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## The excessive contingency. An aesthetics of entanglement between the Situationist International and Jean-Luc Nancy

### Abstract

*This article explores the concept of “excessive contingency” through an analysis of the Situationist International’s practice of the dérive and Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy of exposition. It argues that contingency, rooted in our fundamental being-with-others, exceeds traditional subject-object divisions. In line with Improvisation Studies scholars Dan DiPiero and Alessandro Bertinetto, Situationist dérive is examined as a “deliberate” engagement with urban contingency that subverts functionalist approaches to space. Nancy’s ontology of exposition further illuminates how contingency is integral to our relational existence. By bringing these perspectives together, the article develops an expanded understanding of contingency as fundamentally tied to our exposition to and entanglement with the world. This “excessive contingency” moves beyond binary oppositions to reveal the inherently relational and open-ended nature of experience. The analysis offers new insights into urban practices, social relations, and the ontological significance of contingency, proposing a reimagining of our relationship to urban spaces, others, and the unfolding of contingent experience itself.*

### Keywords

*Contingency, Situationist International, Jean-Luc Nancy*

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### *Introduction\**

Contingency is inherent in virtually every action. Given the world's complexity, adaptability to contingent factors is essential for survival. Consider a quotidian scenario: one leaves home to catch a train, only to find it cancelled due to a strike. Consequently, one alters the route, selects an alternative mode of transport, perhaps serendipitously encounters an old acquaintance, thus fundamentally reshaping the day's trajectory. Contingency, to varying degrees, involves elements of unexpectedness and accidentality, and can be understood as "an umbrella term for events that either were or will be decided according to some non-linear causality, a term that is cleaved in half depending on where in a temporal process one chooses to look. Before the event, the outcome is contingent as in not-yet-known; after the event, the result is contingent as in could-have-been-otherwise" (DiPiero 2018: 2). This broad conceptualization of contingency as omnipresent in life may frustrate those seeking more precise delineations. Indeed, can terms like improvisation, chance, hazard, and unforeseen be used interchangeably to define contingency?

Contemporary scholars are striving to provide more stringent definitions, often exploring contingency's specificity through its relationship with improvisation (Bell 2014; Bertinetto 2016, 2022; Heble, Caines 2014; Nachmanovich 1990). Bertinetto, for instance, attempts to mitigate this conceptual vagueness by distinguishing between "reactive" and "deliberate" improvisation in his work on improvisation and contingency. Reactive improvisation corresponds to ordinary situations where we respond to unforeseen events: "We improvise when we have to manage unusual and unexpected events that catch us unaware, pushing us to react quickly with limited resources, to adapt to the unforeseen, or to manage it. An emergency provokes the urgency of our reaction" (Bertinetto 2022: 6). The aforementioned train strike scenario exemplifies this category. Conversely, deliberate contingency manifests predominantly in artistic practices, which are "improvised deliberately for the pleasure of producing art thanks to improvisation through the creative confrontation with contingency" (Bertinetto 2022: 7). Bertinetto further proposes a "grammar of

\* The section *Aesthetics, subversion and contingency in the situationist practice of the dérive* was written by Enea Bianchi, the section *Contingency as being exposed: Nancy's philosophy* was written by Matteo Maria Paolucci. The *Introduction* and the *Conclusion* were written by both authors.

contingency” to elucidate the relationships between improvisation and various domains, including everyday life, art, poetry, literature, and music. In the artistic *milieu*, Bertinetto posits improvisation as a sense-making practice that initiates a confrontation between human beings and life’s contingency, interplaying with the performativity of the present moment where forms are generated. This process entails the risk of success or failure relative to the initial intention and is intimately connected to a spirit of adventure.

While these broad conceptualizations of contingency provide a foundation, our study seeks to examine how contingency manifests through the Situationist International’s avant-garde endeavors, which offer an insightful perspective on deliberate engagement with contingency in urban environments. In so doing, this article aims to further develop Bertinetto’s notion of “deliberate” contingency, dwelling on the urban practice of the *dérive* (drift), demonstrating how this practice can establish the groundwork for an “excessive” contingency, transcending functionalist and instrumental approaches to urban space in favor of collective and participatory creativity. Similarly to Bertinetto’s account, Improvisation Studies scholar Dan DiPiero conceptualizes contingency as “actively throwing oneself in the game” (DiPiero 2018: 10). While quotidian contingent encounters present contingency as a byproduct, musical and artistic practices exemplify an embodied activity resulting from the constitutive intertwining of spontaneity and project, vitality and strategy. As we will elucidate in subsequent sections, this does not imply privileging the intentionality of the subject over the object, nor does it reinstate the primacy of the artist-creator in a romantic sense. Rather, it entails an openness to a movement that engenders a short circuit between traditional dualisms and binary oppositions. We will explore this “subversive” aspect of contingency in the following pages.

