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MAPPING THE UNSEEN

"To go beyond… matters of visibility, presence and voice"

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When we enter the rooms of the *Mapping the Unseen* virtual platform, we encounter recurring lingering questions. We stumble upon them as we visit the different rooms, as if they were meant to remind us where to look and to (re)direct our attention.

> *How can something be represented that is **not present***?
> *How does **the unseen** appear in a transcultural perspective?*
> *How can a dialogue unfold about **a topic no one talks about***?

These questions shape the research project of *Mapping the Unseen* as an effort to bring forward, that is to make visible marginalised social topics. In a broader perspective, I would like to propose that these questions are also relevant in order to grasp the aims, methods and motivation of artistic research as the discipline of the arts which is mostly concerned with knowledge production and its inherent politics.

As represented in the virtual platform, notions of *invisibility, absence and silence* lurk in the background of the practice of artistic research. They constitute, so to speak, the landscape in which artistic research takes form as a practice that researches the unseen. They function as the negative space upon which *visibility, presence and voice* assume their shapes.

The platform is richly interwoven in many different layers. We have the actual happenings, their documentation and their inclusion into the virtual mapping. The first layer corresponds to the virtuality of the project. The project was conceived from the beginning as a virtual mapping which, considered from the point of view of the philosophy of the media, as I will explain later on, involves questions of consciousness as a relational phenomenon. The second layer could be conceived through the curatorial practice as a dispositive of knowledge production and bridging. Another layer is provided by the methodological pluralism which with which Mapping the Unseen threads its topics, borrowing methods from various disciplines and adapting them for artistic purposes. From the social sciences, these methods include: participant observation, auto-ethnographical recording, biographical workshops, oral history, deep hermeneutics and autobiographical narrative. From activist practices, it borrows the collaborative enquiry that takes place through online discussion forums, conducting field study, video documentation, rich description and reflection in action. In a further layer, we have the different artistic techniques used in the artworks themselves such as drawing, text, audio recordings, multimedia works, spoken poetry and performance, to name just a few.

The palette of methods and techniques displayed in the platform speak of an openness towards the notion of knowledge production and a flexibility regarding its findings. These

layers that interweave create not only a rich texture of impressions, but most importantly they are there to bring forward the invisible topics chosen by the bridges.

In the following lines I would like to use the multilayered nature of the platform as an image to think about the type of knowledge production that takes place in and through artistic research. Furthermore, I want to think about the tensions between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence and voice against silence, from the perspective of artistic research and through the lens of the virtual platform of Mapping the Unseen.

PRESENCE
*How can something be represented that is **not present**?*

In his text "The debate on research in the arts" (2005), Henk Borgdoff distinguishes three main aspects of the debate surrounding the specifics of the discipline of artistic research. The central question he puts forward asks about the distinction between the type of research carried out by artists and mainstream scholarship. He considers that "the issue is whether this type of research distinguishes itself from other research in terms of **the nature of its research object** (an ontological question), in terms of **the knowledge it holds** (an epistemological question) and in terms of the **working methods that are appropriate** to it (a methodological question). A parallel question is whether this type of research qualifies as academic research in its own right and whether it appropriately belongs at the doctoral level of higher education." (Borgdoff, 2005: 1)

Here I will leave aside the ontological questions, as well as the debate about the academisation of the discipline, to focus rather on the methodological and the epistemological character of artistic research. The question of knowledge production, distribution and its politics can be addressed through a methodological pluralism and in a further step also challenged.

While thinking about the epistemological character of artistic research, Borgdoff stresses the idea that "artistic research is the articulation of the unreflective, non-conceptual content enclosed in aesthetic experiences, enacted in creative practices, and embodied in artistic products." (Borgdoff, 2012: 143)

But what is this type of non-conceptual knowledge? How can we understand its political potential and why would we want to produce it?

