EXPERIMENTAL GEOGRAPHY

RADICAL APPROACHES TO LANDSCAPE, CARTOGRAPHY, AND URBANISM

Nato Thompson and Independent Curators International

IN TWO DIRECTIONS:
GEOGRAPHY AS ART, ART AS GEOGRAPHY

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Experimental geography, like it sounds, is more experiment than answer. The term, coined by Trevor Paglen, might bring to mind landscapes, laboratories, obscure cartographies, or a didactic analysis of a remote region of the world. And, ultimately, experimental geography is all these things. Paglen, a writer and artist based at the University of California at Berkeley, produces projects that move between a variety of discourses including those of the art world, the military, journalism, and geography, and the work in *Experimental Geography* has similar variety. While this collection is inspired by Paglen's overarching analysis, the work on display does not illustrate a complete theory—his or anyone else's. Instead, *Experimental Geography* should be considered as a new lens to interpret a growing body of culturally inspired work that deals with human interaction with the land. That is to say, the work here gains more intellectual heft when interpreted with an understanding of both contemporary geography and contemporary art. Interpreted in relation

to either field alone, the work may become clouded or, possibly, be given short shrift.

As opposed to works that demonstrate a single technique or subject (a collection of landscapes, for example), this collection represents a constellation whose entirety allows us to appreciate and consider the dynamic possibilities in experimental geography. Think of the works here as operating across an expansive grid with the poetic-didactic as one axis and the geologic-urban as another.

While these dichotomies aren't necessarily set in stone—the didactic can be poetic, and the geologic can be urban, and vice versa—these binaries provide an opportunity to appreciate the range of works presented here.

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When Andy Warhol reflected obliquely, "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it," many interpreted his Pop Art sensibility as in line with the non-representational strategies being hailed during the rise of abstract expressionism.[1] The surface was the work. But Warhol's acute observation was more nuanced. His deadpan quip implied the death of the subject in the face of a growing industry of visual culture. The television and film industries, not art, had become the largest cultural forces in the world—the mother of us all. Warhol's interest in death was not simply a morbid fascination but a realization that the individual was a product of a growing cultural machine. "Before I was shot," he once remarked, "I always thought that I was more half-there than all-there—I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life. Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television."

I begin with Andy Warhol because he is an accepted representative of the art canon. He is a complicated yet seminal figure, and his life and work define much of contemporary artistic practice. And while
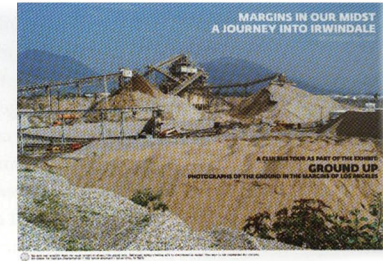
his work did produce a genre like Pop Art inside the discourse of art, it also tore a hole in the fabric of that discourse as well. The field of experimental geography (and many other interdisciplinary practices) derives from similar moments of theoretic rupture. They are born when the extant frame is not wide enough and we must begin to understand the mechanisms of power, finance, and geopolitical structures that produce the culture around us. Because of Warhol's consistent belief in the power of spectacle, his work lent far more cultural power and credence to the post-Fordist mechanisms of capital that were shaping culture across the globe. Television, not art, made culture. And thus, if we are to understand Warhol's work, we must understand television and not art.

Of course, this radical shift in the focus of the interpretative lens has been slow to catch on. Art historians continue to interpret artworks via the canonical history of representation techniques of the West. And let's face it, it is a lot to ask of an art appreciator that he or she understand entire geopolitical conditions before a Warhol work becomes intelligible. However, slowly, a far more informed cross-disciplinary practice emerges that attempts to combine insights from a vast array of disciplines to make cultural actions and projects legible, and meaningful.

