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Randeurive number one: Iowa City to Hills

Christopher A. Pickett
University of Iowa

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RANDEURIVE NUMBER ONE:
IOWA CITY TO HILLS

by

Christopher A Pickett

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Sarah Kanouse

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Christopher A Pickett

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for Master of Arts
degree in Art at
the May 2012 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Sarah Kanouse, Thesis Supervisor

_____
Rachel Williams

_____
Steve McGuire

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The "randeurive" (pronounced: ran-deu-reave) is a research strategy that very loosely fuses elements from the long-distance cycling sport of rantdonneuring with the Situationist concept of dérive.

In randonneuring, cyclists attempt to complete routes of 200km or more in a given time period, stopping in at check points every so often. The dérive was developed by Situationist theorists like Guy Debord as an unplanned journey through urban spaces, allowing the aesthetics, geography and architecture of the city to guide the subject. Through the dérive it was thought that one could map out the psychogeography of the spaces one experienced, usually resulting in aesthetic ephemera and artifacts.

Like a randonneur the randeurive uses a bicycle in order to engage in long-distance travel, allowing us to get outside of our immediate surroundings and broaden our view of psychogeography and constructed landscapes. Like the dérive the original journey was unplanned and guided solely by geography and architecture. But unlike both of the source concepts, the randeurive is also informed by background histories and analysis about the spaces that form the route that are researched after the initial trip. What you hold in your hand is documentation, history, and an attempt at analysis of the roads, highways, and spaces in and between Iowa City and Hills as experienced by bicycle.

I use the randeurive as a research methodology in order to retrace and de-scribe[1] these spaces, as well as the technical objects, people and social relations that fill them. Madeleine Akrich argues that technical objects are designed in order to affect and discipline the way people act, behave, and move – as such, objects can be read as scripts

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1 Akrich, Madeleine, 1992. "The De-Scription of Technical Objects" *Shaping Technology / Building Society*. Ed. Bijker and Law. Cambridge: MIT. pp. 205 – 224.

to be followed with designers and engineers as their playwrights. De-scription, for Akrich is an “inventory and analysis of the mechanisms” of these scripts as well as how they are acted out, or not, by those who they are meant for.

Akrich's arguments are not so far off from the Situationist notions of psychogeography, which assert that the geography of a city (composed of natural formation, technologies, architectures, flows of humans and non-humans) has an affective quality that influences our bodies and the way we move with them. One difference between the methodologies of de-scription and of the dérive is that the former is more analytic, the method of a sociologist interested in the relations of others. The latter is almost entirely experiential, the method of individuals interested in the relations in which they are enmeshed on the level of the body.

Through the randeurive I combine both methodologies into one that takes into account personal and bodily experience as well as history, popular discourses, and some specificities of the spaces and technical objects I interact with.

CHAPTER II – STARTING OUT / TIME TRAVELS

My randeurive starts in the parking lot of the University of Iowa's Studio Arts campus, formerly a Menards -- a big-box hardware and home improvement store. I am on an 8-speed commuter bike that I built in the spring. It is now fall and the weather is crisp and cool. My bicycle is heavy but rides easily and smoothly. I head out on the road out of the parking lot which forks and snakes to the north and south. The two short paths here sharply re-conjoin into a short drive that leads me east, crosses Iowa State highway 1 and then deposits me onto Sunset Street.

I am on the edge of University Heights, a largely residential incorporated city within Iowa City proper. Before the 1920's when UI began to spread westward over the river, University Heights was a small farming community known as West Lucas Township. In the early 1920's Lee and George Koser, middle children in a short-lived Iowa City area dynasty[2], began buying and developing land, predicting the expansion of the University and of Iowa City, which followed. University Heights developed from its official establishment in 1925 to 1960, when it was totally surrounded by Iowa City and then incorporated.

As I pedal through the first leg of our route we are able to observe a narrative of development and automobility that unfolds before us, if only in reverse. The story is told through the houses and streets themselves. As I experience it: post-war suburban tract houses with large, fully integrated garages featured at the front line the wide, smooth Sunset Street. As travel west along this road, I keep turning over in my head: "Menards à

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2 Hibbs, Bob "Ed Koser – Iowa City's Fabulous 150." *Iowa City Press-Citizen,* May 10, 2010. Accessed November 2011. http://www.press-citizen-media.com/150/koser.html

Highway à Suburbs à Highway à Menards…" Is it a coincidence that a big-box home improvement store's parking lot should practically collapse into the highway and suburban streets?

