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Spaces of Arts: Wrap-up Comments

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Abstract

In this personal, polemical, and ad hoc response to papers given at the *Spaces of Arts* conference at Purdue University in September, 2012, Lubin identifies potential problem areas for geographical and digital art history. He admonishes its practitioners not to replace hermeneutical interpretation of art objects and art movements with positivist aggregations of data and inflated faith in digital technology. Likewise, he warns against a utopian hope that maps, charts, and graphs can ever be enough to untangle the intransigent complexity of art and its embodiment of cultural and historical change.

Résumé

Dans cette réponse personnelle, polémique et ad hoc aux communications données lors de la conférence *Spaces of Arts* à Purdue University en septembre 2012, Lubin identifie de possibles problèmes pour l'histoire de l'art géographique et numérique. Il invite à ne pas remplacer l'interprétation herméneutique minutieuse des objets d'art et des mouvements artistiques par une accumulation positiviste de données et une foi exagérée dans la technologie numérique. De même, il met en garde contre l'espoir utopique que cartes et graphiques puissent à eux seuls expliquer l'art dans toutes ses complexités et manifestations du changement culturel et historique.

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I gave the following remarks at the conclusion of the ARTL@S “Spaces of Art” conference held at Purdue University in September, 2012. As the remarks indicate, I was invited as an outside observer, not a practitioner of digital or geographic art history. These comments provide a raw, uncensored response to the papers that I heard (none of them provided to me in advance), the PowerPoints I saw, the structured discussions that followed each formal presentation, and the casual chit-chat over drinks and canapés. In retrospect, I wonder if I may have been too harsh in my assessment, not giving sufficient credit to the vast amount of thought and labor that had gone into the preparation of the papers and the mapping enterprise as a whole. Still, I let these remarks stand, almost entirely unedited or revised, as a verbal snapshot of a precise moment in time and place when practitioners and theorists of a new approach in the making came together to exchange ideas and provide one another with encouragement and caution. They mostly offered encouragement and I caution.

My job, as I understand it, is to be a respondent – which means to *respond* to what I’ve heard over the last couple days and do so, shall we say, responsibly. Afterward I’ll switch to being a discussion moderator, which entails, I suppose, being moderate.

At the same time, though, I understand my role to be that of a “friendly enemy,” or you might say an “adversarial ally.” I hope, therefore, to be critical in my observations. I won’t be talking about any papers in particular, so have no fear of being singled out for criticism – or praise, either, for that matter.

But I do want to point out some of the concerns that have struck me as I’ve listened. By the way, I should say that I am an outsider to the practice of geographical or digital or statistical art history; an alien observer.

My own approach is hermeneutical; I’m given to close readings of individual artifacts and their multidimensional contexts; the social plays a large role in what I do, but the gateway to it is always

through the text. In any case, I’m very object-centered in my practice, and perhaps nothing was more conspicuous to me throughout these sessions than the marginal status of aesthetic objects in and of themselves.

There was a great deal of discussion about geographic marginality, of center and periphery; but I would say I have never been to an art history conference from which the aesthetic object has been so removed from centrality. I was struck by the jaw-dropping beauty of many of the digital charts, images, and maps that you displayed, but their strangeness and beauty seemed – strangely – invisible. As was much of the art that was the nominal topic or end-game of discussion. Art was treated lightly or raced past with swift and silent clicking of the advance-slide control.

This leads me to the first of my critical comments or observations about the art-spaces protocol. The method may show a tendency toward “technophilia” and “chronophobia. At least, to be honest, that’s what I often felt over the past couple days; that geographies of art lead to a sort of gallop at breakneck speed across the open plains of art history. It felt like speed-dating. Every time I wanted to settle in with an image on the screen and get to know it better, you were off and running to the next slide on your list. Art objects, it appears, have little weight in socio-spatial art history. They lack solidity or density.

I sensed much love for technology here but not much love for art as a deep and coruscating emotional experience or as a stirring and insatiable pleasure. Nor much of a passion for history, either – not history in the sense I know it, which is as a complex, multifaceted, slowly unfolding, slowly worked-through narrative. Indeed, if history was minimized in this symposium, “narrative,” a way of writing history, was downright scorned as false consciousness. That’s why I say this conference seemed chronophobic: time was the enemy here in more ways than one. Everyone was racing, racing, talking as fast as possible, speeding through material to get from one point to another, one map

to another, one verbal or visual information-download to another. We were prisoners of technology: not only that of the imperious air-conditioning system, which could not be controlled, but of the apparatus of PowerPoint, which often instills in its users an over-active trigger finger and a promiscuous desire to forsake one slide for the next.

Oh, and that bell, which sounded regularly throughout the conference, dreaded and feared and tiptoed around. We were sheep; it was our sheepdog. We were dogs, and it was our Pavlovian signal. We were Taylorized assembly line workers, and it announced to us the changing of shifts. Please understand, I'm not blaming the organizers of the conference, or any of us who chose to take part in it. Still, I couldn't help but notice that geography trumped history and technology time in the relative value scale of the symposium. We love technology because it saves time, but as Charlie Chaplin pointed out long ago, it also wreaks havoc with our bodily sense of time, much to the detriment of our emotional equilibrium.

