How to Look Around Rather Than Ahead?

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The uses of not

> Thirty spokes
> meet in the hub.
> Where the wheel isn't
> is where it's useful.
> Hollowed out,
> clay makes a pot.
> Where the pot's not
> is where it's useful.
> Cut doors and windows
> to make a room.
> Where the room isn't,
> there's room for you.
> So the profit in what is
> is in the use of what isn't.
>
> – Ursula K. Le Guin, Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997).

On maps

> Far from holding up a simple mirror of nature that is true or false, maps redescribe the world — like any document — in terms of relations of power and of cultural practices, preferences, and priorities.
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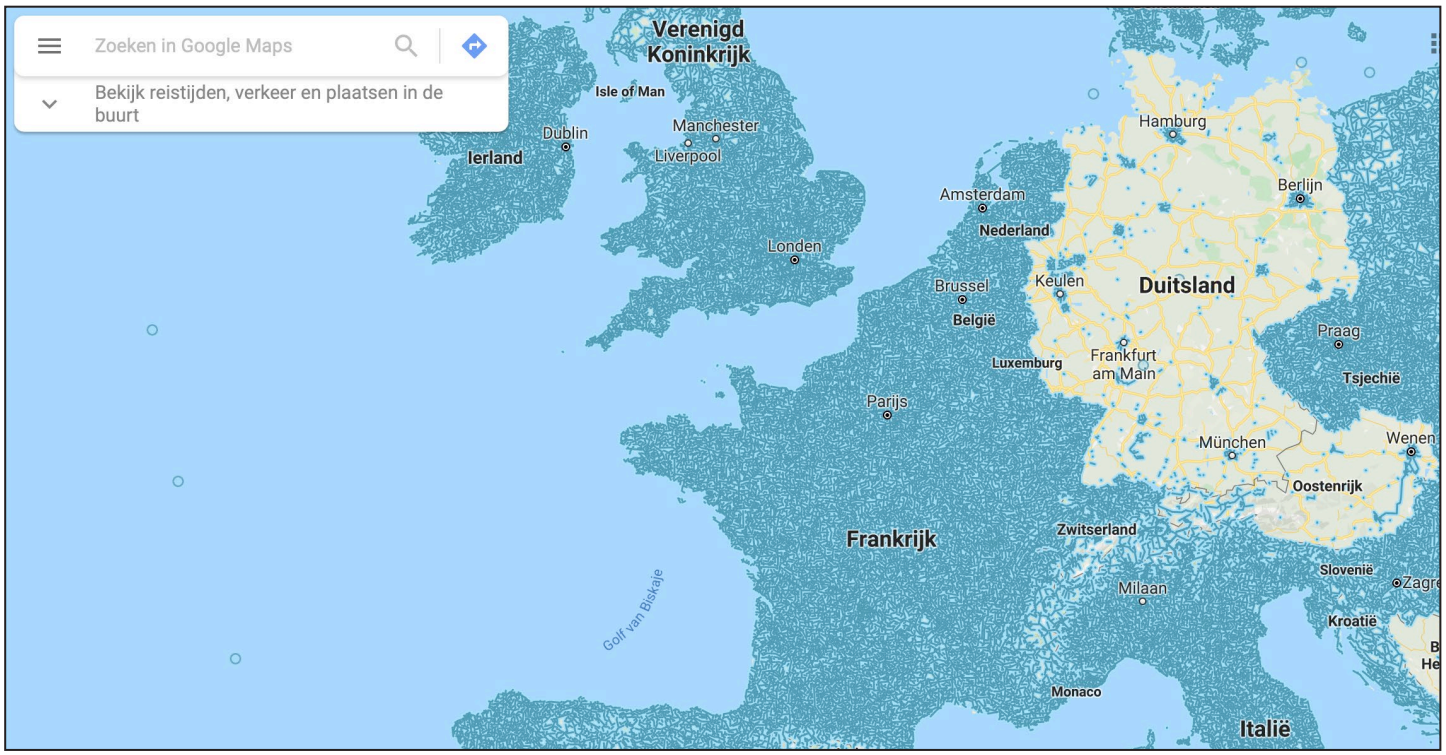
> – J. B. Harley, "Texts and Contexts in the Interpretation of Early Maps," in The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

When you open Google Maps on your device and go to the bottom right part of your screen, you will see a yellow person (they go by the name of Pegman). If you grab them and drag it over the European continent, you will notice that whilst hovering the yellow figure over the map, blue lines appear. They depict the territory that Google Streetview has conquered in the last decade. Like veins, the lines spread across Europe and depict the infrastructure that Google has captured, analysed, photographed, manipulated, measured and then uploaded to their servers.

