

BRIC Contemporary Art

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Maps and Mazes: PS1's Greater New York Exhibition

This is the first in a series of posts by BRIC Contemporary Art summer interns who will be making weekly trips around the city to see artwork on view. Through these posts, Shannon Mulshine and Esther Howe will be responding to each other and developing their curatorial vision.



Around noon last Friday, I met Shannon in the cafe at the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City. We sat down and took a look at the floor plan to map out a path that would lead us through the current exhibition, *Greater New York*. Organized by MoMA PS1 and the Museum of Modern Art, this quinquennial exhibition is dedicated to showcasing work conceived and produced in the metropolitan New York area, and is, to say the least, gigantic. The old school building is a solid three-story brick structure, with a basement, stairwells at either end, and, on every floor, a corridor running north to south. Filled with the work of 68 artists and collectives, the space becomes a strange maze. Entering a room through one doorway often gives way to exiting it through a different doorway; a succession of room-hopping might lead you in a nice circle, back to the room where you started, but it also might lead you astray, frequenting the same room twice while missing others completely. Part of what makes the space so confusing is that, eventually, every cluster of rooms leads back to a corridor, disorienting in its similarity to all the other corridors in the building.

In its first month, this exhibition received reviews full of harsh remarks focusing on its overwhelming nature that thrusts quantity before quality and exposes the detrimental and ambivalence-ridden trajectory of contemporary art in the city. My experience of the show was partially in line with these views: It honestly *was* overwhelming and pretty endless. But it was also really interesting, in large part because many of the artists included are right around my age. Walking through the show, I started to feel solidarity with the cacophonous atmosphere. With some pieces, I found myself imagining an art-school assignment behind their creation—an inclination that I think speaks more to an inevitable recycling of language and themes within contemporary art than to a fault of specific artists. With other pieces, I had no *idea* what was going on, but for the most part, the confusion felt exciting, a problem to figure out and a malfunction to address, rather than a serious glitch in the future of contemporary art.

As Shannon and I wandered the rooms together, it started to seem like every other piece we saw was a video, emanating from a screen or projected on a wall and within these “moving pictures,” a whole new cacophony and multiplicity of spaces to trapeze through. The most difficult part of the show for me quickly became the transitions between spaces, both real and imagined, on screen and off. But rather than wish this show were more cohesive, tied together by something beyond physical proximity, I started to focus on the transitions themselves. Specifically because there was no overarching theme of content or form, I began to think about how the experience of sharing space—streets, stores and parks—is translated into the space of a gallery. Does the sharing of space necessarily render something similar within each of us? Is there a “geography” before “culture,” a “land” before the “law”? Throughout the city, screens are constantly interrupting and mediating how we move through space, influencing how we experience the physical space in which our bodies exist and creating entirely new spaces of virtual reality. It seems only fitting that a show of this size would begin to mirror the mixed-media rendering of space found in everyday urban environments.

Focused on questions of space and transitions, two pieces, stuck out to me as applicable to my inquiries: [Amy Yao's](#) *Entry Ways to Exit Strategies* and a group of images taken from the collaborative project, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*.



Amy Yao, *Entryways to Exit Strategies* (2010)

Yao's three freestanding doors are positioned in a triangle, facing each other in the center of the room. Each door is marked with variations of bright colors on the door knobs and on the doors themselves. Influenced by the title of the piece, I constructed a narrative of decision making (which door do I pick?), urgency (my goal, she tells me, is to exit) and a bit of hopelessness (in a literal sense, these doors lead nowhere). Freestanding, these doors no longer serve as passage ways between separate spaces. After passing through one door, I ended up only a few feet away from where I started; The light, temperature and size of the space in which I stood had not changed at all. For me, Yao's piece was a taunt, a laugh in the face of change, but also, a meditation on a space that we rarely focus on: the space of transition. As I spent more time with the piece, the frustration of doors leading nowhere began to double as a frustration and discomfort with transitions themselves—a discomfort to which Yao insisted I attend.