The two problems I've pointed out thus far are these. First, that an art-spaces approach may have an inherent tendency to dismiss, ignore, or trivialize art and history. Second, that it may have an unexamined inclination toward technophilia and a fear of time. Critical theorists have spoken of "fast capitalism" and its destructive effect on human beings and the environment. I wonder if the so-called digitized humanities are an offshoot of fast capitalism, in this case a sort of fast art history, not conducive to contemplative aesthetic and philosophic experience. What would be, I wonder, the art-historical equivalent to a "slow-food" means of cooking and digesting art and art history?

Next, I want to offer the following proposition in response to some of the things I heard – or thought I heard: Proximity does not a relationship make.

Proximity is nearness or adjacency in time or space. Linguistically, it's related to metonymy.

Mapping clusters of studios in this or that neighborhood implies certain types of shared experiences or goals that are not necessarily warranted.

Take Chairman Mao and Mother Teresa, for example. They would not seem to have much in common. But, in fact, they do. Let's start with an overhead view of the situation. Here, from Google Earth, we see our present location: the Purdue University campus in West Lafayette, Indiana. During one of the lunch breaks, I went for a solitary stroll. I ended up a pedestrian mall, which was filled with food trucks, serving Asian, Latin American, and traditional American cuisines.



Figure 1
Martha Christine Butler Interaction Garden, Purdue University.
Photograph: Catherine Dossin

Looking down I found a plaque embedded in the sidewalk. It carried the name "Mao Tse-Tung." What?? Aren't we in Indiana, a notoriously conservative state? Sure, I know it's considered a "red" state, but I didn't think it was that kind of red! And yet here was the great Chinese Communist leader, accorded a place of honor near the heart of the Purdue campus. Above his name was a quotation from the notorious Little Red Book.

You may know the quote. It could serve perfectly as the motto for the enterprise of geographical art history. It says: "We think too small, like the frog

at the bottom of the well. He thinks the sky's only as big as the top of the well. If he surfaced, he would have an entirely different view." Imagine you were seeking funds for a costly digital mapping endeavor; put this in your proposal, and philanthropic foundations would jump on board! Just don't tell them the source.



Figure 2

Quotation by Moa Tse-Tung, Martha Christine Butler Interaction Garden, Purdue University. Photograph: Catherine Dossin

There are several plaques with inspirational quotations embedded in the sidewalk abutting the food-truck plaza. Closest to Mao's is one from Mother Teresa. It says: "We can do no great things – only small things with love." It's as if her text has entered into dialectical argument with his. He says we think too small and need to change that, whereas she warns that we are not great and should never aspire to be, but rather we must embrace our smallness and act humbly and lovingly because of it.

This is not a moral debate that appears to have attracted much notice on the west bank of the Wabash. I asked several students where we were, exactly, and what those messages conveyed, but they only shrugged their shoulders. They barely

had time to look up from their smart phones. Which brings me back to time-saving, space-eradicating technology. It operates antithetically to history, literature, and art. It takes us out of the moment, out of the here, as well as the now.



Figure 3

Quotation by Mother Teresa, Martha Christine Butler Interaction Garden, Purdue University. Photograph: Catherine Dossin

While I'm back on my technophobic rant, let me go off on Google for a moment. The now-famous noun that became a universal verb is wonderful for word-play: buried within it are loaded terms such as "good," "God," "agog" (amazed), "goggle" (to stare in wonder), "goggles" (protective eyeglasses), and "ogle." Ogle, for the non-native English speakers in the room, means "to look at with greedy or interested attention." By pretending to place the world at our fingertips – our digits – Google makes us feel godlike and it arouses our greed, our lust for information and all the worldly pleasures, or so we think, it can bring us, from pornographic excitement to stock market insights to the silly antics of cats. But the one thing it can't give is wisdom or, to put that in another way, understanding, or, as Mother Teresa would have it, love.

Meanwhile, as commentators such as Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Joseph Heller have all pointed out, a god's eye view of the earth tends to rain down violence on its inhabitants more than it does goodness and light. Here we see an aesthetically beautiful aerial reconnaissance photo from the First World War; its purpose, however, was not to produce visual pleasure but rather to gather intelligence about gun encampments and troop placement in an enemy-occupied town in order to mount a successful counter-attack.



Figure 4
"Observing your surroundings?" Photograph: Catherine Dossin

Back to propinquity, or adjacency. I have been doing a lot of scholarly work on the study of two very well-known art objects both produced in the United States in 1917: Marcel Duchamp's infamous readymade *Fountain* and James Montgomery Flagg's recruiting poster *I Want You*. In a way, they represent the exact opposite poles of American visual culture at that time. But,

would you believe it, they came from the very same place – not only the same neighborhood but the same address? When Duchamp and Flagg made their respective masterpieces, they both worked out of the same studio building on the Upper West Side. Do you think they ever spoke in the hallway or on the elevator? Did they visit each other's studio? That's most unlikely. But even if they did doff their hats to one another in cordial greeting at, say, the mailboxes, what of it?

