HANDBOOK OF IMAGINARY PLACES: LANDSCAPE, PROCESS, TECHNIQUE AND FICTION

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ABSTRACT: The text discusses issues related to the poetic construction of the series of works entitled *Handbook of imaginary places*, product of the institutional research project “landscape-path”. It also presents a report on the processes resulting from hybrid connections between languages and the use of elements of location technologies from ideas that establish a dialogical relation between imagination and reality, in which fictional and documental elements are used to build new possibilities of perceiving and relating with the landscape.

KEYWORDS: Landscape. Graphic processes. Technique. Imagination. Fiction.

Handbook of imaginary places is a poetic production comprised of several series of works, presenting the hybrid connections among languages such as printmaking, audiovisual production, photography and elements present in geographic location technologies.

The idea behind the *Handbook* is to propose a “visual” reflection on the fragmented way we relate with space and landscapes, and how contemporary travel and location mediums determine micro-fictions, which establish possible layers of history and memory in the building of landscapes.

Handbook of imaginary places was initially an experimental process with graphic and audiovisual productions characterized by the use of geotechnological references; in other words, it used the visuality present in certain technological devices, such as maps, GPS coordinates, etc., to create imaginary places, based on the assumption that:

For a landscape to exist, “nature” is not enough; a point of view and a spectator are necessary; a story that gives meaning to what is seen and experienced is also necessary; therefore,

the separation of man and world is consubstantial for the landscape. However, it is not about a complete separation, but an ambiguous form of relation, in which what is seen is rebuilt from memories, losses, our own and others’ nostalgias, that refer some times to extremely wide periods of human sensitivity, and other times to ephemeral fads. The landscaping view is the view of the exiled, who knows his radical strangeness with things, but remembers, or rather builds a past, a memory, a meaning. (Aliata, 2008, p. 12)

The art strategy action in the *Handbook of imaginary places* therefore combines fragments of real and fictional experiences that, connected, reinvent and restructure the formal possibilities of representation of a subjectified place—space.

In this process of poetic construction is a questioning that rests on the power of information and location systems — power that exercises a fascination with the instantaneous way in which data is processed — and the access to these technologies due to the integration of GPS on mobile devices such as cell phones, tablets and cameras.

Generally speaking, to a greater or lesser extent, technological devices are present in the relation between landscape and displacement, substantiating the way we locate or interact with a given space. In several moments in history, the use of technology in the process of comprehension and constitution of mankind’s geographical repertoire can be clearly observed. Maps, geographic and stellar charts, compasses, sextants, invented and built on the impulse of conquest and knowledge, have paved way not only for the great (and real) maritime discoveries, but have also built an increasingly domesticated and millimetrically scanned perception and relationship with the world.

One of the dramas of contemporary world is that Earth has been “denatured” and man can only see it through his measures and calculations, instead of letting its sober and vivid words be read. Our civilization and science many times abandoned to vulgarity have multiplied the number of beings deprived of all provincial

vigor, prudent and energetic wisdom that comes from the daily contact with the plane, the shed or the billow, the natural rhythm of life in the midst of things. (Dardel, 2011, p. 96)

Maps, compasses, GPS, electronic devices and other technical elements are used in the *Handbook of imaginary places* as reference to the “denatured” or “domesticated” contemporary way of life, and thus are purposefully represented with the intention of changing its trajectory in the cultural and historic landscape. Considering this, the works seek to corrupt the utilitarian use of these technical devices, depriving them of their original functionality and provoking new possibilities in the threading among forms, signs, images (Bourriaud, 2009). Based on these assumptions, the work process determines that all devices can be manipulated to offer possibilities of an aesthetic approach, in which truth does not relate to a factual situation, but to a situation linked to imagination.

The first production contained in the *Handbook of imaginary places* is *Point X/Map | Map/Point 0* (figure 1), a diptych produced in 2009 with the use of digital photography.

The cut, edition, deletions and blurring in the work suggest that something needs to be filled by the observer. The images determine a situation in which the *Handbook* does not make a pact with reality, but causes its displacement and discusses the visual and conceptual relations between spatial localization and technical elements, which we use to put in practice our meaning of path and displacement. The idea is to provoke a clash between the use of these mediums and our own relation with the processes of spatial orientation.

The pictures used are indications of location markers (mark X, map, point 0): they are deliberately unfocused and when seen up close are unintelligible; in order to fully perceive the images it is necessary to see them at a certain distance. Thus the function of the “map” and guidance points — which is to approximate, inform, guide — is eliminated and another notion is added; one that causes a withdrawal and disorientation due to the blur, in which the set is only comprehensible when seen panned out, which forces a distant observation of the work for the images to fully form.