Beyond the ambiguity inherent in a broad conception of contingency, an additional complexity arises from a binary approach that posits a dichotomy between the necessary and the contingent, between the monotony of everyday life and the occasional eruption of unexpected elements that demand attention. This perspective relies on a polar logic that this article aims to critique. Our objective is to demonstrate how contingency, understood in “excessive” terms, can transcend the traditional and metaphysical subject-object logic, which conceives the world as an array of inert and passive objects available to human subjects. The notion of excess inherent in the concept of contingency was recently introduced by DiPiero in rela-

tion to jazz improvisation. Specifically, DiPiero discusses the “affective excess” of sound that overflows the listener:

“But an event, a real contingency, is precisely something that overflows [...]”. Even while you are perceiving music, something is *exceeding* you. Contingency references this excess that is partially outside of all perceptive experience, but is especially present in music, whose vibrations linger in silence. Is not sound, which moves with affective force, also exactly something that overflows us? (DiPiero 2018: 4, italics our).

Building upon DiPiero’s initial observations on an “overflowing” contingent experience, we will explore – particularly in the second part of this article – the relational aspect of contingency by examining the etymological roots of the word, derived from *cum* (“with”, “together”) and *tangere* (“to touch”). We will juxtapose the notion of contingency with Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy to demonstrate how contingency is inextricably linked to our communal exposition to both human and non-human worlds.

### 1. *Aesthetics, subversion and contingency in the situationist practice of the dérive*

In this section, we aim to explore the concept of contingency emerging from the practice and theory of the Situationist International, the avant-garde artistic and literary movement founded by Guy Debord, originated in 1957 and dissolved in 1972, a movement that continues to influence both art theorists, artists and cultural practitioners globally (see Plant 1992; Pinder 2005; Bridger 2010; Perniola 2013; Bell 2014; Wight, Killham 2014; Bunyard 2019; Trier 2019).

The Situationist poetics, echoing the historical avant-gardes of the first half of the Twentieth century, sought to renew the foundations existence through the construction of collective everyday situations in which the individual can escape the spectacular passivity imposed by the bourgeois era. In contrast to the “passivity” and “alienation” of the bourgeois and capitalist discourses, which – for the Situationists – force individuals to contemplate the images of the spectacle in a state of narcosis and pseudo-activity, militant action needed to revolve around the deliberate construction of new life “situations” (also see Perniola 1968, 2013). In this regard, the Situationists elaborated on a subversive jargon coining and developing concepts and experiences for a redefinition of the totality of

human experience, including “unitary urbanism”, “industrial painting”, “psychogeography”, *détournement* (diversion) and *dérive* (drift), among others. It is precisely the *dérive* that interests us in the context of this article, especially because – as we will clarify further on – it can be understood as an artistic practice inherently associated with contingency.

The theory of the *dérive* was developed by Debord before the Situationist International, namely in the early 1950s during his engagement with the Lettrist International, a group that carried an iconoclastic charge typical of the Dadaists and Surrealists, and pursued a radical critique of capitalist society, aiming for a collective and generalized creativity. Unlike the Surrealists, however, who explored the hidden folds of reality, such as dreams and the unconscious, Debord believed it was necessary to rethink reality itself through the construction of situations, inextricably linked to practical-material realizations, starting from the city and the urban environment (see Andreotti, Costa 1996; McDonough 2005, 2009). For the Situationists, the bourgeois mentality primarily manifests itself in dwelling and inhabiting cities, where the urban fabric is fragmented according to demands for comfort and functionalism. This drastically reduces the opportunities for the individual to express their creativity and to encounter genuine contingency. The critique brought forward by the Lettrists and later the Situationists was directed against European post-war urbanism and can be summarized using Mario Perniola’s words: “Urbanism understood as a specialist discipline founded on the separation and fragmentation of totality, leading to contemplative and apologetic technicism, devoid of a global vision of existence” (Perniola 1968: 248; on this topic also see Bianchi 2022; Somhegyi 2022). It is this conception of urbanism, which the Situationists regarded as the cornerstone of post-war architecture (and which according to several scholars still applies today, see Jappe 2022), that we focus on in this discussion. Urbanism is seen as a constitutively instrumental conception of space, where one would constantly move from point A to point B, conceiving the urban environment merely as a means, if not an obstacle, to reach a destination. The Situationist conception of urbanism was rooted in a fundamental critique of the way space was organized and controlled in capitalist societies. They viewed traditional urbanism as a tool of social control, designed to maintain order and reinforce the *status quo* by compartmentalizing and fragmenting the urban environment. This, they argued, reduced cities to functional spaces focused solely on efficiency, circulation, and consumption, stripping away the potential for spontaneous human interaction and creativity. Implicitly, therefore, this works a critique of the overall idea of happiness

praised in capitalist societies, based on quantitative elements (circulation) and comfort (smartphone, television...). In opposition to this perspective of the urban environment, where citizens live crammed in “concrete cemeteries”, the Situationists advocated for a psychogeographic nomadism, meaning a wandering attitude that emphasizes the effects, tensions, and moods that the urban environment generates in individual and collective behavior. The Situationists’ artistic practice was deeply intertwined with their conception of the city, as they saw the urban environment not just as a backdrop but as a central aspect of their creative and revolutionary endeavors. This is embodied in an attitude of playful transformation of space through the construction of meaningful, passionate, memorable existential situations, created by people who plan to go on a “drift” in certain city neighborhoods, either through a rational and deliberate study of cartography or by letting themselves be carried away by the contingency of encounters and the “currents”, the emotional and psychic flows that certain streets provoke.

