THE UNFORGIVING RATIO

Darren Tofts

This essay engages with the author's recent experiments in redefining urban space as aesthetic space. From this experiment it will offer a critical discussion of the relations between maps and territories, cartography and topography. This underlines a sense of abstraction, an unforgiving ratio that we continue to resolve and simply live as second nature in our negotiation of space and its representation.

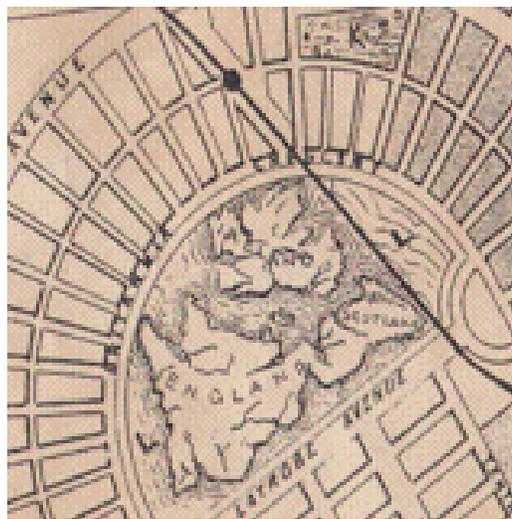*Figure 1. Melbourne/Rome composite map. Darren Tofts, 2011.*

Figure 2. Hydrographic map design for the Port of Melbourne, 1860 (detail). Courtesy State Library of Victoria.

The notion of "unsitely aesthetics" carries with it a number of ambivalent inflections to do with the space of art, its installation and its reception. It presumes the convergence of remote and telematically mediated spaces made possible through personalized mobile media. The unsitely in contemporary media art practice transcends an aesthetically sanctioned notion of 'site' in favour of public spaces in which art would not be expected to be encountered or recognized (hence unsightly), or would seem to be entirely out of place if it were.   This paper is in part a critical reflection on an experiment in unsitely aesthetics I conducted in February this year, which I have blandly titled *Melbourne/Rome*.   What emerges from the specific details of this work is a more general, philosophical critique of the relations between cartography and geography with respect to the construction of site. Rather than pursing a typically postmodern recursion that posits the exact blurring of the two, it argues for a more radical displacement; a rupture in which the map and the territory reside uncomfortably in an awkward, algorithmic relationship with each other, what I call the unforgiving ratio.

The title *Melbourne/Rome* is deliberately nondescript in order to foreground a largely didactic engagement with the process of conceiving, performing and documenting an unsitely aesthetic. Taking its starting point from the Situationists' détournement of maps, I wanted to use the experience of physically walking through the streets of the immediate and embodied city in which I live (Melbourne) and map it on to a virtual journey through a remote city.   Adopting the rule-governed principles of certain OULIPO artists (in particular Raymond Queneau and Italo Calvino), a set of personal preferences established the guidelines and principles for determining the city that was out-of-sight. First, the last international city which I have visited (Rome), second, where I stayed during that time (the Campo dei Fiori), and third, the exploitation of an essential difference between the two sites (the definitive grid structure of the Melbourne CBD and the labyrinthine tangle of streets that circumscribe the Campo dei Fiori). The idea behind this mapping was to see what might happen in the way of sitings in one city and mark anything of conspicuous interest on the appropriate map. The contrast of the topographical characteristics of each city was chosen as a variable, a potential, generative algorithm that allowed for potential convergences of co-ordinates that were beyond my conscious choice.

I selected the judicial section of the Melbourne CBD for obvious reasons, in that it was as far from the local, residential and community vibe of the Campo dei Fiori as Melbourne is from Rome in geographical space and time. I partitioned a selected grid ofMelbourne streets roughly comparable in scale to the area around the Campo dei Fiori with which I was familiar. Then using tracing paper, I outlined a manifold map or palimpsest of both areas so that a siting in one city could easily be mapped on to an equivalent coordinate in the other. Then, using the Streetview function in Google Maps, I traversed the equivalent co-ordinate in Rome in the hope of synchronicities; what Guy Debord described as a "possible rendezvous" (Debord, 2006, 65). The capacity of Streetview to simulate a sense of movement, albeit highly stylized, translated the scanning of the eye over the screen into a synaesthetic analogue of walking. This was a kind of virtual take on the dérive. It was weirdly suggestive of a kind of perambulation that makes sense in the world of atoms and friction, especially with respect to its connotation of drifting. The spectral phasing of the screen as the Streetview image resolves itself into clarity creates the illusion of movement along the street. This ocular mobility is akin to the physical sensation of walking towards and pausing in front of a specific *something*. At this moment I become, to use Timo Kopomaa's term, an "*e-flâneur*" (Kopomaa, 2000, 20).

