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Performing Interpretation

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Abstract

Utilizing a/r/tographic methodology to interrogate interpretive acts in museums, multiple areas of inquiry are raised in this paper, including: which knowledge is assigned the greatest value when preparing a gallery talk; what lies outside of disciplinary knowledge; how invitations to participate invite and disinvite in the same gesture; and what new forms of interaction take place within acts of interpretation. Five concepts organize our investigations into museum interpretation – framing, mapping, shifting, in-between, and potentiality. We employ a conceptual fold by bringing our individual research narratives into contiguity, continually seeking for resonances and dissonances in our studies that point to meaningful understandings about art museum interpretation.

There are times in life when the question if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.

- Michel Foucault (1984/1985),
The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure; p.8

Introduction

This paper is an experiment in folding together and intertwining two performances presented by researchers in art museum education about interpretative practice in museums. It investigates what lies in-between the performativity of live museum gallery interpretation and the multiple layers of invitations that prompt viewers to become participants in interpretive processes. Putting to work a conceptual fold (Springgay and Irwin, 2008), we seek to present two entities that meet, and by meeting, become something else. Allowing room for understandings, resonances, uncertainty, and dissonances, presenting our studies in juxtaposition enables us to conceive differently of interpretation, knowledge, and participation, both in museum practice and in arts-based research methodology. Exploring spaces within which knowledge is constructed and in which participation takes place, we navigate the terrain of museum interpretation through two a/r/tographic studies (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, and Gouzouasis, 2008). Through these investigations, we utilize arts-based methods to raise questions about the processes of investigating Herbert Spencer's curricular question "what knowledge is most worth?" (Spencer, 1860), and how people are invited to participate in museum spaces.

Five resonating concepts organize our investigations into museum interpretation – framing, mapping, shifting, in-between, and potentiality. Our individual studies are brought into contiguity in each of these sections. Through these folds we evoke "an infinite number of undulating entities unable to be separated into parts" (Springgay and Irwin, 2008, p. xxvii). Though addressed independently, these concepts converge and diverge, embracing the notion of potentiality (Rogoff, 2010a) within the undulations. Mirroring the embrace of the unknown in performing museum interpretation, this form allows for sometimes purposeful, sometimes tentative, but always evocative, associations between the studies. We perform interpretation similarly to Charles Garoian's (2001) call to "perform the museum" through "dialogic play" (p. 247). In this research dialogue we bring together the threads of our personal research narratives, public narratives about museum interpretation, and private narratives about interactions within museum spaces.