What struck me is that the area of Germany and Austria is not part of this infrastructural web of blue. Did Google forget about Germany and Austria? Is this content not available in my country? Google, the mega structure that it is, actually did drive their 360-degree-camera-equipped cars through this region, and Streetview was even available for a short period.[1] But after a lot of complaints and requests from German and Austrian citizens for their properties to be blurred out, Google decided to discontinue their business in those regions, realizing that their presence there was no longer profitable.[2] What does it imply that these regions are now kept from the view of its users? Should we consider it a loss that a significant amount of Europe is now left unmapped? Is the map now incomplete, and does it need to be "fixed"?



The European continent in Google Maps,the blue lines depict the zones where street view is available.

Maps tell us stories of our surroundings. Geographically speaking, they can tell you where you are and where you are not, they can help you cross the ocean, show you the contours of borders not visible to the eye, and guide you to your destination. But the notion that maps are an objective representation of the world is a common misunderstanding, or rather a myth. Maps are simplified representations of our world: firstly, they redescribe our surroundings by projecting three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional flat surface; and secondly, the author/cartographer decides which characteristics to place on the map and which to leave out; Think of important roads that should be mapped opposed smaller roads that are not significant enough to be placed on the map.

Maps are thus subjective and profoundly bound to time, zeitgeist and the cartographer's perspective.[3]

To illustrate this, one could take the notion of orientation as an example. Orientation is an arbitrary convention; if we were to observe the Earth from space, terms such as north, south, east and west would not make much sense. Old maps of European cities located next to rivers would typically place the river at the top of the map and the city below it. Old maps of Amsterdam, for example, are commonly placed with the river facing downwards, since the users of the map would enter the city via water.[4]

Other reasons for not putting the north up might follow economical or design reasons. For instance, paper maps are often drawn on sheets of a greater width than height (i.e. in landscape format), and thus cartographers would often orient a city in the most economical way – in the example of a coastal town, the coast might be aligned to the border of the map.[5]

So why is the north located upwards on contemporary maps? Aligning the north with the top of a map nowadays seems like a "neutral" choice, but after all the earth spins on an axis. In a truly "neutral" sense, north is not privileged over south. The reason we think of north as "up" and south as "down" is the result of a historical process closely linked with colonialism and the economic dominance of Western Europe.[6] Maps follow cultural, political and even ideological interests.[7] Authority and its authorship can speak only to what it can see and sense,[8] and for conventions to function they must be well accepted and seemingly transparent.

Exactissima Amsteldami veteris et novissimi delineato (the most accurate image of the new and old Amsterdam) By Frederick de Wit, 1682. In this map Amsterdam is faced towards the river.

The God Trick

> The "eyes" made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life. There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds.
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> – Donna J. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991), 190.

In her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," the writer, philosopher, feminist and mammal[9] Donna Haraway critiques masculinized traditions of scientific rhetoric and the concept of only one objectivity. She argues for an epistemology based on feminist objectivity or, as she puts it, one of *situated knowledges*, where one positions themselves by acknowledging and understanding the contingency of their own position in the world. By doing so one obtains a more objective (partial) perspective than those who claim to be neutral observers. She concludes: "The moral is simple: Only partial perspective promises objective vision."[10]

These partial perspectives would be acknowledging that the things we perceive are situated and seen through our own bodies, equipped with stereoscopic vision. Opposed to this partial perspective is what Haraway refers to as the *god trick*, which she describes as a false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility.[11] This conquering gaze from nowhere claims the power to see and not be seen, to represent

while escaping representation.

