

Artist Babak Golkar is a Canadian of Persian ancestry whose life has been shaped by geographic and cultural displacements following relocations from the USA to Iran, and from Iran to Vancouver. Born in Berkeley, California to Iranian parents, Golkar returned with them to Tehran when he was less than a year old. He was raised in Tehran, and then immigrated to Canada at the age of nineteen. He speaks Farsi and unaccented fluent Canadian English, and lives in an area in North Vancouver called Little Persia. Not surprisingly then he easily takes on various guises for this project. Elusive identities are central to *Deriv(e)*, the *House of Sulphur*'s video component. Within the video the artist is heard but not seen. Golkar's disembodied presence, like that of the drivers featured in the video, signifies the experiences of anonymity and invisibility shared by immigrants. In each of his encounters with five cab drivers of various backgrounds, we register the import and implications of ethnic and cultural derivations. Golkar's ethnicity is evident to his fellow Iranians, but for the other drivers it is indefinable or unimportant.

The title of the video, *Deriv(e)*, plays on and with Guy Debord's "Theory of the Dérive." Debord's theory was a manifesto of sorts for the Situationist International, a radical 1960s movement that critiqued capitalism and consumer culture and aimed to resist the hegemonic production and control of social space. In its noun and its verb form, *dérive* signifies something similar to the English word *drift*: a *dérive* involves human motion and takes place in social space; to *dérive* is to move through a social space mapping "fleeting impressions" of an urban terrain viscerally encountered.¹

Golkar's "objective passional terrain" in *Deriv(e)* and in the *House of Sulphur* project is his own extended neighbourhood plus his and others' derivations. His spatial driftings during taxi rides and his conceptual driftings in conversations with the drivers begin from or end at either his home in North Vancouver or at Presentation House. Golkar investigates the histories and experiences of his subjects who, like him, are immigrants. During the artist's encounters with each driver we discover their unique but inter-related personal "psycho-geographies." Travelling by taxi, traversing North and West Vancouver and, in one instance,

riding westward from these municipalities to the Ferry Terminal at Horseshoe Bay, filming the passing scenery through the windshield, an unseen Babak Golkar assumes a slightly different identity for each drive and each driver. “Fleeting impressions” accumulate during consecutive drifts during which Golkar engages his drivers in conversation, soliciting their histories and their commentary on the social spaces through which they travel. Two drivers hail from Iran, two from India, one from the Caribbean. All are immigrants to Canada, and of course, each has a unique story to tell.

The *House of Suphur*’s three inter-related components include the video; a series of five chalk drawings, each related to a particular taxi ride; and a partial resurfacing of Presentation House, the North Vancouver building where the work is displayed in the *Moodyville* exhibition.² With two components within the premises of Presentation House Gallery and the third element on the building’s exterior, we cannot view all three elements simultaneously. We see parts, never the whole. The viewer’s passage from inside to outside the building, the project’s various media and forms, and its spatial and conceptual movements combine in an extended Situationist-style *dérive*, a drift from one form to another, from site to site, impression to impression, from one social space and “psycho-geography” into others. The project’s geographic “passional terrain” stretches across the attenuated contiguous urban development of Burrard Inlet’s North Shore; its psychological territory, more difficult to define, proceeds from the subjects, including the artist himself.

¹ “In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psycho-geographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. . . . The ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of fissures in the urban network, of the role of microclimates, of distinct neighborhoods with no relation to administrative boundaries, and above all of the dominating action of centers of attraction, must be utilized and completed by psycho-geographical methods. The objective passional terrain of the *dérive* must be defined in accordance both with its own logic and with its relations with social morphology.”

“*Théorie de la dérive*” was published in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (Paris, December 1958). A slightly different version was published in the Belgian surrealist journal *Les Lèvres Nues* #9 (November 1956) along with accounts of two *dérives*. This excerpt is from a translation by Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (revised and expanded edition, 2006).

² Presentation House is currently home to Presentation House Gallery, Presentation House Theatre, and the North Vancouver Museum and Archives.

House of Sulphur's hour and a quarter of looped and partially subtitled video footage plays continuously on a small wall-mounted flat-screen monitor within Presentation House Gallery. During a portion of the video, an English translation of a conversation spoken in Farsi appears in luminous yellow subtitles. The colour of these subtitles echoes the yellow line bisecting the wall behind the video screen, a line like those dividing roads and highways.