Framing

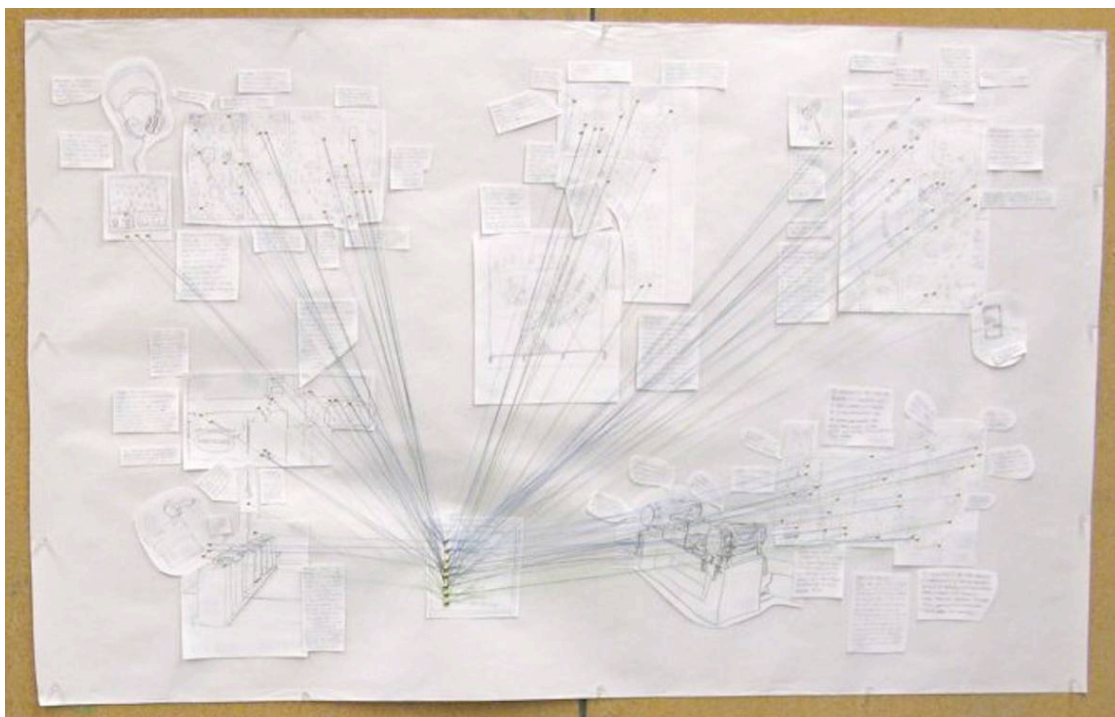


Figure 1. Mapping Invitations to Participate, photo courtesy of Heidi May

Having spent much of my time as a museum educator organizing and facilitating experiences for others, in this study I explored the process of participation from the perspective of the participant, simultaneously drawing on my knowledge and experience as an educator. Therefore, this project, *Mapping Invitations to Participate* (Figure 1), was an effort to understand more about participatory and interactive interpretive strategies, and in particular, how people are invited to participate. While inquiring into these strategies, I was interested in participatory moments facilitated by an educator or guide, but especially moments in which people arrived at a stationary interpretive element, such as a letter from an immigrant written to their family or a listening station where Inuit works of art were given context through listening to radio stations and market interactions in Inuktitut.

Several questions revolving around the concepts of invitations, interpretation, and participation guided this study. Primarily, I was concerned with the question: Why are there some invitations to participate that we accept and other invitations that we don't accept? Several other questions cascaded from this initial query: What makes an invitation 'inviting'? What makes some invitations 'uninviting'? What do invitations look like in various places such as art museums, community events, bars, concerts, activism, and personal interactions? What barriers are put in place that keep people from accepting invitations to participate? What

can I learn from successful and unsuccessful invitations from a variety of settings that can inform art museum education and interpretation? These questions were explored in a variety of participatory contexts, including three museums, one contemporary art gallery, a concert venue, and an outdoor dance performance.