As I turn right on Benton Street the road begins to narrow as I move past the apartment buildings nearer to Sunset and approach the Benton Street hill. The road on Benton Street, first developed as a dirt road in the late 1800's and later paved in 1953, is not as smooth and not as open as on Sunset. The driveways to the houses lining the road on the right, and to Roosevelt Elementary school on the left are a bit of a sharper turn and don't bleed as quickly into the street itself as the drives on Sunset. To me, the entry points to the places along the street don't seem as generous in size. They don't accommodate access for multiple cars quite as easily as the more immediately recognizable suburban homes along Sunset do.

While Benton Street was paved with the automobile in mind[3], the space and its development is not so totally dictated by the spatial demands of auto traffic due, in part, to its specific geography – a long, steep hill, originally dropping down into the Iowa River. But it is also less dictated by automobile traffic because at the time it was built, there were less cars on the road. Sunset, on the other hand, came into being during a time when cars were becoming more common and auto traffic heavier. None the less I am aware, the whole four-fifths of a mile down the hill, of the difference between my speed and the speed of the cars in front of and behind me. I am afraid of the narrow road and the cars climbing up it in the opposite direction. I see why the streets are wider elsewhere.

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3 "Transportation" *Iowa City Planning and Community Development,* January 28, 2009. Accessed November 2011. http://www.icgov.org/default/?id=1443

My spatial time traveling comes to an end as the ground levels out at the bottom of the hill and I come up to the Benton Street Bridge. This is not the first bridge to span this particular spot of the Iowa River. The first structure to be built here was designed in 1947 by Edward L. Ashton, a university engineer. The technique that Ashton chose for this bridge was called 'all-welded' construction and was rarely used in the United States, though it had been pioneered in Germany and France twenty years earlier. The all-welded bridge was cheaper than other steel construction processes, which involved the use of rivets and extra material, and could be easily maintained and repaired. In the late 1940's the two-lane steel bridge made sense for the amount of auto traffic that crossed the river here. In 1989, however, the original bridge was demolished and replaced with the wider, four-lane rebar-and-concrete construction that we are passing over now. As the auto-mobile population grows, spaces are made to conform to the spatial and practical demands of the car.

The changes to construction style, of streets, bridges and houses, is of course pragmatic and addresses the reality of a growing use of automobiles. But how do these spaces also function ideologically and economically? These spaces not only meet and predict the demands of a growing auto-mobile population – they also act to facilitate and encourage the exponential increase of the use of the car.

CHAPTER III – TRAILS / CHANNELS / CONFLUENCES

The Benton Street Bridge crosses the Iowa River and ends, shifting to a wide curve that leads me to the right. In front of me is the former Iowa City Sewage Treatment Works building, damaged when the river flooded in 2008. I head forward, towards the Sewage Treatment Works and leave Benton Street as it leads off to my left. To the right and left, I see an entrance to the Iowa River Corridor trail, a walking and cycling trail that weaves all the way from the north side of Iowa City to the South side, and the skeleton of a former railroad grade, intersecting the paved trail. I take a left down the trail. The rail grade runs to our left, stopping in a dead end at the back of some shopping centers along Gilbert Street. It is intersections like this that show us Iowa City's early development as railroad town, before the university and before the car.

I continue down the trail which curves and winds at a shallow grade upward. I come upon the Iowa River, in front of me, and State Highway 1, above me. This time, I'm further north on the highway than when I left the Studio Arts parking lot. The highway crosses over the river as a low bridge. There is just enough room for the path that I am on to squeeze under this bridge as well. I now follow the trail as it curves left along the side of the river. My way is lined with thin, young trees on either side that barely veil my view from the auto and construction yards to my left and industrial buildings to my right that also line the bank of the river.

