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Towards a Spatial (Digital) Art History

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Spatial (Digital) Art History

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Editorial Statement

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The *ARTL@S BULLETIN* is a peer-reviewed, transdisciplinary journal devoted to spatial and transnational questions in the history of the arts and literature.

The journal promises to never separate methodology and history, and to support innovative research and new methodologies. Its ambition is twofold: 1. a focus on the “transnational” as constituted by exchange between the local and the global or between the national and the international, and 2. an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

By encouraging scholars to continuously shift the scope of their analysis from the national to the transnational, *ARTL@S BULLETIN* intends to contribute to the collective project of a global history of the arts.

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Towards a Spatial (Digital) Art History

Among the numerous possibilities offered by the Digital Humanities, digital mapping is certainly among the most promising for art history. It is a rather simple yet efficient way to explore the large amount of data and databases which are available to the discipline but that are often underutilized. New mapping technologies allow us to work with art history's big data serially and spatially, and to diffuse the result of our research through attractive and compelling visualizations.

As often mentioned in the *ARTL@S Bulletin*, questions of geography started dominating discourse in art history during the early 2000s. In 2004, the Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art chose "Sites and Territories of Art History" as the theme of its annual conference, and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann published *Toward a Geography of Art*.¹ Since then many conferences, books, and articles have adopted a geographic approach, which has brought new insights into old questions.² However, these geohistorical speculations have rarely produced physical maps thereby perpetuating Fernand Braudel's famous comment that "we have museum catalogs, but no artistic atlases".³

Art historians tend to discuss space as an abstract, immaterial concept in relation to artworks or the art worlds. Rarely do they study it as a material,

historical fact that requires mapping. And even among those who are interested in and see the value of maps, most lack the knowledge and tools to make, use, and interpret them. Creating historical maps of artistic phenomena is indeed a daunting task. Besides the difficulties inherent to any cartographic project, art historians face several challenges that are specific to the discipline: How to render the succession of events that comprise the history of art onto a single document without sacrificing readability? How to visualize the flux of traveling exhibitions, collecting practices, artists' networks, exchanges and influences that are the very objects of art history?

Such renderings are virtually impossible to achieve using traditional cartographic methods. But, with recent developments in GIS and web mapping, it is now possible to create multidimensional, dynamic maps that display vast amounts of spatial and temporal data while remaining perfectly readable and intuitive. Additionally, the mainstreaming of location-awareness and spatial information led by our daily use of recreational GPS, Google Maps, and Google Earth creates a demand for maps and visualizations at all levels of society. The result is an urgency in those of us with mappable research to embrace these new technologies and their ability to analyze and visualize spatial data.

Dynamic spatial visualizations are particularly useful in revealing how spatial logics interact with artistic creation, and vice-versa. They also allow

¹ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Christophe Charle, *La dérégulation culturelle. Essai d'histoire des cultures en Europe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 2015).

² See, for instance, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Elizabeth Pilliod, eds., *Time and Place: Essays in the Geohistory of Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

³ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

historians to study the locations and movements of artistic agents and artworks, their integration in social milieus, specifically in political, cultural, and artistic fields, as well as their response, whether visual or discursive, to these spatial logics. Combined with a narrative interpretation of visual and textual sources, maps enable us to escape purely theoretical speculation, and to work in a materialistic, structural way which a growing number of scholars in other disciplines call for, from Christophe Charle in cultural history to Franco Moretti in literature.⁴

And indeed a few art historians have started leveraging recent developments in mapping technology to create maps which convey vast amounts of multidimensional, dynamic data. Among the most relevant projects, we can cite a few projects, some of which have already been featured in the *Artl@s Bulletin*:

- *Culture, mobilité, territoire: émergence et transformation de l'identité métropolitaine bruxelloise (18e-21e siècles)*, a project of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium), which examines the artistic identity of Brussels.⁵
- *International Graduate Program in Art Markets and Visual Studies*, a collaboration between Duke University and Université Lille 3 that considers the geography of the art market in the 17th and 18th century.⁶
- *Mapa cronològic dels espais de l'oci a la Barcelona de 1900*, a project of the Universitat de Barcelona, which maps the spaces of leisure in Barcelona at the turn of the 20th century.⁷

⁴ Christophe Charle, "Peut-on écrire une histoire de la culture européenne à l'époque contemporaine ?," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 65e année, no. 5 (2010): 1207-21. Charle, *La dérégulation culturelle. Essai d'histoire des cultures en Europe au XIXe siècle*. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 126.

