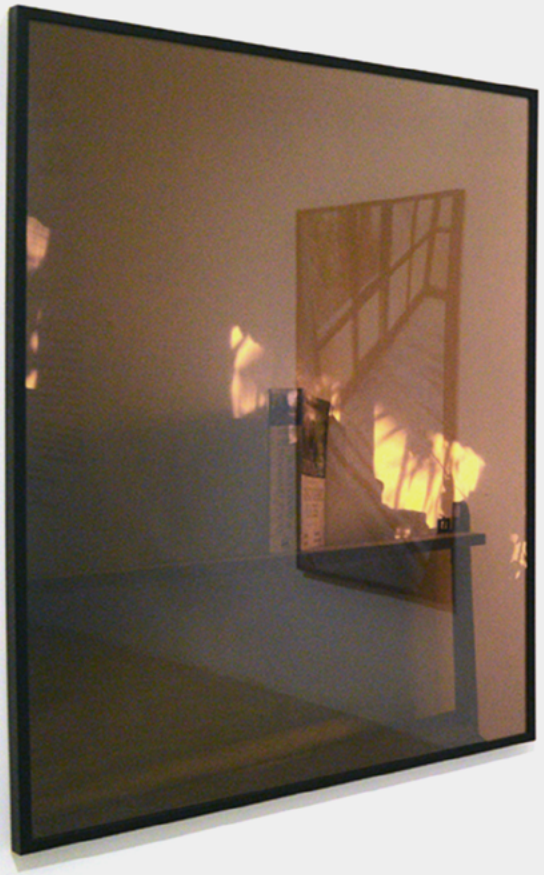
Documentation for Teachers around

Rana ElNemr

A Chapter of Synonyms

25.01.2017 - 26.03.2017



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مركز بيروت للفن

This document is aimed at teachers: it is not meant for students' use. It does not replace the visit, nor is it a record that documents the exhibition. It is a research tool to be used by the teachers to address the exhibition in relation to different knowledge backgrounds so that they can refer to it in the course of their practice. The Workbook exists to facilitate the teachers' use of the visit for work-in-class purposes and to inspire them to invent whatever their teaching practices require.

To book a group visit for your class, please write to:
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Cover Image: Right: Assembled in Streams of Synonyms, The Map, 2013. Photography
Left: Assembled in Streams of Synonyms, The Dictionary of Imaginary Places. 2014. Photography

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I. Curator's Statement

Drawing from a series of photographs, videos and notes assembled by Egyptian artist Rana ElNemr, this show associates Cairo's recent and significant urban changes with the idea of architecture as a double projection: a plan for construction, but also a way to materialize the imaginary.

Architectural photography often augments two-dimensionality, thereby usurping the idea of inhabitable space. The artist's work addresses the implications of conveying constructed space, the images and meanings of which are dealt with as synonyms. As Robert Smithson once wrote: By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a "logical two dimensional picture." A "logical picture" differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor - A is Z.

ElNemr invests in this game of substitution by introducing ambivalence and dialogue between different planes of representation. She plays with still images, films, sounds and texts, to accentuate disparities thus introducing deliberate pauses in the assumed visual discourse. These elements remind us that images can only be readable in reference to specific frameworks of knowledge.

-Marie Muracciole

Biography

Rana ElNemr is an artist who works primarily with photography, but also engages text, film, sound, and sculpture. She has performed extensive research and developed various workshops, which aim to analyze, question, and develop our relationship with the images we produce or consume. ElNemr has received several awards for her work and research on the image, and has held exhibitions at the Townhouse Gallery Cairo, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and the Zentrum fuer Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe (ZKM).

A community space enabling Egypt's artists to thrive

Rana ElNemr is a cofounder of the independent art space, the Contemporary Image Collective(CIC). Started in 2004, the Collective provides a wide variety of art and media services as a means to develop visual culture and artistic practice, engagement, and discourse. The CIC exists as a multi-purpose organization, offering educational workshops, residency opportunities, exhibition spaces, and access to a variety of other resources for interested individuals.

CIC's educational scope expanded in 2010 to include the CIC PhotoSchool, a space that offers strategic photography and videography curricula with artistic, practical, theoretical, and career based options. By developing an increasingly diverse educational program, the CIC can serve a wide range of interested students, from the casual photographer, to the aspiring photojournalist.

In addition to a multi-media library, the CIC also offers a studio space with professional lighting equipment, a black and white darkroom, and a brand new digital lab for professional printing and scanning facilities. By offering these rare resources CIC has become instrumental in developing the artistic and cultural sphere in Egypt.

II. Rana ElNemr

Rana ElNemr: Synonyms of Seeing

While revealing the many possibilities of seeing the city (Cairo), she raises profound questions about the very practice of photography itself.

Nafas Art Magazine By Ismail Fayed

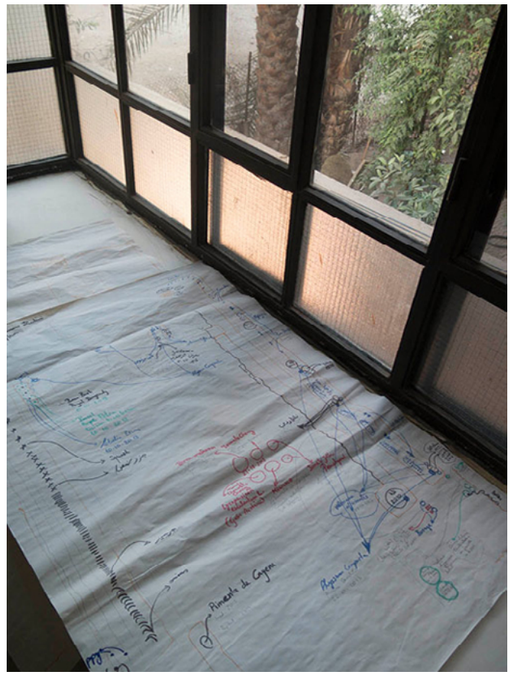
"With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed... Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else." [1] Perhaps it is Calvino's description of the city that most closely echoes the practice of Rana ElNemr. From her photographic series of extravagant and often kitschy resort gates on the Mediterranean coast in Coastline (2005), through her installation/ collage of the fronts of residential balconies all over Cairo in Telekinesis (2007), to her visual escapades as she drives through the city in Giza Threads (2011), ElNemr sets out to explore the many ways we relate to, understand, and 'see' the city. In doing so, she not only reveals the many possibilities of seeing the city and creating all kinds of scenarios to visually perceive it, she also raises profound questions about the very practice of photography itself. ElNemr's practice hinges on the dual process of expanding our visual and conceptual understanding of space (immediate space, such as personal residence or studio space, to more abstract notions of space, such as the city or even imaginary space) and experimenting with the materiality and meaning of the image.

In her latest exhibition, Assembled in Streams of Synonyms (2014), curated by Maha Maamoun for the Sharjah Art Gallery, ElNemr couples her exploration of spaces, in their many forms and meanings, with a curiosity about new materialities and formats that reflect her artistic interests and preoccupations. She uses photographic prints on archival paper as well as vinyl, 16mm film, 8mm film, animation, audio, and a sculpture to share with the audience the different ways she negotiates meaning through her personal experience of space and of the different mediums that visually translate her ideas in ever-changing and distinctive ways. She investigates the layers of meaning that each medium carries and the connections and overlaps between such meanings and her own artistic and subjective experience.

The Sharjah Art Gallery at AUC is a two-storey space, with a peculiar hexagonal front and a semi-square that ends in a slanted passage in one corner. The exhibition consists of 11 elements or sequences, five on the ground floor (Map, The Dictionary of Imaginary Places, It Became Known That King Mariout Now Has a Library, The Living Object, The Shaft) and six on the first upper floor (Depot, Assembled in Streams of Synonyms, Extent, Department of Squares and Roundabouts, The Khan, It Became Known That King Mariout Now Has a Library). Together they are fragments that work by association between image, text, and various formats of the moving image. Each sequence can stand by itself, reflecting ElNemr's artistic general interests and questions, but also echoing other connections and links with other sequences and elements, thus serving as building blocks for multiple stories and narratives as experienced uniquely by each audience member.