Paved trails such as this one perform a couple of functions that are more or less directly felt or seen while on the route. First, they allow people a safe and comfortable space to walk and go cycling. They also allow us to take in a little bit of nature – or of the outdoors, at least – that isn't so far removed from the city. This is something that many

people want and that is arguably needed because city streets and roadways, including their adjacent sidewalks, are so thoroughly dominated by auto traffic visually, audibly, and physically.

Another function of such trails, however, is an effective relocating away of modes of transportation other than the car from spaces like streets and highways where the quick flow of automobile traffic continues its dominance. In University Heights and on Benton Street, auto-mobile spaces facilitate and encourage cars while discouraging other forms of transportation. If I wanted to, I could not walk in the street. I would die or, in the least, block auto-traffic, which seems to demand speed. I can ride my bike in the street but am constantly left-hooked, a favorite tactic of passive aggressive car-drivers who want me to know they're faster than I am. Where are these forms of transport allowed or made to exist? How can the city / county / state satisfy people who either choose to, or need to, walk or ride their bike, all without disrupting auto traffic?

Near the end of the IRC I come, again, to a bridge – a road over the trail. The pathway turns sharply to the left and I climb the embankment and then the trail turns to the right, depositing me onto a sidewalk. The distinction between 'trail' and 'sidewalk' is difficult to see at this intersection. They are made of the same stuff, materially, and it seems that were laid at around the same time. The sidewalk that I now travel on is a continuation of the IRC trail, which does not actually end until Old Highway 218, a little ways before me now. But the similarity to a sidewalk is undeniable, considering the concrete, the adjacency to the road, the boundary lines of sod grass on either side.

Indeed, my trail was always a sidewalk, both in composition and in function. Sidewalks present an alternative to the road while being adjacent to it. They present a

space that is certainly safer than the road for pedestrians and even cyclists, but here we have to examine why this is and why the car has come to dominate the road, despite its making necessary alternative routes by way of its speed, danger and spatial domination.

CHAPTER IV – SHIFTING HIGHWAYS

At the end of the Iowa River Corridor Trail I turn left onto Old Highway 218. Running from Keokuk, Iowa to the Minnesota border, the highway was designated in 1926. Construction continued on the original route until 1932, when the project was taken up by the WPA. Realignments and additions added more towns and cities to the route, shortened the distance between destinations, and widened the highway since the second half of the 20th century to the present.

I am riding south on what is called Old Highway 218, even though it is relatively new, having been opened in just 1983 as a part of a "realignment" project. In a realignment project the state will build a new section of highway and have it connect at beginning and end to the old highway. The older sections that have been 'realigned' don't actually go anywhere. They become service or county roads. From 218's original construction until 1981 there were three similar changes, one in 1938, one in 1952 and one in 1957. Then starting in the 1980's, highway construction in Iowa boomed. There were twenty-eight adjustments and additions to Highway 218 alone between 1981 and 2006, resulting in the highway being completely re-routed to the expressway that can be seen on our right as I follow the now 'old' route.

There are actually several "Old Highway 218's" in Iowa, all of which are small segments of road that were once connected to the main route but since have been disconnected and re-designated. In Johnson County, alone, there are four such spaces. Of course, these roads are not really disconnected from anything – they still exist, you can still get to them and you can still drive or ride your bike on them. The roads remain but the highway itself – the idea of Highway 218 – has moved.

The fact that the highway is a fluid and mobile entity is significant. It attests to the dominance and influence of automobility over space and how we move through it. Specifically, 218's change from highway to expressway speaks to the rapid increase in speed and connectivity between spaces made necessary by auto-mobile capital. With the proliferation of roads left behind from the highway build/realign/re-designate/build process and with the increased speed afforded by building more expressways, capital is able to flow from one metropolitan center to another with more and more ease, always faster and faster. Time and space become compressed[4].

The mobility of workers is increased and people live in one place while working in another. While this opens up jobs for people, it also necessitates car travel. The ability to travel long distances quickly changes the perceived time and distance, the durée[5], between places, shortening it. The daily experience of traveling at a fast pace over distances and the need of long distance travel ensures the continued production of cars as well as the continued production and shifting of the highways that facilitate them.

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4 Harvey, David, 1989. *The Condition of Post-Modernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 284 – 307.