Several accounts and descriptions of *dérives*, conducted in various European cities such as Paris and Amsterdam, were produced by the Situationists (see Khatib 1958). Debord, in his article *Theory of the dérive*, defines the *dérive* in these terms: “One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive*, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Derives involve playful constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll” (Debord 2006b: 62). The stroll and the journey would be too dependent on the aesthetic contemplation of the environment, which for the Situationists would fall into a weak, impotent and disinterest gaze, ultimately complicit with the *status quo*, rather than laying the ground to militant intervention and practical realization. It would be reductive to understand the *dérive* within the horizon of temporary exploration; it was intended as a permanent way of life, which could last months or years. Working at certain hours and then going on a *dérive* at others, for the Situationists, equated to losing sight of the project for a global renewal of existence: “The *dérive* is part of a permanent subversive attitude that, among other things, seeks to transcend art as well as any other form of alienation of bourgeois society” (Jappe 2023: 132-3). Thus, it is not about an erratic and highly intense life, but an alternative mode of existence: “To *dérive* was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed” (Plant 1992: 59). The *dérive*

is in fact part of the Situationists' interest in urbanism through the lens of what they call psychogeography, that is, the systematic observation of the effects that different urban environments produce on one's state of mind: "The study of the specific effects that the geographical environment, whether consciously arranged or not, directly exerts on the affective behavior of individuals" (Perniola 2013: 42). According to Mario Perniola the *dérive* presents a twofold aspect, a passive and an active one. On one hand, it involves the renunciation of pre-set goals and destinations while surrendering to the stimuli of the terrain and contingent encounters; on the other hand, it implies a subtle understanding and receptivity to psychological and affective variations. Marxist scholar Anselm Jappe also notes this duality, highlighting the more "scientific" side – so to speak – which includes systematic observations producing "psychogeographic maps", and the "adventurous" side, which is open to the contingency of encounters and environmental stimuli (see Bassett 2004; Coverley 2010; Wight, Killham 2014).

Having established the basic principles of the *dérive*, we can now examine how this practice specifically engages with and manifests contingency. From the perspective of contingency, the *dérive* offers a particularly intriguing case study, as it implies the co-existence of a seemingly opposed attitude: surrendering to chance and the accidental while, at the same time, strategically trying to plan situations. It involves hypothesizing an approach to urban phenomena based on an experience of space which is not oriented to or limited by a quantitative and instrumental stamp. In this sense, contingency is seen as emerging through a practice where pre-existing material, so to speak, is reused according to new configurations. The urban landscape is the same, but through the experience of the *dérive* it is displaced, highjacked, *détournée*. This practice, at a theoretical level, involved a dialectic of devaluation and revaluation that negated the value of previous organization (in this case, functionalist and capitalist) and its subversion from within. This is a crucial point in Debord's and the Situationists' practice because it implies that all the elements for a different life are already present, both culturally, technically and in urban terms; they need to be reoriented and "composed" in an alternative way. We could say, it is not about producing the new but, rather, about seeing and working on the same through different eyes. The city itself thus – for the Situationists – becomes a text to be rewritten, re-typed, not anymore as a history written by the ruling powers. Crucially, and this is what interests us the most here, this can happen through what we define an "excessive contingency", which arises precisely from the artistic practice of the *dérive*,

with its blending and interaction between the environment and human beings, between critical urban geography and participatory activity, between strategy and chance.

To further elucidate the complex interplay between strategy and chance in the *dérive*, it is helpful to consider this practice also in Deleuzian terms. Echoing Alistair Macaulay's study on contingency (Macaulay 2023), we could say that the *dérive* possesses the double movement of "territorialization", namely the agency of the Situationists (the study of maps, cartography, and the urban environment in general), and "deterritorialization", which instead comprises a new articulation of urban structures welcoming contingent elements. It possesses, in other words, a receptive aspect that consists in exposing oneself, in allowing oneself to be exposed to the urban environment, a "letting oneself be contaminated by the contingency of the visible" (Cimatti 2024: 25). In this sense, contingency is "excessive", i.e. it implies a radical abandonment of the traditional sovereign gaze towards the things of the world:

