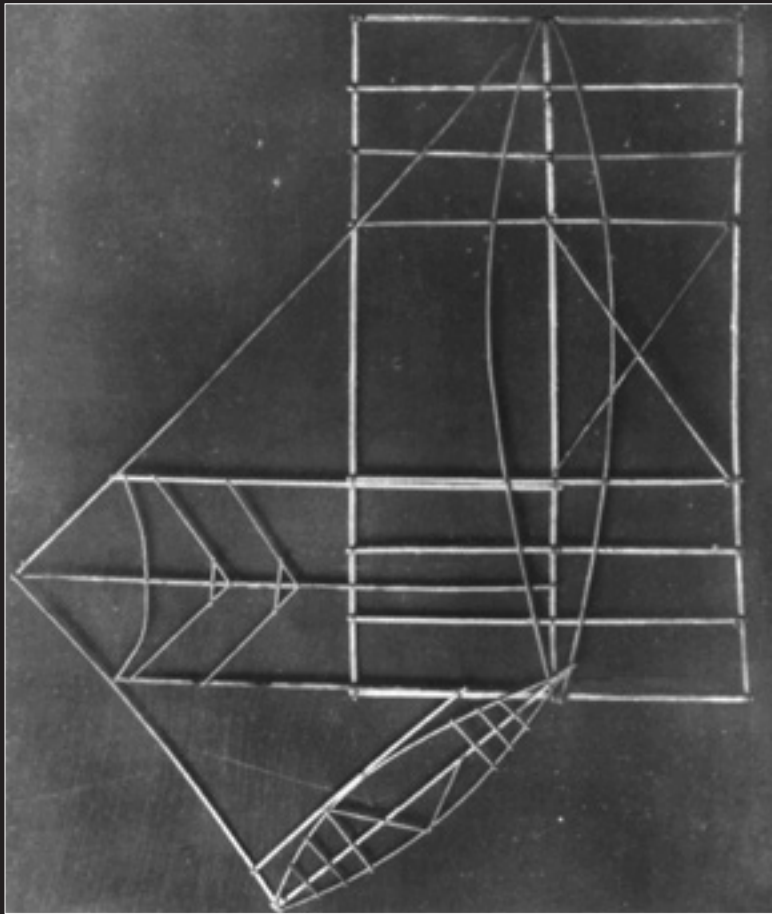


The Museum as Archipelago



Example of a "Maddo," 160cm, from Captain Winkler, "On Sea Charts. Formerly Used in the Marshall Islands, with Notices on the Navigation of These Islanders in General," *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1899, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1901), 1:487–508, esp. pl. VIII.

by Anna-Sophie
Springer

I imagine the museum as an archipelago.

—Édouard Glissant

In 1948, the geography department at Harvard University was shut down for being “hopelessly amorphous” and for failing to produce “a clear definition of the subject” or to “determine its boundaries with other disciplines.”¹ This essay emerges from a much newer discipline, one that, in contrast to geography, has only just begun to exist as a proper academic field, but that is nevertheless enjoying its precocious status and attracting increasing theoretical interest. Within the upstart discipline of “Curatorial Studies,” curatorial practice departs from the idea that curating historically entails caring for artifacts within the institution, enabling the current discourse to turn its attention toward investigating and contouring forms of creative and critical agency, thus resulting in the production of knowledge with a performative element that has been called “the curatorial.” Like geography’s struggle for a convincing self-definition in the 1940s, curatorial practice today struggles with its own fluid boundaries. This fluidity, however, is the field’s strength; in what follows, I argue that far from being conceived of as a weakness, the openness of contemporary curatorial practice finds a retroactive and productive affirmation in the geographic and spatial theories that distinguish between settler and indigenous cartographies.²

Machining Knowledge

The island was spread out under their eyes like a map, and they had only to give names to all its angles and points.