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I would like to posit that The Center for Land Use Interpretation can be seen as the Andy Warhol in the field of geography. Based in Culver City, California, since 1993, CLUI is dedicated to "the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized and perceived."[2] Clearly the polar opposite in terms of a relationship to glamour (Warhol was obsessed with celebrities; CLUI is obsessed with landfills, airstrips, and freeway on-ramps), they both retain a dry form of pointing as methodology. Acting as a facilitator, each artist simply points to the phenomena that condition our lives. While Warhol dryly points at Marilyn Monroe, CLUI points at a water-treatment plant. (For a selection of CLUI's work, see pages 42–47.) Warhol wasn't explaining what these images mean so much as placing a mirror in front of the viewer and implying, "This is who we are." We are these images. It is not that we simply watch television, but that we take the phenomena around us into our ourselves. We become what we experience. The same can be said of CLUI, which points toward the geologic and urban conditions around us and indicates that these forces produce our sense of self. Tour busses, placards, and informational kiosks takes us physically to the spaces that comprise the land we live in. It might seem fairly dry to say, "This is a court house." But the overall implication is that we are the courthouse. We are the water-treatment plant. We are the land we live on.

The core idea at the heart of experimental geography is that we make the world and, in turn, the world makes us. This insight brings into relief an intimate relationship between what we consider culture and the spaces around us. In Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's video *take into the air my quiet breath*, 2007, a Syrian architect discusses the

Previous pages: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Yellow Sector* (from the *New Babylon* project), 1958. Collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Above: Andy Warhol, *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I),* 1963 (detail). Synthetic polymer, silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen, 90 x 80 in. (228.6 x 203.2 cm)

Above: The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Untitled (image and text panels depicting the programs and projects of CLUI)*, 2007. Inkjet print. 16 x 24 in. (40.6 x 61 cm)

unfinished construction project to build a massive building complex over a fourteenth-century Mamluk mosque in Martyr's Square in Damascus. (See pages 60–61.) As the story of bureaucratic infighting and conflicting administrations emerges, we find that this urban space not only reflects the complicated and cultural forces at work in Syria, but also continues these tensions as an abandoned unfinished social space. In their work, *Erosion by Whispers*, 2007, Raqs Media Collective (see pages 56–59) contrast ephemeral cultural forces such as rumors and whispers with the supposed static nature of architectural space. The juxtaposition lies at the heart of much of the work featured in *Experimental Geography*.

SPECTACLES IN SPACE

"At the opposite pole from these imbecilities, the primarily urban character of the *dérive*, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities—those centers of possibilities and meanings—could be expressed in Marx's phrase: 'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive.'"
  – Guy Debord[3]

In tracing historic antecedents for experimental geographic practice, an interesting location to begin is postwar France, with the works of Guy Debord and the eventual father of Marxist geography, Henri Lefebvre. Even before their intense discussions from 1958 to 1962, after Lefebvre had been expelled from the Communist Party, Lefebvre's writings exerted a profound influence on Debord and the avant-garde group CoBRA, particularly in his seminal book *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947).[4] In 1957, Guy Debord founded the Situationist International, a Marxist-inspired organization of artists and philosophers that came out of avant-garde associations including the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (an offshoot of CoBRA) and the Lettrist International.

Debord's early writings on what he called "unitary urbanism" and "psychogeography" clearly lay out a framework that is impressively consistent with the one employed in experimental geography: "Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. *Psychogeography* could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviors of individuals."[5] Taking this Situationist credo at face value, the artist kanarinka, in her *It Takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston*, 2007, runs the Boston evacuation route as a spatial interpretation of the post-9/11 urban condition. (See pages 86–89.) Installed as a series of jars with speakers inside, this psychogeographic project allows visitors to listen to her breaths, a reflection of behavior and psychologic condition, as she runs across this suggested evacuation plan.