The video is accompanied by five drawings made with yellow schoolroom chalk. Each of the drawings represents an aspect of a “psycho-geography” disclosed and explored by a cab driver featured in *Deriv(e)*. The drawings include a monochrome or colour-field titled *Sulphur Mountain*, a silhouette of a Lamborghini sports car titled *A Lamborghini for Iqbal*, a silhouette of a man titled *Self Portrait as a Doctor*, an abstract composition comprised of two yellow arrowheads (like those that identify the BC Binning Residence, which figures in the video) titled *After, After BC Binning House*. The fifth drawing, called *House of Sulphur*, depicts Presentation House in profile. The yellow in these drawings and within the exhibition space recalls the partial resurfacing of the exterior of Presentation House itself. The repeated title *House of Sulphur* combined with the yellow of the five monochrome drawings, the line on the gallery wall, and the chalk covering the building's exterior, call to mind the two numinous sulphur piles that indelibly mark the shores of North Vancouver. Babak Golkar calls them sulphur mountains.

These sulphur piles sit on the north shore of Burrard Inlet between the two major bridges linking the North Shore with Vancouver. Massive and luminous, the sulphur piles are visible from downtown Vancouver and from much further afield, reputedly from satellites orbiting in space. Icons of North Vancouver, their mass ascends higher than any surrounding architectural structure. They are landmarks within the harbour and evidence of ongoing industrial activities within an exquisite and once pristine setting. *House of Sulphur's* repeated references to these sulphur piles evoke the history of their location, Moodyville, where the founding economy was based on natural resource extraction.

They also bring to mind Jerry Pethick's fascination with these giant yellow masses and his various uses of the material, particularly his use of sulphur to represent illumination, light, and sunlight. Golkar's references to the sulphur piles situate his project in a specific time and locale and unites its various

components—literally (by colour coding them), figuratively (with a metaphoric thread that maps the projects’ drifts from terrain to terrain), and conceptually (as a way of signifying continuous and embricated thematic concerns).

The yellow chalk applied to specific exterior surfaces of Presentation House makes the building appear, from a certain perspective, to emit the same sunny glow as the sulphur piles: the structure seems transformed into a house of sulphur. This treatment gives Golkar’s project its title. In an extended performance (a collaborative “drawing” accomplished with the participation of students from Emily Carr University of Art and Design) chalk was applied only to those surfaces of the building that are visible from the 7-Eleven store across the street. When closely inspected, it is obvious that only some of the edifice’s surfaces are transformed—as if the building has been prepared for a photo session or is in use as a film set. In addition to citing Greater Vancouver’s current designation as Hollywood North, or Brollywood, the surface treatment of the heritage-designated house produces a three-quarter view and thus a reference to perspective and photography. This manufactured image speaks to questions of artifice and authenticity, to the possibility of multiple truths and various simultaneous or consecutive appearances. Which takes us back to Golkar’s assumed identities and the cab drivers differing perspectives. The alteration to the building’s exterior—its public face—also emphatically differentiates its current public usages and identity (and its exterior) from its previous private (and interior) aspects. The abstracted drawings are reductions of the artist’s encounters with the individual cab drivers, souvenirs of those experiences, reminders of the dynamics between the cab’s interior (where the interlocutors are heard but unseen) and the passing landscape outside, the site of the cultural invisibility of the immigrant taxi drivers and the artist.

The project’s repeated use of the colour yellow—with its references to the sulphur mountains but also to the painted lines on streets and roads, lines that connect the recorded conversations between the interrogating artist and his taxi driver subjects—alludes to and acknowledges pedagogy, research, the import and unavoidability of history and the past, the potency of a *dérive*. The footage of visits to and conversations about specific sites—for instance, the affluence of the neighbourhood in which the BC Binning Residence is located and the harsh conditions on a First Nations Reserve—are exemplary of the wide spectrum of

present social, economic and cultural conditions and the dramatic differences between everyday lives within a locale.

House of Sulphur's various components manifest the artist's objective yet passionate research into his own derivations—the sources of his sense of self, his history, but also his current interests and the derivations of the places in which he drifts; also, the histories and experiences of his interlocutors, the taxi drivers, who initially present their public personae but drift occasionally, when encouraged and engaged by Golkar, into more intimate reveries and disclosures. These various derivations are the source for the title *Deriv(e)*, which in the alliteration also suggests the *drives* (noun and verb) which take us into a “passional terrain” and toward a “psycho-geographical” understanding of urban experience.