One enters and is met first with two pictures, a photograph of a hand-drawn map of a garden and a photograph of the book The Dictionary of Imaginary Places on a shelf, suggesting a shelf in a library or at someone's home. The two images set the tone for the exhibition as an exercise in imagining and re-imaging space. Around the corner, a life-size lamppost lights the triple-height exhibition space. To all intents and purposes, it is a regular lamppost, yet on closer inspection one notices the intervention of the artist, the tilted position of one of the heads (and upon a closer look from the upper floor balcony, more details

of the lamppost are revealed, including a resident plant inside the slanted head, reflecting yet again the ways, not immediately perceptible, in which nature infects and cohabits spaces in Cairo). The lamppost casts light and shadows upon two other works inhabiting the main space:



1. a flock of pigeons perpetually taking flight in a looped 16mm video. Their continuous flight with no clear end or beginning brings to mind the metaphor of "flight of fancy". 2. Across the video, a huge night shot of what we learn is the library that King Marriot now has. This second reference/encounter with books will ricochet in different works in the exhibition.

This cohabitation between nature and the most vurban of spaces or the periphery of the city is echoed in the six other sequences on the first floor, once in relation to large pipes in what looks like the periphery of the city. And in little hedges abutted by walls. And again in between unfinished high-rise residential buildings, with multiple perspectives showing a secret patch of green. The sequences go hand in hand with the themes of nature, the construction of spaces, and meditative texts that provide an ethereal dimension in how we perceive space and its relation to fiction and its relationship the city. Even the mysterious shelf and the library reappear as a series of small frames of photos of the street leading to and the entrance to a library and in the recorded conversation with an anonymous character who speaks about his passion for nature and libraries.

The play on imaginary spaces was reiterated in large photographs of a fairground and what looks like an abandoned themed park. The juxtaposing of various formats of the moving image (8mm videos, animation… etc.) with the still nature of photography and the contemplative bent of the texts adds a depth and intensity that transforms all these elements into an open space that allows different ways of seeing and various ways of creating and recreating meaning.

Notes:

Calvino, Italo. "Invisible Cities", trans. William Weaver, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1974

Ismail Fayed

Writer and researcher based in Cairo. He has been writing on contemporary artistic practices since 2007.

She Who Tells a Story:

Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World on view April 08–July 31, 2016.

This landmark exhibition of more than 80 photographs and a video installation challenges stereotypes surrounding the people, landscapes, and cultures of Iran and the Arab world. She Who Tells a Story refutes the conventional idea that Arab and Iranian women are oppressed or powerless, illuminating the fact that women are creating some of the most significant photographic work in the region today.

The title of the exhibition is inspired by the Arabic word rawiya, which means "she who tells a story." It is also the name of a collective of women photographers based in the Middle East founded in 2009. Women worldwide have been pioneers in the mediums of photography and video since their inception. This exhibition demonstrates that the work of women photographers continues to resonate on a global scale.

Each artist in She Who Tells a Story offers a vision of the world she has witnessed. The photographers' images invite viewers to reconsider their own preconceptions about the nature of politics, family, and personal identity in the Middle East.

Rana ElNemr

(b. 1974, Hanover, Germany; lives Cairo)

Primarily working with conceptual photography, Egyptian artist Rana El Nemr captures urban stories that focus on ideas of space, identity, and the sense of belonging. She is also a co-founder of the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC), a platform for contemporary Egyptian art.

Rana El Nemr, Metro (#7), from the series "The Metro," 2003; Pigment print, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in.; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum purchase with general funds and the Abbott Lawrence Fund, 2013.569; Photograph © 2015 MFA Boston

In Her Own Words

"I try [in the series "The Metro"] to capture the riders' response to the urban underground, the train, the station, and its vibrant ceramic designs. Riders become figures defined by form, line, and color in the midst of a congested modernity in which they no longer have a sense of place." — Rana El Nemr

"When I was watching people and watching the space, I became very obsessed by how the space made the people, some of the people who are using the space, how it made them so absorbed, and so kind of out of their body's presence in a way."

— Rana El Nemr, WGBH News

What's On View?

In four images on view from her series "The Metro" (2003), El Nemr inconspicuously photographs passengers in the first car of Cairo's subway, which is reserved for women and children. Her subjects are shown seated or standing, often absorbed in thought. Some riders are only glimpsed through the car's windows, as seen in Metro (#7). Conveying the anonymity of city life, El Nemr's subjects seem to be alienated. The artist describes them as "vulnerable to cycles of depression, indifference, and religious intolerance—illnesses that are both caused by, and transmitted to, the rest of Egyptian and Arab society and the world."

ElNemr's photographs record the rapid changes that middle-class Egyptians encounter in the megalopolis of Cairo. Her works convey the displacement and belonging that affect interactions between people and public space. Metro (#7) depicts the backs of two subway riders through the blue-and-white exterior of the car. The pairing of their black and white abayas, each framed by a window of the closed doors, demonstrates the artist's eye for asymmetrical compositions.

Very real imagined spaces of Rana ElNemr

MadaMasr, Jenifer Evans and Sama Waly
December 22, 2014

Rana ElNemr is known for her photographs of abnormalities of urban Egypt, detached from their surrounding context. Beautiful, they invite us to investigate nameless, dissected environments, often devoid of human presence.

For its third event, after a show by Malak Helmy and program of events alongside Hassan Khan's D-CAF show, AUC_LAB brings ElNemr to the spotlight at Sharjah Art Gallery, in a solo exhibition of new work that represents a significant development on the work shown at her 2012 show at Townhouse, Giza Threads.

Titled Assembled in Streams of Synonyms and curated by Maha Maamoun, it features photographs, videos, sound, text and one sculpture. The Sharjah Gallery's two-story space requires from artists and curators an extra flexibility: It is labyrinth-like and rigid, limiting the possibilities for rearrangement, and the acoustics complicate the display of sound-based works. But ElNemr and Maamoun have managed to create a logical, natural flow.

Upon entering, we find ourselves inside an octagonal room. Two large-format photographs hang in a corner, each framed under glass in roughly solid, painted wooden frames, billboard-like. Map shows a hand-drawn map of a garden, spread out in a room, next to a window we can see out of. The Dictionary of Imaginary Places shows Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi's book of the same name, standing upright, alone on a shelf. In both, natural light plays on surfaces.

The rest of the room stands hollow, and we are left curious to continue into the adjoining space. Here, wallpapered onto the wall facing us, a large dim photograph shows a villa, with lights on inside and against a dusky sky, seen through the trees and plants of its garden. Its title is It became known that King Mariut now has a library.

Courtesy: AUC_LAB / Sharjah Gallery

In an opposite corner a hazy, almost black-and-white video (transferred from 16mm film) is projected. The Shaft is only 24 seconds long, and shows birds (possibly pigeons) taking off and landing against a dark bluish sky cut through at the very bottom by telephone wires. Right next to it, a freshly welded street-light, possibly life-size, rises up to the second story. One light faces downward as expected, adding another light to the already will-lit space, but a second light veers upward on a pole that then bends over itself, plant-like.

The overall effect is a bit like being outside — the streetlight, an enigmatic projection of the sky, and large weather-proof images. This suits the marbly, corridor-like gallery space, which seems as if it was built to move through on your way to somewhere, rather than to linger or sit.

Curious again, we climb the stairs. We're easily guided in a full circular trajectory through the upper spaces, ending up back at the top of the staircase. But in contrast to the sparse boldness of the five large pieces on the first floor, the show becomes more complicated, busy and bitty.

