

You Are Here: New York

Laura Kurgan

I am requesting funding from NYSCA for a project called "You Are Here: New York." The project is part of a larger one investigating the status and role of maps in contemporary architecture and urbanism, comprised of both extensive research into and experimentation with new technologies of mapping, and a critique of its prevailing codes and conventions. Without dispensing with the form of the map altogether "You Are Here" seeks to put into question the classical aim of orientation which has always driven the mapping enterprise, so as to open up the possibility of that new experience of discovery which can only derive from a certain disorientation. Start-up funding for the project as a whole has been provided by the Graham Foundation, and this application is limited to funds necessary for completing the segment which relates to New York City.

The project is guided by this claim: the analogy between a building and a city, as unified systems or machines capable of being diagrammed or charted in their functioning, can no longer be sustained. It has become impossible to claim, as did for example the Regional Plan Association in its 1962 Urban Design Manhattan, that "the entire urban infrastructure, not just the public transportation system but the water and waste, the energy and communications systems, should be viewed and designed as one 'mega-building.'" This analogy (which has a distinguished heritage, not simply to be dismissed, including among others Le Corbusier and Sant'Elia) finally implies, whatever its conceptual power, the form of the the map: the regulated flow of people, things, and information through a unified system or a totality. But the city today is an irreducible experience of complication, of the interference between flows and a radical fragmentation of systems: no longer a plan and a map, but multiple, incomplete, and often incompatible maps overlaid across one another. If each map of the city tells a different story about it, and in a certain sense makes a different city available to us, we must expose these different stories -- different cities -- to one another. "You Are Here" attempts to draw the lines, movements, and relations which the conventions of mapping and an inherited concept of the city (and of the building) prevent us from seeing. If we cannot, and indeed must not, erase these complications, our task must be to make them readable.

I propose a thorough re-mapping of New York City, but one compiled entirely from existing maps. The work of re-mapping will be done against two backgrounds, two of the most powerful and different overviews of the city: a satellite photograph of the region digitized and scaled such that the pixelated image can be read as a map, and a 3-D model based on the computerized version of New York's Sandborn map. A multiplicity of what claim to be more specific maps can then be overlaid onto these from a variety of sources: telephone (including fax machine and beeper) networks, the subway system and its patterns of use, electronic banking networks and currency flows, property ownership and zoning, homelessness, income distribution, ethnicity and national origin, language use, and violence, to name a few. This process of reading the city will rely on the way maps are structured by the computer, as data, i.e., with layers, floating scales, zooms and annotations, to produce a new and synthetic architecture of information. The analytic work involves reproducing and reprocessing the maps in the computer so as to collate them at interchangeable scales, allowing comparison and overlay. The task of analysis implies a constant effort to supplement existing maps with each other, in order to produce a kind of friction between barely-compatible conventions that makes their assumptions, and not simply the maps themselves, legible.

The structure of the project therefore, does not tolerate the single point of view associated with either maps or master plans. The two background maps are constantly shifting and being redefined by the forces (and maps) acting upon them. The resulting product will be a trace of some of the forces at work in the contemporary city... so that we might expose them to one another, and have the chance to live in some without losing the others.

You Are Here: Kuwait

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This installation will be part of a larger project called **You Are Here**:

You Are Here – derives from the ubiquitous legend which aims to orient readers of a map to their position within its space. The basic claim of any map is to orient its reader, which is to say, make space available in a total and coherent image so that it can be known and used. **You Are Here** seeks to put a certain project of orientation (location, use, exploration) into question, without dispensing with the form of the map altogether. A critique of mapping: maps let us see too much, and hence blind us to what we cannot see, imposing a quiet tyranny of orientation which erases the possibility of a certain kind of disoriented discovery, or else they lose sight of what they ought to see, omit according to their conventions those invisible lines (people, places, networks) that create what are arguably the most common spaces we live within today. Maps are interpretations of spaces, not so much representations or descriptions of information as conventionally-organized constructions. We can read maps because they come laden with conventions, ranging from the codes of graphic presentation to what counts as the information they provide. **You Are Here** offers a critical analysis, in the form of a re-mapping, of the conventions of mapping: an attempt to draw the limits of the project of mapping itself, and at the same time an effort to create new kinds of maps and new kinds of spaces by rewriting the invisible lines that maps usually omit.