Seeing, in our tradition, is the sovereign gesture through which the body of the perceiving subject takes possession of the world; in fact, in sight, the human being "embraces" with the gaze the field of the visible that presents itself to them in all its extension. Thus, the spectacle of the world is nothing but an object fully at the disposal of the subject who contemplates it. (Cimatti 2024: 24)

This gaze situates the dualism between subject and object. The surrounding world is fragmented into a series of entities at our disposal, as a matter available for us, humans. Seeing the world through this sovereign gaze means distancing ourselves from this very world, analyzing it from the outside, being not an integral part of it. The practice of the *dérive*, in these terms, can be seen as an abandonment of the instrumental, sovereign gaze of the traditional subject, insofar as it does not conceive the city as a conglomerate of buildings under the control of the human being. Following Bridger's article (2013), we claim that the psychogeographical study of the urban environment may work as a practice against traditional male gaze and heteronormativity, precisely through contingency. The urban landscape possesses a contingency that through the *dérive* is not understood as an obstacle to be overcome, a stumbling block in the daily path that has to be bypassed through skill, adaptation, and versatility. On the contrary, this excessive contingency implies allowing oneself to be transformed by the clash with unpredictability, finally recognizing an inverted, subverted and surprising perspective on the entirety of the city.



“Floating encounters” and “hunting for marvels” (Plant 1992: 59), which were part of the *dérive*, were not sought for the pure joy of experiencing them. The *dérive* was especially understood a dislocating practice with a political application, in order to experiment the concealed potential of everyday life disentangled from capitalist production. For this reason, the city becomes enigmatic, experienced at once familiar and strange, uncanny, disorienting. Paradoxically, the Situationist *dérive* is not a means to “find oneself” in the urban context, but on the contrary, to lose oneself, weakening the traditional “strong” subjectivity. It is therefore a matter of thinking of an alternative position that the subject can assume so that the urban environment does not remain a distant, immobile, instrumental projection of subjectivity.

This position is brought about by a revolutionary use, so to speak, of contingency, distinguished from its reactionary use. The Situationists in fact differentiate between an “ideological” use of contingency and one that can introduce real “disorientation” (Debord 2006b: 63). The former is linked to a potentially conservative use of contingency, that is, the one that tends to bring the unexpected we encounter back into the framework of the quantitative and the habitual. It would consist of a moment of fortification of the subject, who emerges stronger after having overcome a given temporary obstacle, an ideological vision that the Situationists consider insufficient to create new conditions and modes of urban exploration. On the other hand, the Situationist *dérive* aims to produce the possibility of getting lost, so to speak, in neighborhoods already long traversed, that is, identifying, through the study of maps, directions of “penetration” through which engaging with the urban environment. It implies an insubordination to the usual stimuli of chance. Practically, this also involves an analysis of neighborhoods and social morphology, taking into account both the urban fabric and the types of buildings, as well as geographical and economic factors – which obviously play a significant role in determining the representation of space. By doing so, “letting oneself go” on the *dérive* implies both an abandonment of functionalism and urban determinism, but at the same time a careful study capable of delineating a psychogeographic relief of the city. In *Introduction to a critique of urban geography*, Debord writes: “The sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; [...] the appealing or repelling character of certain places these phenomena all seem to be neglected” (Debord 2006a: 10). In other words, for Debord, traditionally, one moves in the urban environment without considering possible combi-

nations of atmospheres and affects, which give rise to complex, layered, and differentiated experiences compared to the simplistic view that there are “sad” neighborhoods, associated with poor and depressing streets, and “pleasant” neighborhoods because they are elegant and more luxurious. For this reason, the *dérive* implies an alternative conception of everydayness (see Di Stefano 2017; Lehtinen 2021; Giombini, Kvokačka 2023). Specifically, what seems interesting to us is that, echoing the words of Felice Cimatti, the openness towards the urban contingency, for the Situationists, primarily involves a depowering of the self and the strong subject: “Abandoning oneself to the landscape, becoming one with the environment, so that in this collective situation the body no longer feels the need to rely on the self to guide and control it. It is *impersonally* the situation that feels, thinks, and decides” (Cimatti 2023: 364, italics in the text).

According to Cimatti, the *dérive* opens individuals to an impersonal dimension, where one does not follow the path dictated by the self, and where participants contribute to the production of an aesthetic event that manifests itself in a non-utilitarian and non-functional experience of the city. Here too, to reiterate the thesis put forward by DiPiero, it is not a reaction to the contingent understood as everyday unpredictability, but a deliberate engagement with it, actively, lively, interacting with the situation as it unfolds. This depowering of the self leads to an anonymous, impersonal art, where the romantic idea of the creative subject disappears. Not surprisingly, Bertinetto emphasizes that the aesthetic experience implicit in contingency and improvisation represents a “*distributive creativity* – among artists, artistic traditions, the materials and the adopted forms, the situation itself of the performance and thus also the audience” (Bertinetto 2022: x). Rather than producing new art, that is, introducing new works into the artistic circuit, it would be a matter of practically and collectively realizing the creativity that institutional art – according to the Situationists – leaves only to a few artist-creators, maintaining instead a mass of passive viewers or spectators. As Jappe rightly notes, the *dérive* initially was not conceived as an artistic form, but as the making of a new lifestyle (Jappe 2023: 131). The *dérive* would be closer to an (anti)artistic practice through an experimental attitude towards the world that privileges ephemeral action over lasting work. Although some contemporary artists and artistic groups drew inspiration from the Situationists (such as Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alÿs, Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade), it is fair to remember that, first and foremost, the Situationists’ practice was indeed anti-artistic. This means that their aim was