On a side note, and before discussing *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, I want to mention the photographs featured on the walls surrounding Yao's work. David Benjamin Sherry's photographs are full of humor and managed to single handedly dismantle the mood of "disaffected negativity" many critics found present throughout the show. I highly recommend checking out his website, <http://www.davidbenjaminsherry.com/>, to see images of his prints! Another interesting aside is that Yao included Sherry's work in a show she recently curated at the Jack Hanley Gallery, entitled "Is A Rustling Petticoat Enough To Bring It Down To Earth?".

A couple hours after leaving Yao and Sherry, I landed on the third floor and was struck by *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*. Even the introductory plaque spoke directly to my questions of space and place, culture and law, and to transitions between spaces, psychological and otherwise. As stated on their website, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* is a collection of 10 maps and essays that aim to use map making to subvert "conventional notions in order to actively promote social change." From the movement of bodies across the U.S./Mexico Border to the movement of surveillance cameras across Manhattan, these maps show themselves as instruments of power, directly exposing the politics inherent in all maps and destabilizing the façade of objectivity, played out across the surfaces of atlases around the world. Though I'm not sure about the actual political effectiveness of these maps (they seem to ride a long way on the pure *shock* of "uncovering" social, political and environmental injustices), part of what makes them so exciting to me is the fun they poke at representing our experience of space with a static diagram and the homage they pay to the impossibility of separating out our physical and psychological relationships with the land around us.

Of the maps displayed, the one that caught my eye immediately was Ashley Hunt's *A World Map: In which we see...* Though this is not an installation view from the PS1 show, I think the above image does a good job of giving a general sense of the map's layout: Hunt's work is almost like a compilation of slides from a PowerPoint presentation or a series of flow charts on a science fair poster. With a short paragraph and series of bullet points, Hunt directs the viewers' attention towards the inverse relationship between the movement of capital and the movement of people. The work is very theoretical, using quotes from philosophers like [Michel Foucault](#), [Hannah Ardent](#), and [Judith Butler](#) to present its message. What is particularly pleasing to me is that this map gains self-awareness from its context. In other words, it seems

to take all the benefits of map-making—the assuredness and clarity of a diagram—and avoid being didactic, because the very project of which it is part admits to the subjectivity present in all maps. Additionally, I was gratified by the physical spaces the map created for abstract ideas, and felt that it helped me to have a deeper understanding of complex philosophical ideas I have encountered before, in text alone. That being said, the map left me with questions, specifically in regards to how the map is approached by people who are not familiar with the philosophers Hunt quotes.

As I try to figure out my relationship to and opinions about contemporary art, I find myself worrying about the accessibility of art. While I want to deny that art could express some sort of “universal essence of humanity,” accessible to all people, I also want to do away with work that is meaningful only in a limited number of contexts. I enjoy Hunt’s work because it makes dense, philosophical texts that feel exclusive to me, more accessible. But what if I hadn’t read these authors before? I wonder about the limits of this piece, as it gains so much of its meaning from very specific texts and, subsequently, about the piece’s ability to effect social change and hold some sort of political power.

As we begin to work on a joint project, I hope Shannon and I can address the accessibility of art as well as its political effectiveness. One place I might start looking for answers is in some of BRIC’s past exhibitions, like *the no place*, that includes a whole group of very political pieces on place and space.

In closing, I want to shift focus back to the *Greater New York* show, a show that is a map in it’s own right: a map of New York’s contemporary artistic production . Though I think many of the unsatisfied reviews regarding the show’s size were spot on, I don’t think these complaints warrant a full dismissal of the show; A lot of these artists take cues from each other, work off of each others ideas and collaborate as both curators and artists. For me, struggling with the atmosphere of cacophony brought up interesting questions and made me excited to go back and see it all again.

-Esther Howe, Intern