



Elizabeth Neel, *Sideshow*, 2008, oil on canvas, 76 x 85". Photo: Tom Powel Imaging Inc. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

Depression. For her, the choice to position centrally the only recognizable image, which was a " clichéd" fish head (and some nicely etched-in fish scales), was uncomfortable and embarrassing; yet because of that, it felt right in its wrongness. Elements swirl in an expansive vocabulary of greyish circular marks interrupted by gravity-defying, horizontal paint drips.

*Humpndump*, 2008, was an off-hand term invented by her friend referring to a careless approach to dating. It sounds cute like a fairytale creature but is also disturbing, she said. The canvas is slightly more vertical (figurative) than horizontal, anthropomorphizing the only representational ingredient: blue outlines of dogs, or maybe a single frenzied dog, with a human-sized, raw naked thigh. Peeled pink-peach-red flesh tones induce compassion as we relate this beast to the human condition. Energetic brushwork bends the background up into the foreground, vibrating in a shallow depth of space. Working or source imagery included Dutch and Medieval hunting paintings and photos of piled up animals shot at rendering dumps.

*Count to Ten*, 2008, was made in response to Neel's childhood memory of a beloved barn burned by a mentally unstable man and his sidekick. The tragedy of the event corresponds with a more generally understood gothic American paradigm of rural violence. The title of the piece, she said, engages with the apprehension of an event as well as a strategy for imposing calm through the logical act of counting. A stage of architectural forms and billows of orange or grey reminded me of Monet's 1877 painting of the Saint-Lazare train station in Paris.

There are connections in Elizabeth Neel's work with Philip Guston, Caravaggio, and with the aggression of Francis Bacon, but more prevalent as influence is the work of non-painters—videos by Neel's boyfriend, Uri Aran, or Paul Pfeiffer, as well as the three-dimensional work of Isa Genzken, whose formal rigour transforms castaway materials into beautiful and classical assemblage.

It is Neel's wish never to bore the viewer with artwork that dictates answers. Rather, her painting consciously remains one of possibilities and questions implicating audience participation, with her gentle guidance in forming a viewer's own associations and meaning. ■

*Elizabeth Neel's "Make No Bones" was exhibited at Deitch Projects in New York from November 6 to December 6, 2008.*

*Charmaine Wheatley is a Canadian performance artist living in New York. In 2009 a new bookwork titled 30% of Buffalo will be published by Brooklyn Artists Alliance.*

## VISUAL ART

### "Maps in Doubt"

William V Ganis

In the good old days of post-modernist thought, Jean Baudrillard recalled in "The Precession of Simulacra," an essay in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, an allegory written by Jorge Luis Borges that imagined "a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, coinciding point for point with it." Baudrillard's argument is that the map, both in this parable and present experience, precedes real space and that political powers strive to make lived existence reflect simulation. His famous "deserts of the real" are vestigial spaces that no longer reflect simulacra—of maps or other proxies for actuality.

Mercer Union: A Centre for Contemporary Art is newly located in such a Torontonion desert, in a working-class, immigrant neighbourhood named after the unappealing Dufferin Mall. The former community theatre has a gritty shell, but inside, it sports white-box galleries. This location boasts a new cluster of galleries and arts organizations; with more momentum these will engender gentrification and put the area back on the map. I'll propose a trendy name—NoDuffMART.

It's fitting, then, that one of the inaugural exhibitions for this space is Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico's collaborative installation, "Maps in Doubt," that shows the inadequacies of objective (and simulacral) maps for describing experience. This exhibition's works

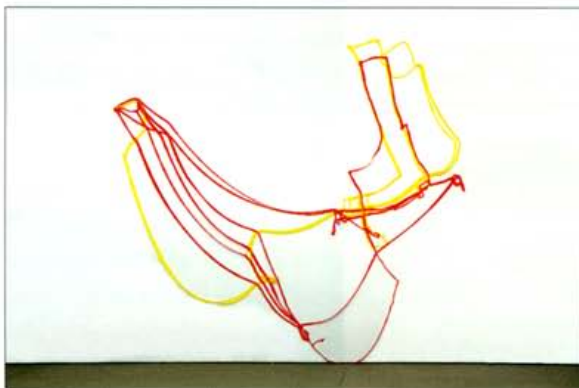
stem from data collected by each of the artists. Rechico is an analogue recorder, writing tedious details about her travels in a notebook; MacGregor's moves are plotted automatically by a digital GPS system. Examples of this collected, digitized and printed system comprise *Data (Münster)*, 2008. In the show's other works, similar information is compared in visual representations that summarize their journeys.