Courtesy: AUC_LAB / Sharjah Gallery

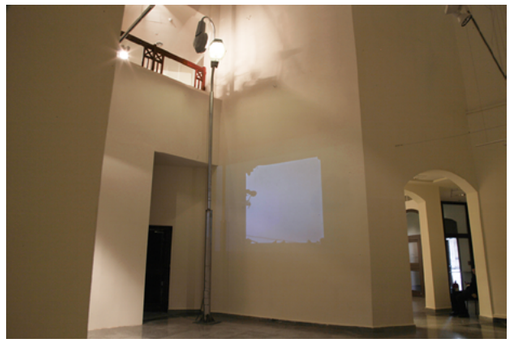
In a long thin space, we see photographs of varying sizes, framed like downstairs, each combining a natural element with something manmade: leaves and telephone wires, a dog sleeping in the shade of a curve of concrete, some plants growing in front of a painted wall. There are also videos, displayed in different formats (projection, large plasma screen, small monitors): a cactus blows gently in the wind above some building materials, a water hose moves like a snake through some undergrowth.

The little details of the exhibition set-up don't seem to matter much — the works are not installed preciously, not carefully lit. Some lines of text printed on white A4 sheets of paper, pinned to the wall here, are an exception. These flimsy pieces break the continuity of the tough presentation methods and the imagery, and seem to act more like an artist's statement than an artwork. This is the only place where we feel the artist's presence: In her images, she is a barely-felt observer.

"Multiplicity creates a possibility for association," says one phrase.

Another work stands out: an animation projected downward onto a square white table with a glass top. It shows digitally drawn lines and arrows moving slowly in a black vacuum, a mysterious diagram. Later we find out that it's a symbolic abstraction of the exhibition's spatial plan.

Eventually, having passed more photographs, a time-consuming projection of entries from The Dictionary of Imagined Spaces, a screen on the floor showing a hand writing a list of gardening items in Arabic, and the lamppost again — from this high angle we see a growing plant inside the glass of the mutated light — we end up in another octagonal room, listening to a recording of a man speaking about building a new library, and planning the garden in which it should go. The title we have seen before: It became known that King Mariut now has a library.



Courtesy: AUC_LAB / Sharjah Gallery

So is this the garden we saw in the wallpaper photograph of the villa? And is it the one we saw a map of in the first photo downstairs? Is the list of gardening items video related? We don't know. Are these gardens imagined, as The Dictionary of Imagines Spaces might suggest? Or are they real, like the photos and videos of urban Egypt that make up the bulk of the show? Perhaps the streetlight, real but distorted, fairy-tale-like, is the connecting element. Is the artist denouncing or celebrating human interventions into the natural environment? As her presence in these works is so modest, we can't tell.

While the largely familiar spaces photographed and the dense texts don't enthrall, they are sharp observations in sensitive compositions, and the images' high quality printing on archival paper transforms these ordinary scenes into artistic landscapes and valuable art pieces — the work is also for sale.

On December 4, Rana ElNemr spoke at the gallery. She spoke of her process for the exhibition — created over several years — as one in which she tried to detach herself from past experiences, from all that she had seen and perceived, to begin reading The Dictionary of Imagined Places as a blank slate.

ElNemr described this process as fun. One audience member seemed uneasy at the idea of a process of detaching oneself as being fun, or even possible. She went on to describe the exhibition as "dada, which refers to a wooden rocking horse in French, one that doesn't move forward nor backward, but that simply rocks a child to sleep." The analogy suggested that the exhibition didn't take her on a journey of imagination, but rather numbed her.

And the gallery's security guard asks us: "Have you studied art? Could you explain to me what I'm meant to see in these images?"

What is it that we expect from an image, we wonder, why do we look to justify an artwork? Is the desire for emotion or meaning based on an understanding of art as a means of communication, as language? To whom is the work addressed, and can it be translated?

ElNemr's spaces are more often than not void of human emotion — they focus on absence as much as presence. The artist seems absent from the work, and aesthetically, the absence of focal points in her compositions leave us hungry. Is this not a very real depiction of "imagined space": A subtle celebration of bare spaces, of deterioration, in a context where it is usually the most colorful voice that is heard?

III. Workbook

1- Photography and Space

The architect conceives of a space through plans, digital images and simulations. On the other hand, we describe spaces using floor plans, photography or sometimes even film. The experience of sculpture transforms our perception of space. Show and discuss the Socle du Monde by Bruno Manzoni, Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson and Donald Judd's Marfa Monument. Then take a look at some of the installations of chaos by Dieter Roth and Christoph Büchel. Look at some spaces constructed around colour and sound, for instance in the work of LaMonte Young. Also, observe how Dan Flavin, Ann Veronica Jensen or James Turell play with light and colour in their work.

James Turrell, Twilight Epiphany, 2012

Bruno Manzoni, Socle Du Monde, 1961

Dieter, Vera and Bjorn Roth, Keller Duo,1980-1989

Christoph Büchel, Dump, 2008

Exercise Samples

I. Ask one group of students to find or build a dark space and to begin attaching materials on the wall of this space, so as to create a tactile sculpture. Invite a separate group of students to discover the space, and what was created in it. After both groups have spent time in the space, ask the students what they found most important for them to orient themselves; their sense of touch, the sound resonance in the room, their memory? They should also attempt to map the space, and write a list of materials they think were included on the wall.

As a supplementary exercise to this, bring light into the space, and ask the students to notice the differences between how they had imagined the space to look and how it looks in reality. They should make a list of these specific differences, paying attention to what area of perception they belong to; the tactile, the visual or the spatial.

LaMonte Young, Dream House, 1993

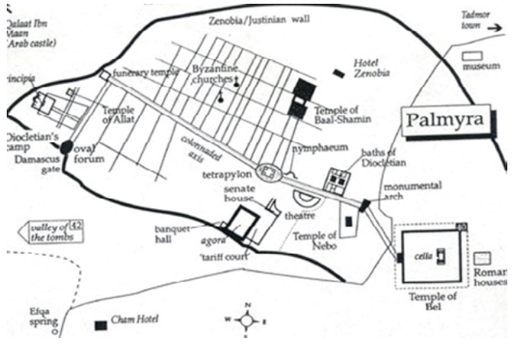
II. Find some photographs of a specific building, and give reproductions to the students. Ask them, in whatever way they wish, to deconstruct and reconstruct the photographs in the shape of another building.

Ask a student to describe a space in words, whilst a classmate draws a map and an image of it according to his friend's description. Repeat this exercise with two other students, one describing the newly drawn map, and the other attempting to translate his words into images. If the whole class or group repeats this exercise, many different visual versions of the same oral description will emerge.

Dan Flavin, Pink Out of The Corner (For John Caspers),1963

III. Find descriptions of space in literature, and ask different people to give them an appearance - like in the Dictionary of Imaginary Spaces. Compare results, and try and identify the different words and elements in the text that were interpreted differently.

IV. Some places that were destroyed have become imaginary. Look at old images of Jaffa, in Kamal Aljafari's Recollection for instance, in which the director made a reconstruction of the old town through found images in old films. Another example might be Palmyra; look at a map of the site and see if you can find and compare it with news reports that show where the destruction took place.



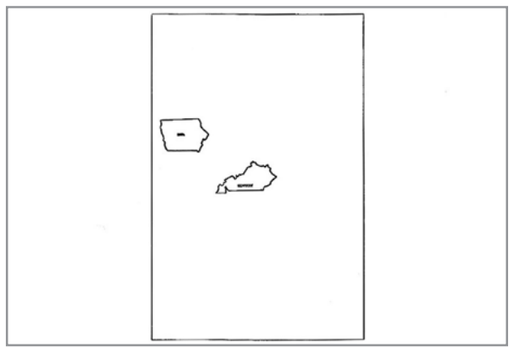
Palmyra's Map

2- Create Your Map

Contemporary artists have incorporated maps and cartography into their own work, and Katherine Harmon documents this in her book The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography. Artists have used the map to challenge and critique their 'truthfulness' of, as well as to make other political statements or personal interpretations.