> Cradled in a nest of membranes, the embryo (magnified seven times) celebrates a milestone at eight weeks. Though only the size of a walnut, it has all of its basic organs and systems. Now the embryo begins to test its muscles, which are growing daily. Its heart has been beating for one month, and the embryo takes on a more familiar, baby like appearance. Its head, now almost half the embryo's total size, signifies the rapid brain development that is taking place.[12]

To clarify her statement, she points to representations of unrestricted vision featured in the *100th anniversary volume of the National Geographic Society*. Images showing *outer space in the volume are a good example of this unrestricted vision.* Colour-enhanced imagery is presented as if were the result of someone going there and taking a snapshot, while in reality the pictured objects are light-years away and are measured and located using digitalized signals transmitted over great distance. Similarly, the second chapter of the volume focuses on "inner space": the realm where things exist that are too small for human eyes to perceive. In both chapters these objects are presented to us as indubitable recordings; photographs are being offered to us as unaltered and utterly transparent, as if they are similar to our regular family photographs. Yet in order for us to be able to perceive the specific objects, someone or something must have tailored them to our stereoscopic human vision. These representations are thus mediated, edited and colour enhanced depictions of things we are not able to see. This, she concludes is an illusion and a god trick, making us believe we could have taken that photo of outer space if we would happen to be there.

Spherical Eyes

How does this god trick resonate in contemporary cartography?

When I first read about the god trick, it reminded me (the millennial that I am) of Google Maps. Google maps plays out the the god trick in full glory. Without any effort, its users can see "everything" from anywhere. Within seconds, we can zoom from an overview of the whole world to a parked car on a Walmart parking lot. With their service Streetview, which was rolled out in 2007, Google provided their users with millions of 360-degree panoramic images, so that they could virtually gaze at cities, streets and their neighbours' backyards.

With stunning resolution, these images are presented to us as objective. They pretend to provide a clear and neutral depiction of *what is out there*. But it seems that the body of the authors is excluded in these spherical photographs. Sometimes we might notice a shadow of a car, or a tripod standing on the ground, revealing a glimpse of the viewpoint of its author, but in most images these traces are eliminated and replaced with a blurred patch of asphalt, gravel or grass, leaving us floating in an orb. With their online mapping service, we can see everything yet we cannot see them. All is represented apart from the body. Google teaches us how to look; meanwhile, we forget how to see. These high-definition images trick us into believing that we are looking at reality. We forget both that these seemingly neutral images are taken from someone's partial perspective, and that they consist of many different smaller images stitched together into

a sphere. Google blurs out not only faces and license plates in Streetview's pictures, but also, seemingly, the partiality and the subjective nature of the world we live in.