*Distance (Kassel)*, 2008, is the simplest of the mapping enterprises insofar as only total distances are represented; the execution, though, is exceedingly laboured. Graphite strokes make manifest the distances travelled by each artist; Rechico presents three leaves of approximately metre-wide paper, and MacGregor four. The tens of thousands of linear marks represent the astounding 69.05 kilometres and 82 kilometres traversed by each artist. These are installed in a comparative grid that shows independent solutions for the task; Rechico makes curved lines that suggest the arc of the artist's arm and her analogue approach. MacGregor's lines are more or less straight; and ultimately might offer a more precise measure, given that Rechico's curves add several erroneous centimetres to each page-wide stroke and many metres to the total distance. Each horizontal stroke suggests a stride, a basic unit of human movement, recalling Robert Morris's *Blind Time* drawings (1973–2000) that also show the body's range, even though MacGregor and Rechico's trips may have been made by foot, train, bus or other modes.

Another cartograph of incredulity is the painterly *Floppy*

*Map (Montreal)*, 2008, that hangs from the wall. MacGregor traces her whereabouts in bright red and Rechico in yellow silicone lines that evoke the graphics of subway system maps. The blobby swaths twist in space as a reminder that Cartesian plotting is an abstraction; the third dimension dutifully plotted as elevation by MacGregor's GPS (some hilariously erroneous data locate MacGregor at millions of metres above sea level) are eliminated. Sagging like a Claes Oldenburg sculpture, the maps become fleshy, all too human, and prone to error. Indeed, MacGregor points out that her GPS doesn't work in the subway, so her recorded plots may bend space and reason. Rechico notes that she is careful but that it's all too easy to make mistakes while constantly recording.

The artists play with arbitrary analysis in *Working Days (Toronto)*, 2008. Again they use a matrix, this time composed of letter-sized Lambda prints tracing the independent movements of the artists around Toronto. Each column shows a data-form-of-the-month. November 2007 shows simple, plotted points; January 2008 applies a Voronoi diagram; and April yields the total area travelled, juxtaposed (in winsomely paranoiac fashion) along with the sites from 2007 of known marijuana growth operatives. The graphics serve a futile self-surveillance—much number crunching and exotic graphing reveal almost nothing about the movements of these two artists except perhaps that they frequent similar parts of the city. What remains is the official nature of the data's presentation.