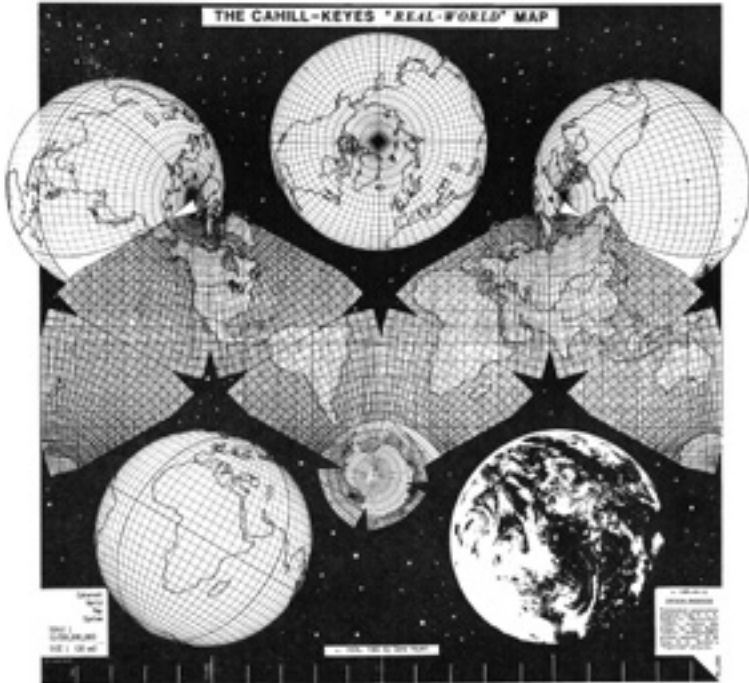
—Jules Verne

Most fundamentally, a map is an *eidetic*—visual, but also mental—representation of an area. Such a form of representation is connected to an activity of production, including navigational devices and models of surroundings, that is nearly as old as recorded history.³ But maps, whether we look at Roman, Greek, Chinese, or early European explorers, have also been important “weapons of imperialism”⁴ and “tools for projecting power-knowledge,”⁵ enabling and expanding the scope and violence of countless colonial endeavours. In fact, it was during the colonial scramble of the nineteenth century that “a pen across a map could determine the lives and deaths of millions of people.”⁶ In this instance,

the map both anticipated and actualized processes of human cultural intervention, rendering them conceivable and actionable. Despite this material actualization, however, it is important to stress that maps are, in a large part, *fictions* of factual conditions; as human-made interpretations of the world, they foreground certain elements while leaving out others. What this means is that a map is not simply a mirror image of the world but a creation with “semantic, symbolic and instrumental” content.⁷ Therefore, maps do not represent anything; instead, they produce effects by organizing knowledge and constructing perspectives. They are performative tools that can both frame and undo territories; read optimistically, every map has the potential to produce a new and different world.

One such example is R. Buckminster Fuller’s “Dymaxion Map” of 1943. While our common Mercator projection privileges Europe and North America through orientation and distortion, Fuller’s projection

Koyuk Dancing Coat made of reindeer skin. The bleached disks symbolize the stars and constellations of seasonal skies, the waistband the summer Milky Way. Image from David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, eds., *Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, Vol. 2, Book 3, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Plate 14.



Draft version of Cahill-Keys "Real-World" Map, 1984. Actual scale of original digital image is 1/100 million. This map is adapted from B.J.S. Cahill's octahedral "Butterfly" projection, published in 1909. The graticule was newly devised, computed, and drawn by Gene Keys in 1975, along with the coastlines, boundaries, and overall map design. Image courtesy of Gene Keys.

unfolds the earth into a poly-directional icosahedron, depicting the seven continents as a chain of islands ("one island earth") and the oceans as a connected, fluid mass. The triangles of the map can be rotated towards each other in different ways, each time offering a radically different but always valid configuration, making the Dymaxion Map a rare specimen of a world map that does not depend on a predetermined perspectival centre.⁸ It is exactly this kind of approach to mapping that Deleuze and Guattari encourage in their ground-breaking text "Rhizome," in which they use the concepts of map and rhizome almost interchangeably over several passages:

Make a map not a tracing! [...] What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. [...] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. [...] The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged "competence."⁹

According to Deleuze and Guattari, a tracing is nothing more than a reductive reproduction of given assumptions. Making a map, on the other hand, becomes a productive and often physical engagement with a territory that conditions the rhythmic relations of time and space.

