

MAPPING SYDNEY

Lee Stickells reviews *Mapping Sydney: Experimental Cartography and the Imagined City*, curated by Naomi Stead.



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Nº1 Overview of *Mapping Sydney*, with its rear wall of postcards.

E15112°8.82'; S3352°59.7"

Where I had a coffee before looking at the maps

I recently heard a woman on talkback radio describe how, in order to read maps, she imagined herself as the map: her limbs became the branching roads of the landscape being traversed. It was a striking image: outstretched body as map, flowing arterial roads, lungs of the city – the Lilliputian king advancing along Gulliver's leg with his retinue.

It also emphasized the ubiquity of maps. They are everywhere: endlessly flexible, manipulable and reproducible. Changing technologies have only increased their penetration and familiarity. Geographical, ecological, political, genetic, touristic – spatial conventions and referencing give cartographic rationality a centrality in our lives. The *Mapping Sydney* exhibition connected to a wider, ongoing cultural response to that boundless growth. As Naomi Stead notes in her catalogue essay, the conventions of scientific cartography have been ruthlessly deconstructed within the academy, the elisions and distortions explored in a host of books. Alongside that critique the processes of mapping have become fertile ground for artistic expression and intervention. The exhibition brought some of those reflective and creative strands together.

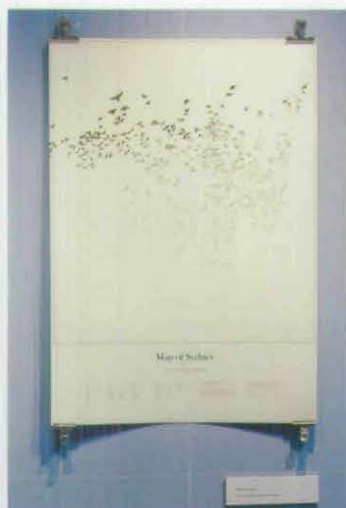
Specifically, *Mapping Sydney* emerged out of Stead's interest in the much-maligned tourist map and was initially intended to address the way that tourist media represent and "construct" Sydney. Eventually, the desire to revise the traditional "objectivity" of the map, and to reveal other Sydneys repressed or ignored by those conventional maps, inspired what Stead calls "anti-tourist maps". To interrogate the practice of mapping, she invited eight collaborators to produce alternative maps drawing on their own perceptions, ideas and knowledge of the city.

E1518°12.28'; S3353°0.06"

Where I looked at the maps

The exhibition layout reflected that project history. The gallery's rear wall was covered with a collection of Sydney postcards that in itself mapped a particular Sydney territory. Collected over a number of years, they ranged from tasteful, sepia-toned images of The Rocks to lurid visions of koalas straddling Centrepoint Tower, as well as many, many Sydney Opera Houses. An invitation pinned to the centre of the wall encouraged visitors to jot a message or memory on the rear of a card and replace it on the wall, message-side out. Consequently, a new map of idiosyncratic commentary and reminiscence began to replace the limited subjects of picture-perfect postcard Sydney. In the centre of the room, Stead continued that exploration of the subjective, and of experience as a mode of mapping, with a sound and image installation *May the Fourth: The Story of a Sydney Walk* – an attempt to map the experience of a *dérive*.

The flanking walls, painted map-ocean blue and crisscrossed by a cartographic grid, were taken up with the commissioned maps. If Sydney's commercial tourist maps are concerned with the significant – locating the must-see itinerary – then the maps exhibited here largely paid attention to the insignificant, the personal and marginal. They ranged in approach: from Kate Sweetapple's *Map of Sydney: Avian Surnames* – where hundreds of bird silhouettes picked out the locations of all avian-surnamed families in Sydney – to Stead's own collaboration with Katrina Schlunke and Trina Day – a cityscape formed by towers of text taken from a writing game. The Stead Schlunke Day map's tongue-in-cheek title not only spelt out the creative process but also hinted at the broader concerns of the exhibition: *Sydney Letters: An Alphabetic Correspondence, or the Beginnings of it*, in which



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Nº2 Map of Sydney: Avian Surnames, by Kate Sweetapple.

Nº3 Sydney Letters: An Alphabetic Correspondence, or the Beginnings of it, in which Katrina Schlunke and Naomi Stead Write to One Another in Emails where the Subject is the Object, and thereby Attempt to Map out a Taxonomy of Urban Things, or also to Write a Portrait of Sydney through its Objects, in a Kind of A-Z of Material-Culture that is Yet Only up to J, and is Here Laid Out as a City of Words.

Nº4 Turning Left and Turning Right, by Louisa Bufardeci.

Nº5 Map and Coastal Profile of Sydney, shewing Mt Prospect and the Blue Hills beyond by Katrina Simon.

Nº6 Ruth Watson, Maps That Cried (1995-2005), by Ruth Watson.

Nº7 Map 9 K11 by Jane Shadbolt.

Katrina Schlunke and Naomi Stead Write to One Another in Emails where the Subject is the Object, and thereby Attempt to Map out a Taxonomy of Urban Things, or also to Write a Portrait of Sydney through its Objects, in a Kind of A-Z of Material-Culture that is Yet Only up to J, and is Here Laid Out as a City of Words.

The maps were also beautiful things in themselves. Louisa Bufardeci's *Turning Left and Turning Right* created a luminous Sydney: a cracked, vivid patchwork of neighbourhoods in candy-cane colours. By contrast, Katrina Simon's rendering of a looming Mount Prospect re-figured Sydney as a city on a volcano. The melancholic graphite vision, collaged and layered, evoked a post-apocalyptic landscape even while based on ancient geological forms.

E15112°8.1'; S3353°0.06"

Where I talked to Lucas, who printed some of the maps

"The city ... [consists of] ... relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet.[1]"

When dealing with the imagined city, as this exhibition did, it's obligatory to quote Italo Calvino.

But Calvino's beautiful text is relevant here as it entwines two concepts of space that maps deal with: the measurable and the experiential. Jane Shadbolt's *Map 9 K11* embodied just such an interweaving: in tiny text it detailed a mass of tall tales and true, all precisely forming the street layout of their locality. It is the map I pored over longest and derived the most pleasure from – the funny, sometimes disquieting scraps of narrative evoking a complex social and physical territory. It also embodied the strength of the exhibition. Slight, whimsical and occasionally exploring well-worn tropes (such as the Situationist *dérive*), it was still a compelling exercise in creative mapping. Given the tendency within architecture and planning to view maps as stable, accurate mirrors of reality, this seemed an especially useful characteristic.

E15112°7.02'; S3352°59.7"

Where I collected my bike after looking at the maps

Dr Lee Stickells is a senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Sydney.

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1974), p. 10.

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