

During the time that I read Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, I carried the book with me everywhere in case of having a spare moment to read. Even if only going to the corner store, I persisted, thinking that the small additional load was always worth the avoidance of possible idleness or boredom. Having grown up an only child, I have learned well how to keep myself occupied. I carry a big bag. But in this particular case, *Everyday Life* never much saw the light of day. Not that I didn't read it; I just couldn't read it in public. I was embarrassed. My apologies to M. deCerteau, but the title sounds too much like a self-help book. It's incredibly silly, I know, but my ego just hasn't the resilience to publicly display a need for self-help, even if it isn't self-help.

In this way, *The Practice of Everyday Life* has taken an alternative but not inconsequential role in my daily life by its mere presence through my ins and outs of the city. And while this consciousness towards everyday practice remained deliberately obscured from my encounters with the public sphere, the caricature of carrying the text while, say, buying groceries or riding the tram creates another stratum of perception, a way of tracing these activities not only as "relational tactics" for maintaining daily life, but "artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic)".<sup>1</sup> For deCerteau, these are the points in which anyone's to-do list can become a script for dramatic narrative, where ordinary man has the greatest opportunity for mobility, if not in a direct social sense, at least in an attitudinal one. For this reason deCerteau's analyses can always be applied as a certain appropriation of life and why it is interesting to look at them with regards to culture and media production today.

First published in 1980, *L'Invention du quotidien* embarked upon a cultural anthropology at an extreme turning point in consumer technology. The exponential growth of networked society since then is astounding, but what is especially remarkable is how deCerteau's views have now such an intrinsic role with regard to everyday life in the Internet era. His foremost contribution lies in his shift in focus from the objects of consumption to the tactics, ruses, appropriations and "systems of operational combination (*les combinatoires d'opérations*)" which emerge around these objects.<sup>2</sup> He is less interested in the quantitative data about time spent reading (or not reading) the book than

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<sup>1</sup> deCerteau, ix.

<sup>2</sup> deCerteau, xi.

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how the content is actually being used. In questioning usage, deCerteau points out the short-sightedness of traditional measures of human production (i.e., media usage, urban development statistics, commerce, etc.); his strategy takes into greater account the relationships bound in production and consumer society and is a precursor to employing more sustainable measures of progress. It is less about seeing the totality as merely the sum of parts but as an "indivisible web in which all human activities are interconnected".<sup>3</sup> In this vein, deCerteau takes reference from the questions of Marxist historiography and analyses them on the scale of the anonymous individual. He is well aware of the polemic of class struggle and the domination by a ruling minority. But by elaborating upon a creative "antidiscipline", consumers can, in subtle diversions, interact with and even subvert the constraints of political and social systems. Like Marx, deCerteau acknowledges that mass production is inseparable from material and social culture; the actions of men and women stem inevitably from the historical situation, but this should not presume a passive mass consumption. Where Marx counts upon social uprising as the catalyst for change, deCerteau finds empowerment in the minute details and qualitative differences of everyday culture. The longing for a revolutionary model or absolute utopia has been replaced by creative survival at a very basic level. Consumer society cannot be avoided and mainstream culture dictates, but we can identify another layer of meaning in the small manipulations of users, the active roles they take through the consumption of objects and media. Four million new iPod users were expected to join the ranks during Apple's autumn 2004 quarter alone, but every one of them will surely attest to the absolute uniqueness of their player's personal music library.<sup>4</sup> For each of them, moving through the banal spaces of the city becomes also a completely singular and poetic experience. The addition of a personal soundscape makes deCerteau's "chorus of idle footsteps" literal and immediate.<sup>5</sup> One's movements through the city form the composition for Lefebvre's rhythm analysis; they displace the simple trajectory of points in space with a different kind of continuity, "the act itself of passing by".<sup>6</sup> It is through this act that the city becomes stratified with the psychogeography of what Colson Whitehead calls "eight million cities in this naked city. They dispute and disagree. The New York City you live in is not my New York City. How could it be? This place multiplies when you're not looking."<sup>7</sup> The City becomes

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<sup>3</sup> Hobsbawm.

<sup>4</sup> Crum.

<sup>5</sup> deCerteau, 97.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead and DJ Spooky.

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less a mapped variable than a simultaneous “result of activities.” It is an effect dependent upon processes, context and the imaginative appropriation of an otherwise incomprehensible network of information. And while for iPod users this may only be a matter of aestheticising a harsh reality, their environment quickly transforms through the process of this subjectification. It is a derive through the city paced by the whim of the shuffle button.

The result of this is a largely subjective perspective of contemporary society, but it is a view that parallels the way one must wade through the muck that is most media production today. One wanders through the city not so dissimilarly to the way one manoeuvres through the World Wide Web. With the ever-increasing range of activities possible in cyberspace, symbols, meanings, opinions and translations far outnumber their signifiers. The former rooted-ness of appropriateness in time and/or place is no longer valid. Business can be conducted anywhere; we chat with grandmother over tea or over the Internet. Whitehead’s city is a collision of activities and histories in space. In a similar manner, cultural production today is also marked by the multiplicity. The art/design collective Bernadette Corporation has built their identity upon the flexibility of a range of production, from fashion to print media and film. Their most recent work is the creation of a fictional character known as Reena Spauldings, the model of this phenomenon of identity as conglomeration. Gathering a stable of 150 writers, Bernadette Corporation weaved together a novel whose heroine they describe as “generic and perfect”. Generic in the sense of becoming an entity informed and imagined by many people at the same time, “an everyday group hallucination”.<sup>8</sup>

This concept of the generic is an underscore for much of deCerteau’s beliefs, where basic activities such as cooking, walking and telling stories elaborate a meta-communication about the noble, overlooked aspects of life. As a result, identity is simultaneously refined—as seen through media literacy and marketing sophistication—and rendered ambiguous. “‘Truth’ no longer depends on the attention of a receiver who assimilates himself to the great identifying message”.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Certeau writes, “It depends upon a ‘will to do’ (*un vouloir-faire*)... Henceforth identity depends on the production, on the endless moving on (or detachment and cutting loose) that this loss makes necessary.

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<sup>8</sup> Bernadette Corporation.  
<sup>9</sup> deCerteau, 137.

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Being is measured by doing".<sup>10</sup> This falls parallel to the postmodernist view of history, to the technological race where the past and any 'objective' view are constantly remodelled and rendered outdated by the latest downloadable version. And while this seems hardly an optimistic view of progress, it does provide the promise of possibility. If identity and our ways of operating in society are indeed modelled on this commutative system of functioning, then we begin to see again the importance of relationships as more accurate variables with which we examine the world around us. Products, outcomes, and closing statements don't express nearly as much as procedures, processes and what Nicolas Bourriaud describes as "relational aesthetics". Like deCerteau, Bourriaud looks for the micro-utopias at the margins of direct critical action. Not denying the stronghold of the society of the spectacle, he conceives of contemporary art as an opposition to it, motivated by the relationships between people rather than art as object. What both theorists are doing, in a sense, is applying the *Mittelglied* allowing the analysis between daily life and art. With *The Practice of Everyday Life*, M. deCerteau manages to establish an influential theoretical groundwork from the dispersed meanderings of ordinary life. His ideas are increasingly relevant with regards to contemporary cultural production, although in a most self-effacing way. They are borne of and disappear into the fabric of the everyday.

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<sup>10</sup> deCerteau, 137.

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