⁵ <http://www.ulb.ac.be/recherche/presentation/en-arclemaireen.html> and see Laurence Brogniez and Tatiana Debroux, "Les XX in the City: An Artists' Neighborhood in Brussels," *ARTL@s Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (2013): 38-51, at <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol2/iss2/5/>

⁶ <http://irhis.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/00-M-Arts/anr/Accueil.html> and see Sophie Raux, "Visualizing Spaces, Flows, Agents, and Networks of the Art Markets in the 18th Century: Some Methodological Challenges," *ARTL@s Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 27-37, at <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol2/iss2/4/>

⁷ http://www.ub.edu/gracmon/gracmon_nou/?page_id=43

- *Mapping Nineteenth-Century London's Art Market*, a project created by Pamela Fletcher and Anne Helmreich and published in the journal *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*.⁸
- Michele Greet's website, *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris between the Wars*, which acts as a companion to her upcoming book.⁹
- *Mapping Video Art*, a data visualization project developed at New York City University, which maps the exhibitions of seven video artists from 1963 to 2011.¹⁰
- *Africamap* which is housed at the Center for Geographic Analysis at Harvard University.¹¹
- *Wired! at Duke University*, an initiative to engage digital technologies in the study of Art History.¹² One of their projects, *Visualizing Venice* is featured in this issue.
- And, of course, our own *ARTL@s* project, which began in 2009 at the École normale supérieure and focuses on artistic circulations since the 18th century through the quantitative and geographical analysis of one homogeneous source, namely exhibition catalogues.¹³

Exhibition catalogues are indeed a major primary source for art history. They provide information about works of art, artists, and their histories. They help trace artists' career paths and the trajectories of art pieces, and are the basis of many studies in art history. The goal of ARTL@s is to use exhibition catalogues to quantitatively trace artistic circulations from the 18th century to the present, combining a geographic approach with traditional methods in art history. In order to do

⁸ <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/autumn12/fletcher-helmreich-mapping-the-london-art-market>

⁹ <http://chmm.gmu.edu/transatlanticencounters/> and see Michele Greet, "Mapping Cultural Exchange: Latin American Artists in Paris between the Wars," in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds. *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 133-147.

¹⁰ <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/projects/>

¹¹ <http://worldmap.harvard.edu/africamap/> <http://worldmap.harvard.edu/>

¹² <http://www.dukewired.org/>

¹³ <http://www.artlas.ens.fr> and see Catherine Dossin, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, and Sorin A. Matei, "Spatial (Digital) History: A Total History? The ARTL@s Project," *Visual Resources: Digital Art History Special Issue* (Spring 2013): 47-58.

this, the ARTL@S team has been developing a database that accommodates every possible catalogue format since the first exhibition catalogues were published in the late 17th century. This database consists of a growing collection of catalogues that are transcribed, georeferenced, and verified by a multidisciplinary team of scholars who share their data. We are now working on enriching the database to a global scale, and developing an efficient query interface to study complex circulations, map works of arts, and artists' progression, as well as the geographies and geopolitics of art on a world scale. A comprehensive database of exhibition catalogues from all over the world, connected to efficient query tools, will foster new questions and discoveries. It will also encourage the “decentering” of art history which historically has been focused on only a very few key cities in the West.

The new Spatial (Digital) art history that these projects are implementing participates in the redefinition of the discipline by embracing the theories and methods of the Spatial, Global, and Digital Turns that have been challenging the humanities over the past decades. It is also a means to implement the horizontal approach promoted by Piotr Piotrowski, who sadly passed away unexpectedly last month, but whose ideas and legacy will remain with us.¹⁴ But in what directions is this Spatial (Digital) approach taking the discipline? What are its connections with past and current developments in geography, the social sciences, and critical theory? What kind of new findings and new interpretations does it achieve? What does it change in the way we practice, interpret, write, and teach art history, especially in regard to the canon? With this special issue of the *ARTL@S Bulletin*, which began as a panel we organized at the 2014 Meeting of the College Art Association,¹⁵ we wish to bring together scholars

who are pioneering the field of Spatial (Digital) art history, to not only take stock of projects currently under development and allow others to learn about them, but also to foster exchange and collaboration among Spatial (Digital) historians.

The following papers combine concrete presentations of cartographic projects with methodological reflection on the use of maps and digital tools and, as a whole, showcase the diversity and potential of the new field of Spatial (Digital) Art History.

¹⁴ See for instance, Piotr Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde,” in *Europa! Europa?: The Avant-Garde, Modernism, and the Fate of a Continent*, ed. Sascha Bru (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009); Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

¹⁵ The panel took place on February 2014 in Chicago. It featured five papers: Lisa Reilly, University of Virginia at Charlottesville: *Change Over Time: Neatline and the Study of Architectural History*; Niall Stephen Atkinson, University of Chicago: *Florentia*

Illustrata: Digital Mapping and the Return of Renaissance Geographies; Kristin Lanzoni, The Wired! at Duke University: *Visualizing Venice: Mapping the Digital onto Art History*; Michele Greet, George Mason University: *Mapping Cultural Exchange: Strategies for Locating the Narrative in the Digital World*; Paul B. Jaskot, DePaul University: *Spatial Analysis and Vernacular Architecture: The Case of the Built Environment at Auschwitz*. Suzanne Preston Blier, Allen Whitehill Clowes Professor of Fine Arts and of African and African American Studies, Harvard University, and Pamela M. Fletcher, Professor of Art History, Bowdoin College, served as respondents.