

SPECIAL SECTION

HALF HERO, HALF IDIOT: THE HITCHHIKER AS ETHNOGRAPHER

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URBAN HITCHHIKING: WANDERING WITH OTHERS AS A RESEARCH METHOD

ABSTRACT

this essay introduces urban hitchhiking, a reflective practice of sharing a walk with strangers, and considers its relevance for research and artistic practice. Drawing from ethnography, psychogeography and performance studies, we frame urban hitchhiking as a score that has ethnographic potential akin to the ethnographic installation (Hartblay 2017) for exploring the complex relationships between people and cityscapes. We demonstrate this with the help of our own accounts of Urban Hitchhiking as two artists who developed the concept and a researcher who practiced it. The essay summarises four perspectives that emerged from our findings: spatiality, performativity, gender, and hospitality. It concludes that the key value of urban hitchhiking lies in its potential to create a setting that we define as an empathetic drift, which turns random encounters into shared acts of trust through which a variety of anthropological questions can be explored.

INTRODUCTION¹

We would like to introduce you to urban hitchhiking. The score is fairly simple: take a sign that says, 'May I walk with you for a while?' Place yourself on a pedestrian route (Figure 1). Stand somewhere along that path, raise your thumb and search for eye contact with people who are passing. Wait until someone approaches you and then let the journey begin. Often the

person who offers you a lift will ask what this is about. We tend to say that this is an experiment, that we are trying out what happens when we encounter a stranger. But urban hitchhiking is more than a talk with a stranger. It is a drift in city space guided by interaction with another person, a constructed situation where the randomness of encounter confronts the intimacy of the interaction. Sometimes the drift leads to shopping for a thimble or discussing what it



Figure 1. Hitchhiker about to get a ride. Photo by L. Jäntti.

means to encounter someone, and sometimes to a brief walk to a bus stop or an overnight stay. It is a challenge both for the Hitchhiker and for the person who accepts the invitation, an act of trust and an intervention into the regular course of urban life.

Urban Hitchhiking was developed by Tuuli Malla and Lauri Jäntti during several iterations of their artistic experiments. The third author, Anna Kholina, practiced Urban Hitchhiking in her own research after learning about the practice from Malla and Jäntti. The aim of the article is to introduce the practice of urban hitchhiking and consider its relevance for research and artistic practices that tap into the complexities of human nature and contemporary urban life. We examine urban hitchhiking through the lens of psychogeography and ethnography, and later through our own accounts of doing it. What is the value of this practice? What kind of questions can it answer? What role does a performative aspect play and how is it manifested in the results? By analysing our own accounts and experiences, we frame urban hitchhiking as a performative score in line with the ethnographic installation (Hartblay 2017),

as a prism through which a variety of themes can be explored. We present four of these themes: spatiality, performativity, gender, and hospitality, and conclude by highlighting the value of wandering with others that we define as empathetic drifting.

BACKGROUND

Urban Hitchhiking is a way to engage with people while moving together in space. It is based on walking as an activity that connects spatial settings and human routines in a form of a dialogue, although it is not restricted to walking and may include other forms of movement or stillness according to the course of events. Walking is itself a practice that produces particular relationships with the environment (de Certeau 1984; Ingold 2011; Solnit 2000) which facilitate sensing and learning about spaces, discovering and transforming the city, mutually constituting bodies and landscapes, and constructing meanings in human-environment relationships (Pinder 2011; Middleton 2010). Walking is both an appropriation and an exploration, a way to connect time and space

(Edensor 2010) and a mode of experiencing place (Wunderlich 2008).

At the same time, urban hitchhiking is a very specific form of walking. First of all, the hitchhiker makes herself visible and available for a shared walk by holding out a raised thumb as a sign and by making an eye-contact. Secondly, the practice takes place only if another person volunteers to take part and lead the way. Thirdly, the walk is mostly a conversation. Finally, the route of the walk is not restricted in advance in time and space, rather, it is a form of a drift where the hitchhiker follows the directions of the participant and actively immerses herself in the situation and the lifeworld of the other. Based on this description, urban hitchhiking is related both to the psychogeographic practice of *dérive* and the walking interviews used in ethnography. The following section will draw the parallels between the above mentioned practices and urban hitchhiking, outlining the distinctive qualities and the potential of the latter.

