The Museum as Archipelago

by Anna-Sophie Springer

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

I imagine the museum as an archipelago.
—Édouard Glissant

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 “semiotic, 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...
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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.” 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.” 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.” 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.”

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 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 as a particular order; the exhibition space is always a narrative space.” 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 identity—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.” 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-
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 settler’s 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, aesthetic, and technological.”

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.”

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,
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Endnotes


3 The oldest preserved world map originates from Babylonia, ninth century BC.


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 Stankievech, 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.


20 Lucy Lippard, Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 1995), 114.


Bio

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