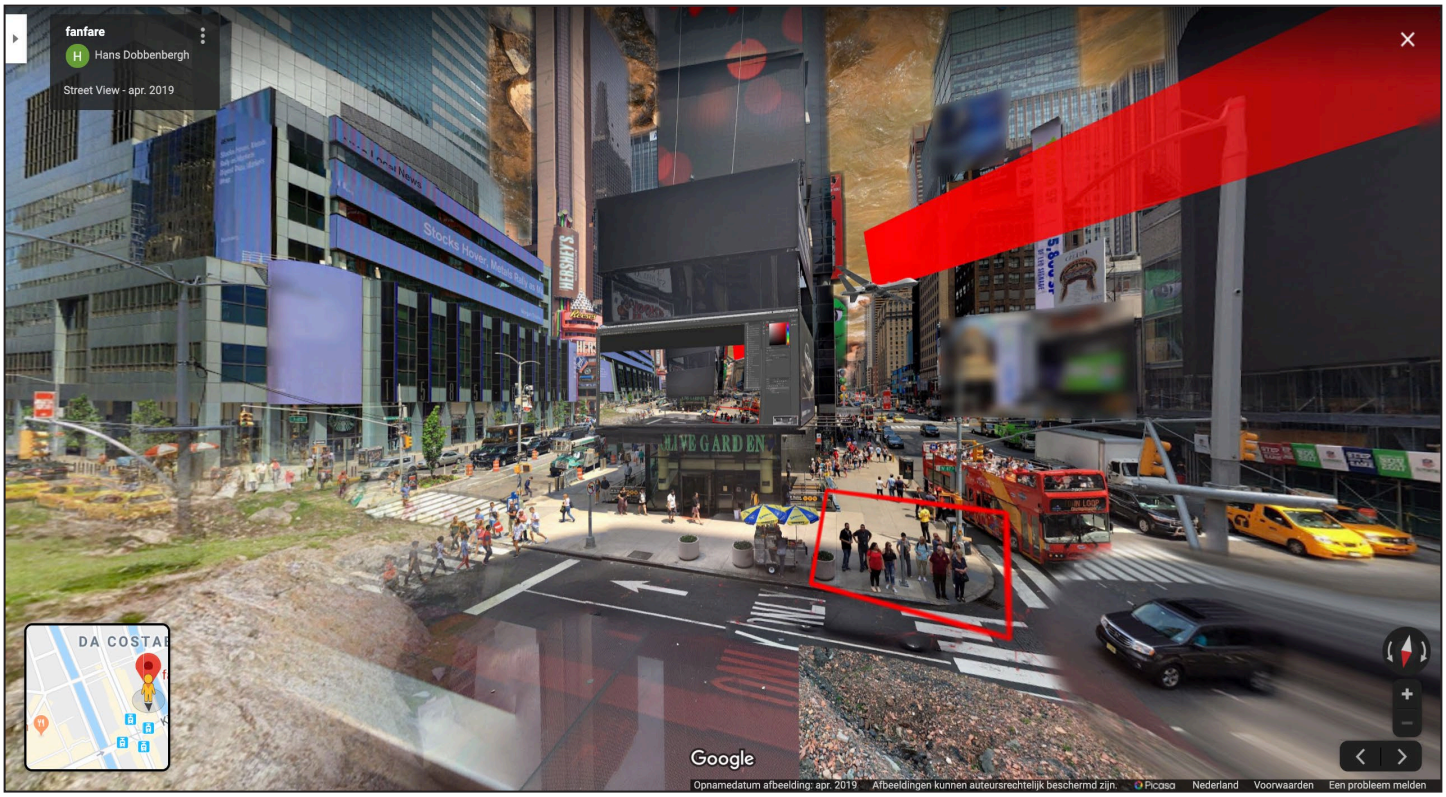
There is a certain paradox that takes place when we observe the world through the wide-angle lens of a 360-degree photograph: you are at the centre of the world, everything revolves around you like a spherical universe, yet at the same time your body is missing.[13]

A classic god trick.

Screen capture of Google Streetview revealing a glimpse of the author.

On their website, Google promotes their service as follows: *"Street View's content comes from two sources: Google and its contributors. Through our collective efforts, we enable people everywhere to virtually explore the world."*[14] As Google puts it, we get the sense that the company and its contributors are working on this immense collaborative project together. But what does contribution imply within this structure? From a business perspective, it is basically free labour for Google. Instead of having to drive their expensive cars through the streets, now freelancers do the job for them. This is where I saw the opportunity to contribute and intervene within the existing structure.

Why haven't we yet seen a 360-degree panorama of their authors? If we were to have a clearer image of the creators of these images, it would also clarify that they have been taken from a specific, partial viewpoint. Last year I contributed with a series of 360-degree photographs. Instead of buying a 360-degree camera, I decided to rip existing panoramas from Streetview, cut them up, and assemble them as new worlds, new terrains for locations yet to be determined. They depict suburban areas with skies that are made of aluminium tubes, waterfalls that morph into parking lots, and a scene of Times Square where, instead of the faces of pedestrians, the billboards with advertisements are blurred. Landmarks or other familiar signs that give us anchoring points



Altered Streetview image uploaded and geotagged on the Tetterode building in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (April 2019)

to help us orient, objects that we recognize, are now scattered across the screen; signs that would gather on the ground are now gathered in the clouds. Infrastructural and graphical signs such as arrows and crosswalks lead you in impossible directions. With these (micro)interventions I want to let the spectator experience disorientation, so that they then might start to think that orientation is not self-evident.