What good would be gained in this instance by digitally linking geographic proximities? I don't know, but I find myself wondering again about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of mere proximity in space. Notice, by the way, that both R. Mutt's urinal and Flagg's Uncle Sam gesture to the viewer with what might be described as a rigid digit. They finger us, so to speak, a term that has multiple implications, having to do with sex, domination, and guilt. As, perhaps, does digital technology.

I said I wasn't going to mention anyone by name but that's not true. I want to mention Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel's disclaimer at the beginning of her presentation yesterday: "Maps Lie." That was a clever rhetorical move on her part; it was an amulet that protected her from our evil eye. "We are postmodernists," she said, "we recognize the violence that maps do" – and then, having gotten that out of the way, she extolled the benefits that GIS mapping can provide historians and art historians.

Part of me believes this, and I certainly wish her, and all of you, well as you embark on this collective endeavor. But I also think of the activist poet Audre Lorde, who in a different context troublingly observed that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Can mapping be used in a socially progressive way without also, inevitably, contributing to social forms of regression? Can its toxic properties be sufficiently isolated such as not to contaminate its users? Again, I don't know, but I do think it's a serious problem worth addressing.

A couple last points. I'm writing these words at two o'clock in the morning, and I need some sleep. First, there's the trees-for-the-forest problem. Map-making and data-collecting can be addictive. They can be never-ending processes. They can be ends-in-themselves. And that is toxic. The great cautionary model for this in English literature is Casaubon, the withered old scholar in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, who denies love to everyone around him, including his passionate young wife, because he is obsessed with completing his grand, ultimately empty, scholarly project, always adding one more piece to his castle in the air, and then another, and another, endlessly deferring closure and meaning. Casaubon's project, by its very scale, supersedes the importance of the human element and, as such, slowly, invisibly erodes the humanity of its user (which, in his case, was probably never much to speak of anyway).

Finally, an anthropological observation. Over the last couple days I found myself mapping the geopolitics of the seating arrangements in our conference rooms. Who was sitting where, and why? What were (are) the power hierarchies? Which were the power tables? Was I lucky enough to be seated at one? Did I deserve to be so seated? Does propinquity provide parity? Would a statistical heat-mapping of our bodies, showing us clustered together in one small location on a very large campus, accurately indicate significant differences between us in other spheres of existence? Or, to condense these questions into the terms most often invoked in our discussions: where were the centers of power and where the peripheries? The fact that the seating was open and non-hierarchical does not remove it from such analysis.

Please don't get me wrong, we've been a very nice, well-behaved group. But still, who was dominant, who was subaltern, and why? Nothing unusual here; it's the rules of the game we have all consented to play. I've been in this business a long time now, and I will let you younger members of the guild in on a secret, which is that higher education is rampant with status anxiety. At every

level. I've never met a successful academic who feels that she or he has had enough success – or recognition. No one need be or should be held personally accountable, because it's endemic. It's systemic.

This last topic may seem a rather negative way to conclude my remarks, but it's consistent with the cautionary note I've tried to sound throughout, in one way or another. I agree with Chairman Mao that it's not always good to think small, and it's definitely good to get out of the well. But I also agree with Mother Teresa about valuing smallness – in ourselves, as in others.

Sometimes that means not moving so fast. It means taking time to examine the fine grain. It means looking down beneath your feet, where you might find words unexpectedly embedded in the ground, rather than scanning the skies or, worse, fixating on your computer screen and data spreadsheets. It's about trying to notice and listen to and respect others, wherever they might be located on the socio-economic-academic graph. Our systems of knowledge and success oppose that kind of slowing down, and they do so in such a variety of ways that we're always going to be tempted by subtle, or not so subtle, forms of inhumanity toward others and ourselves.

Bring on the geopolitical analysis of art, I say, but not to the extent that macro devours micro and that the graphing of data becomes a substitute for thinking or, more importantly, for feeling what other people have felt in the past and are feeling today.

[I provided the following chart, which summarized the points made above and opened the door to a lively, sometimes heated, 90-minute follow-up discussion:]

FAULTLINES AND FALLACIES

- Technophilia & chronophobia
- Propinquity (or apposition): metonymy gone wild

- Google-ism: licensed ogling
- Neo-positivism & fact-fetishism displace meaning-seeking
- Supermarket-sweep mentality; most toys (data) wins
- Academic & cultural status anxiety; embedded systems of hierarchy and reward keep the mills turning

Despite my obstreperous tone and skeptical outlook regarding digital/geographic art history, I was and, a year later, still am intrigued by its promise. My own preference is to take a rambling and digressive, if ultimately pointed, journey of inquiry into the highways and byways of the art-historical past, one that plants its feet on the ground, looks up, down, and around, and doesn't aspire to godlike perspectives. Yet I can't help but admire the audacity of the geo-digitizers and art-cartographers and applaud them for their intrepid venture into previously unmapped spaces of artistic form and production. I am grateful to Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel for asking me to speak at the conference and to publish my remarks herein.