URBAN HITCHHIKING AND THE DÉRIVE

The *dérive* or drifting is ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’ (Debord 1963) used by The International Situationists’ movement to confront ‘the society of the spectacle’ (Bassett 2004: 401) in which commodities and consumption dominate the city. It is ‘a mode of experimental behaviour’ (McDonough 2004: 215) based on a sensibility towards the changing atmospheres of the space and the urban landscape: ‘one should abandon oneself to the attractions of the terrain and the encounters one finds there’ (Debord 1963). In practice, it can mean taking a walk in Paris with a map of Rome or using any pre-defined principles to randomise the course of the journey and become more sensitive to the mundane

cityscape. This technique is a part of what the Situationists called ‘a psychogeography’—a study of the effects that the geographical environment has on the affective responses of the individual.

Urban Hitchhiking presents a form of drifting wherein random encounters define the course of the journey and construct the situations that uncover the narratives and personal stories embedded in the urban realm. Like the *dérive*, it helps identify the hidden borders, affectual contours, and sensual flows of the city space. The hitchhiker notices these changes through a sense of intimacy in the moment of sharing a memory with a stranger or in the act of buying groceries together, while entering someone’s home or a private car. Even though urban hitchhiking does not have a critical political agenda as its foundation, it challenges society by provoking the non-scripted behaviour of engaging in a stranger’s life.

Although perceived as a solo activity, early *dérives* were done in groups of two or three people and Debord advocated wandering for a lengthy amount of time in order to create a true dispersal (Wilcox, Palassio and Dovercourt 2002: 96). The participants of the *dérive* should share political, aesthetic, and philosophical views to cross-check their impressions and arrive at more objective conclusions (Macauley 2000: 31; Wood 2010: 187). This is different from urban hitchhiking in which the participants do not necessarily share common views and goals (Lavolette 2017) and there is no emphasis on coming to any specific conclusions. As the participants of urban hitchhiking change, new views, routes, and experiences emerge, turning the hitchhiker’s experience into a collage of shared journeys led by encounters with strangers.

There are other differences as well. The Situationists preferred ghettos and slums (Bassett 2004: 402), while for a hitchhiker the

emphasis is on the quality of the encounters and the level of openness of strangers rather than their attribution to a certain social class. Finally, whereas practitioners of *dérive* are looking outwards, the starting position of urban hitchhiking places the gaze on the person who is Hitchhiking, echoing the critique of the tradition of *dérive's* being rooted in the male gaze (Bridger 2013). The presence of the hitchhiker in the city space, a stranger who is waiting to be interacted with, is the opposite of the anonymous view behind the camera that is associated with the male gaze. Being exposed is an essential part of urban hitchhiking and it renders the gender imbalances visible, as we will demonstrate in the later section. Even when the walk has started, the hitchhiker is still exposed: a sign or an unusual combination of people walking together draws the attention of passers-by.

URBAN HITCHHIKING AND THE WALKING INTERVIEW

Ethnography has a long-standing tradition of methods based on movement through space. Walking interviews create a natural setting for studying interlocutors' everyday routines (Kusenbach 2003: 464), generating rich data 'because interviewees are prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment and are less likely to try and give the "right" answer' (Evans and Jones 2011: 849). Known as a go-along, a method of walking together with the interviewee shares many similarities with urban hitchhiking: 'When conducting go-alongs, fieldworkers accompany individual informants on their "natural" outings, and—through asking questions, listening and observing—actively explore their subjects' stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment.'

(ibid.: 463). However, there are several qualities that differentiate the two practices.