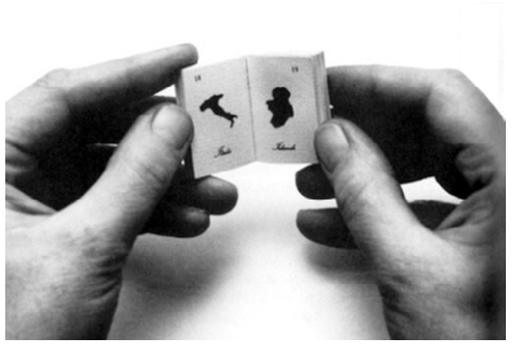
Alighiero e Boetti, Mappa, 1989

This map was embroidered by Afghan artists, commissioned by Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti. The map itself includes mistakes and oddities. Furthermore, some countries do not appear yet on the map as they did not exist, while others that do appear are no longer nations. This highlights how nothing is permanent, even a map which is supposed to be a definitive representation.



Art and Language, Map to not indicate (Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin), 1967

The Map to not indicate's title includes all the areas that the artists have removed from the map. In this way, the geographic areas that are left lose their relevance. The artists' are creatively playing with the conventions of cartography and its boundaries.



Marcel Broodthaers, The Conquest of Space, Atlas for the Use of Artists and Military, 1975

Marcel Broodthaers work consists of a tiny book with 32 countries arranged in alphabetical order and each of approximately the same size on a different page. By arranging the world atlas in such a way, Bloodthaers is removing the hierarchy and geographical relationship between countries. The loss of power is further underscored by the tiny size of the book.

Kim Victoria Abeles, Smog Map, 2010

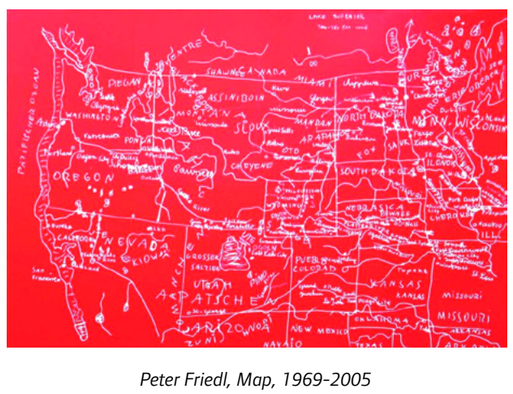
In this work, Kim Victoria Abeles creates a world map using smog collected on clear acrylic surface. The piece is a statement on air pollution, possibly highlighting the increasing pollution created by a globalized world.

Mona Hatoum, Present Tense, 1996

Mona Hatoum traces the map of the 1991 Oslo Accords with glass beads across bars of olive oil soap local to Palestine. Tracing the map across a material that is inherently Palestinian is a poignant choice. Furthermore, the title Present Tense reminds the audience of the tense temporality in Palestine today.

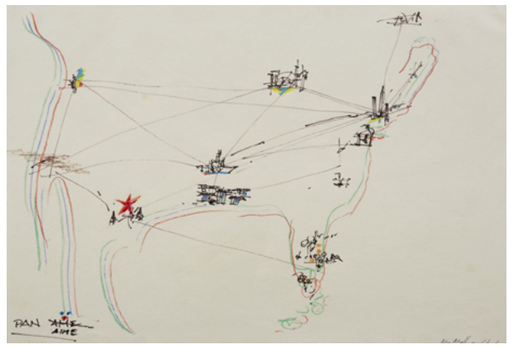
Oyvind Fahlstrom, Pentagon Puzzle, 1970

The maps created by Fahlstrom in the 1960s and 1970s were a direct commentary on the geopolticial tensions of the ongoing Cold War, as well as the changing structures and organizations of capitalism in the globalising economy of the 1970s.



Peter Friedl, Map, 1969-2005

Peter Friedl's 'incorrect' map of the United States includes the names of Native-American peoples that modern maps and representations of the USA leave out.



Gordon Matta-Clark's drawing for "From Memory, Draw a Map of the United States", 1971-2

Matta-Clark's piece is part of a series commissioned by Takahashi Hisachika who asked his peers to draw a map of the USA from memory. The maps that were produced are all personal and idiosyncratic representations: "a depiction of physical territory as mediated by an indelible and highly personal process of knowing and remembering".

3- Photography

I. Take some artist as example

Zoe Leonard's photographs of such diverse subjects are distinguished by the impression of their having been stolen more than taken with a camera; the images appear to be the result of Leonard's seizing split-second opportunities or hurrying so as not to get caught. Thus her photographs have a transfixing and exclusive power, as if they are giving us a privileged glimpse behind the scenes. Leonard's pictures are both impulsive and calculated, keenly balanced between visceral fascination and political purpose. The more we look at them, the more mesmerized and/or repulsed we are by them.

This push/pull effect forces our cognitive skills to rationalize, or resolve, this conflict. We begin to order the images along the lines of vanity, voyeurism, or ritualized violence.

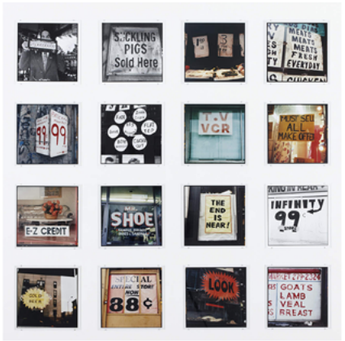
a. Ask the students to check some of Zoe Leonard's photographs.

b. Discuss with them what do they really want from a photograph?

c. Do they agree with what Wolfgang Tillmans said?

> *'I want the pictures to be working in both directions, I accept that they speak about me, and yet at the same time, I want and expect them to function in terms of the viewer and their experience.'*

Wolfgang Tillmans, paper drop, 2008



Zoe Leonard, ch 17 from Analogue.

Russell Ferguson on Wolfgang Tillmans (2005)

Nowadays, the camera is easily available for anyone wishing to take pictures. We often take a hundred pictures to choose only one. Most pictures taken on a cellphone are most likely to be forgotten as we rarely check them again. Open this conversation: Imagine you get only one shot at a picture. How hard is it to get it right?

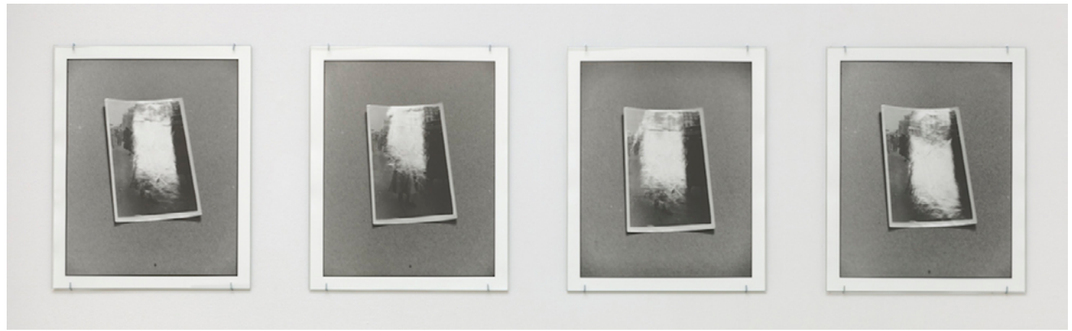
d- Propose to them to do the exercise below while they list a number of artificial restrictions for a day or weekend of shooting. They should promise that they will respect these restrictions.

No cheating, Enjoy!

The rules are:
- *One prime lens*
- *One location*
- *B&W only*
- *4-5 P.M. only*
- *Manual mode only*
- *Overexpose/Underexpose everything*
- *Spot meter only*
- *Photograph while sitting*
- *Only things above you*
- *Only things below you*
- *No people in the frame*
- *No structures in the frame*
- *Fill the frame*
- *Negative space in more than three quarters of the frame*

e- Let them choose one subject and place it, where it exists, in each corner of the frame for 4 images. Can they go to the other side of the subject? they will do the same: shoot all four sides in all four corners if possible.

See what they come up with!



Zoe Leonard: Misia, postwar, 2016. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

II. 'Just as any literature should take into account its typos, photography needs to address its mistakes' — Denis Roche

This exercise is based on the large 'game-competition' called Fautographique organized throughout France in 1991 with the aim of collecting from amateur photographers the best of their failed pictures, and based on 'Photography by Default' by Clément Chéroux, translated by Garnet C. Butchart. Do the same exercise and ask your students to collect the most failed photo from their collections or from their family albums.