Deleuze and Guattari's laudatory estimation of the practice of mapping finds ample support within the history of cartography. The Polynesian stick chart, for example, emphasizes subjectivity, embodiment, direct experience, and connectivity. Used at least until the end of World War II to canoe from atoll to atoll and island to island in the Marshall Islands region of the Pacific Ocean, these maps were constructed as open frameworks from coconut fronds and tiny seashells to symbolize ocean swells, and the wave and crest patterns of the ocean surface. Made by the navigators themselves, these maps reflected their individual, physical experience in the open sea, varying so much in interpretation and form that they were readable solely to the author-cartographer. Contrary to many other navigation techniques, the charts were not taken along on

the trips but studied and memorized prior to departure, and the navigator would lie down in the canoe during the voyage to *feel* how the boat was moved about by the underlying ebb and flow. While this practice makes the map a bio-geographical tool, rendering it personal and idiosyncratic, it nevertheless suggests that these personal cartographies were crucial devices for creating a network of inter-island communication.¹⁰

Voyages and Charts

Perhaps there never was a very first voyage that scattered the seeds of human habitation in the world's space. But we do know of the last of them, of poles conquered, deserts crossed, wilderness invaded. This is the end of all voyages. All possible encounters have been accomplished, undertaken, ended, foreclosed. The cycle is completed, the map of the earth has covered the earth. Space is inscribed upon the charts. The globe is perceived as a ball in a net of latitudes and longitudes.

—Michel Serres

The tension between "voyages" and "charts" is well documented by David Neufeld, a historian of the Western Arctic and Yukon Territory. His text "Learning to Drive the Yukon River: Western Cartography and Athapaskan Story Maps" examines how artifacts and landscapes necessarily embody different, possibly conflicting, cultural narratives, and questions how to deal with these differences productively. Through his estimation of cartographic difference, the practice of the curator finds especially valuable clues. By remaining particularly sensitive to the idea that different peoples' stories and histories "have shaped the way they experience, understand, and respond to the physical world,"¹¹ curators can unfold new relations to previously discounted modes of knowledge production and dissemination, and the values that attend to them. Neufeld uses a comparison between settler and native mapping techniques from the Dawson City region as a means to discuss issues of identity and cultural and environmental coexistence in the area of the Yukon River. The quintessential experience that he recounts from his fieldwork revolves around the oral instructions

ultimately bear within them an emblem of violent colonial conquest.

Like maps, curatorial projects are social constructions—“narrative spaces”—that shape our understanding of place and space. In Boris Groys’ estimation, “Every exhibition tells a story by directing the viewer through the exhibition in a particular order; the exhibition space is always a narrative space.”¹⁶ From this perspective, we can see how Neufeld’s description of the two histories of map-making also suggest two approaches to curatorial practice. If traditional museums have organized artifacts according to a particular history—in fact, using the artifacts to support and represent that very history and construct a particular identity¹⁷—contemporary curatorial practice can work to become more vulnerable and attentive to radically different, and differentiated, decisions and actions that create meaning and place. This trajectory finds a compelling resonance with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a “smooth” space, particularly when curatorial projects are designed as “an amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways.”¹⁸ Operating from within the tentative territory of a smooth space, a curator-cartographer can partake in making palpable worlds moved by fluxes and intensities more than by clear-cut, easy-to-grasp subject-object relations.

