discipline or profession to walk paths that don't yet exist, paths of connection. It doesn't require any particular specialized knowledge or expertise, only the willingness to make a sort of *dérive* in the field of knowledge.