Thus, the conversion of functional meanings into poetic-conceptual meanings is also present in the work, and the installation proposes visual noise caused by the frame box’s black frames, in a formal reference to the creases on travel maps.

Another production in the *Handbook of imaginary places* is entitled *Imaginary places*, a sequence of images based on fictitious places with reference to the book *Dictionary of imaginary places*, by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi (2003).

The material execution of this work is based on the use of graphic prints, photos and digital image manipulation, which are transferred on PVC plates. Again, the conclusion of the montage emphasizes each module as a “fictitious document” due to the use of frames and *passepapouts*, in which the images are exposed in a wall installation (figure 2) presenting materials traditionally linked to the exhibition of cartographic or archival documents.

The use of graphic processes is based on the historical connection that these mediums have established with geographic documents, such as, for example, the several printmaking techniques, broadly used in the publishing of geographic documents, which characterized it as a strategic and fundamental element in the dissemination of cartographic information throughout the centuries.

The images that compose the first set of *Imaginary places* (figure 3) are visual representations of the entrance of Erewhon — fictitious land from Samuel Butler’s homonymous book published in 1872. Erewhon is based on an anagram proposed by Butler from the word *nowhere*. The access to this land is described in the *Dictionary of imaginary places* as “the gorge of a river that descends from very cold mountains” (Manguel; Guadalupi, 2003, p. 143). Thus, the work was elaborated based on an iconographic research of several version of the “entrance” described in the book.

At first, eighteen images were captured in the internet and treated in *halftone*, using high contrast to eliminate significant traces of the reference. The images were chosen for their visual characteristics similar to “postcards”: they present certain traces of inhospitable landscapes, later reinforced with digital manipulation.

The image treatment sequence undergoes a graphic process, the conversion of the digital file to laser print on paper, which is then manually transferred to a hard PVC sheet. The technique uses acrylic resin as active agent for overlaying the image on the support, a hard hygroscopic sheet, allowing the resin coated image to stay impregnated on the PVC without dimensional instability.

This transposition movement can be controlled in order to promote a precise decal or certain deletion of the image. However, the incorporation of fortuities and accidents that generate flaws in the original image is preferable.

These flaws emphasize a type of “translation” process the image goes through. In the rhythm of procedures that begin with the photograph, the “data of reality is contaminated by an infinity of possible variations due to the digital treatment that tosses them to fiction’s side” (Rey, 2010, p. 118).

An installation deployment of the previous work, the second set of *Imaginary places* can be contextualized as a sort of work in

progress, in which new elements are incorporated at each exhibition. It explores the premises of an ever-changing flow of elements, creating visual citations through form, similar to how the city of Ersilia (Calvino, 1990) is described in *Dictionary of imaginary places* (Manguel; Guadalupi, 2003, p. 142-143).

A city of changing location, where in order to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or grey or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, trade, authority, or agency. When the strings become so numerous that one can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave; the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain.

The inhabitants then rebuild Ersilia elsewhere, weaving a similar pattern of strings which they try to make more complex and at the same time more regular than the other. Then they abandon it and take themselves and their houses still farther away.

Thus, when travelling in the territory of Ersilia, a visitor will come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities without the walls, which do not last; without the bones of the dead, which the wind rolls away: spiderwebs of intricate relationships seeking a form.

The installation uses photo transfers on PVC sheets (figure 4), mini backlights and slides and video projectors, also determining certain relation between the “generations” of devices used. The basic conceptual structure of the work emphasizes the aspect of a mutating space, determined by the way the inhabitants of Ersilia built their city and their relationships.

In this context, new devices, images and power cables are added to each exhibition, seeking to develop a type of three-dimensional map in which the buildup precludes the perception of connection points among devices and energy sources. In this case, the visuality of the work refers to the strings that Ersilia's inhabitants stretch along “the corners of the houses” (Manguel; Guadalupi, 2003, p. 142-143) to outline their relations of hierarchy, affection, etc.

This experience of permanent construction and reconstruction was also decisive for the constitution of another series of works called *Illusory cartography*, that establishes the elaboration flow of the process, not based on the exhibition space anymore, but on the studio space instead.