Borgdoff highlights three examples from the western philosophical tradition that asks for the epistemic character of research in the arts. His genealogy includes "the liberation of sensory knowledge in Baumgarten, the cultural value of the aesthetic idea in Kant, and the epistemic character of art in Adorno" (Borgdoff, 2012: 153)
According to him, these three authors were already asking questions regarding the type of knowledge that can be produced by art. Baumgarten called it "analogon rationis" and linked it to sensory knowledge, that is knowledge produced through sensory experiences. In his Critique of Judgement, Kant distinguished between judgment of art and judgment of taste, while Adorno spoke about it as the faculty through which art reveals the concealed truth about the dark reality of society.

I would like to expand the genealogy proposed by Borgdoff and think about this "*je ne sais quoi*" of the arts, the non-conceptual order of knowledge in terms of a) its medial aspects b) its social implications and c) decolonial perspective.

It is important to extend the genealogy of artistic research to include non-Western knowledge practices and actors for which the artificial divisions brought up by science and methods have long appeared as such, as constructs that objectify, control, categorise and measure. In this sense, I believe that the classic genealogy of artistic research eludes and silences certain voices. Women and people of colour, indigenous communities and voices form the periphery have been ever since silenced by the regimes of visuality and the western understanding of authority.

I take these two perspectives, since I believe they are very present in Mapping the Unseen and as mentioned before, are helpful when considering notions of visibility and invisibility.

The perspective of knowledge production from the perspective of the media is directly linked with the philosophy of the mind and phenomenology.

Consciousness is not absolute, but changing and historical, yet its history depends on the history of the human media as communication devices: consciousness is mediation.

The media philosopher Marshal Mcluhan conceives of the mind as a relational and malleable phenomenon which is shaped by the media we use. In his theory, human beings create artefacts to extend our possibilities of living, adapting, and thriving in the world. All our creations, as well as what he calls the media, come to constitute extensions of our human capacities. In such a view, for example, the spoon as an artifact is an extension of the hand, the car is an extension of our feet, as it extends our ability to transport and to shorten distances, the pen for instance is an extension of memory, since it allows us to record information on paper, the radio would be an extension of our voice, which allows it to go further, to reach more people and so on.

The sum of all our artifacts creates a sort of environment. That means that the way we communicate and expand our capacities and abilities through our extensions directly influences what we are able to perceive. Every extension comes with a set of unexpected consequences. That is, while cars were meant to shorten distances and travel time, they had the consequence of structuring our cities as concrete grids. Print expanded our memory, while at the same time set our minds in a linear manner, thus alienating us from oral traditions.

Our media expands our senses and in doing so creates an environment. McLuhan explains this by referring to gestalt theory and the idea of figure and background. The figure is what is distinguished from the background, this means that the figure is what is visible and the background is what is there but actually becomes imperceptible, because the ability to distinguish the figure presupposes the ability to block out the background. Thus, the background is not perceptible as a distinct form but as an environment. I am putting forward this model because I think it is quite enlightening regarding how issues of visibility

and invisibility operate in his perceptual model. Visibility appears as a matter of focus. Which part of the totality of the image "of reality" do we address when we see something and "unsee" the background? And which type of environment allows for information to be visible or invisible, to be perceived or not perceived?

McLuhan conceived of artists as visionaries, as those members of a society who are able to bring forward the information contained in the background, the information which is latent but veiled by layers of habit, noise, interference and indeterminacy. He saw in art the possibility to render visible what normally would fall into the background as noise and interference, blocking our senses and abilities to grasp the consequences of the way we design our cities, media, social relationships, interactions and so on. Based on this idea, I would like us consider together the figure/background model to understand interrelationships between the artistic, the political and the aesthetic, as present in the platform of Mapping the Unseen. Furthermore, to think about the ways the unseen and the visible, silence and speech and absence and presence interact in the fields of knowledge, communication and the shaping of social relationships in a much more complex way than a mere "show and tell" exercise.