Moving Islands

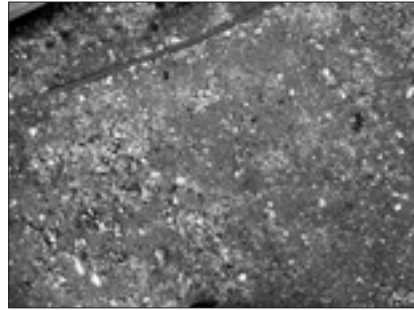
The matter at hand is: things that resist discourse, things that cut our tongues, and for which we have no words—things whose only spectator is savage.

—Vincent Normand

The exhibition *Journeys: How Travelling Fruit, Ideas and Buildings Rearrange Our Environment*, held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2010–2011, is an exemplary case of a curatorial approach that amorphously juxtaposed a number of different spaces—a thematic exhibition with different rooms and sub-topics, a book composed of theory disguised as short stories, a web platform and a series of live events—while fostering a sense of both navigational openness and conceptual connectedness. Curated by Giovanna Borasi and designed by Martin Beck, *Jour-*

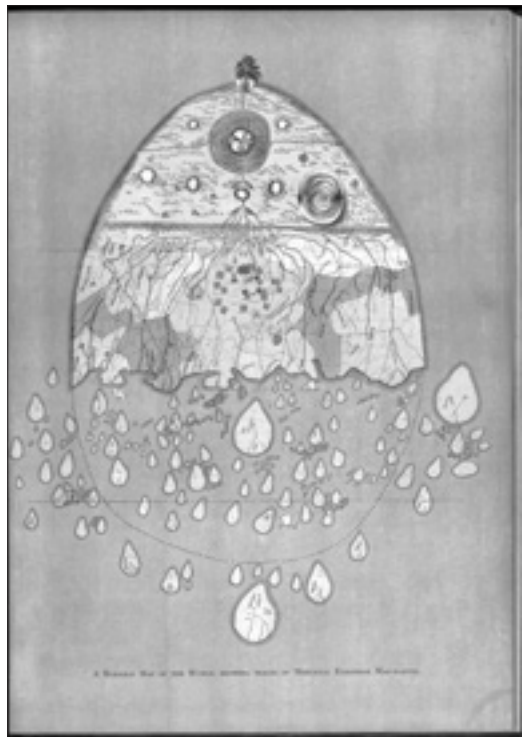
given to him from an indigenous elder on how to navigate the site of his historical and anthropological research. When consulted, the man uses a stick to scribble a pattern of a crucial part of the Yukon River—a conglomeration of sandbars and islands—into the ground. To the historian, these signs are as cryptic as the advice he is sent on his way with: “Just watch [the island in front of you], when it starts to move, turn and head towards the next island. [...] And when that island starts to move, turn away and you’re through.”¹² When Neufeld and his team reach the area by boat the sandbars do indeed appear, shift, and disappear in the water. But by following the instructions the boat actually makes it through the tricky area without running aground.

In retrospect, Neufeld tries in vain to find a rational explanation for the encountered phenomena and states instead that the elder’s experiential description is less about objective investigation than “about journeys and the relationships exercised during travel.”¹³ While the First Nations river man’s story-map of “moving islands” conveys his knowledge as conditioned by a participatory relationship with the land (in the sense of a “co-production of a shared world”), the settler approach is historically grounded in scientific, mathematical data-collection and guided by the endeavour to *master* the surrounding world; it is detached through an aerial perspective and oriented toward future outcomes such as “settlement, development, and production.”¹⁴ While the indigenous map is based on an engagement with a particular place in a specific time, creating a sense of *vibrant* geography actualised through the act of travelling, settler cartography assumes that the objects in the world are real when they are objective and independent from the cartographer, leading to maps that are “ethnocentric images [...] producing] an empty land [...] of unexploited resources and opportunity.”¹⁵ This notion of neutrality is, of course, an illusion that relies on a colonial ideology. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the longitudes and latitudes of the common, abstract grid have been modelled according to physical space/time synchronization with the chronometer on the Greenwich prime meridian at the Royal Observatory in London. The grid is thus a direct historical outcome of colonial British maritime power; instead of territorial neutrality, the settlers’ maps