THE NAKED CITY
ILLUSTRATION DE L'HYPOTHÈSE DES PLAQUES
TOURNANTES EN PSYCHOGÉOGRAPHIQUE
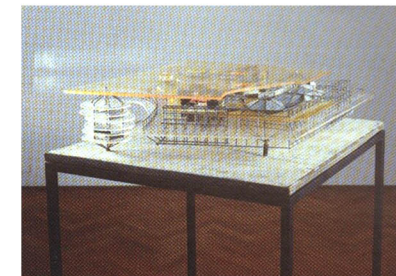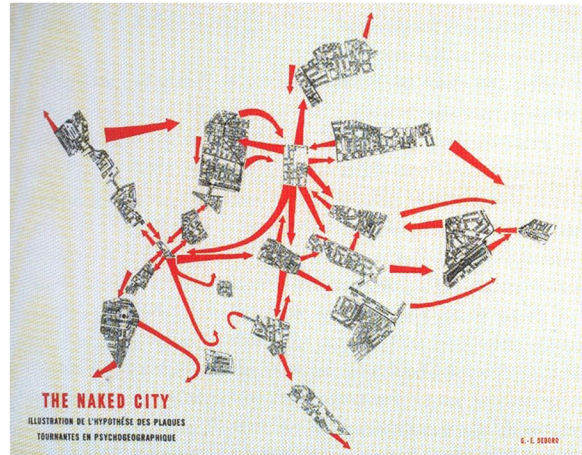
Debord's position (that our behaviors are a result of the ways we not only see the world but actually move through it) came out of a deep reaction to the largest French art movement of the early twentieth century, Surrealism. The Situationists, as well as precursors such as CoBRA with Asger Jorn, harshly critiqued the focus on the individual imagination that constituted the theories espoused by the Surrealist André Breton. "The error that is at the root of Surrealism is the idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination."[6] For Debord, the individual was only a product of larger forces of capital, and the Surrealists' dependence on the individual unconscious was deeply misguided if not flagrantly status quo. The Situationists cleverly inverted the Surrealists' Freudian-inspired mandate and made the subconscious mind a product, not a producer, of urbanism. If one wants to change the mind, one must change the geographic conditions that shape it.

In demonstrating the potential for psychogeography, Debord turned to cartography. His collage of 1957 titled *The Naked City* is formed from cut-out sections of a map of Paris. In juxtaposing and combining different sections of the city, Debord took the exquisite corpse of the Surrealists and applied it directly to urbanism. And more maps began to emerge. The Dutch Situationist Constant Nieuwenhuys produced numerous maps for his utopian city, New Babylon, a city based on the organizing principle of play. Cartography as a medium through which not only to reflect existing conditions of power, but also to produce new urban relationships, became an aesthetic and geographic endeavor. Today, this legacy has hit full stride. In his *We Are Here Map Archive*, 1997–2008, *AREA Chicago* editor Daniel Tucker displays a tiny portion of the multitude of artistic cartographic materials that have emerged in the last decade, including the works of Ashley Hunt, the Beehive Design Collective, and the important urban mapping collective Repohistory. (See pages 118–159.)

While often deployed as a vehicle for empiricism, maps inherently contain political assumptions (think of the earth sitting at the center of the universe before the Copernican revolution, or the United States at the center of a map before Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map) and

Above left: Guy Debord, *The Naked City*, 1957. Screenprint.

Above right: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Yellow Sector* (from the *New Babylon* project), 1958. Collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

some artists simply highlight these problematics. Artist Lize Mogel, who co-edited the book *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, contributes a map of World's Fairs titled *Mappa Mundi*, 2008. (See pages 106–109.) The World's Fairs, which coincided with the rise of modernism and the city, embodied both the industrial and economic shifts transpiring across the globe but also the utopian dreams they inspired. Mogel's map shifts the arrangement of the world to reflect a lost history of dreams, power, and aspirations. Ellen Rothenberg interrogates a bias in the very form of cartography in her *De-Stabilized Geography: Map 3*, 2007–08. (See pages 110–113). A cartographic wall piece comprised of camouflage seams and orange pushpins, her abstract work implies a synergy between militarism and mapping. To what degree do the abstraction of space, the display of roads, fuel supplies, and bunkers, imply an abstraction of bodies and lives?

This question and many others force us to reconsider not only the obvious politics of mapping, but also which maps we choose to use. Whose life becomes abstract? Whose world gains precedence? How is value assigned and distributed? In *AREA Chicago*'s *Notes for a People's Atlas* (2007–ongoing), the power to answer these questions is given to community members living in the vicinity where a map is distributed: Asked, quite simply, to draw their own maps, individuals can privilege personal spaces, family lives, forces or conditions of oppression, in the spirit of Constant Nieuwenhuys, for play. (Samples from the project are reproduced on pages 114–117.)