to critique the art institution and galleries, with a view toward dissolving art's "promise" of creativity of expression into everyday life (see Perniola 1971; Jappe 2023). The *dérive* does indeed aim at overcoming art, but it does not represent its cessation: it represents art's exit from the narrow borders of institutions and galleries, "to become like a perfume [...] that pervades the entire 'situation', that is, the entire existence" (Cimatti 2023: 366). It is in this double movement, somewhat contradictory, of openness and closure, of strategy and spontaneity, that a conception of excessive contingency unfolds. Excessive precisely because of its contradictory nature: only a "self" can possess the desire to free itself from this very self, i.e. to move beyond the boundaries of the self towards a non-dualistic experience of the urban landscape and, more generally, of the whole world. "In this sense, as a non-dualistic life practice, Situationism represents a radical attempt to experience a post-human life, because it is located beyond the distinctions between 'subject' and 'object'" (Cimatti 2023: 366).

Although contingency is potentially present and detectable in every moment of quotidian life, it manifests itself in the paradoxical decision of a body willing to abandon itself to the environment, to its atmosphere (also see Böhme 2013; Wang 2015). Abandonment and receptivity imply a passive instance of openness to the encounters; but at the same time this very abandonment is ignited by a decision, i.e. the active, strategic study plan of the expedition. Reading the Situationist's *dérive* through DiPiero and Bertinetto's lens on the relationship between contingency and improvisation, we could claim that the excessive contingency is understood in terms of a lived, deliberate action, in sight of a creative confrontation with reality.

## 2. Contingency as being exposed: Nancy's philosophy

As suggested above, excessive contingency implies "exposing oneself" to the urban environment. The excess of contingency that we are trying to highlight here would, in other words, have to do with an "exposition". The very term "contingency" paves the way towards this understanding. Etymologically, "contingency" derives from the union of the Latin preposition *cum*, "with", and the verb *tangere*, "to touch". The urban scene opened up by contingency, to the extent that it is articulated by this *cum*, is therefore a plural scene, a scene of the many, rather than being that of the "subject" *versus* the "object" (also see Rynnänen, Kovalčic 2024). Instead of

stressing the “accidental” side of contingency, we stress that it is precisely the “with” which makes contingency excessive, because it implies an experience of exposition to the other, not being merely confined within oneself. The word *cum* underlies precisely this relational constitutive feature of contingency. The dismantling of the “subject-object” logic plays out on the terrain of this exposition: before the traditional distinction between subject and object, there is the scene of exposition (primarily of bodies, as we will clarify), where entities are-with-one-another. This plural scene could be defined as the unthought-of element with respect to the usual consideration of contingency, understood as something “fortuitous”, “accidental”, “hazardous”. Even if it were to be understood as randomness, as a chance occurrence, which disrupts our daily plans, contingency seems to point the finger towards a fundamentally co-ontological status of the experience of the world. An example: the cancellation of the train due to a strike that would have allowed us, for instance, to reach the airport from which we would have departed for a holiday, not only messes up our plans; it shows the relational nature which constitutes each experience – of relationships with human entities but also non-human: the train and the rails on which it runs, the software through which we book plane tickets, the expropriated lands on which the airport was built, the non-human animals that inhabit it, among others.

What truly impacts us is not merely the notion of a strike, but the particularities of *this* strike – the specific conditions under which it occurs. In other words, it is not the word “strike” that disrupts our plans, that arouses our dismay or anger, or that forces us to regulate ourselves accordingly; it is *this* strike, the one on *this* day, that takes place for *these* reasons, in *this* country, at *this* specific moment, which equally disrupts the plans of those people who, like us, were waiting on the platform of *this* station for the train to arrive. Knowing the meaning of the word “strike” – knowing a universal – will not tell us how to deal with it here and now, nor it will shed light on our emotional states when it occurs. We are not dealing with the strike, but with *a* strike. From this perspective, the world in which we are immersed is not simply the “phenomenal correlate” of the human: as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, “it is the effective exteriority without which the very disposition of or to sense would not make... any sense” (Nancy 1997: 56). Our devising an alternative to the strike, our feelings about the idea of having to give up the longed-for vacation would make no sense if we were not already always exposed to this exteriority that, for Nancy, is the world itself. As suggested earlier, contingency simply understood as “accidental” and “fortuitous”

becomes blind with regards to the relational reticularity, the entanglement, of the experience of the world: “The world always springs [*surgit*] each time according to a decidedly local turn [of events]. Its unity, its uniqueness, and its totality consist in a combination of this reticulated multiplicity” (Nancy 2000: 9; see also Armstrong 2009; on the notion of entanglement, Noë 2023; on the notion of relationality, Cimatti 2018). Thus, according to Nancy, “reality” is far from being just an object set against a subject; rather, “it is the incessantly active connection of things”, which includes, as our strike example was meant to show, “human beings as well” (Nancy 2021: 39).