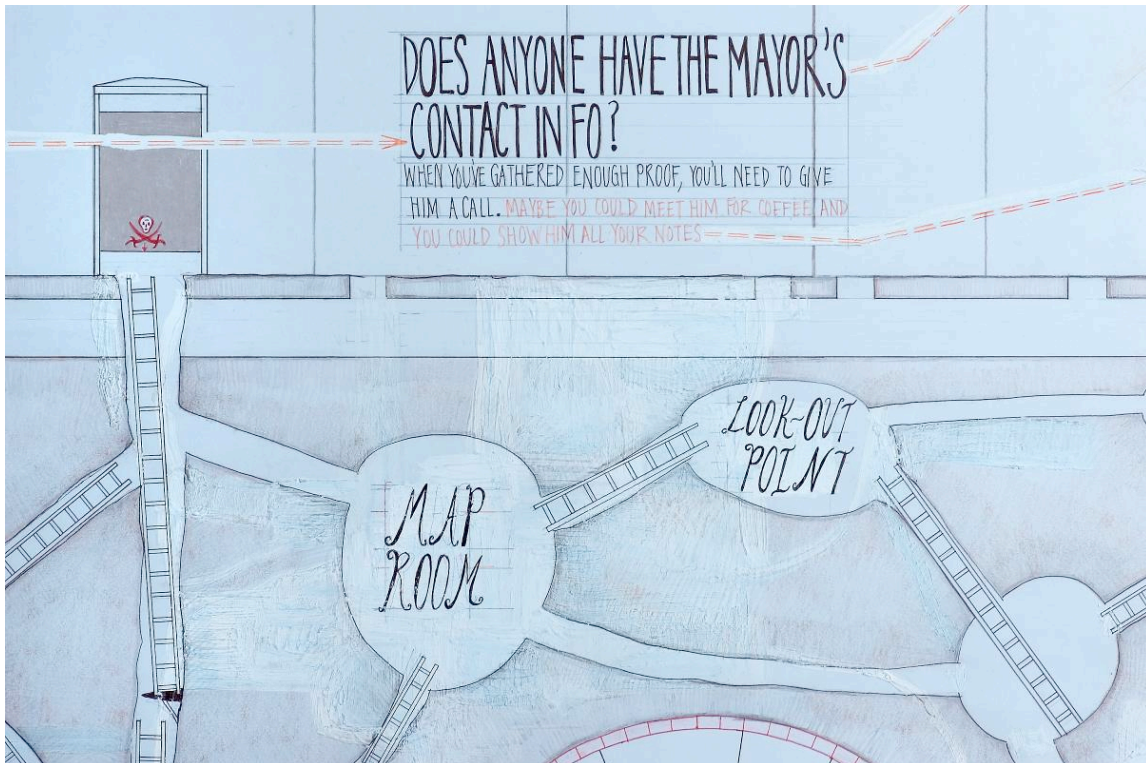


Figure 2. Deb Sokolow, *Someone tell Mayor Daley the pirates are coming*, 2005, detail, photo courtesy of the artist

Inspired by several artists, particularly Chicago-based artist Deb Sokolow (www.debsokolow.com), I undertook a layered process in order to gain further understanding about invitations to participate. Sokolow employs humor, intrigue, and a healthy dose of suspicion to weave narratives that take viewers on what can be described as a choose-your-own-artistic-adventure, where you may end up following Richard Daley on a hunt for pirates (Figure 2), or being asked to participate in a conspiracy with your neighbor, the sometimes hitman, sometimes sculptor, Richard Serra (Figure 3).

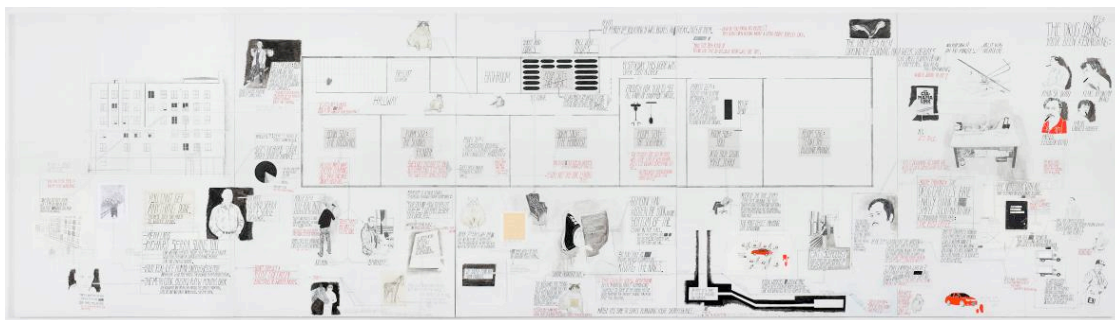


Figure 3. Deb Sokolow, You tell people you're working really hard on things these days, 2010, photo courtesy of the artist

Employing the narrative and mapping aspects, rather than the crime-sleuthing aspects of Sokolow's work, I created a visual narrative of several sites in which I searched for invitations to participate. I visited these sites, of which five are represented in a large map, with an eye toward moments in which an invitation was extended. Following the visits, I created a memory map¹ of the site tracing my chosen route through the space, noting invitational moments along these paths. I noted my internal dialogue with the space and the invitations, as well as dialogue that took place when I visited with others or overheard particularly interesting conversations. Finally, the maps were laid out and I used color-coded thread to understand more about the types of invitations – including familiarity, personalization, enthusiasm, playfulness, narrative, sociability, uniqueness, and listening, as well as anti-invitations – that I encountered in these spaces (Figure 4).