In the Jorge Luis Borges story "The Exactitude of Science," a group of dedicated cartographers produce a map of a city in such fine exquisite detail that it replicates the city itself on a one-to-one scale. The map becomes that which it interprets. We find that maps also reflect not only the physical reality, but also the social realities that space produces. If biases exist in popular maps, these same biases are reflected in the manner in which we move and experience our world. The Situationists were eager to point out that the forces operating in cultural production (which they referred to as "spectacle") had a spatial corollary. If capitalism had made visual culture an excuse for the production of consumers, so too did the structure of the social space. Like Andy Warhol, the Situationists collapsed the difference between an emerging system of cultural production and that of artistic production. Unlike Warhol, the Situationists aggressively articulated this phenomenon as the next logical step of capitalism and were dedicated to subverting and overthrowing its mechanisms of control. While Warhol was poetically resigned to the flow of Brillo boxes and Campbell's soup cans, the Situationists were hard at work developing techniques to counter the effects of spectacle. They called forms of resistance to the visual aspects of advertising *détournement* and its spatial equivalent the *dérive* (the drift): "In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain, and the encounters they find there."[7] In essence, the Situationists advocated walking.

A SIDEWALK HAS A PLAN

The art of the pedestrian has a longstanding relationship to the city. Looking at mid-nineteenth century Paris (the Second Empire), we find the emergence of the *flâneur* dovetailing with radical restructuring of Paris by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann in 1852. Haussmann was charged by Napoleon III to modernize Paris by broadening the avenues, which would facilitate troop movements as well as railway traffic, initiate better sanitation, and streamline the entire city. Haussmann produced a city whose composition clearly reflected an infusion of capitalism and military control into its shop windows and boulevards. In his never-completed *Arcades Project*, the magical Marxist Walter Benjamin evinced a fascination with the manner in which the new Paris shaped and produced responses to the city, particularly in the embodiment of the nineteenth century *flâneur*. As Rebecca Solnit writes, "the *flâneur* arose, Benjamin argues, at a period early in the nineteenth century when the city had become so large and complex that it was for the first time strange to its inhabitants."[8] The *flâneur* was a stroller who walked the streets of Paris peeking in shop windows and observing crowds. His attitude was of a refined distance that observed the evolving condition of modernity. During this period, the great poet of modernism Charles Baudelaire heralded the *flâneur* as the apotheosis of the artist in an emerging urban condition. Walking was the rage in the cities. Emile Zola would traipse the streets of Paris with a notebook gaining insights into the modern subject. Gustave Courbet would paint himself as the sojourner replete with walking stick. A sign of refinement and cultural reflection went hand in hand with a propensity for the stroll.

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau considered the politics of walking, "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered."[9] De Certeau's interest was in the forms of resistance and meaning that are produced in a mild sojourn through the city. Applying Foucauldian discipline to the antics of the pedestrian, de Certeau's strategy clarified the primacy of space and the walk as its interlocutor: "The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (*tours*) and detours that can be compared to 'turns of phrase' or 'stylistic figures.' There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of 'turning' phrases finds an equivalent in the art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*). Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses."[10] The city could be considered a language: a place where a short-cut across a yard or jay-walking were moments of personal flair. Loitering could be an aside, skateboarding a sonnet.

Ultimately, the discussion so far has laid out a simple framework whereby acts in space can be interpreted via the various forces that produce that space—whether it is walking, bus riding, interventions, or mapping, that is, an analysis of how culture is produced in space and, in turn, how those spaces produce culture. When Vito Acconci famously followed people in his *Following Piece*, 1969, the work gained more clarity with an understanding of the *flâneur*; the distanced viewer observing the crowd. His nonutilitarian, deeply personal journey also finds resonance in the Situationist *dérive*, as well as the city-as-language