In a chapter of his book *Being singular plural*, Nancy discusses a series of shortcomings he detects in the Situationist discourse. As previously noted (see Critchley 1998), Nancy identifies two main weaknesses in the Situationist critique of the society of the spectacle. When Situationist theory opposes the deceitful images of the spectacle against a creative imagination of situations, it would inevitably be reminiscent, despite the Situationist stance against various aestheticisms, to the subjectivity of romantic genius, of the subject-producer (Nancy 2000: 52). The Situationists’ attempt to “incorporate the survival of art into the art of living” by contrasting the instrumental bourgeoisie mindset in favor of the creative operation, would remain a strongly subject-centric perspective (see also Perniola 2013). However, according to Nancy, beneath the Situationists’ endeavor to oppose the alienation of spectacularized commodification, lies a relevant intuition, namely, that – so to speak – in the aftermath of the Death of God, society, devoid of transcendent founding instances, revealed itself exposed to nothing other than its being-in-common, without a horizon of Meaning that could unify social being (Nancy 2000: 52). Still, for Nancy, the Situationist project would fall in the “metaphysical” trap of the opposition between “appearance” and “reality”, between a “true”, an “original” world and that of “deceits” and “lies”. Here Nancy is not denying the alienation targeted by the Situationist critique. Rather, he is questioning the very recourse to the idea of a true life, to a human, universal nature, which for him may end up in a teleological conception of human and society: “The dominant theme of self-sufficiency, of self-organization, and of a process oriented toward an end state” (Nancy 2000: 53). According to Nancy, “this sort of nature is at a remove from exteriority and *contingency*, which, in other places, are marks of a ‘nature’ that is ‘outside’ us, to which we are exposed and without which our exposition would not take *place*. Similarly, the *ego* is from the very start removed from that exteriority and contingency

without which it is impossible to expose it *as ego*" (Nancy 2000: 53, first italics ours).

Still, did the Situationist drowned – metaphorically speaking – exteriority and contingency while advocating for “authenticity”? Here we claim that the Situationist practice of the *dérive* is actually much closer to Nancy’s position than he himself may have thought of. Bourgeois and capitalist functionalism, which mystifies the reticular exposition of singularities through the subject-object logic (something is functional for a subject and their projects), renders urban space readable only under the “one-way” sense of functionality, thereby depriving it of all meaningful opportunities that the space of exposition to others (be they buildings, streets, signs, people, etc.) gives rise to. In other words, the functionality and the urban determinism that dominate the habitual experience of the city space saturate the urban text, which is articulated through distances and discretions, scraps and differences. The syntax of the urban text is saturated with the unidirectional semantics of functionalism which nestles in the interstices and scraps of the urban fabric. What matters, from a functionalist experience of the city, are not the effects, tensions, and moods that, as suggested earlier, the urban environment can generate in individual and collective behavior; what matters is being informed that one can go across that street to buy one of the latest devices, or that street x (or interchangeably street y) is traversable to get from point A to point B. Conversely, the Situationist *dérive* aims to repopulate the spatiality inherent in our exposition to others that inhabits urban space (whether a building, an advertisement, a group of passers-by, and so on) with singular experiences – precisely those effects, tensions, or moods – that break with the meanings of the functions to which such “inhabitants” are usually subjected. It is a practice, we could say, of proliferation of singularities opposed to the one-way sense of functionalism. The proper name of a city, far from establishing a supposed identity, actually challenges this functionalist unidirectionality: “A city does not have to be identified by anything other than a name, which indicates a place, the place of a *mêlée*, a crossing and a stop, a knot and an exchange, a gathering, a disjunction, a circulation, a radiating” (Nancy 2000: 145). Indeed, functionalism works with one lens through which the urban text is experienced, articulated and made readable. Of course, without the functionalist readability of the urban text, an experimental practice like the situationist *dérive*, which aims to rewrite this very text, could not exist: “Writing”, as Nancy’s *Corpus* goes, “doesn’t work as a stampede or chaos of signification: it only works with the tension *that is a part of* the signify-

ing system *itself*" (Nancy 2008: 83, Nancy's italics). The tension of the bodies within the reticularity of the city, coming across, clashing, ignoring, looking, desiring each other; the solicitation of our sensations and thoughts; all of this contributes to the abovementioned "making sense". Each body inscribes itself in the urban text always starting from its peculiar singularity, from a certain way of having hair, walking, dressing, articulating voice or gestures. As in the aforementioned strike case, what is at stake is not *the* body – as a presumed universality –, but, each time, *a* body in its singular inscription of being (see also Cimatti 2015: 91). In fact, even if these inscriptions are stereotyped, it is still a singular inscription of the stereotype itself: "The typical traits (ethnic, cultural, social, generational, and so forth) [...] do not abolish singular differences; instead, they bring them into relief" (Nancy 2000: 8).