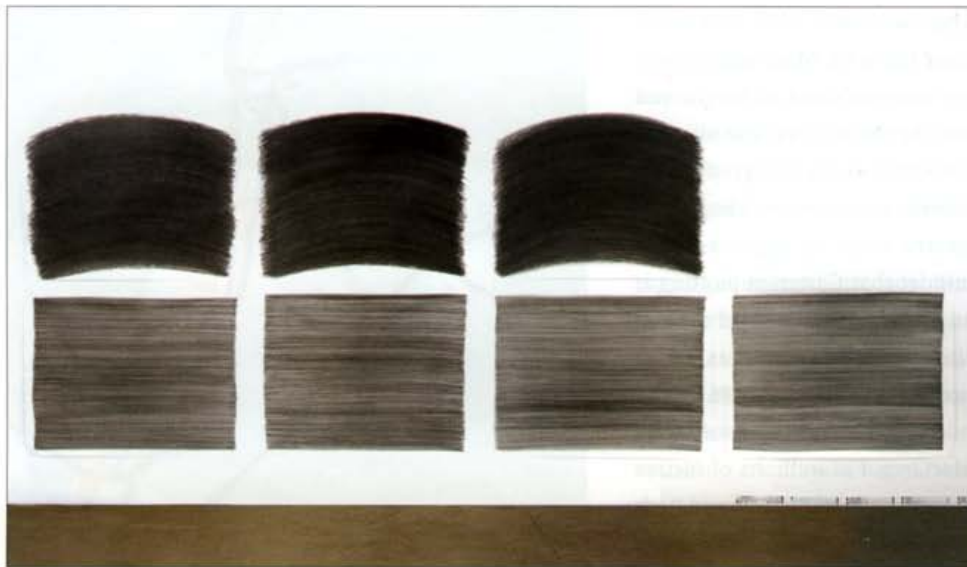


*Working Days* takes aim at the seductive charts and diagrams of urban-planning presentations, social metrics and epidemic models that can seem compelling even if their data are flawed, presumed or absurd.

The duo are careful to note that the travels they record are chosen because they are related to art-career activities, whether visiting Documenta 12 in Kassel, installing an exhibition in Montreal or going about the quotidian business of art making and working in Toronto. Rechico and MacGregor unpack ideas fostered by Duchamp, Rosenberg, Kaprow, and many others, that art and the artist's life are intertwined in

top: Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico, *Floppy Map (Montreal)*, 2008, detail, silicone, 14 x 14". Photo: Miles Stemp. Courtesy the artists.

below: Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico, *Floppy Map (Montreal)*, 2008, silicone, 14 x 14". Photo: Miles Stemp. Courtesy the artists.



Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico, *Distance* (Kassel), 2008, graphite on paper, 24 x 9'. Photo: Miles Stemp. Courtesy the artists.

creative performance. But is everything an artist does necessarily artful? These journeys tell of a historical situation in which art is made within a process of international networking and idea exchange. The decentredness of the present art world that becomes manifested in international art fairs, biennials and art tourism is also connoted by these dubious maps. To be a player in the art market is to bounce from Miami to London to Venice to Beijing and so forth; the scope of a star artist or curator's travel has become a marker of importance (Cai Guo-Qiang's globe-trotting is a spectacle in itself). MacGregor and Rechico set forth a frustrated set of maps in media and conceptual tropes that are to be read as overtly artistic. The self-consciously flawed works equate journeys as performance, but with travels that are synecdoches of careers, this duo offers a critique of a professional artless precession that inadequately stands in for the artist and her expression. ■

*"Maps in Doubt," curated by Dan Adler, was exhibited at the new*

*Mercer Union: A Centre for Contemporary Art, Toronto, from October 24 to November 29, 2008.*

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## VISUAL ART

### "Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer"

Petra Halkes

"Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer," an all-Canadian contemporary exhibition at the National Gallery in Ottawa, rides a global wave of museum shows and art festivals that have variously been called participatory, interactive, performative, experiential or relational. It is concurrent with "theanyspacewhatever" at the Guggenheim—which includes the usual suspects, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Maurizio Cattelan—and with Christoph Büchel's "Deutsche Grammatik," an exhibition that converts the

hallowed galleries of Kassel's Fridericianum into such everyday spaces as a gym, supermarket and conference room.

There is, of course, nothing new in artistic efforts to overcome the alleged gap between the viewer as passive observer and the artwork as an autonomous, fixed object. The various strategies employed in "Caught in the Act"—transformation of architectural space, electrically charged objects that react to the viewers' presence, and installations that foreground the communal aspects of art making—have a long history that can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp, Dada, Allan Kaprow's Happenings and the Fluxus movement, to name but a few of their antecedents. In the NGC's exhibition, curator Joséé Drouin-Brisebois has emphasized the continuity of experiential art by including works from the '70s, '80s and early '90s (by Mowry Baden, Jana Sterbak, Max Dean and Rebecca Belmore). These older works present, as she writes in the catalogue, a framework for the "new practices" of BGL (Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère and Nicolas Laverdière), Geoffrey Farmer, Massimo Guerrera, Glen Johnson, Rodney LaTourelle, Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, and Kent Monkman. Discovering connections among the works of different periods provides an added interest to this lively exhibition.

In the gallery's large, glassed hall, Belmore's monumental wooden megaphone invites visitors to address Parliament (the grand buildings can be seen through the window).