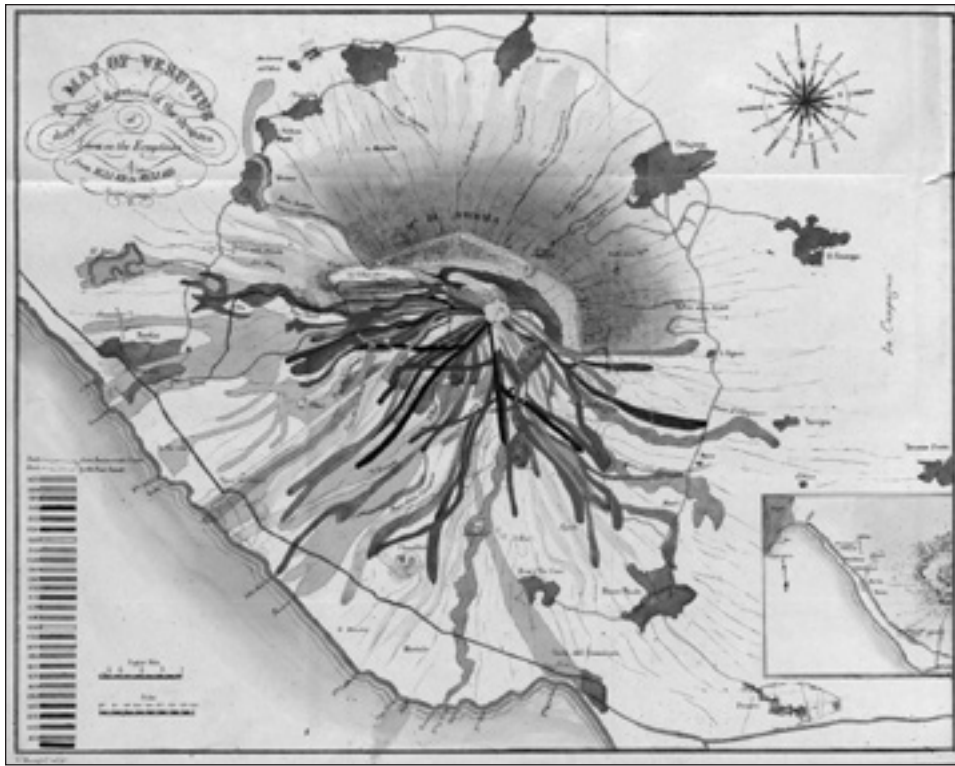


“Victor Henry’s Map, July 2006,” photo of the yard which the river man dabbed with his stick to explain the moving islands to historian David Neufeld. Photo: D. Neufeld.

Clement Valla, “Postcards From Google Earth (33°52'37.41″N, 118°11'22.05″W)”, courtesy the artist.