Making *Illusory cartography* depended on fragments and disposed material gathered during the process of making the other works; these fragments later underwent a process of collage, juxtaposition or fixation among themselves or on many different planographic supports, in order to establish a pseudo-documental look, referring to a journey diary with visual references of maps, postcards or simulations of documents and topographic studies, etc.

Thus, the “maps” contained in *Illusory cartography* (figures 5 and 6) are studio productions and experiences that determine that the materiality of the final work is established by the remains of other works; therefore, according to Bourriaud (2009, p. 16), it is not “a ‘finished product’ to be contemplated, but a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities. We tinker with production, we surf on a network of signs we insert our forms on existing lines”. Concluding the analysis of the productions made in *Handbook of imaginary places*, the video *Random projections/found images* is an ongoing project conceived from images generated by old projection devices such as slide projectors and super-8 film moviolas.

The expressions “random projections” and “found images” refer to the process itself of making the work, which depends on images found randomly in old equipment, bought or found, which represent the remnants of a lost and stagnated time.

These devices were chosen as a reference to the obsolescence of certain technology, drawing attention to peculiar forms of projections and formal constitutions as objects of aesthetic interest which therefore act in a contemporary practice, placing the work of art in a network of meaning (Bourriaud, 2009).

The discarded equipment, abandoned or available at used bookstores or depots are seen in this project as time boxes that can store information — almost archaeologically, given that they establish layers of time and history that are unveiled at each new purchase of images that make reference to landscapes.

Many of these old devices are discarded still containing slides (figure 7) and intact films inside. The meaning itself of the work has changed into a chase for images of urban and natural landscapes, pictures of places and images of particular private situations, whose original idea and sentimental value have been lost in time and are rediscovered and resubmitted according to my own references. Therefore, the video made from these images establishes a new story from the stories of others. It is the “temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives” (Bourriaud, 2009, p. 16).

Handbook of imaginary places purposely establishes a sequence of experimental productions that are subject to changes, corrections

and additions in the course of its creation and construction. The majority of the works can be seen as works in progress, related to the unchaining of connections of signs among technique, history and memory of objects, constituting a subjectified fragmented visuality of the landscape and its connection with real or imaginary displacement. In this context, the landscape is seen as a referential element through which relations between seen things and significant fragments of poetic construction are evoked. Due to the affective qualities preserved in these fragments it is possible to create a network of relations that collaborate for a new representation of space. In this aspect, poetic construction is established as a dialogical structure in which the materiality itself of the works shows or highlights the process in the instauration of the work.

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CAPTIONS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

The images in this article are placed in its Portuguese version.

Figure 1: *Point X/Map | Map/Point 0*, from *Handbook of imaginary places*, 2009. Diptych (assembled to unite the two parts in the map intersection). Dimensions: 45 x 180 x 5 cm (full size). Technique and materials used: digital photograph printed on expanded PVC, montage in black lacquered wooden box.

Figure 2: View of the installation *Imaginary places I*, 2011. Transfer on hard PVC sheet, montage in *passepoutout* Crescent and white wooden frame. Each image: 18 x 24 cm, each module: 35 x 45 cm. *Handbook of imaginary places* Exhibition, Galeria Vertente, Campinas, SP.

Figure 3: *Imaginary places I*, 2011, 18 x 24.5 cm (each image). First set contains 11 images made through transfers of laser printed images and prepared with acrylic resin overlay on hard PVC sheet.

Figure 4: Detail of *Imaginary places 2*, 2011. Transfer on hard PVC sheet, sheets assembled directly on wall. Each image: 18 x 24 cm. Work presented in the *Landscape-path* exhibition, Galeria Gravura Brasileira, São Paulo, June to August, 2011.

Figure 5: *Illusory cartography I*, 2011. 25,5 x 45,5 cm. Digital images printed on 200g/m² Canson paper and greaseproof paper, collage, use of numerical rubber stamps. Montage on Black polystyrene folder file.

Figure 6: *Illusory cartography 2*, 2011. 35 x 25 cm (each module). Inkjet print on 300g/m² Canson Paper, CTP/photo transfer print on 0.20mm aluminum sheet, clipping and fixation on 18mm naval plywood structure. For this montage, the dimensional instability of the paper (in the middle), which moves creating a counterpoint to the stability of the lateral aluminum sheets, was considered.

Figure 7: Slide image, undated (c. 197), 35 mm, color. Example of a slide found in one of the projection devices and used in the video *Random projections/found images*. Information written on the slide mask: "56/6 — Via Anchieta, stretches of the Serra do Mar descent, Olympia color slides".

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