In the same way as a person on a *dérive*, the ethnographer usually prefers to remain unnoticeable, but for an urban hitchhiker with a sign and a raised thumb, it is difficult to stay incognito. Moreover, urban hitchhiking highlights the initial strangeness of approaching a stranger with the intention of going along with them. Although the walk itself may resemble a go-along interview, the act of inviting people's company has a strong performative dimension that emphasises intruding into the course of someone's daily routines. Yet the same happens when an ethnographer rigorously follows his informants' practices, making notes and jottings. The artificiality of urban hitchhiking as a behaviour plays an important role as it renders the Hitchhiker the Other in relation to those whose behaviour does not attract attention. Hitchhikers purposefully stand out from the crowd with a somewhat absurd invitation, which draws attention to their initiative of encountering strangers. This otherness changes the dynamics of researcher-subject relations as the hitchhiker presents herself as the subject by being the Other, rather than adopting the role of the observing ethnographer. Perhaps even more prominent than the role of the hitchhiker's going along with a stranger is the role of a stranger's going along with the idea of social hitchhiking. Rendering oneself the Other (as a hero and idiot) exposes the hitchhiker's strange logic from first moment of encounter.

This sense of empathy and exposure while presenting oneself in an urban space echoes the idea of heroic activist anthropology outlined by Susan Sontag (1966): being honest about one's motives and being open to emotional collisions, for example when entering someone's home (Figure 2), challenges Hitchhikers to become more aware of their presence and their



*Figure 2 & 3. Photographs from a Hitchhiker's visits to domestic spaces: allotment (left) & home (right).
By L. Jäntti*

responsibility for the people with whom they share the journey. Another difference between ethnography and urban hitchhiking concerns the scope of people included in the practice. In certain forms of urban ethnography, the focus is often on the deviants, outcast groups, and minorities (Suttles 1976: 1). Urban hitchhiking does not aim at reaching specific types of people although it is always connected to the particular space where the journey unfolds. Documenting urban hitchhiking experiments allowed Jäntti and Malla understand that the randomness of encounters allowed them to reach a wide spectrum of participants in terms of age, gender, and social status, although they did not specifically target that variety.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INSTALLATION

Not exactly a drift or an ethnography, urban hitchhiking borrows the features of both practices. Its performative aspect differentiates it from traditional research practices and brings it closer to art. To avoid labelling it as an artistic or a research practice, we frame urban hitchhiking as a practice akin to the

ethnographic installation (Hartblay 2017), a term elaborated by Cassandra Hartblay to refer to a 'a generative part of a dialogic practice of ethnographic knowledge production' (2017: 1), highlighting that the research process itself is a cultural performance.

The concept of ethnographic installation, understood as a way of engaging with contemporary art practice to explore an ethnographic problem, reflects the process of how urban hitchhiking came into being. In 2015, it emerged out of a conversation Lauri Jäntti had with someone he bumped into by chance. Right after the conversation, Jäntti tried out pedestrian hitchhiking; this did not lead into getting a lift in the first fifteen minutes as he was holding his thumb up by the entrance to Stockmann department store in central Helsinki. A sign was later developed during several stages of experimentation and workshops in St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Lappeenranta, Tartu, and Prague. Ethnographic problems in the beginning were posed by the strangeness of the activity and the goal of breaking the divide between people who do not know each other. Later, other research perspectives were added, such as the invisible borders between public and private space in cities.

Some of the most well-known pieces of performance art based on following strangers are Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) and Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* (Jeffries 2009), both based on a secretive task that carries its poetry in a one-way relationship that contains a risk of the 'stalker' being discovered. In *#TAKEMEANYWHERE* by LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner (Coldwell 2016) the stalker situation was reversed as the artists relied on someone to find them based on their coordinates, posted online, and take them anywhere from there.

Framing urban hitchhiking in line with the ethnographic installation (Hartblay 2017) avoids the dualistic distinction of art versus research in our work: 'Artistic practice can become not only an "output" for ethnography, but also a mode of research' (ibid.: 9). It also encourages a focus on the dialogic and embodied knowledge that is produced through this practice, taking dual perspectives and experiences into account: those of the participant and the hitchhiker. In the following section we present our own accounts of practicing urban hitchhiking in order to discuss how an ethnographic installation becomes a setting to explore the complex relations between people and urban space.