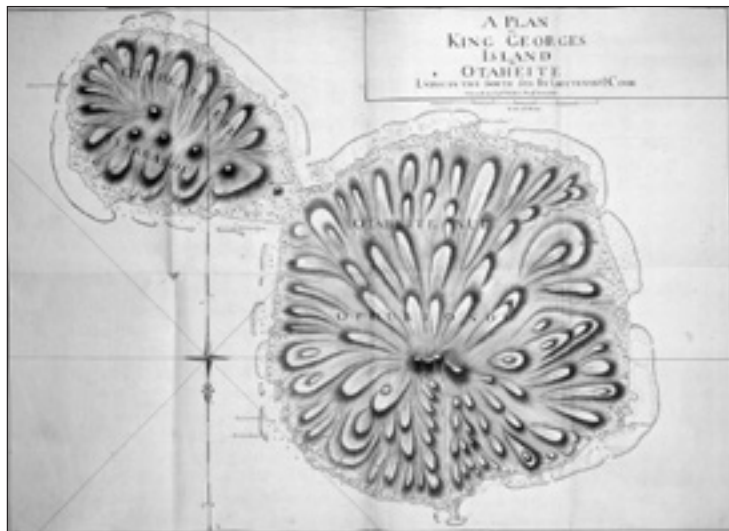


A Burmese map of the world, showing traces of Medieval European map-making. From R. C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats: A Phase of Spirit-Worship Prevailing in Burma* [1906]. Chronolithograph, Asian and Middle Eastern Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



"A Map of Vesuvius Showing the Directions of the Streams of Lava in the Eruptions from 1631 AD to 1831 AD." John Aulido, *Sketches of Vesuvius: With Short Accounts of its Principal Eruptions, From the Commencement of the Christian Era to the Present Time*, (Naples: G. Glass, 1832), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

James Cook, "A Plan of King Georges Island or Otaheite Lying in the South Sea, by Lieutenant I. Cook; Discover'd by Captn. Wallice the 19th June, 1767." Rare Map Collection of the State Library of North South Wales, Sydney.



neys confronted the phenomenon of global transformation and hybridization precisely by examining the production of space through displacement, dislocation, and movement. Borasi and her curatorial team considered how our physical surroundings are incessantly subjected to exchange processes occurring across architectural, environmental, and geo-political planes, triggering material changes which ultimately feed back into shaping the realities of the people affected. In order to invite visitors to navigate this assemblage, the exhibition was organized as a compilation of 15 thematic narrative zones visually distinguished by a colour scheme and mapped out according to a glossary of 15 concepts serving as frames for the case studies. The exhibits themselves included a diverse array of archival documents, museological and mundane objects, antique books, maquettes, maps, plans, videos, illustrations, art photography and, faithful to its title, even a coconut drifting through ocean currents. It was through this diversity and unconventional composition that the exhibition could provoke discoveries based on tensions, correlations, and curiosities.

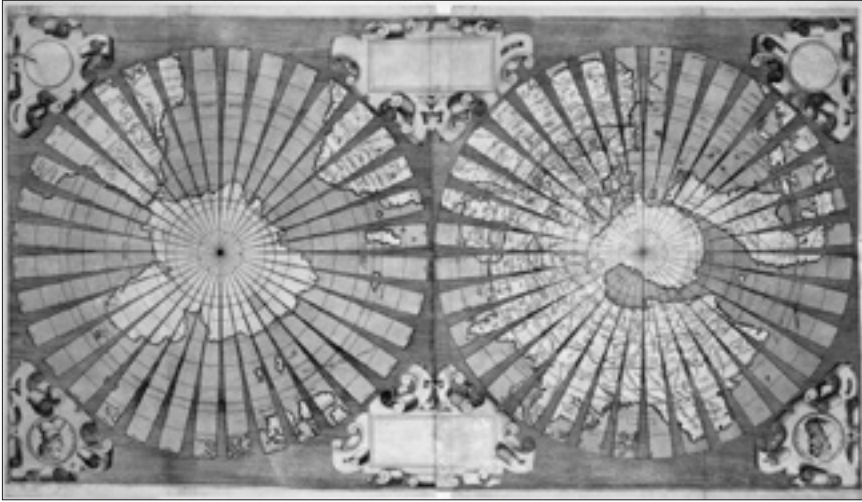
While Deleuze and Guattari were developing their innovative spatio-philosophical concepts of smooth and striated space in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the difference between the ideology of the modernist White Cube (as articulated by Brian O'Doherty) and the decentring strategies of Lucy Lippard (based on the work of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, among others) was being argued in the realms of art theory and scholarship. Echoing the critique of the illusionary construction of settlers' maps, O'Doherty argued in a series of essays published in *Artforum* that the White Cube of the modernist gallery space is built upon an illusion of neutrality: "The white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion. It stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions. [...] The development of the pristine, placeless white cube is one of modernism's triumphs—a development commercial, esthetic, and technological."¹⁹ Accordingly, the art displayed in the context of this "void" is set apart from the world and can seemingly take on its own life, existing independently from social, historical, or political contingencies. What really is the case, however, is that the architecture of the cube becomes

