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Abstract

*From Here To* is an art project that combines intuitive drawing strategies with interventionist performance practices: it collects hand-drawn directions from helpful passers-by in order to generate new visual scripts of space and memory. The project, which has been performed in three cities in North America and Europe, has produced a rich dataset of vernacular mappings and locative diagrams. The resulting 180 drawings, made with black ink on white paper, provide point to the possibility of research practices situated within a genealogy of art. These encounters follow a trajectory set by the situations of Guy Debord (1957), the cultural “tactics” of Michel de Certeau (1988), and the conceptual work of Fluxus artists, Stanley Brouwn (1961). In September 2015, Noone performed *From Here To* in Brighton, UK. Noone compiled and connected these spatial abstractions to make a foldout map, which she reprinted and distributed at the From Here To Information Installation throughout the International Visual Methods Conference.

*From Here To* is a vernacular form of information visualization that explores the visual culture of navigation and articulation of spatial relations. The ‘real action’ - the almost-accidental and hurried nature of drawing a map for a stranger - becomes an act of translating an abstract sensibility to a notation of place-ness. In a time when the ubiquitous Google Map dominates cartographical thinking, what does it mean to elicit intuitive drawing as a way to capture the complexity and ambiguity of spatial interpretations?

Keywords: visual research; interventionist art; drawing and mapping; information visualizations; spatial navigation and representation
Introduction: A Direction

*From Here To* is an on-going art-research project that explores the perceptual and aesthetic possibilities of art as a strategy to elicit visualizations of everyday information; specifically, the perception and representation of space, combining spontaneous drawing with interventionist performance. Overall, *From Here To* points to the imaginative possibilities of research practices situated within a genealogy of art, based on the precedents of the urban situationist strategies of Guy Debord (1957), the minimalist tracings of Stanley Brouwn (1961), and the attentiveness to everyday ephemeral moments of Robert Filliou (1970). I contextualize my perceptual art-historical guides in a commitment to the rigors of social scientific research processes, combining the visual methodologies outlined by visual researcher Gillian Rose (2012; 2007) with Information scholar Johanna Drucker’s call for new visual epistemologies that account for the subjective possibilities of visual information, which are so often muted in a quantitatively-driven data-dense landscape (Drucker, 2014). The collected maps function as what Drucker calls “capta”, the interpretive corollary of data that acknowledges the constitutive context in which information is collected and reimagined visually (Drucker, 2011). Understanding information visualizations as “capta” acknowledges the porous ways we understand what “data” actually is and how stable it is as an item of study.

For now *From Here To* is a provocation that uses novel methodological processes to set up the question: in a time when the ubiquitous Google Map dominates cartographical thinking, what does it mean to elicit spontaneous drawings as a way to capture the complexity and ambiguity of spatial interpretations? I have performed the project in Toronto, ON, St. Louis, MO, and Brighton, UK, with the intention to continue this investigation in six more cities across North America and Britain. The process has generated a rich set of over 180 vernacular mappings, made with black ink on white paper. Images from the Toronto, St. Louis, and Brighton iterations have been reproduced in this article.

*Figure 1: 10 drawings collected in St. Louis (2015) for From Here To.*

The act of collecting the drawings begins with the familiar encounter of stopping people in the street and asking for directions. I approached people with a simple question: how do you get from here to... there? To capture their answer, I asked them to draw their instruction for me, citing that I am unable to remember the spoken explanation or follow all the pointing and waving that have become part of the gestural translations of space. Following my request, the drawer reproduced their conception of movement through a three-dimensional space using two-dimensional shapes and one-dimensional lines. This performance of an otherwise banal act of asking for directions - framed as an artwork in itself that intervenes in the everyday and works outside the traditional gallery context - is a passing encounter. The performance results in the almost-accidental and hurried drawing of a map for a stranger, translating an abstract sensibility to a notation of space. As such, the act of asking for directions elicits multiple iterations of graphic notations that have aesthetic and conceptual value, that when taken together, function as a visual narrative that exists in the blurry space between social science research and art. The capta will be the focus of later analysis.
The Process: Following the Directions

The following section describes the site of production, framing it as an interventionist drawing event that collects the spontaneously produced drawings of directions. I walked along the gridded neighbourhood roads in Toronto, the sprawling car-filled streets of St Louis, and throughout the weaving lanes of Brighton, approaching strangers for directions. In this process, I asked how to get to the near and the far away: local sites that so often just sit patiently in the background, such as the library or the nearest ATM; and those iconic city attractions that proudly stamp their presence over tourist brochures, like the CN Tower in Toronto, Forrest Park in St. Louis, or the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. I requested that the people I stopped draw these directions for me, with the white pieces of paper (blank index cards sized 4”x 3”) and the black pen I had with me. In these disguised and disruptive instants, I temporarily drew (excuse this pun) these strangers out of their day’s flow. I ruptured the momentum in their strategy to move through the city by asking them to take a few seconds or minutes to recall what they remembered of another space they had experienced in another moment for the benefit of someone who had never experienced that space before, but needs to get there. In response to this request, people scripted spatial projections that functioned as navigational tools. In its three instantiations as an art project, I have acted as a covert artist who does not reveal my actions as art, even though, I always note how ‘cool’ the drawings look at the moment of image making, and that I may, indeed keep the drawing. The project remains hidden within the relatively common encounter of asking for and giving directions.

As such, it takes its cues from interventionist projects, adapting the strategies of Stanley Brouwn. However, this strategy, once it leaves the realm of art and enters the realm of research, bears in mind some ethical considerations around the issues of deception. These questions will be the focus of my future work as I proceed with my doctoral research.