The results of this process have been detailed elsewhere (Miranda, forthcoming). I am less interested here in reporting on the outcomes of the experiment than reflecting upon some conceptual tensions

that emerged from it; tensions that have implications for the notion of the unsitely as the "*superimposition of real and virtual space*". If we accept that real here refers to my embodied, quantum experience of being in Melbourne, then the virtual is my image of a specific part of Rome where I cannot be at the same time through means other than mediation. The use of Google Streetview offered a canny, pictorial solution to this vectoral assemblage of here and there. Rather than telematically feeding me an image of Rome in a common global time of now, it captured an image of a co-ordinate that exists despite the need for a common here and now. In other words, the Google image of a streetscape in Via del Biscione was not live, and nor did it need to be live for a conceptual overlapping of space. After all, it is difficult to know when specific images archived in the Streetview database were actually taken. This in fact removes the need for a temporal link in the process, maintaining the emphasis on site.

Semiotically, then, the Streetview images constitute an index of a location in Rome where I have been, or, after Roland Barthes, an experience "that-has-been" (Barthes, 1984, 77); a photographic supplement for a somewhere that is not here, that I know exists while I am in Platypus Lane in Melbourne at 9.45am, Eastern Standard Time. Like a live televisual feed, it is an index of a remote elsewhere aligned conceptually with my immediate here and now (just as a phone conversation is symbolic in the semiotic sense). The index provides a sense of coincidence that makes sense, a vector that resolves the abstraction of mediated real-time telepresence. However Streetview was not my first choice of media to establish counterpoints between two distinct and remote locations in time and space. I had originally planned to use GPS co-ordinates, in a similar manner to McKenzie Wark's book *Dispositions*, an experiment in real-time diarizing of the author's experience of a here and now "lived increasingly in the shadow of the satellites" (Wark, 2002). Wark's use of global positioning satellite co-ordinates is more abstract again than the symbolic and indexical registers of voice and image, adding another hand-held media device to the kit of the e-flâneur. Polemically Wark's project sought to draw attention to the increasingly surveilled nature of private space. Aesthetically, his preface of every entry with a topographic point of latitude and longitude underlines the highly abstract, even absurd nature of mapping lived experience in such a manner. His bio note is suggestive of this: "He lives at about 40.7°North and 073.9° West, aka Williamsburg, New York City" (Wark, 2002).

It is necessary to underline the abstract nature of any and all forms of mapping that seek to converge remote sites in the name of unsitely aesthetics. Our use of maps has acquired a familiarity over time, a virtual assurance that they can be read as if they are semblances or facsimiles of the spaces they represent. I want to reclaim the abstraction of cartography as a formal characteristic of contemporary media art practice. To get to this point I need to make a brief digression into the relations between maps and territories. The very notion of cartography is premised on a figurative geometry of scale, a convenient, disproportionate projection of space that makes it apprehensible to the gaze in real-time. Gerardus Mercator described his famous 1569 projection of the world as an "augmented description of Earth corrected for the use of sailors". Perhaps the first instance of augmented reality, Mercator's map revealed the approximation of an actual terrain that could never be experienced other than as a projection. His legacy of a modified form of vision was hardwired into the collective psyche of human perception for centuries; a technique of observation that shaped modernist epistemology's command of nature through scientific knowledge. In his *Simulations* (1983), Jean Baudrillard's prefatory use of Ecclesiastes' definition of the simulacrum as "the truth which conceals that there is none" signaled the emergence of postmodern skepticism towards the grand narratives of modernity and in particular, to quote Jorge Luis Borges, "exactitude in science".

Borges revisits the equation of the map and the territory many times in his fictions, notably in "Partial Magic in the *Quixote*", where he quotes the 19th century Idealist philosopher Josiah Royce imagining a

scale map of England carved into the very terrain of England itself, in which "no detail of the soil of England, no matter how minute… is not registered on the map", including a map of the map of the map, and so on to infinity (Borges, 2007, 195-196). However his famous 1946 fragment "On Exactitude in Science" is a parable of the consequences of a literal 1:1 scale in cartography. Here Borges imagines a souped up version of Mercator's projection in which the map is an exact copy of the territory "point for point", whereby "the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province" (Borges, 2000, 181). The idea of a map that is the scale of a "mile to a mile" is also encountered in Lewis Carroll's 1893 text *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, where the absurdity of the map standing in for the territory it represents also presages the advent of the hyperreal. This map is so big that it has never been rolled out as the "farmer's objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight!" Consequently, as Mein Herr explains to Bruno, "we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well" (Carroll, 1893, 169).