Disorientation

As I argued earlier, the conventions of orientation are arbitrary. So how do we know which way to turn in order to reach our destination? Perhaps we need to take a little detour. Before we know which way to go we might have to first head in the wrong direction. In these moments of disorientation we become aware of what it means to be orientated in the first place. A specific method for disorientation I find very useful is the psychogeographic technique of urban strolling called the *Dérive*, which one of its leading theorists, the French situationist Guy Debord describes as: *"a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances."*[15] During this practice, one or more persons drop their usual motives for movement through an urban environment and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. A Dérive aims to study the terrain of a city through emotional disorientation, in the hope that by doing so one will discover its psychogeographical contours.

In the "Theory of Dérive,"[16] Debord describes the parameters for a successful Dérive, but several groups have adapted the Dérive and altered it to their specific needs. There are myriad ways to perform a Dérive. Some techniques I found useful are (in no particular order):

1. Taking a cab to a random location
2. Drawing a circle on a neighbourhood map and trying to stick as closely as possible to the circle
3. Taking a map of one city and drawing a route on it that you will then follow in another city of your choice.
4. Walking straight as long as possible.
5. Walking an imaginary dog through town.
6. Following someone or something

While all such techniques are different in nature, they all enact a performative revolt against the predictable and monotonous experience of everyday city life. Unlike a stroll or an aimless walk, the Dérive aims to go against the path of least resistance, by doing so creating an environment of disorientation. I have discovered that it is during these moments of disorientation that you start to think about what it means to be oriented in the first place. Suddenly you realize you experience orientation as something you do not have.

With my Streetview interventions, I try to evoke a similar feeling of disorientation. While I'm not sure wether it's truly possible to perform a Dérive in Streetview – after all, you're still using their service and will always be restricted by the limits of their interface – psychogeographic walks did however help me to shape and assemble these interventions. I see the collages as an attempt to translate these experiences into images. In the spirit of the situationists, who aimed to take pedestrians off their usual paths and raise an awareness of the patchiness of urban environments, by deconstructing these images and assembling them as new worlds I aim to disorient the viewer and ultimately make them aware that they are looking at a patchwork of images. While Google tries to present a "seamless" translation of our world, I'm interested in exposing seams, showing where the images are stitched together.

Turn, Turn, Turn

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed takes up a more theoretical approach to the concept of orientation. Wanting to start a dialogue between queer studies and phenomenology. Ahmed asks, "What does it mean to be orientated?", and argues:

In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation. When we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated: we might not even think "to think" about this point. When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have. [...] How do we begin to know or feel where we are, or even where we are going, by lining ourselves up with the features of the grounds we inhabit, the sky that surrounds us, or the imaginary lines that cut through maps?[17]

Imagine walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room. You don't know where you are, or how you relate to the contours of the room. How would you find your way around the room? To become oriented in this situation, you could argue that

you have to know the difference between the left and right sides of your body – only then you could know which way you are turning, you can then situate yourself in relation to objects in the room. On a basic level, orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn once we know which way we are facing. But with what should we align our bodies in a digital space so huge it seems humanly incomprehensible? And if we would know where we are facing, to which side should we turn?[18] Should we even think in terms of opposites like left and right, or could we turn in multiple directions simultaneously?

When Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing was writing *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, I imagine she was facing similar questions. When dealing with huge issues such as, for instance, the precarious condition of a planet that we have made a huge mess of, it seems out of place to tell either stories of industrial progress and modernization or to end the story with decay. Instead, Tsing turned to mushroom picking. Through tracking the commerce and ecology of *matsutake*,[19] Tsing takes up the story of precarious livelihoods and precarious environments. Unlike imagining precarity as the exception she suggests that precarity is the condition of our time: since we are unable to rely on stable structures, appreciating precarity might make it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible.