concepts of de Certeau. And finally, his walking in the city is all the more comprehensible as we understand the forces that produce the sidewalks he saunters on. To tear the meaning of the work away from the conditions and forces that shape its environment is to limit its relevance. There are many walking-based artistic projects, including those of Marina Abramović, Adrian Piper, Francis Alÿs, and Janet Cardiff.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation will often use the "tour" as a form to introduce their guests on a bus to the uses of the land around them. (See pages 42–47). Take for example a trip to the industrial city of Irwindale at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains. As CLUI tour guide Matt Coolidge stated at the onset, "We will be going to some of the most banal and dramatic landscapes in Los Angeles, and by the time we are done, we probably won't be able to tell the difference." The tour bus visited the Durbin Pit (a massive site for mining the residue of the mountain range), Hanson Spancreet complex (a company that designed concrete support beams for freeways), and the Santa Fe Dam, among other sites. In personally visiting the gears of the city-machine, one realizes that the banal activities of our daily lives (plugging in a light, commuting to work, washing dishes) actually require a vast network of structures that exist in the same cities we live in. The collective e-Xplo, consisting of Rene Gabri, Heimo Lattner, and Erin McGonigle, produces GPS-guided bus tours with synched sound. (See pages 98–101.) As an auditory environment, the tour is meant to disrupt assumptions about place in order to insert a poetic read on site. Like Debord's *Naked City*, this montage of sound and speed allows one to restructure the given map of a city.

Understanding the forces that act on any given space requires a handle on numerous fields of knowledge. The Situationists, Lefebvre, and de Certeau provide a useful template for understanding how space produces culture, but these sources are just entry points to a vast reading of spatial phenomena. Any act has economic, racial, and sexual aspects, and thus resists easy containment in a frame. In her book *Evictions* Rosalyn Deutsche criticizes urban geographers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja for discounting the roles that gender and race play in the construction of power in space. When Adrian Piper dresses like an African-American male walking in the city in *The Mythic Being*, 1973,

Above: Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being* (film still), 1972-75

it would clearly be deeply limiting to interpret the work in a purely economic frame that excludes race and gender.

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Traveling through this environment, of course, can take many forms. Piper's intervention demonstrates a technique of performance that occurs throughout this exhibition. In tactically deploying their work into the parking lots, sidewalks, alleys, and bus benches of the metropolis, these artists either disrupt given power relations or reveal the power structures that remain hidden. Chaplinesque slapstick artist Alex Villar contrasts the basic functions of the body's movement to the structure of urban space itself. In his video *Upward Mobility,* 2002, Villar attempts to literally climb the building surfaces around him. Grasping onto corners and lifting himself on cornices, he flails in his attempt to move vertically as opposed to the designed horizontal nature of the city. (See pages 90–93.) In essence, Villar's videos make a viewer aware of just how coercive the city is as his efforts to resist appear almost comical in their futility.

In Deborah Stratman's *Park*, 2000, the artist produced a mobile facsimile of a parking-attendant booth. (See pages 94–97.) She then transported the quasi-security booth throughout the city of Chicago, letting it rest near abandoned lots. The introduction of this booth transformed the psychological nature of an abandoned space by implying an architecture of control. Drivers trying to park near the structure immediately wondered how to interact with this vacated station. In moving this structure throughout the city, Stratman makes evident the manner in which we, as participants in an urbanism produced via control, accept and expect this type of social interaction.

Through the work of Villar and Stratman, we gain an immediate understanding of concepts that might at times feel theoretically abstract or altogether mystifying. How does the city make us who we are? Simply put, a sidewalk is meant for non-loitering movement. A parking structure implies power that we immediately obey. But these works contain more than these simple ideas. They demonstrate play, and their implications far exceed such reductiveness. But nonetheless, these elegant and facile interventions allow us to appreciate one of geography's most critical contributions: culture and politics happen in space. We can point at them. In the wake of the art world's romance with post-modern theory, the fact that some artists and thinkers now find solace in an approach grounded in real sites with real histories might appear more reasonable. A postmodern critical malaise might find comfort in the arms of contemporary geography.

THE GLOBAL AND THE GENTRY

In Trevor Paglen's essay, he expands the reach of experimental geography to include the structures of the forces that produce culture itself. That is to say, culture does not happen in a vacuum, and neither do the ideas, careers, dreams, and exhibitions promulgated in the art world. The art world has buildings. It has offices. It exists in space. In taking this necessary leap, we must go from interpreting simply how the city works to how

the physical spaces of our world produce the various cultural discourses that comprise it (the art world, music, television, radio, film, computers, social networking, education, and on and on). If to understand Warhol we need to understand television, then today, in order to understand cultural phenomena, we must understand neoliberalism.