In *Mapping the Unseen* we can find the workings of exactly this mechanism. The platform functions in this way, not only through its virtual interface which could be seen as a metaphor for this model but also and mostly through the visibility of topics which are not present otherwise. We need to imagine and to relate. The connectivity fostered by the act of mapping not only connects topics and agents across different geographical spaces and among cultures, but also poses links between different knowledge registers, some of them which are of a non-conceptual order, thereby enacting the visionary capacity that McLuhan saw in artists.

VISIBILITY

How does the unseen appear in a transcultural perspective?

The question of the visible is central for the 21st century, in our regimes ruled by forms of looking that are more of an objectifying gaze.

The French theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff has coined the concept of countervisuality as the desired practice or an ideal attitude with which to train the *gaze* and engage with visual information from a subjective point of view. That is, a way of looking that aims to create community end express solidarity.

But what is there to counteract visuality? Why is it so necessary to oppose it? What urges him to claim a right to look, furthermore to elevate this involvement with the visual to the level of a right? Why does this claim seem so urgent and decisive for the present times? Furthermore, how can countervisuality, as a discursive practice, hold a position capable of allowing us "to determine what is right"? (Mirzoeff, 2011:474) In other words, how can the claim for the right to look act as an ethics of the visible and the sayable?

Visuality as a complex mechanism knits together vision with the unfolding of cultural, political, social and aesthetic western history. Such a visuality is not just about images, "the right to look is not about merely seeing." (Mirzoeff, 2011:473) Visuality and countervisuality are discursive practices that operate in subjectification mechanisms rather than in mere sensory significance production, they refer to the "imaginary, rather than perceptual" (Mirzoeff, 2011:474) processes of making sense of the world.

When Mirzoeff sheds light on *visuality* as a an *old project* linked to the unfolding of the concept of western authority, he is stressing the concept of authority in two senses; on the one hand it refers to history not as a true, trustworthy, objective account of past situations and their concatenation into a sort of logical development but as a selective mechanism of showing and hiding, of remembering and forgetting, linked to power: in other words an authoritarian process. The second comprehension leads to a more literal understanding of authority, one that proceeds as a form of control over life, in other words a biopolitics. Following the studies on panoptics by Foulcault, Mirzzoeff traces the relation of visuality with biopolitics, in the application of visualisation for control and dominance purposes. Visualisation is the process and ability to transform non-visual data (such as ideas, concepts, space, mental states) into images. It is, for example, the ability required for cartographers to organise three-dimensional space into a one-dimensional map, or the process an architect engages in while projecting a building into a blueprint.

The key word here is projecting, because visualisation renders something non-existent visible, it is a project: a plan, meaning a proposed sequence of action. As such, those who are endowed with the power to determine and render visible a forthcoming sequence of actions are those who are endowed with the authority of writing history.

MAPPING

In the following, I would like to contrast the idea of mapping as a countervisual practice and oppose it to cartography as a dominance-led practice. In his text *The agency of mapping: speculation critique and invention*, James Corner considers "the function of mapping is less to mirror reality than to engender the reshaping of the worlds in which people live." (Corner, 1999: 213)

In describing the 'agency' of mapping, I do not intend to invoke agendas of imperialist technocracy and control but rather to suggest ways in which mapping acts may emancipate potential, enrich experiences and diversify worlds. We have been adequately cautioned about mapping as a means of projecting power-knowledge, but what about mapping as a productive and liberating instrument, a world-enriching agent especially in the design and planning arts?" (Corner, 1999: 213)

For Corner, the interrelationships that take place through the act of mapping allows new developments to unfold. Since mapping precedes planning, it can be thought of as the exploration phase, and thus it can be compared to artistic research, where exploration precedes research.

VOICE

*How can a dialogue develop on **a topic no one talks about**?*

Up until now, I have tried to show how the mind and consciousness are determined by the structure of our media and the role of the artist in fostering a switch of focus in society, in other words showing what otherwise remains hidden by the numbing environment created by our technological societies. I introduced the idea of visuality, not as the visual environment that surrounds us but as an authoritarian process of history writing. I linked this emancipatory potential with the act of mapping as an active agent of cultural intervention.