PRACTICING URBAN HITCHHIKING

There was a lot of divergence in how we practiced urban hitchhiking. We asked ourselves different questions and walked with a different number of people for varied durations of time in different spatial settings. When we set out to analyse our accounts, the themes emerging from them had very little overlap. That and the later comments of our colleagues made us think that urban hitchhiking is not a method with clearly defined inputs and results, but a setting through which different research and artistic perspectives

can be explored. Below we present four of these perspectives and our findings.

1. SPATIALITY

Studying the invisible structure of urban space is the core question of this perspective. Urban Hitchhiking allows the researcher(s) to map the experiences of both the Hitchhiker and the participant in relation to the physical environment, and to analyse the rhythms, meanings, and practices that define the boundaries of private and public spaces. This perspective resembles psychogeography as it makes the Hitchhiker aware of the invisible boundaries which divide the urban fabric.

Anna Kholina experimented with Urban Hitchhiking in spring 2017 to learn more about part of a university campus which included a variety of public areas that were devoid of public life. Physically, the space does not have clear boundaries or restriction signs, meaning that a newcomer does not know where the study area ends and the student village starts. By hitchhiking with the students, Kholina wanted to understand how the public space was structured and how homogenous it was in different parts of the campus. One of her accounts illustrates the process of discovering the hidden boundaries of the public space:

I was standing on one of the small pedestrian roads some fifty metres away from the University building when a student agreed to give me a ride. As we talked, I learned that she was on her way home to the student village and was overall very satisfied about the campus space. She particularly stressed the presence of nature and the possibility to get away from other people as positive qualities. It resonated with the nature of her studies:

as an engineer, she preferred concentration and solitude to buzz and interaction. I was surprised and left her on the edge of the student village, not far from the study area. But when I tried to find the next ride, I encountered a problem. Nobody was making eye contact with me and people were avoiding me to the extent of crossing the street in the opposite direction as soon as they saw a person holding a sign. Even when a dozen people exited a bus just in front of me, none of them even looked my way. I felt like an intruder who was breaking some laws or unspoken rules. It was then that I realised that I found the border between public and private space, although there was no visible change. I repeated my attempt several times before returning to the publicness, which happened to be just across the street. In less than five minutes, I was walking with a lady pushing a stroller who now accepted my eye contact.

This account illustrates how the process of interacting with people through the practice of hitchhiking rather than focusing on the physical qualities or the atmosphere of the space meant that the perceived publicness and privateness could be traced. The shift from public to private space was not explicated by hitchhike participants, but rather emerged as embodied knowledge of not being welcome in a particular location.

2. PERFORMATIVITY

The performative dimension of urban hitchhiking is subtle, more an attitude than a perspective, which is based on following, listening, and staying in the moment with the person (or people) with whom one is sharing a journey. This attitude creates a space for the

other to open up but there are many different levels of attention, depending on the encounter. The clearest element of performativity consists in the moment of standing still and waiting with a sign and a thumb. There are reactions from the people passing by which influence the hitchhiker; some look down and try to avoid the situation, but they are still in a dialogue with the hitchhiker. The performative dimension is related to the reflexivity of the artist or researcher, which meant that awareness about one's own body and the way other people react to it became another important perspective that was explored while wandering with others.

Leading urban hitchhiking workshops made Malla and Jänti realise how important embodied skills are to the hitchhiker's trip. The very fact of becoming visible through hitchhiking requires patience in the moment of waiting and allowing people to look at oneself. The experience of hitchhiking can be uncomfortable or pleasurable depending on one's own mood and expectations as well as external impulses, which are partly a response to the inner mood shining through but also related to the locality. Helsinki's fancy Töölö neighbourhood was different to the city's edgy Kallio. Töölö is an area associated with wealthy and often older inhabitants while Kallio is a former working-class neighbourhood that has been gentrified in recent years (Karhula 2015). Smaller-scale differences were noticeable when comparing Hitchhiking on a square and a street with regard to accessing flows of people to meet.