Because mid–nineteenth century Paris has been a touchstone for thinking about the rise of the city, we can use some if its basic characteristics as a template for uneven development in cities across the globe. As populations move toward the cities of the world (due to complex phenomena including post-Fordist manufacturing and the consolidation of agri-business), culture becomes increasingly streamlined by capitalism. As the bohemian lifestyle emerged in concert with the growing function of cities during the nineteenth century, in the twenty-first century this relationship to culturally produced space became an oft-touted new economy of "the creative class," to use a term coined by Richard Florida. In her book *Evictions*, Rosalyn Deutsche compellingly points out the manner in which cities have been restructured not by artworks, but by artists' lives: "When galleries and artists, assuming the role of the proverbial "shock troops" of gentrification, moved into inexpensive storefronts and apartments, they aided the mechanisms by driving up rents and displacing residents."[11] The term "gentrification," which fills the conversations of most city residents, brings to light the close proximity that cultural production has to spatial production. In his essay on experimental geography, Paglen asks practitioners to reconsider their relationship to economic status as cultural producers. That is, to use the argument Walter Benjamin articulates in "The Artist as Producer," to ask all participants in cultural production to be aware of the production part of their work. These conditions are not only produced by the role of culture within a city; but they produce the culture of that city in turn.

Gentrification and many of its various city-restructuring forces are certainly results of shifting global markets. As the role of the city increases, the city itself is being reshaped according to neoliberal principles. Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen reflects this porous intra-city connection with a series of suitcases with sewn-together cities inside made from the discarded clothes of the city's residents. (See pages 102–103.) This series, aptly titled "Portable Cities," reflects the manufacturing base that makes these cities possible while also highlighting an increasing sense of global mobility.

Globalism clearly dominated the discourse of the 1990s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ushering in of a neoliberal agenda devoid of a Marxist counter-argument, the jet-setting fever of global capitalism took hold. By the end of the 1990s, global biennials were sprouting up around the world, and the arts community saw an expanding function for the arts, not just in terms of global reach, but in effecting the production of urban space in general. Biennials were used for a variety of reasons, but many had to do with the positioning of the city in the global imagination. Museums such as the Guggenheim Bilbao took Milton Friedman's economics and applied them concretely to the production of a tourist-generated, post-manufacturing city.

As the initial gestalt of global capitalism wore off, certain tendencies in urban restructuring emerged. While the face of gentrification in the arts focused on the complicated role artists played in displacing themselves, the more obvious function was the rezoning of a city along racial lines. Gentrification has more than a capital component; on a global level, its effects are distributed unevenly. As the immigrants in the suburbs of Paris erupted in riots and the largely African-American city of New Orleans began to tear down the public housing after the traumatic damage of the Hurricane Katrina floods, the racialization of city planning became much more evident.

In their provocative look at the territory that defines Israel and Palestine titled *The Road Map,* 2003, the collective Multiplicity used a simple empirical formula: they compared the time it took for a person holding an Israeli passport and a resident of Palestine to go the same distance. (See pages 70–73.) The time for the Israeli citizen was one hour and that of the Palestinian citizen, five and a half hours. The inequity is unsurprising, given the vast array of checkpoints and obstacles to which a Palestinian resident is subjected. But what also becomes clear is the spatialization of a politics along religious and ethnic lines. This has implications in many aspects of everyday life. While this contested border region with its checkpoints and delays becomes a condition of daily existence, it simultaneously produces a political and cultural condition.

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But let us not forget the lochs, the mesas, the bluffs, the meadows, and the canyons. As much as I have focused on the increased role of the urban, these same conditions operate in what we typically understand as the natural world. Jeffrey Kastner's essay points out the collision that the Land Art works of Heizer, Smithson, and de Maria are facing as industrial forces rapidly encroach on them. The natural world does not appear to be as separated from the unnatural world as one might assume. While the illusory qualities of the term "natural" would have been difficult to discuss only ten years ago, today global warming has accelerated the specious dichotomy of natural/unnatural. As carbon emissions reduce the salmon run in southern Alaska, the globe wakes up to a startling and useful fact: It is all one system.

Artist Ilana Halperin had a sudden realization of this fact when she learned that tectonic plates move at the same pace your fingernails grow. To operate on a time scale equivalent to massive geologic phenomena produces a sense of connectedness that she describes as "geologic intimacy." She takes the process one step further in infusing the geologic with the domestic. In *Boiling Milk (Solfataras)*, 2000, Halperin attempts to boil milk in a natural hot spring. (See pages 52–55.) The gesture, while poetic, also provides an ambiguous key into the potential of a collapsed distance between the natural and unnatural.