Instead of picking mushrooms, I decided to pick the title for this essay from Anna Tsing:

> The modern human conceit is not the only plan for making worlds: we are surrounded by many world-making projects, human and not human. World-making projects emerge from practical activities of making lives; in the process these projects alter our planet. To see them, in the shadow of the Anthropocene's "anthropo-," we must reorient our attention. Many preindustrial livelihoods, from foraging to stealing, persist today, and new ones (including commercial mushroom picking) emerge, but we neglect them because they are not a part of progress. These livelihoods make worlds too—and they show us how to look around rather than ahead.[20]

Opening up to think through precarity and allowing oneself to become disoriented seem closely linked to each other. I consider both to be methods of unlearning that teach us *how to look around rather than ahead*. If precarity is life without the promise of stability,[21] and if orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but also to *who* or *what* we direct our energy and attention,[22] then disorientation, like precarity, might give us a new way of thinking about how we are directed towards objects, and in turn what we align our bodies to.

We might notice the lines that direct us, and we might seek stories that have been ignored. It might be frightening to think of a world without stable ground, without a north as up, but eventually it could allow us to reopen our imaginations and bring us back to curiosity and multiple partial perspectives. When thinking through precarity or out of disorientation, we will have to look around out of necessity, out of the need to orient ourselves.

Perhaps foraging and mushroom picking could serve as an appropriate metaphor for my position In order to *survive*, I'm looking around, picking twigs out of the metaphorical forest that is Google Maps. From our surroundings that Google has so violently scanned, altered, stitched together and uploaded to their servers, I'm foraging for the glitches, stitches, textures and seams that make up the patchwork. By reassembling these "twigs", turning them around and placing them next to each other, I attempt to catch a glimpse of the digital ruin that we are actually looking at. Through unraveling parts of the digital fabric that covers our earth, I aim to unwrap tales of linear progression and map out the blurriness of our world, creating a narrative assembled from specific ways of looking.

Looking around might be a provocative method of inverting the god trick. Looking around implies unlearning the map, mediating the images that are presented as unmediated, and questioning the authority that decides what is in focus and what is not. We can decide not to align with the straight lines that direct us; we can create a landscape assembled from partial perspectives that tell stories of patchiness and entanglement. No conquering gaze, but multi-directional glances from many different bodies. Glances that all together could be weaved in a new narrative. One that reorients us to curiosity and teaches us how to look around rather than ahead.

Notes

1. And still is in some cities, but with outdated imagery and a lot of blurred buildings.
2. Harry McCracken, “Alas, There Will Be No More Google Street View in Germany,” Techland.time.com, April 11, 2012.
3. David Turnbull and Helen Watson, Maps Are Territories: Science Is an Atlas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.
4. Peter van der Krogt, “Het noorden boven,” Geografie 21, no. 4 (April 2012): 16–21.
5. van der Krogt, “Het noorden boven,” 19.
6. Turnbull and Watson, Maps Are Territories, 8.
7. Turnbull and Watson, Maps Are Territories, 8.
8. Benjamin H. Bratton, “Geography and Geoaesthetics,” in The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
9. “Who are Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway?,” interview by Stine Jensen, uploaded March 8, 2013, video, 01:05, https://youtu.be/lZYPDg16fvc
10. Donna J Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991), 190.
11. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women, 190.
12. C.D.B. Bryan, The National Geographic Society: 100 years of adventure and discovery (New York: Abrams, 1987), 463.
13. Hito Steyerl, “Bubble vision” (talk), January 25, 2018, video, 44:11, Stamps School of Art and Design, https://youtu.be/T1Qhy0_PCjs.
14. “What is Street View?”, Google, https://www.google.com/streetview/.
15. Guy Debord, Theory of the Dérive, (Les Lèvres Nues 9 November 1956).
16. Debord, Theory of the Dérive.
17. Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.
18. Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology, 6.
19. Matsutake are wild mushrooms that live in human-disturbed forests. Like rats, raccoons, and cockroaches, they are willing to put up with some of the environmental messes humans have made. Yet they are not pests; they are valuable gourmet treats—at least in Japan, where high prices sometimes make matsutake the most valuable mushroom on earth. Through their ability to nurture trees, matsutake help forests grow in daunting places. From: Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Prologue,” in The Mushroom at the end of the World (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
20. Tsing, “Arts of Noticing,” in The Mushroom at the end of the World
21. Tsing, “Arts of Noticing,” in The Mushroom at the end of the World
22. Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology, 3.