3. GENDER

In terms of unintended performativity of gender, Urban Hitchhiking made Malla consider the role of an open offer for encounter in association with being seen as a female body. Prior to Urban Hitchhiking Malla had various

experiences of drifting without thinking of the male gaze. Comments from people who approached her, though perhaps intended as compliments, revealed the tension between the assumed neutrality of following someone and the role of a young female open to invitations. The types of comments were nothing new but the position of being open in this way made it challenging to maintain the boundaries that would normally be in place. Someone asked Malla to go home with her, refusing the offer to walk together only part of the journey, while someone else asked: 'Are you selling yourself too?' In a similar vein, others warned her of possible rapists, and a journalist commented that he was surprised she did not face much sexual harassment. For Malla the encounter-led drift revealed the role of a female body in the chance journeys in a way that made her revisit the gendered aspect of the psychogeographical tradition. In fact, she saw herself as part of the lineage of psychogeographers and only came to enquire into the tradition more deeply after comments to which she was exposed during urban hitchhiking. Malla's personal view of the performance as one presenting a gender-neutral body—of not regarding her own work in terms of gender binaries (Butler 2011 [1990])—conflicted with the comments regarding her body that she received.

4. HOSPITALITY

The ease in situations where one would expect to be outside one's comfort zone became one of the most significant experiences for Malla. In hindsight these situations often seemed strange when retold to others but in the reality of Hitchhiking they had not seemed strange at all: for example, queuing for free food together with a stranger in what is colloquially known as 'the bread queue', officially Veikko and Lahja

Hursti's Charitable Association, which is often portrayed as a site of poverty (Hirvonen 2017). Queuing with a person who had agreed they could walk together was a part of the journey, a transition from familiar streets to a place she had never thought to visit before, an invitation into another social realm which in the end was surprisingly approachable. This experience of queuing around the block with someone she had never met before, among other journeys, changed Malla's perception of boundaries, social structure, and access in the city. Practicing Urban Hitchhiking re-articulates social interactions and also impacts on the hitchhikers' behaviour outside of the practice. Much as an ethnographer becomes a local (Geertz 2008 [1983]; Jeevendrampillai 2016), the urban hitchhiker starts to behave according to their hitchhiking mode of openness to encounters even when not actually hitchhiking. For example, Malla found herself talking to strangers with greater ease than before and her perception of its being hard to encounter people in Helsinki shifted. Kholina noticed that this practice shortened the period of entering the field in her research and revealed social groups she had not taken into account earlier. Interactions with strangers become the norm rather than an exception.

What became most significant in the project for Malla were sudden moments of intimacy upon hearing a story that describes a person's life. The most memorable of these consisted of the fragility in stories sharing the tragedy and beauty of a life. Even before starting urban hitchhiking, Malla had suspected a universal need to share these stories with others, even with strangers. Urban hitchhiking provides the opportunity to do so by creating a space to meet someone in the middle of the everyday: the hitchhiker, who is offering to listen. These experiences were documented in the form of a diary (Figure 4).