Francis Alÿs deploys the power of metaphor similarly in *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002. (The work is also represented here on page 48 by a selection from *The Making of Lima*, which is about the making of *When Faith Moves Mountains*.) On April 11, 2002, five hundred

volunteers gathered at the base of a large sand dune outside Lima, Peru. Equipped with shovels, the collective mass attempted to move the dune forward by four inches. Like Halperin's, this work operates on the level of allegory and metaphor (Alÿs says as much in the title). Clearly, moving the sand dune forward four inches was an impossibility, but the rumor of its movement, and the power of the metaphor in attempting the impossible, are actually what were created. In a collection such as *Experimental Geography,* where the urge toward the didactic is healthy and at times productive and eye-opening, gestures such as those of Halperin and Alÿs make way for a more ambiguous relationship to landscape.

CULTURE MAKES DUST

To shift gears at the end of this essay, I would like to also question the concept of an interdisciplinary practice. While I have so far explicated in shorthand some of the historic and theoretic elements that produce a lens for interpreting the work included in *Experimental Geography*, I have not discussed the vicissitudes of the interaction between artistic and academic disciplines. If one were to ask those who are clearly working in the complicated terrain between fields of aesthetic and empirical investigation, the term "interdisciplinary" would produce an incredulous response. The term strikes many practitioners as grossly antiquated. But clarifying this relationship is important, as it is clearly a stumbling block for many who are involved. As this practice grows, and a field combining ambiguity, empiricism, techniques of representation, and education makes its way into popular practice (in art and in other fields) the question of what makes something "art" or "geography" will inevitably arise.

In answering this question, let's turn to two projects highlighted here by collectives whose very organizing principles imply a radical departure from traditional dichotomies of art and academia. Let's look at a project by the diffuse art collective Spurse. In *Micromobilia: Machines for the Intensive Research of Interior Bio-Geographies,* 2005–08, Spurse attempts to study all phenomena at the bacterial level. As they write, "This mobile laboratory allows visitors to understand the material reality by which supposedly separate phenomena (particularly the cultural and material) in fact, coexist and that there are simple strategies to investigate this." Spurse's project is a laboratory replete with cotton swabs, Petri dishes, dry agar medium, chalkboards, microscopes and refrigerators. (See pages 64–69). The goal is a participatory form of investigation intended to break down accepted semiotic categories of the cultural and the material. Reflecting the organizing principle of this exhibition, Spurse dramatically refuses to distinguish between phenomena that most of us consider absolutely discrete. How can a person be the same as a rock? How can the effects of a rumor be measured in the same manner as those of a river? By not privileging phenomena that we identify with humanity, we root out some of the biases underpinning the distinctions made between that art and geography. In an altogether different but equally radical

shift, the collective the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) uses the mantle of pedagogy to deploy a myriad of information-delivery mechanisms. As pedagogy is the art of teaching, surely art and most academic disciplines should find common ground here. How do we communicate with one another in order to understand the world around us? In pursuit of an answer to this question, we find techniques throughout this collection reflected ranging from the didactic to the poetic, from the urban to the geologic, that allow a unified field to emerge.

Ultimately, all phenomena resolve themselves in space. Cultural and material production are not simply abstract ideas, but are forces that shape who and what we are, and they do so in places we can walk to, intervene in, and tour. The work collected here emerges from this understanding and, ideally, provides a glimpse into a form of cultural production that we are just beginning to understand. Exactly fifty years ago, Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord began a discussion that went in two directions (one toward geography, one toward art), and it seems fitting that their seminal works dovetail here. For if who we are is a result of the cultural and material production existing today, then this subject requires the attention and fealty of every discipline across the board.

Notes

1. Gretchen Berg, "Andy: my true story," *Los Angeles Free Press* (March 17, 1967), p. 3.
2. See www.clui.org.
3. Ken Knabb, "In Theory of the Dérive," *International Situationniste #2* (December 1958), p. 51.
4. See www.notbored.org/space.html
5. Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology,* Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, p. 5.
6. Ibid, p. 19.
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