The map is a surrogate or proxy of the space it projects. The episteme of projection implies a necessary amnesia whereby the territory and its other avatar, geography, are completely forgotten. The map is a fetish that stands in for an absent, impossible presence. And so we return to the unforgiving ratio of scale. It is unforgiving in that it persistently foreshortens the relationship between the territory and our capacity to perceive it. Mercator's projection of the earth flattens out scale, topography, distance and time into a facsimile, a necessary fiction. It is a reminder that cartography relates us in inhuman ways to the space we live in and, more particularly, the spaces that are elsewhere, out of sight and out of site.

The *Melbourne/Rome* map manufactured a semblance of flow and consistency, whereby streets seemed to blend naturally into each other (see Figure 1). Here Via dei Baullari runs in tidy parallel with Lonsdale Street, as do Via del Biscione and Bourke Street. In the context of the composite map, things converge in ways that bear absolutely no relation to anything other than the map itself. But nor should they be obliged to, since the stylized figuration of scale is an approximation of what actual space would look like if we could see it from an inhuman point of view. The map works because of a distortion of the difference between the two sites, not any perceived fit . The unsitely and unsightly come together here not as a manifestation of scale, but as a plausible palimpsest, a tracing that is self-referential and makes sense within the poetic of the *Melbourne/Rome* experiment itself.

And in this we are privy to something like a nomadic, synchronous and ideally mobile point of view of unsightly and unsitely space. As I have been using these terms throughout this discussion their semantic, orthographic and phonetic difference can only be grasped visually rather than sonically. Their difference can only be seen but not heard. But as sonic events of time, of duration and delay, they remain equivocal, elusive and beyond immediate comprehension. This undecidability of site and sight is the *pharmakon*of deconstruction, the ambivalence of either *and* or, the unavoidable, ineradicable slippage between sound, image and sense. This aporia is also at work in our perception of space, it is the unforgiving ratio that must, of necessity, abstract the way we perceive geographic space. Cartography smoothes out and reconciles the abstraction of ratio to create the illusion that we have mastered the relations between space and time. In particular it manipulates our ability to believe that we can comprehend the here and now in relation to a distant there an now, where Melbourne and Rome can exist in the world simultaneously from the embodied experience of being in one of those cities. This inevitable flickering between presence and absence, here and there, unsightly and unsitely will continue to beguile its aesthetic practitioners for some time to come.

During the research undertaken for the *Melbourne/Rome* project I came across this map in the State Library of Victoria (Figure 2). It was made in 1860 and details plans for the western development of the Port of Melbourne. It features the design of an ornamental pond with two horticultural islands as its centerpiece.   The islands are cultivated to resemble Great Britain. Here is a different version of the decorative *mise en abyme* of heraldry, the map that contains itself in miniature. It is a powerful image of empire and colonial expansion throughout the globe, a patrician homeland carved to scale into its antipodes. The notion of the antipodes presumes otherness, a subordinate relation to a distant and autonomous self.   There could never be a hyperreal synthesis of map and territory here, whereby the map of Great Britain covered the territory ofAustralia. Apart from the obvious discordances of terrain, the spirit of Republicanism would, I like to think, prohibit such a travesty. The token Britain, suffice to say, was never built. But this hardly matters for even the idea of it sounds like a 'Pataphysical art project of the kind that Alfred Jarry might have cooked up while riding around Parison a bicycle. In the spirit of 'Pataphysics it invokes an imaginary response to the very real condition of presence at a distance. This image of little Britain in a distant colony is an incipient allegory of unsitely aesthetics. It evokes an image, a metaphor of possibility for unifying site and sight, sitely and unsightly that we can glimpse in the age of synchronous, mobile media. It is the intuition of a form of perception to come, a way of seeing also intuited in a rhetorical question asked by Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer in *Pure War*: "When we can go to the antipodes in a second or a minute, what will remain of the city? What will remain of us?" (Virilio and Lotringer, 1988, p.62).

References and Notes:

1. *Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984), 77.*
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3. *Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths. Selected Writings and Other Stories, ed. Donald A. Yates & James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 2007), 195-19.*
4. *Jorge Luis Borges, The Aleph, trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 181.*
5. *Lewis Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded (Los Angeles: The Library of the University of California, 1893), 169.*
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8. *Darren Tofts, "Possible Rendezvous: Art as Accident in Urban Spaces," in Uncertain Practices. Unsitely Aesthetics, ed. Maria Miranda (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press forthcoming).*
9. *Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, Pure War, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York:Semiotext(e), 1988), 62.*
10. *McKenzie Wark, Dispositions (London: Salt Publishing, 2002).*