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Lynn Beudert for initially introducing me to the concept of memory mapping.

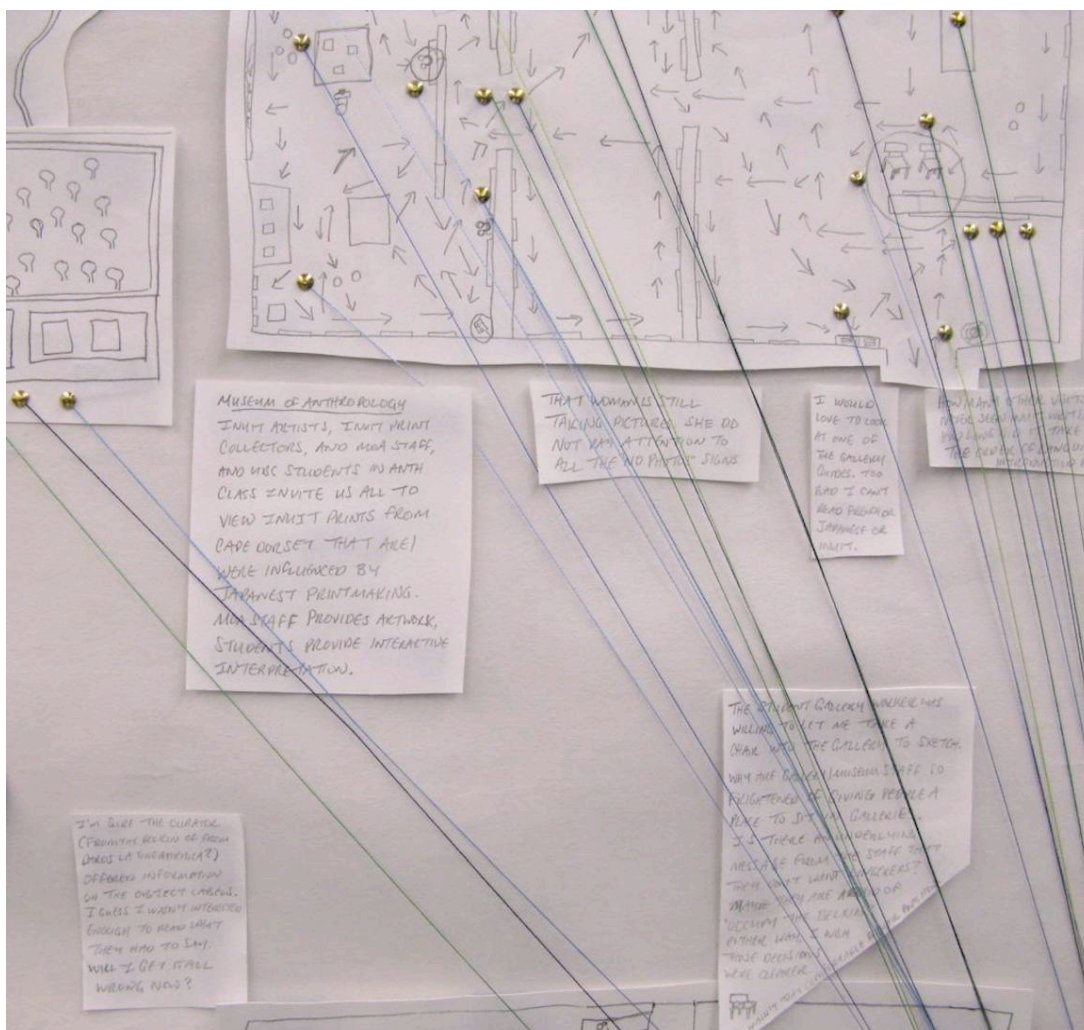


Figure 4. *Mapping Invitations to Participate*, detail, photo courtesy of Heidi May