It would be necessary to question the criteria used to give importance to ratage which, varying according to the epochs and the points of view, constitute an outstanding revelator of what is expected of the photograph and of its "fluctuating relation to the mimesis".

See how far they can get using their phone's camera every day and how they evaluate the various ways to take a photo.

It would be also interesting to refer to Thomas Lélu's The Manual of the Missed Photo, where the author pledges that it is in its shadows; its failures, its accidents and its lapses, that photography indulges itself most and analyzes itself best, betting on photographic error as a cognitive tool.

Vito Acconci, Step Piece, 1971; gelatin silver prints;
4 5/8 x 6 1/8 in. (11.75 x 15.56 cm)
Gift of Lisa and John Pritzker; © Vit Acconci

III. Read this extract from A Short History of Photography by Walter Benjamin. After reading the paragraph, give yourself a little time to reflect and try to answer Benjamin's questions:

'The camera becomes smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture transitory and secret pictures which are able to shock the associative mechanism of the observer to a standstill. At this point the caption must step in, thereby creating photography which literarises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate. Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been compared with those of a scene of action. But is not every corner of our cities a scene of action? Is not each passerby an actor? Is it not the task of the photographer — descendant of the augurs and the haruspices - to uncover guilt and name the guilty in his pictures? 'The illiterate of the future', it has been said, 'will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph. But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures? Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot? Such are the questions released by the historical tensions of the ninety year's distance which separates us from the daguerreotype. It is in the irradiation of these sparks that the first photographs stand forth with such unapproachable beauty from out of the darkness of our grandfathers days.'

IV. Selected Readings

Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier

James Attlee

Gordon Matta-Clark
Bronx Floors: Threshole 1972
2 black and white photographs, Each 356 x 508 mm
© ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), who trained originally as an architect, is best known for his spectacular 'building cuts'. These have often been seen as an outright rejection of the architectural profession. The collaborative project Anarchitecture (1974), however, demonstrates how the language of modernism, particularly the polemical and epigrammatic Towards a New Architecture by the French modernist artist and architect Le Corbusier, was very much part of his raw material.

'Architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience', wrote Roland Barthes in The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies. In this paper I wish to explore the way in which the language of modernist architecture and the dreams embedded within it impacted on the work of Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978). Unusually among artists of his generation, Matta-Clark was trained as an architect at Cornell University, where he was taught by some of the most eminent architectural theorists of the era and from where he graduated with a BArch in 1968. Recent scholarship reveals him to have been a far from indifferent student. He is best known for those works in which he dissected existing buildings, slicing into and opening them up, using the simplest of means and converting them into gravity-defying, profoundly disorientating walk-through sculptures. These varied in scale from the cuts he made in abandoned tenements in the Bronx to create a series of works called Bronx Floors.

Gordon Matta-Clark, Splitting 1974
Colour photograph, 680 x 990 mm
Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark, GMCT1051 © ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

Since his death it has become closely associated with his wider ideas about art and architecture; indeed, some would probably argue that it has been hi-jacked by those seeking to foreground their own agenda. Finally, if Anarchitecture was originally the title of a collaborative exhibition, how comfortable should we be with the way it is now used almost exclusively in connection with Gordon Matta-Clark? The surviving artists who took part in the development and staging of the show have continuing careers and their own ideas about what it all meant. The 're-staging' of Anarchitecture

as part of the exhibition Open Systems (2005) at Tate Modern triggered numerous questions relating to the work's authorship and content. At the simplest level, the memories of surviving participants differed as to what had and had not been included. The original installation had not been documented, and in such a situation the first question that the exhibition needed to attempt to answer became whose memory is it that is being reconstructed?3 Meanwhile, the passage of time and the accruing of financial value in the work itself raised questions about whether the material could be safely exhibited in the informal manner it had been at 112 Greene Street. However problematic these issues may have been for those engaged in organising or lending to the exhibition, it seems somehow fitting that a piece gestated through freewheeling discussions in the lofts and bars of SoHo in the early 1970s should continue to generate heated debate, dissension and hilarity three decades later. I make no apology for concentrating as much on the artist's writings and on the way the concept of Anarchitecture informed his wider practice as on the 1974 show, the exact content of which is still the subject of dispute.

Gordon Matta-Clark
Day's End (Pier 52) (Exterior with Ice) 1975,
Colour photograph,1029 x 794 mm
Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark, GMCT685 © ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

[...] The origin of the word Anarchitecture itself equally evades pinning down. While those who attended the meetings have generally attributed it to Matta-Clark, surviving participants also sometimes remember it as having been arrived at collectively; a combination of 'anarchy' and 'architecture' stumbled across through group discussion.6 Whatever its origin, the term Anarchitecture, expressing as it does a creative tension between Apollonian and Dionysian opposites, has come to summarise many of the concerns explored by Matta-Clark during his brief career.

[...] Anarchitecture served its purpose in terms of laying down a marker in the wider art community, and as a launching-pad for Matta-Clark's ideas. He was well versed in such art-historical strategies; after all, his own father, the Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta, treated every interview and exhibition catalogue as an opportunity for polemical and philosophical discourse. The Anarchitecture show, then, was a kind of manifesto; but a manifesto of a tendency that never existed, a temporary alliance of creative spirits that inhabited the same moment in history. A manifesto, perhaps, for a generation disillusioned with manifestos. Or, as Caroline Gooden put it, 'Anarchitecture was a work in progress in Gordon's mind'.

[...] Equally characteristically, closer inspection reveals it to be firmly grounded in the writings of the giants of European modernism and design that he had studied at Cornell, particularly the French artist and architect Le Corbusier. Through a process of linguistic reversal, a favourite philosophical tool, he uses these writings as a springboard to launch himself in a different direction and arrive at new starting points for his own explorations. The version of Anarchitecture imagined in the letter is a far cry from the disciplined, photography-based exhibition he proposed later. His methodology is made explicit from the start. The first object he suggests for inclusion is a plain board with the words 'NOTHING WORKS' written on it. This fundamentally anti-functional statement, described in his letter as 'a reaction to the prime-crime axium of modern design-fighters', stands in direct opposition to the whole ethos of utilitarian modernism.

Untitled (Anarchitecture) 1974
Photograph mounted on board, 406 x 559 mm
© ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

At the same time it approaches the life-experience of inhabitants of downtown New York in the early 1970s, as the city approached bankruptcy and garbage piled up on the streets. In a footnote, Louis Sullivan's dictum 'form follows function' is manipulated through the distorting mirror of the artist's compulsive punning to become 'form fallows function'. If this wordplay means anything it implies that a rigid adherence to certain ideas of form will restrict an object or a building's usefulness. An opposite approach might be to allow an object's appearance to suggest spontaneous new uses, in the way that the carriage of a wrecked train suddenly becomes a bridge in the photograph included in the Anarchitecture show. Further on in the same letter, Matta-Clark makes explicit his relationship to Le Corbusier, by suggesting another idea for inclusion: 'AN MACHINE FOR NOT LIVING WITH AN EXTRACT FROM CORBUSIER'S VERSO UN ARCHITEC (edge of paper destroyed) SHOWING THE VIRGIN MACHINE HE WANTS US ALL TO LIVE IN.'

It is not insignificant that in the hands of Matta-Clark, the title of Corbusier's work becomes Verso un Architecture. To read Le Corbusier's seminal text when you have also studied the letters, notebooks and interviews of Matta-Clark is to experience what we can call, for lack of a better term, reverse echoes: there is no doubt as you turn the pages that you are in the presence of an important influence on the artist's thinking. Almost every one of the French architect's key statements finds its opposite in the writings and the practice of the American artist. 'Do not forget the problem of architecture', wrote Le Corbusier. 'Anarchitecture attempts to solve no problem', wrote Matta-Clark in one of the poetic and ambiguous statements in his notebooks. (In these words one hears an echo, impossible to verify, of Marcel Duchamp's statement, 'Il n'y a pas de solution parce qu'il n'y a pas de problème', and beyond it to the concluding remarks in Wittgenstein's Tractatus).