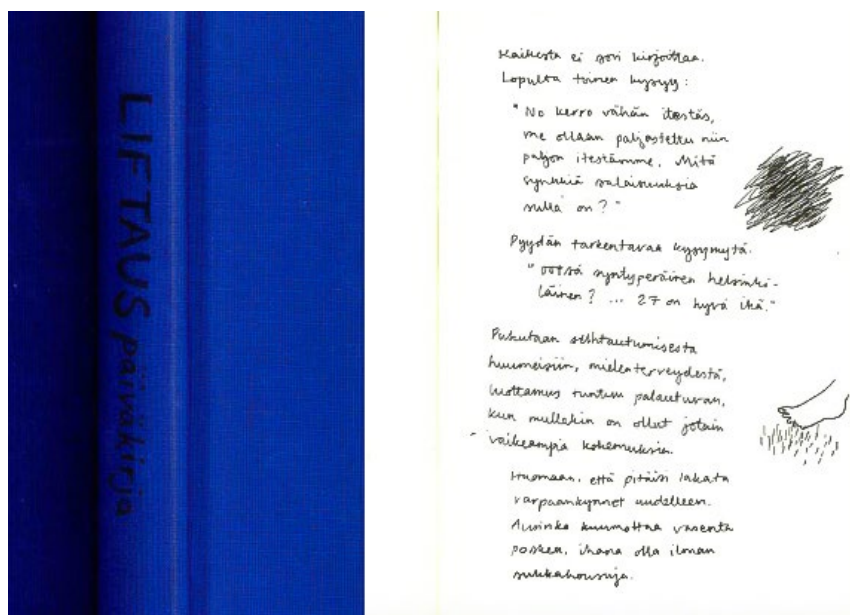


Figure 4. Tuuli Malla's Hitchhiking diary

CONCLUSION

This article considers urban hitchhiking, a practice of wandering with others, as akin to the ethnographic installation (Hartblay 2017), an activity that allows exploration of the complex relationships between people and space from the perspectives of art and research. Building on our own accounts of doing urban hitchhiking, we introduced four perspectives that reflect our interests: spatiality facilitates examination of invisible borders in the urban fabric; performativity explores the bodily skills which are needed to start a random encounter on the street; gender renders visible the imbalances between the male and female body in urban space; and hospitality highlights the difficulty and ease of establishing temporary intimacy with strangers. The common thread that unites these perspectives is that the process of knowledge production is open, dialogic, embodied, and situated in space and time. It is exactly for this reason that we posit urban

hitchhiking in relation to the ethnographic installation (Hartblay 2017) rather than as a research method or an artistic practice.

Urban hitchhiking also extends outwards from ethnography and psychogeography. The communication between the two journeys of drifting and purposeful movement creates a crossroads between two ways of walking and makes the hitchhiker's motives visible to the other person. Borrowing from both the walking interview and the *dérive*, Urban hitchhiking possesses a unique quality that turns it into a setting for exploring a variety of socio-spatial phenomena. We characterise this quality as an empathetic drift, which is a mutual, shared act of trust that emerges in a particular space and develops in time (with its failures and limitations, from which one can also learn). It is a process of mutual attuning of strangers in which the hitchhiker opens up to the world and the participant opens part of her life in response. It produces a methodological empathy towards the participant and a return of hospitality for

the Hitchhiker that tap into intimate and intangible aspects of our urban existence, such as social isolation, gender, privatisation of space, and the role of the body in breaking through the strangeness. It is a form of study which can be developed with further comparative insights.

Looking at projects of walking with strangers—*The People Walker of LA* (Carroll 2016), Rebecca Cade's performance project *Walking Holding* (2011; 2015), and, for example, Kio Stark's TED talk (2016) on the importance of talking to strangers (2016)—it seems there is an urgent need to find ways of connecting with each other. In our experience of urban hitchhiking, walking together in public space is intimate and yet offers ease: there is a shared journey and pace, being seen together while simultaneously being able to talk about things around us and not being face to face. As the setting changes, the social dynamics also shift, especially when entering a home.

The four perspectives that we outlined—spatiality, performativity, gender, and hospitality—demonstrate that urban hitchhiking as an ethnographic installation is suited to elicit first-person, embodied knowledge of Otherness in different contexts. It is a practice between art and research, performance and life: a short mutual act of trust that seems almost like a remedy to the alienation and isolation of contemporary urban dwellers. 'May I walk with you for a while?'

NOTES

- 1 We would like to thank everyone with whom we hitchhiked, those who have tried Urban Hitchhiking themselves, Sissi Korhonen for being part of developing Urban Hitchhiking, Dr. David Jeevendrampillai for support during the Hitchhiking process and for suggesting readings, as well as Francisco Martínez and Matti Eräsaari for their helpful comments on the article.

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