No names or identifiable marks are attached to these pieces of paper, nor do my field notes attribute personal details to the images. When displayed, the drawings are reproduced in groups, side by side; or, in some cases, they have been retraced into a composite map that connect all discreet visualization on one 11”x 17” poster. Additionally, I ensured my field notes corresponded to their related map by tracing each image at the top of the notes and then jotting a description of the event below.

Preliminary Observations: Looking at Directions

The following section sketches out cursory impressions gleaned from the drawings based on a general overview - both the maps and my jottings from each encounter - produced over the course of the project thus far. The graphical representations of space, once abstracted from the communicative moment, appear as a collection of austere outlines and points, that fail to account for the dialogue and gestures that often accompany this creation. Though demonstrating movement and relationality through marks such as arrows or intersecting strokes, the intonations of the spoken instructions as well as the waves in the air and the pointings into

Figure 2: 9 drawings collected in Brighton for From Here To at the International Visual Methods Conference. 2015
distance that can translate to “keep going” or “that way” or “avoid that”, are lost in the minimal graphic details. This is the benefit of the field notes which work to supplement each drawing. After the exchange, I transcribe what I remember of the conversation: the gestures I observed, the conditions of the interaction, the location of the action, and the directional language used.

Some of the people I stopped would seem engrossed in the process of drawing, spending multiple minutes and making sure I fully understood where I was going through use of repetition and the repeated question of, “ok?” Others made quick, cursory strokes as if to note the inconvenience of the process or, perhaps, absorbing the perceived hurried pace around them, the hum of the moving cars and the steps of the moving people. Sometimes, the speed of completion reflected the simplicity of the direction, requiring minimal effort on the part of the drawer, rather than a sign or irritation: “no, you really just go straight, and then there, and then there; and then you’re there.” It is rare that the drawer refers to Google Maps or checks their mobile device for verification. Only in one such instance has this happened thus far, in St. Louis. As the project progresses, it will continue to track this observation.

Ultimately, the project results in a collection of multiple pieces of paper, each adorned with all manner of curving, straight, intersecting, and disconnected lines; though separated from its intended function as an instructive document that plans a route on how to get from one place to another. Sometimes the lines begin and end abruptly, jutting into other lines, dissecting, intersecting and scribbling over. Often there are arrows and sometimes there are drawings of key points, particularly striking buildings or a bridge or motorway. Each one of the multiples represents a visual truncation of an on-the-ground impression of space that often represents a real projection of the almost inconsequential details one would only notice if walking in the streets. Therefore, even though the process of collection asks people in an instant to collapse their perception of three-dimensional space into a minimal notation, it still yields the possibility of tracing the elements that often are missed in traditional cartography. Additionally, many of the hand-drawn maps make reference to the symbols of traditional navigational maps that mark trees, train tracks, and monuments.
Presenting the Collection: Directions

From Here To’s collected drawings have been presented as composited foldout maps and as map books. In September 2015, I reprinted and distributed the maps at the From Here To Information Installation throughout the International Visual Methods Conference at the University of Brighton. Similarly, in May 2014, I built a nomadic information booth for the Art of the Danforth Festival in Toronto from where I handed out free maps. In February 2015, I produced a book of the St. Louis collection, printing an edition of seven with the support of the Luminary Artist Residency. Each book contains the retracings of the “original” document, left as discreet drawings. However, in order to relocate the document in the event, I made sure that an anecdotal framing of the conversations hovered above every visualization as a type of visual poem. The reader can flip past directions marked “go straight”, “turn left”, “hang a right”, “past the ‘t’”, “keep going”, “all the way down”, “you can’t miss it.”

Next Steps: New Directions

The map is an important means to study information visualization, as both a mimetic and navigational medium that is at once familiar and historically imperialist (November, Camacho-Hübner, Latour, 2010). From Here To works to unlock the often-untapped spatial memory that we carry around within us - a sense of where to go and how we exist in space. It explores how we translate that sense of the space into a denotative set of lines that can be completed in an instant and still carry the clarity to direct a stranger from one point to another. The hand-drawn maps generated in the exercise capture a potentially subjective cognitive experience since the almost accidental and hurried nature of drawing a map for a stranger becomes an act of translating an abstract sensibility to paper. As a flash of an everyday encounter, this may seem like a non-consequential moment; but these events serve to interrupt the assertion of the Google Map or the satellite navigation that graphs itself atop our everyday and implicate itself on top of our imagination. We surrender to its imprint of space: we carry it with us in our pockets, it speaks to us in the car, and it pops up on our screen anytime we run words through a search engine on the Internet. Perhaps the codified Google Maps works to objectify space and codify our sense of place. Even how we interact with the digitized map is embedded in our muscle memory, of zooming in and zooming out and scrolling along, as we pinch screens and swipe grid patterns. In contrast, the visualizations produced within this art project are not definitive. The epistemological value of the project is seeing how art can be used as a strategy to create these distances between the certain and the uncertain, and think through constitutive elements of the visual informations we interact with on a daily basis. How this happens will be the grounds for my continued research.

References

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**List of Figures**

Figure 1: Noone, R. (2015). From Here To, St. Louis. [10 drawings collected in St. Louis, MO]. The Luminary Artspace. St. Louis, MO. Image from the artist’s personal collection.


Figure 4: Noone, R. (2014) From Here To. [A composite map of the 60 drawings collected in Brighton. The map was given away for free at the IVMC From Here To Information Booth by the artist]. International Visual Methodology Conference. University of Brighton. Image from artist’s personal collection.

Figure 5: Noone, R. (2014) From Here To. [A selection of 5 maps collected over the course of the project]. The Art of the Danforth Festival, 2014. Toronto, ON.