Such singular inscription, more generally, applies also to those bodies that are not human: that of this dumpster, whose smell nauseates us; that of this lamppost late at night whose dim light makes us feel insecure; that of this building whose decorative lines, beyond its function, seduce us. These affections listed as examples are not affections of a subject that precedes them and that only afterwards encounters them as objects. As Nancy reminds us (Nancy 2023: 16), to be affected, one must be capable of being affected, which means to be already exposed to an outside, to an exteriority and a contingency that can solicit us, touch us. If there is a subject here, it is a subject subjected to an outside, to an alterity and its touch – hence the inherent "touching" detectable in the etymology of the word "contingency" (see Recchia Luciani 2022, 2023). Not surprisingly, the Situationist *dérive* is a constitutively corporeal practice: letting one's body be exposed to movement, to the possibility of wandering with other bodies (the *dérive* is always conducted in a group, albeit not very numerous) among other bodies (human and non-human) immersed in the urban fabric. In the *dérive*, the subject makes room for a body that, like a vector traversing a map, leads to possible actions and sensations, and which, with a sort of "tactile", mobile and restless gaze – different from the subjectivist sovereign gaze – exposes itself to the "unpredictable collision" of contingency (Cimatti 2024: 25).

Contrary to Nancy's concerns, we argue that the practice of the *dérive* does not aspire to any form of interiority. The "true life" that Nancy worried the Situationists might be seeking is not a spiritual retreat into oneself to escape the deceptive imagery of the spectacle. Instead, it involves an exposition to a community of bodies. We can consider the *dérive*'s exposition as an act of resistance against the over-signification to which

Capital reduces bodies: as Nancy puts it, “First of all, bodies are going to work, coming home from work, waiting for rest, taking it and promptly leaving it, and working, incorporating themselves into merchandise, themselves merchandise, a work force, nonaccumulable capital, sellable, exhaustible in the market of accumulated, accumulative capital” (Nancy 2008: 109). From this standpoint, the *dérive* aims to re-open the space between bodies for the plural solicitations of sense to which the functionalistic lens of Capital leaves no room. The *dérive* seems to reclaim what Nancy terms the “spaciousness” of bodies – their capacity to make room, akin to the unreadable interstitial spaces of a text, allowing sense to emerge in our existence (Nancy 2008: 15, 85-7; also see Ponzio 2022). This means that, if there is any form of appropriation in the *dérive*, it is not about claiming a body as “one’s own” or as a vessel of interiority. Rather, it is about embracing the inherent exteriority of the body itself, its being exposed to other bodies. This aligns with Nancy’s arguments in his book *Corpus*, which consistently emphasizes the fundamental exteriority and non-appropriable nature of the body (see Nancy 2008). The community formed by bodies engaged in the *dérive* embodies and is reminiscent of what Nancy, borrowing from Blanchot, calls “inoperativity”. This concept characterizes community in its most fundamental sense: a “being-in-common” which is prior to any formal organization or structuring principles, whether transcendent or immanent (see Nancy 1991). This inoperative community – the community of “*dérivers*” – can be understood as a community of bodies that, while producing nothing in a conventional sense, reveals something ontologically relevant: by existing beyond any instrumental purpose or predetermined goal, it exposes the “excessive” aspect of every encounter, clash, step, and road taken, that very “excess” in which “world”, as Boyan Manchev states, exceeds itself as a “self”, being nothing but “the universal name of the irreducible multiplicity of singularities that appear in the mode of *being-for-each-other*” (Manchev 2023: 231, Manchev’s italics). This “common appearance”, qualified by Manchev as “proto-subjective” (Manchev 2023: 231), does not belong to subject-object logic; it is an impersonal one. To the extent that we immerse ourselves in the affections of the urban space, we become the “resonances” of this very space, space resonates through us. In the perceptual stimuli evoked by the green canopy of this tree against the concrete of this building, “this green becomes this green ‘in me’, but as ‘I’ also become its nuance, its gleam, and some part of the sap which runs through it, some part of its exuberant growth taken from the soil, the rain, and the sun, some part also of its contrast with other colors, and with the forms,



densities, and turning shapes which surround it" (Nancy 2011: 216). Reading this passage in terms of an opposition between a subject and an object seems to us reductive and misleading.