5 Bergson, Henri. 1999. *An Introduction to Metaphysics.* Indianapolis: Hackett. pp. 12.

CHAPTER V – BLOCKAGES / FLOWS

Travelling south on Old Highway 218, I turn right into a small, gravel parking lot. I enjoy riding on gravel and do so at any chance I get. It gives me a fleeting feeling of being rugged and riding in a time before roads were paved. I ride through the lot up to a large brown and yellow sign that reads RYERSON'S WOODS. This is an Iowa City park that was designated in 1985. The forty acres of mature oak forest was preserved by dairy farmers, the Ryersons, in the first half of the 20th century. The family fenced off the woods in order to protect them against the grazing cows from other near-by farms.

In 1982, the State of Iowa had plans to build the new link of Highway 218 through the informal preservation. Local property owners around the woods successfully prevented this from happening by presenting evidence to state planners and officials that the woods contained Meskwaki burial grounds. Because of this, the property owners argued that the woods held an important part of the areas cultural heritage. The park is also home to diverse and rare flora such as wild ferns, sasparilla and spikenard plants. In recent years, there has been a push from conservationists and the Iowa City city council to turn the site into a state preserve in order to protect Iowa's natural heritage as well[6].

The highway was not paved straight through the park. Instead, it has been built up to effectively surround it. The borders of the woods are marked by Old Highway 218 and the Highway 218 expressway on the west and east, respectively. The park is an odd island where narratives of wilderness and heritage are fixed while a more auto-mobile world flows around it.

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6 "Iowa City wants park to be designated a state preserve" *The Gazette Online,* July 18, 2011. Accessed November 2011. http://thegazette.com/2011/07/18/iowa-city-wants-park-to-be-designated-a-state-preserve/

I get off of my bicycle and I lock it to a bench. I start to walk the dirt trail that winds through the park. It is an easy climb up to the middle of the trail where there is a 'scenic overlook,' a tall platform made of hardware store lumber. I look down from the top into an empty creek bed filled with dirt and dead leaves.

It would probably be a stretch to call this park a site of resistance to the development of the highway since the residents of the area didn't necessarily rally against the construction work itself, but the original route it was to take. Similarly to paved trails, like the IRC, there is a demand for space that is set aside from the effects of automobility and development. This temporary resistance and demand for alternative spaces is centered in places like the trail and the park – like Ryerson's Woods itself, it exists as an island in a sea of automobility. How are the politics and discourses deployed in Ryerson's Woods out beyond its boundaries? Can highways be natural spaces? Can roads be fragile ecosystems?

CHAPTER VI – PARALLELS

As I leave Ryerson's Woods, I head straight across the highway onto Oak Crest Hill Road SE. Oak Crest Hill Road is another former US Highway 218 and follows the expressway as it curves south / south-east to Hills, Iowa. The road follows another route, that of a rail line that terminates in Hills. I can see the rail on my left for most of the ride into Hills until it moves further south-east, away from the road.

This particular stretch of rail was originally built by the Chicago Rock Island and Pacific Railway in the 1880's and extended south from Iowa City the seven miles to Hills. In 1980 the line was sold to the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City Railway. CRANDIC still operates the Iowa City-to-Hills line today as a freight line that carries the corn grown in the farms around Hills to Iowa City and then further north to Cedar Rapids. From there the commodity will be taken by train to the Archer Daniels Midland plant. There, the corn will be fractioned off into any number of corn derivatives, perhaps high fructose corn syrup, or shipped off to farms in the United States or elsewhere in North and South America as animal feed.

When some of the first railways were being built for freight and human transport in France and in Britain in the early 1800's, it was easier and more cost-efficient to simply build over existing roads instead of designing all new routes between metropolitan centers. As noted by contemporary accounts at the time other forms of transportation – horses, carts and feet – were therefore effectively eliminated as options for travel[7]. The spaces of known routes were taken over by the rail. Trains continued to proliferate and

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7 Schivelbusch, Wolfgang, 1987. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Berkeley: University of California.

dominate travel until the 1870's when bicycles were mass produced and introduced to the market.

Beginning in the 20th century, the popularity of the train for personal transportation declined significantly with the introduction of the automobile. People had long complained of feeling like parcels when traveling by train, as though they had no choice or agency for choosing where and when they travelled or how quickly they would go. Railway travel was owned by a few companies that set routes, speed and even the local time.