Matta-Clark once told an interviewer that, far from addressing humanity's problems, most architects were not 'solving anything except how to make a living'. Yet it was not just a question of attacking architects or architectural theories. Matta-Clark writes in one of his notebooks that, 'Design morality is valid. The functional issue was chosen because it seemed the most critical break from the beaux-arts, histrionic garbage. It was valid for its time. But how long has it been? Seventy years since any kind of radical reappraisal has gone on?' It was the dead hand of such figures as Le Corbusier on American creativity that Matta-Clark resented. Yet the passionately held tenets of those he jokingly referred to as 'The International Stool' could be turned in an intellectual judo-move and used to develop his own conceptual framework. This was a game that could provide real results. With the help of his fellow travellers Matta-Clark was carving out a territory within which to work. Anarchitecture, with its use of found photographs and the aphoristic statements Matta-Clark recorded in his notebooks, is on some level both an echo of and a riposte to Corbusier's polemic.

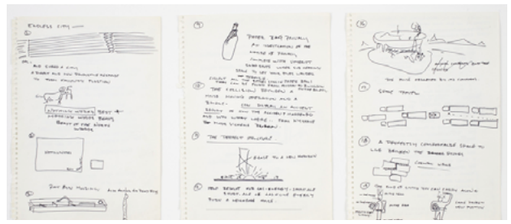
[...]

There was another connection between Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier. His father, the Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta, had worked as a draughtsman in the architect's studio in the late 1930s, at the time Le Corbusier was developing his plans for La Ville Radieuse. As has been frequently reported, he rejected his employer's ideas, proposing in an article in the surrealist journal Minotaure an apartment with walls 'like wet sheets that change shape to fit our

Photograph from Anarchitecture 1974
Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

Photograph from Anarchitecture 1974
Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

psychological fears', furnished with biomorphic couches that appear in his illustrations to mould to and at the same threaten to swallow the human body. Jane Crawford, Matta-Clark's widow, maintains that Matta pēre, an intermittent but influential presence in his son's life as he grew up, 'always railed against Corbu', and that Gordon would have followed suit. Perhaps more importantly, Matta provided a model of an artist who saw himself as a philosopher as much as a visual draughtsman, someone who took great care over the statements he made in interviews and in the publications that accompanied his exhibitions, coining new terms for areas he opened up in his art practice. As the curator Joanna Drew wrote in one such catalogue:



Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark © ARS, NY and DACS, London, 2007

'Matta says that he is not a painter but this statement is not as unambiguous as it might appear. Among other things he means that he is not only a painter; his painting language and the many other (verbal) languages he uses serve his dynamic inventiveness… He invents words with the same freedom that he invents images and they at once take on their own independent life.' Words used to describe the father that could equally be applied to the son.

[…] What are these images suggesting? Firstly, they are not meant to be read literally. On a metaphorical level they represent the opposite of the harmonious structuring of society and the urban environment that Le Corbusier believed was the highest aim of civilisation. Anarchitecture celebrated the inner city in all its disorder and variety and crazy juxtaposition of eras and styles. The forces of nature that picked up boats and piled them on top of one another both suggested new types of structures and alluded to the densely packed fabric of the inner city.

The gas explosion that removed the side of a building, exposing its inner framework, broke down the strict privacy and property codes that dominated city life. On one level, the sign still affixed to the wall that declares space 'Available' is grimly humorous. On another, the building's interior is indeed available in new ways; to the onlooker, who is granted a different vista; and to those who could now walk in if they chose, untroubled by exterior boundaries.

[…]

Matta-Clark wrote:

ANARCHITECTURE WORKING IN SEVERAL DIMENTIONS (sic) MAKING THE DISCUSSIONS THE SHOW AND THE WORK. KEEPING IT AN ONGOING PROCESS. NOT FINISHING JUST KEEPING GOING AND STARTING OVER AND OVER

Where Le Corbusier offered a mass-produced utopia, built on strictly functionalist foundations, Matta-Clark offered a model of what could be achieved both by individuals and at the level of the small collective, that through informal but intense discussion and shared experience could act as a hothouse for new ideas. Which, if we are still trying to pin down the word Anarchitecture, is probably as good a definition as we are going to get.

The politics of contemplation

Zoe Leonard &
Elisabeth Lebovici

A CONVERSATION RECORDED IN PARIS IN APRIL, 2012.
A VERSION OF THIS TEXT FIRST APPEARED IN THE CATALOGUE FOR THE EXHIBITION VOICE OF IMAGES AT PALAZZO GRASSI, VENICE, 30 AUGUST 2012 — 13 JANUARY 2013.

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Zoe Leonard, Exhibition Title: Available Light.
Venue: Gisela Capitain, Cologne.
Date:September 9 – October 29, 2011

Elisabeth Lebovici: Here we are, talking before getting our words in written form, about the camera obscura you are installing in Venice. The camera obscura as an apparatus and an experiment has been written about extensively, but what often goes unexamined is the specific experience that each of us has in the space and time of a particular camera obscura. Can we talk, first, about this experience and about what it means?

Zoe Leonard: Maybe we can start by talking about what a camera obscura is.

The term "camera obscura" really describes a natural phenomenon: the principal that in a dark room, a small hole will let in light rays that will project an image of the outside world onto the opposite wall. Since light rays move in a straight line, the image comes in upside down and reversed.

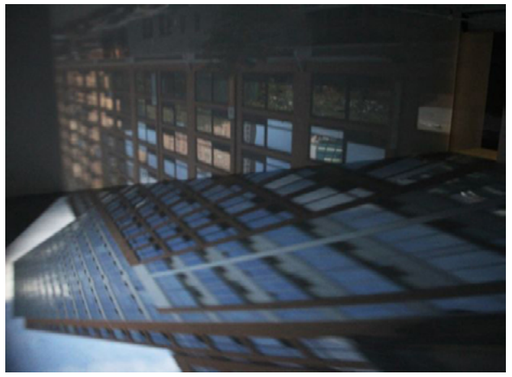
There are written observations of this phenomenon that date as far back as 400 BCE. Throughout history various tools have been built to utilize it in different ways; the camera obscura was employed by scientists to understand the physical laws of light. During the Renaissance, the camera obscura was instrumental in the understanding of perspective, and various apparatuses have been used by draughtsmen, painters and architects.

What is interesting to me is that photography has been separated from these other sciences and arts. And yet, the camera shows us a kind of "shared ancestry" — that these various arts and sciences are deeply connected. Perhaps there is a way to think differently about these segregated practices — that there is a common ground, a desire to know and to understand the world around us and our place in it.

I think it's an interesting time to pick up this tool again. The fi eld of photography is at a turning point, changing so rapidly, and we live in an incredibly image-saturated culture. My curiosity about the camera obscura involves asking questions about how we see, how we look, and what we take for granted about sight. The camera obscura offers us a way of seeing that does not have to result in a fi xed image — such as a photograph or a film. My iteration of the camera obscura offers photographic seeing as a spatial, temporal experience. A space that can be entered and inhabited. The inverted landscape inside the camera obscura is not a photograph, it is not an object. Rather, you are inside the camera and it becomes a space for observation and contemplation.

Elisabeth Lebovici: I think the series of camerae obscurae that you have built so far you have made three of these installations: the fi rst in Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, the second in the Camden Arts Centre in London, and now, one in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice represents a shift in your body of work, which spans thirty years. Could you describe, with a few shortcuts, what led you to these projects and to this form?

Zoe Leonard: I began taking photographs when I was quite young. Right from the start I kept trying to fi nd the limits of the medium. Back then, there were lots of different kinds of film, and I worked my way through as many as I could fi nd: black and white, color, slide and print, infrared and ortho; I also tried to fi nd the full range of my camera's capability. I tried shooting at every speed, pushing and pulling the fi lm, playing with contrast and grain. When I learned to print, I experimented with various developers and papers. I often used outdated paper that was given to me or could be bought cheaply. I just wanted to see everything photography could do.