a frame—a grid structure—that signifies the affirmation and unification of certain ideas and values by excluding a great number of others. This exclusionary aspect is something the feminist thinker and curator Lucy Lippard has confronted in her curatorial work. Reminiscent of the "vibrant geography" acknowledged and produced through indigenous mapping techniques, Lippard's practice sees sites and places as crucial elements of meaningful art practice. In her words,

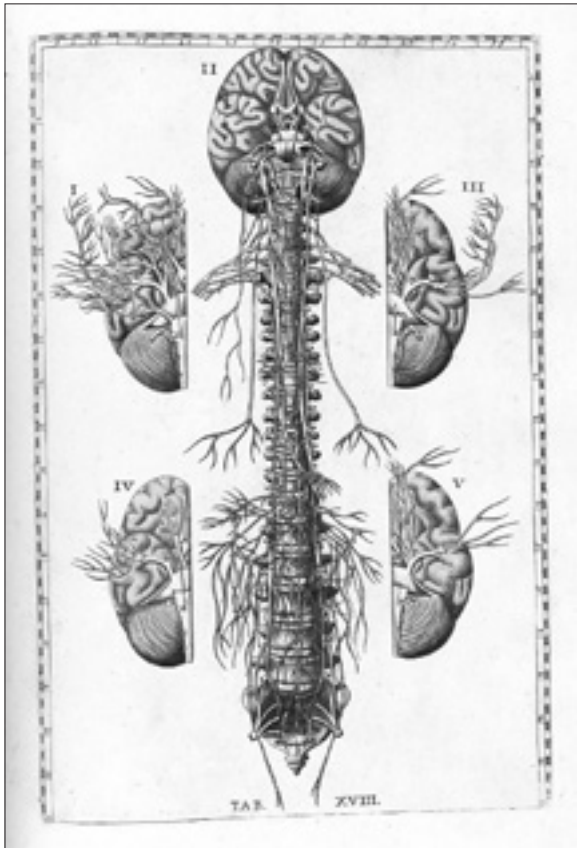
Art that illuminates its location rather than just occupying it is place-specific [...], incorporating people and economic and historical forces as well as topography. It usually 'takes place' outside of conventional venues that entice audiences through publicity and fashion. It is not closeted in 'white cubes,' accessible only when admission is paid or boundaries are breached. It is not readable only to those in the know. [...] It makes places mean more to those who live or spend time in them.²⁰ Like in the two types of mapping described by Neufeld, or the concepts of smooth and striated space in Deleuze and Guattari, the difference for Lippard is signalled by her emphatic refusal of the alleged objectivity or neutrality of the gallery space.

In comparing the roles of the cartographer and the curator, we might now ask more directly: what does Antillean philosopher Édouard Glissant mean when he says, "I imagine the museum as an archipelago"? Essential to Glissant's notion of the archipelago is the idea of a fragmented territory that cannot be reconciled under a collective identity but which instead must accept individual identities as the diverse multiplicities which they always are. Like a Dymaxion Map, a "moving islands" story map, or a Polynesian stick chart, the curator operates on the institution to make it leak; curatorial practice, as a cartography of the fluid, works to create a decentred space that does not operate according to absoluteness, objectivity, or synthesis, but rather invites a multiplicity of interconnections brought about by conjecture, memory, sensation, excess, and reflexivity. In moving toward this curatorial invitation, we could do worse than to appropriate James Corner's description of mapping as our own cartographic guide:

As both analogue and abstraction, then, the surface of the map functions like an operating table, a staging ground or a theatre of operations upon which the mapper collects, combines, connects,



Untitled world map on a double hemisphere polar projection with each hemisphere drawn onto 36 gores by Antonius Florianus, estimated before 1566. Rare Map Collection of the State Library of North South Wales, Sydney.