Possibly following Europe's lead from a century earlier, many early auto routes in the United States, like the one I am pedaling along now, were built adjacent and parallel to many rail lines. Rail lines must be smooth and relatively flat in order for the trains to run as efficiently as possible. On top of this, the rail lines were pre-established routes into many cities and towns that early auto road planners could follow almost directly. And so in a reverse move, the road – the auto road – eliminated the train as a viable option for personal transportation by the 1950's. The Cedar Rapids and Iowa City railway system was an interurban commuter line that sometimes would haul freight until 1953 when it was forced to cut its commuter program and become all-freight.

The train was the first modern transporatation technology and was able to travel long distances in shorter amounts of time than before imaginable. But this system proved to be a rigid time-space ordering device that disciplined peoples daily lives according to the schedules of a few national and regional monopolies[8]. White men who could afford a bicycle used it as a way of dis-embedding themselves from the grip of the railroad barons, gaining back their sense of autonomy while maintaining the their velocity.

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8 Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity. pp. 20.

Cyclists in Europe and the United States began lobbying their governments for paved and gravel routes to replace the roads that had been taken over by rails earlier in the 19th century[9]. Many of these cyclists were from upper-middle class backgrounds and had ties in city and regional government and many cyclotouriste roads were built.

The automobile was also presented by manufacturers and advertisers as another way for people to dis-embed themselves from not only the railroad time tables, but also exposure to the weather, physical exertion and all the other inconveniences of the bicycle. Auto ways were quickly built over cyclotouriste routes and directly next to train grades in the first part of the 20th century. The complex assembly of highways and roads was built up around these.

While individuals have become dis-embedded from local travel at slow speeds and the monopoly of the rails, the car-driver is re-embedded into a time-space ordering system that demands speed, distance, and constant movement – a system of automobility[10]. Am I any more autonomous by car? Am I any more autonomous by bike?

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9 Furness, Zachary. 2010. *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

10 Beckmann, Jorg. 2000. "Automobility – a social problem and theoretical concept." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space Vol. 19*. Ed. Elden. London: Pion.

CHAPTER VII – WHERE TOWN AND COUNTRY MEET

Turning left at County Road F62 I enter Hills. Established in 1906, Hills was and still is a railroad town. Huge grain silos that feed corn into freight trains sit along F62, the towns main street, right along side the Hills Bank and Trust Co., the Hills Community Center and Hills Elementary School. The city's motto is "Where Town and Country Meet."

During the early years of France's railway, many commentators noted how their country seemed to be shrinking due to the increasing speed of travel by way of rail – an example of time-space compression. But while the country and the spaces between cities were getting smaller, in many ways the city of Paris was growing. Most railways started in Paris and expanded outward into the countryside to other metropolitan areas. Like Britain and the United States, a very small number of companies controlled the rails. They were, of course, all headquartered in Paris. As such, the metropolis effectively "grew" to incorporate nearly the whole of France through the control of space and how people could travel through it.

Cedar Rapids is not Paris. It is however a center for industry in Eastern Iowa, just as Iowa City has come to be seen as a center for culture in the area. The CRANDIC railway line connects Hills to Cedar Rapids and every other stop on the rest of the rail. But it also connects Hills to an even larger system by way of some of CRANDIC's largest customers, including Archer Daniels Midland and Cargill. These companies use the railway to ship the commodity foodstuffs like corn and other grains that they buy from the fields around Hills to their factories and processors in Cedar Rapids.

The CRANDIC railway line terminates just south of Hills, truly making the city a point at which ‘town’ and ‘country’ meet. There are many places that, like Hills, straddle the border of this binary – enough, in fact, to make the separation between the metropole and 'the farm' or 'countryside' arbitrary. But Hills is a place where this binary is acknowledged and played out. It is the last stop on the line, the final station and outpost before being hitting what is thought of as open country, which holds the promise of freedom.

Of course, beyond the rail line there is no open country. There are grids of roads, corn and soybean fields, housing developments, and towns like Hills. All of these places are connected in numerous ways, physically and not. By train, by car, and by bicycle I can move through and to these spaces but I am never *not* deeply enmeshed within a system of relations and domination.

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