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The subject was always part of it — I was aiming my camera at something, or someone — but the material was equally important. I was interested in the physical constitution of the photograph: what the print looked like, its size and tone, if it was dark or light, warm or cool, murky or crisp.

A few years into these experiments, I realized that most of this work was incredibly bad! I realized I needed to start all over again, to teach to myself to make a decent picture. So I started in what I thought would be the simplest way, the most stripped down elements: black and white, still life. This led me down what turned out to be a long path, an extended exploration of different modes of representation, the different kinds of jobs a photograph can do. It can be a document, or a record, it can be used to transmit information, or employed as evidence, or proof. It can be a snapshot, intimately connected to memory and emotion. It can be a kind of blueprint of the world, or it can be completely abstract. Photographs can be used for both ordering and disordering the world.

I became interested in mapping and archiving. I liked the deadpan appearance of photographs used in science and cartography. I looked at war photographs, especially aerial reconnaissance photographs. I started experimenting with different kinds of situations, taking photographs from planes, in museums and libraries, of maps and books and displays. I was interested in the image as information, and equally in how that information was unreliable or subjective. Various ideas of classifi cation and systems of interpretation created different versions of reality. This was much more interesting to me than the notion of a "fi ne art" photograph. I found myself questioning what constitutes knowledge: why things are ordered a certain way, what is accepted as fact, or truth, and how that categorization is connected to power, and to our lives. Photography seemed to be a kind of lynchpin in this structuring.

[...]

Elisabeth Lebovici: Psychoanalytic theory, such as the work of Jacques Lacan, uses the camera obscura as a model for the subject, or for the relations between the outside and the inside of the body — it is only through a pinhole that the world outside is represented and translated into images, which will, in turn, determine the psychic

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life of an inside surface — a place to stock "all that could be diversely called affects, instincts or drives."

Zoe Leonard: The way that I approach these installations — making the entire space into a camera — creates a particular experience. You can walk around, sit down, lie on the fl oor; the image falls on all the surfaces of the room, so you are surrounded by the image. It's a spatial experience. The camera obscura makes the mechanics of sight visible. It is a simplifed version, but what we see in the camera is like what happens inside our head: our eyes receive an image, light rays enter through the pupil, and the image lands on our retina, inverted and reversed. Then the brain, in turn, processes that image, and turns it "right side up." There are a series of translations that allow us to comprehend the images we receive.

Inside the installation, you are experiencing images as they would be before they have been corrected: sight before comprehension. In this way, I think the space of the camera obscura is related to the space of the unconscious, to what happens inside the box of the head. Occupying this space allows us to engage with our own process of seeing, to actually track our process of seeing. We experience light, movement, color, contrast and shape, and slowly we resolve these elements into a picture. In the camera, we can be present and conscious and observe ourselves as we go through this process. Because the space is darkened, there is a certain mood, a kind of quiet. The room feels slowed down. The image is inverted; at fi rst it is disorienting. And this allows for us to consider what it is we are seeing. Maybe it opens up space inside a process we take for granted. These installations are also social spaces. You occupy this space with other people, and so this experience of looking and understanding is shared. You watch each other. And as the image moves and changes, it becomes a temporal experience. There is no beginning or end; you can stay as long as you want.

Elisabeth Lebovici: This also connects with Jonathan Crary's theories of the "observer" in Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, that extract the camera obscura from the evolutionnary logic leading to photography. Opposite many art practices — such as video — which produce a material record, even if they document an object or event that is already gone, this experience of the camera obscura produces the sense of a journey looking at things passing by.

Zoe Leonard: The image in the camera obscura is not fixed. It is photographic seeing unhinged from the print, or even from the notion of a picture as a stable thing. Nothing is recorded, there is no way to repeat it or play it back, and no two people who visit the exhibition see the same artwork. The image changes constantly every minute and every day: a cloud goes by and the light shifts. You become sensitized to every small fluctuation. A traditional camera obscura — an apparatus for drawing or one made in the 19th century as a tourist attraction — is designed for making pictures. There are a number of these tourist attractions still extant. Usually they are housed in small rooms, where the image is directed onto a small white table which provides a kind of frame.

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A mirror is often used to fl ip the image "right-sideup," so it is presented as a conventional "picture." In my installations, nothing is gathered into a coherent picture for the viewer.

The image falls on the floor, on the wall, on the ceiling. The image is sharply in focus in some parts of the room and out of focus in others. In places it is distended and blown out. It is non-hierarchical: there is no privileged vantage point, no part of the image is more important than any other. This work questions the ways we gather images into a picture, or a fact, or a truth. The whole idea of a "decisive moment" dissolves here. Light comes in, hits the floor and unpredictable things happen. It is fugitive and unstable, constantly unfolding. It relies on your body adapting to it: as your eyes adjust, you see more. A room that appeared completely dark at fi rst is filled with an image. For someone like me, who has made objects all their life, it feels liberating not to make an object, not to hang a thing on the wall. I come up with a set of conditions, and the work unfolds with its own logic. In these installations there is another principle that is very important to me, which is that the room remains visible. I don't build out the space or conceal any of the existing architecture. I want viewers to be aware of where they are. The work becomes a kind of double exposure: an image of the outside world superimposed on an existing room.

[...]

Elisabeth Lebovici: Can you describe this feminist questioning of form, and your conversations around it?

Zoe Leonard: I think a lot about Gertrude Stein's writing. She has characters. There is a story, but she never quite lets you get to the story. Or rather, she never lets you lose yourself in the story; she keeps you in the space of your own reading. You are aware of her writing and of the process of your reading — the words, their sound, their shape, the structure of the sentences, the repetition. So the story is there, but it's not the only thing. Virginia Woolf also does something remarkable in her work in regard to subjectivity. Her work acknowledges subjective space. She fully describes the interior of a character's mind — what they are thinking, feeling, their internal dialogue, the reality of their consciousness — and at the same time, her characters move through the world, they interact. She doesn't give up the exterior world, the narrative, the social situation that's outside. She keeps us present in that moment of interaction — where your whole subjective interior meets and interacts with the outside world.

This is what I'm interested in, the way we live an interior and an exterior life, simultaneously and continuously.

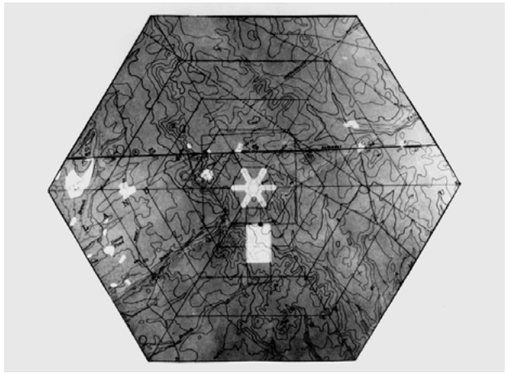
A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites

Robert Smithson, in Artforum, June 1966

Robert Smithson (1938-1973) was an American artist and writer, Robert Smithson is most well known for his monumental earthwork Spiral Jetty, 1970, located in the Great Salt Lake, in Utah. While he is most recognized for his earthworks, Smithson also created a large body of work that explored a variety of themes dealing with the post-industrial landscape, entropy, and paradox. His experiments with maps and mapping began in 1966, when he was commissioned to do a project for the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport. Smithson developed an idea for a low-lying site-specific project to be seen from the air. Smithson's use of topographic maps from that project led him to develop a small but focused body of works based on his notions of mapping as fictive sites that pre-figured his sculptures called nonsites.

Smithson's early nonsites combined both a map and a container that housed the earth or industrial materials he brought back from the site he had visited. He thought of the nonsites as "an absence of site" referring to the geographical place where he gathered these materials. Smithson wanted to confound the viewer's perception by constructing a dialectic that referred simultaneously to the indoor gallery space where the work is exhibited and the outdoor site from where he collected the material.

In 1967 Robert Smithson began exploring the industrial areas around New Jersey and, after assisting to dumper trucks excavating tons of earth and rocks, he described them as the equivalent of the monuments of antiquity. The series of "Non-Sites" resulted from the installation in the gallery of gravel, rocks, salt materials collected from specific mines, excavations or quarries, usually contained in boxes of galvanized steel or situated within mirrors formations.