Bartholomeo Eustachi, *Tabulae anatomicae*, Table 18, engraved anatomical plates, 1783. US National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD.

marks, masks, relates and generally explores. These surfaces are massive collection, sorting and transfer sites, great fields upon which real material conditions are isolated, indexed and placed within an assortment of relational structures.²¹

If the curator acts as a cartographer, then mapping becomes her technique, and the map can be understood as the product of her work. This would not be limited to floor plans, didactics, or curatorial statements; such a method is inclusive of the curatorial practice as a mode of knowledge production. In other words, the curator as

cartographer establishes an attitude towards the world that partakes in making the world. Like a voyage through interminably moving islands, curatorial practice, to be effective as a navigational practice, would necessarily become vulnerable to physical contact, improbable exchange, and collaborative experimentation; such vulnerabilities would undoubtedly lead the curator far from the safety of the illusory horizons of representation, which is all the better for her construction of fictions, both real and imagined.✕



"Plate XI: Section from a Chart of 324,198 Stars on an Equal Surface Projection" from Richard A. Proctor, "Statement of Views Respecting the Sidereal Universe," *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 33, no. 6 (1873): 547.

Endnotes

- 1 See Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," in *Experimental Geography*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York: iCi, 2009), 28–30.
- 2 See, for example, Irit Rogoff, "Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality," European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, 2006, <http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling>; and Maria Lind, "On the Curatorial," in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 63–66. For positions that specifically address the relationship to artistic practice, see Beatrice von Bismarck, "Curatorial Criticality: On the Role of Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art," *Oncurating* 9 (2007): 19–23; and Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 43–52.
- 3 The oldest preserved world map originates from Babylonia, ninth century BC.
- 4 J.B. Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Iconography of Landscape*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 282.
- 5 James Corner, "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention," in *Mappings*, ed. Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion, 1999), 213.
- 6 Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power," 283.
- 7 Corner, "The Agency of Mapping," 216.
- 8 See R. Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1981). A predecessor of the Dymaxion Map is the Butterfly Map developed at the beginning of the twentieth century by Bernard J.S. Cahill.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 12.
- 10 See Dirk H.R. Spennemann, "Traditional and Nineteenth Century Communication Patterns in the Marshall Islands," *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1, (2005): 25–52; a less academic treatment of the stick charts can be found in a section about mental maps in Ken Jennings, *Maphead* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 20–21.
- 11 David Neufeld, "Learning to Drive the Yukon River: Western Cartography and Athapaskan Story Maps," *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives* 4 (2011): 22. Here I also want to express my gratitude to the artist Charles Stankieveh, not only for introducing me to part-time life in the Yukon, and to David Neufeld, but also for the many inspiring discussions we had while I was writing this essay.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 15 *Ibid.* See also Harley, "Maps, Knowledge and Power," 303: "Maps as an impersonal type of knowledge tend to 'desocialise' the territory they represent."
- 16 Groys, *Art Power*, 43.
- 17 See, for instance, Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex", in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 58–79, for a seminal text that critiques the traditional museum institution as a bourgeois tool for producing certain desired social values and ideals within its viewing public. Bennett shows not only how the arrangement of objects but also their display architecture and viewing rituals are directly connected to a rationalist approach and identitarian and territorial politics of representation.
- 18 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 476.
- 19 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), 79.
- 20 Lucy Lippard, *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 1995), 114.
- 21 Corner, "The Agency of Mapping," 215.

Bio

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