Finally, I would like to put forward two concepts from the field of so-called "third-world feminism". The first one is "bridging" by Gloria Anzaldúa and the second one is "world travelling" by Maria Lugones. I believe that it is necessary and urgent to consider artistic research from a decolonial perspective.

Artistic research is a relatively new discipline linked to academisation of research in the arts and which has developed mostly out of Norden study centres, as a discipline that started to establish itself around the decade of the 90s with the first study programmes in Finland and in Norway. As a discipline of the arts with a strong connection to academic practices of knowledge production, artistic research has become difficult to pin down, define and grasp what it is and what it can do. It also raises questions regarding the type of knowledge that it might or might not produce and for whom. Some of the detractors of artistic research claim that the research carried out in an artistic way or by artists cannot really be considered as research in the classic sense of the term, since research is carried out with the aim of producing new knowledge about a certain topic and answering a research question. The scepticism surrounding the discipline of artistic research discusses the validity of the findings produced through the act of exploration characteristic of artistic research. Here I would like to stress the idea that in fact the clear line that tends to separate artistic and scientific research can be linked to the division of thought into a set of binaries as present in the western tradition. The type of thought that demarcates art from science is, we could say, the same as that which seeks to draw a clear line between subjective and objective approaches, a clear-cut separation between public and private, true or false, and me and the *Other*.

In this sense, I believe that a decolonial perspective is useful because it poses a critique on binary thought as a western construct and fiction. In the understanding of authors such as Maria Lugones or Gloria Anzaldúa, knowledge has many forms and all of them are equally rich and apt, as it were, to say something about "reality".

Maria Lugones's phenomenological approach proposes a multiplicitous self. Based on the multiplicity of experience, we do not experience ourselves and others the same way in different contexts or situations. Her concept of "world travelling" might be compared to other phenomenologists accounts such as Martin Heidegger's concept of 'Dasein' and Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception. But Lugones, as well as other BIPOC feminist scholars, really strive for a phenomenology of lived experience. Instead of abstracting perception or experience, she speaks out from her own views and perceptions.

Allowing thus for her voice to be heard and considered as "legitimate". As such, being-between-worlds is the existential description of experiencing a life of "constant ruptures". Lugones is able to integrate hers and other BIPOC experience of marginalisation and oppression to an ontological manner of being-in-the-world.

The dichotomy that opposes marginalised/non-marginalized or oppressed/oppressor is insufficient, since we experience ourselves always in changing roles and various positioning. In Lugones's words, we "travel along worlds". Lugones puts forward an understanding of the self in its complexity and in terms of the different roles it plays in the matrix of power relations. The different positionings and power shifts we experience is what she has called "worlds". For her:

"A 'world' need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people (…) A 'world' may be incomplete in that things in it may not be altogether constructed or some things may be constructed negatively (they are not what 'they' are in some other 'world.') (…) The shift from being one person to being a different person is what I call "travel." This shift may not be wilful or even conscious, and one may be completely unaware of being different than one is in a different "world," and may not recognise that one is in a different "world." Even though the shift can be done wilfully, it is not a matter of acting." (Lugones,1987: 13)

To become a bridge, the call for visibility implies the development of strategies towards empowerment with the will to connect collective and individual struggles and bring them out of the background into the foreground. To become a bridge, we need common conceptual foundations built up in dialogue, to become a bridge we need to accept ourselves and our various selves in the different worlds that we inhabit. In such a model, the unsaid and the unseen can be rendered visible and audible through a process that must first happen in the realm of the imagination. In reference to Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), I think of the imagination as the condition of possibility for new realities to manifest, that is for the invisible to become visible and for the unutterable to enter speech, we require first the capacity to imagine new worlds, new ways of inhabiting them and as well the ability to imagine ourselves being changed by them.

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