Robert Smithson: A Nonsite (an indoor earthwork)
Franklin, New Jersey (1968)

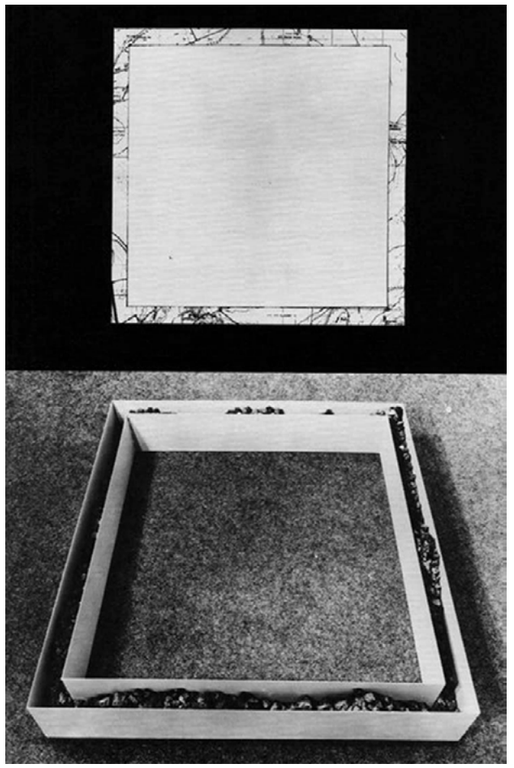
Whereas a "Site" is scattered information, a place you can visit, experience, travel-to, a "Non Site" is a container, an abstract work about contained information. Crucial to the notion of "Non-Sites" was the condition of displacement and the conservation of meaning after the removal to another site.

"Instead of putting something on the landscape, I decided it would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the Non-site, which is an abstract container".

(Kasther and Wallis, 1998: 31)

The dialectic tension between Sites and Non-Sites is established by the photographs, and above all, by the maps exhibited with the containers. They provided the viewer the link between the original sites and their representations, – that is: between outdoors and indoors -, and implied the performance aspect of the passage between the two locations, throwing emphasis on the spatial practices based on time, duration and physical participation.

From the Robert Smithson own website: "Literal and allegorical, the Nonsites confounded the

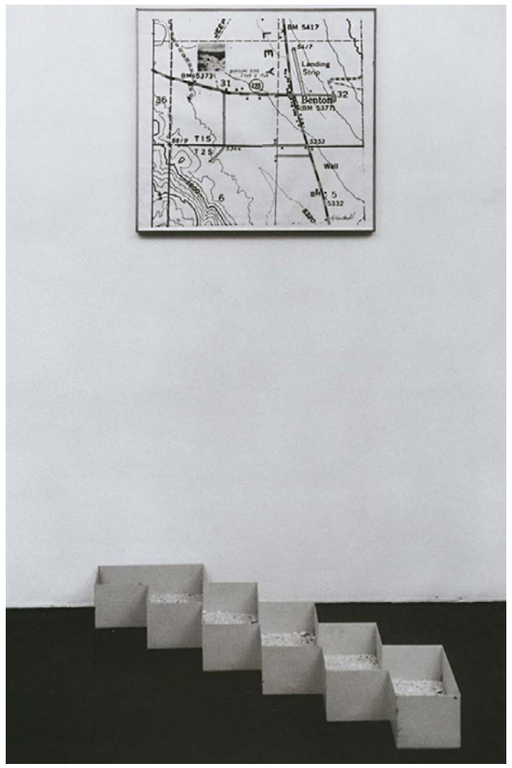


Robert Smithson: Oberhausen
Ruhr, Germany (1968)

illusion of materiality and order. The mirrors functioned to order and displace, to add and subtract, while the sediments, displaced from its original site, blur distinctions between outdoors and indoors as well as refer the viewer back to the site where the materials were originally collected."

The aesthetical and conceptual analogy between the "Non Site"s and the" One and three" series (Chairs/Tables/Saws/Lamps, and so on..) by Joseph Kosuth (1965) is evident in the linguistic analysis by Lawrence Alloway in his essay: "Sites/ Nonsites," from the book "The Writings of Robert Smithson", where he states "The relation of a Nonsite to the Site is also like that of language to the world: it is a signifier and the Site is that which is signified."

A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites



Robert Smithson: Gypsum Non site
Benton, California (1968)

By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a "logical two dimensional picture." A "logical picture" differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor – A is Z.

The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork)* is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it – this The Non-Site.

To understand this language of sites is to appreciate the metaphor between the syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a three dimensional picture which doesn't look like a picture. "Expressive art" avoids the problem of logic; therefore it is not

Robert Smithson: A Nonsite
Franklin, New Jersey (1968)

truly abstract. A logical intuition can develop in an entirely "new sense of metaphor" free of natural of realistic expressive content. Between the actual site in the Pine Barrens and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that "travel" in this space is a vast metaphor.

Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions. Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the Non-Site.

The "trip" becomes invented, devised, artificial; therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site. Once one arrives at the "airfield", one discovers that it is man-made in the shape of a hexagon, and that I mapped this site in terms of esthetic boundaries rather than political or economic boundaries (31 sub-division-see map).

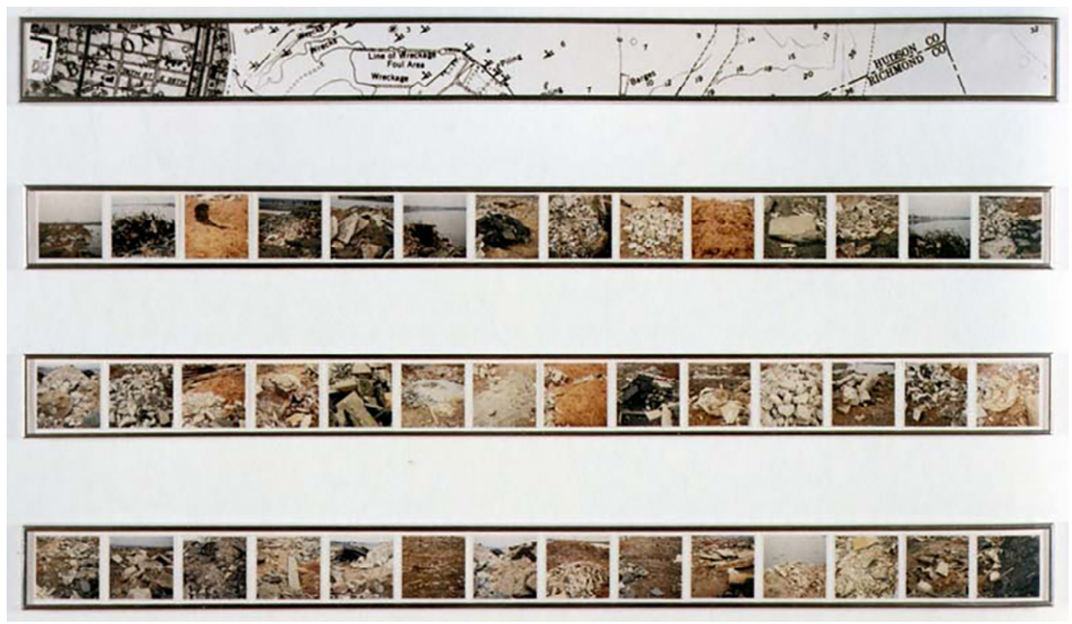
This little theory is tentative and could be abandoned at any time. Theories like things are also abandoned. That theories are eternal is doubtful. Vanished theories compose the strata of many forgotten books.

*Non-Site #1. Smithson changed the title for this text which was initially "Some Notes on Non-Sites." It has been partially excerpted by Lawrence Alloway in "Introductions 1: Options, Milwaukee Art Center, 1979, p. 6

from Unpublished Writings in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, edited by Jack Flam, published University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2nd Edition 1996

"...the artist seeks.... the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate."

-Robert Smithson from "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," 1968



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