As Nancy points out, "I" becomes the singular "nuance" of this green, that is, I become the place of an impersonality, of an exteriority, a place where my feeling reveals itself in an impersonal dimension. To attribute this feeling to a subjectivity means forgetting that our presumed subjectivity "is itself firstly a body among others" (Nancy 2011: 216). It is such a being-a-body-among-others, so to speak, what the *dérive* aims to reclaim. It is oriented toward the *expeausition* we are subjected to, to use the word Nancy coined interpolating French word *peau*, "skin", with *exposition* (Nancy 2008: 33; see also Calabrò 2022). As we have shown, this means to ask for that very exteriority which, prior to any logic of the subject and the object, does articulate our experience. In fact, skin is the "organ of the heteronomy of an organism", namely the organ that makes us always exposed to exteriority (Nancy 2011: 88). Thus, given that the exposition of bodies allows sense to arise in existence, skin "is not the site of calculation and measurement: it is a place of passage, of transit and transport" (Nancy 2011: 89) – those very passages, transits and transports of sense which functionalism, as discussed, makes readable one-way. In this sense, the *expeausition-oriented-dérive*, if we may say so, might be considered as "a collective subversion of the ordinary" (Angelucci 2023: 192) – i.e. the "ordinary" functionalistic lens which, compounded with urban determinism and functionalism, weaken the plural solicitations of senses of our constitutive exposition.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the concept of contingency through the lens of the Situationist International's practice of the *dérive* and Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy of exposition. By examining these perspectives, we have aimed to develop the notion of "excessive contingency", which moves beyond traditional binary oppositions and subject-object logic to reveal a more relational and expansive understanding of contingency as fundamentally tied to our exposition to and entanglement with the world.

The Situationist *dérive* offers a compelling example of how contingency can be actively engaged with as an artistic/anti-artistic and political practice, rather than simply reacted to as an occasional disruption of everyday life. Through the deliberate construction of situations that blend

strategy and chance, the *dérive* seeks to subvert functionalist approaches to urban space and open up new possibilities for collective creativity and transformative encounters. Crucially, this practice involves a weakening or “depowering” of the traditional sovereign subject, as participants surrender themselves to the psychogeographic flows and atmospheres of the city while simultaneously studying and analyzing urban environments.

This paradoxical combination of abandonment and strategic intention allows for what we have termed an “excessive contingency” to emerge – one that overflows the boundaries between subject and object, active and passive, planned and spontaneous. The *dérive* thus exemplifies a non-dualistic mode of engaging with contingency that moves beyond both purely accidental encounters and rigidly determined paths. Instead, it cultivates a heightened receptivity and openness to the affective and transformative potential latent within urban landscapes and social relations (also see D’Angelo 2014).

By reading the Situationist practice through the lens of contemporary scholarship on improvisation and contingency, we have highlighted how the *dérive* embodies a form of “deliberate” contingency that is actively thrown into play, aligning this article with recent efforts to develop more nuanced understandings of contingency that move beyond vague notions which link it solely to chance or unpredictability. The *dérive* demonstrates how contingency can be productively engaged with as a creative resource for reimagining social and spatial relations, rather than simply an obstacle to be overcome. Crucially, the excessive contingency manifested in the *dérive* is fundamentally tied to an experience of exposition – to the urban environment, to others, and to the possibilities for transformation that arise through these encounters. This connects the Situationist practice to Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy and his emphasis on the relationality and exposition that precedes any constitution of subjects and objects. Nancy’s thought allows us to further develop the notion of excessive contingency by grounding it in an ontology of exposition and being-in-common. The etymological roots of contingency in *cum-tangere* point toward this fundamental entanglement and contact with alterity that Nancy sees as constitutive of existence. From this perspective, contingency is not simply about chance occurrences, but about the very fabric of being as inherently plural, relational, and exposed. The urban space of the *dérive* can thus be understood as a site where this constitutive exposition and being-with is made manifest, as bodies (human and non-human) encounter and affect one another in ways that overflow functionalist logics and unidirectional meanings.

While Nancy was critical of certain aspects of Situationist theory, we have argued that the practice of the *dérive* aligns more closely with his philosophy than he may have recognized. Rather than reinforcing notions of subjective interiority or authentic experience divorced from exteriority, the *dérive* can be seen as a corporeal practice of exposition that makes room for impersonal affects and encounters. It cultivates a “tactile” and mobile gaze that stands in contrast to the sovereign, appropriative gaze of the traditional subject. The community formed through the *dérive* thus exemplifies what Nancy terms the “inoperative” community – one that produces nothing in instrumental terms, but precisely in doing so exposes the very being-in-common that exceeds our articulations and projects. It reveals the excess inherent in every encounter, step, and turn, manifesting the fundamental exposition, relationality and entanglement that precedes any formal structuring of community (like the functionalism-structured one in which those steps, encounters and turns we have experience with are made readable one-way). This perspective allows us to reframe contingency not as something that occasionally disrupts an otherwise stable reality, but as the very texture of a world fundamentally characterized by exposition, contact, and being-with.

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