Mapping

One hundred and seventy artworks on two floors dating from the mid-nineteenth century to 2010. The curator's tour lasted two hours. The exhibition became a walk into an art history textbook – or should I say, a Western art history textbook with some post-colonial revisions. The museum has transformed a personal collecting project into a captivating yet well-entrenched disciplinary discourse. Where did the curator pause and specifically focus our attention? What were the conceptual, historical or thematic threads? During the meeting, I draw a map of the rooms (Figure 5). I need to visualize the space to help me think about the content of my tour. The art historian in me wanted to structure the gallery tour according to post-colonial theory for the historical section, the received canons of B.C. artists (Carr, Shadbolt, Wall) and well-known contemporary First Nations artists such as Yuxweluptun and Jungen. I keep

thinking: “How do I determine which works or spaces correspond to ‘the knowledge of most worth?’”. Yet, the ‘public’ does not exist; visitors are so diverse in terms of gender, age, social context and race, how may I determine in advance? I am reminded of Ted Aoki’s (2005) notion of the ‘curriculum as lived,’ which invites me to remain open to the constant flux of what emerges in the tour. I think also of feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (2011) who insists that, “rather than finding out what art is about – a project leading back to the artistic subject in whom it is thought to originate – we need to ask what artistic practice is doing and where as well as when that doing occurs” (para. 3).

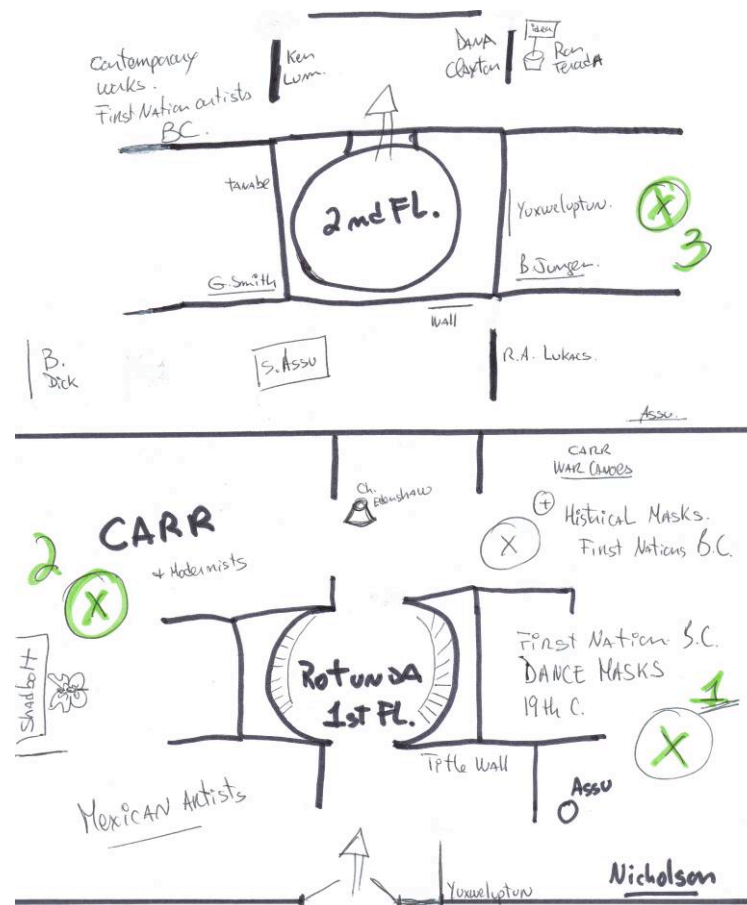


Figure 5. For personal reference in preparing my gallery tour, a hand drawn map of the exhibition *Shore, Forest and Beyond. Art from the Audain Collection*

Utilizing mapping to investigate interpretative practices was a specific reference to the familiar materials of wayfinding located in museum settings (Figure 6). Ubiquitous at most information kiosks and greeter desks are the colorful maps that hold within them the promise

of potential experiences. Signage, symbols, guards, and gallery guides “encourage people to explore, discover their own paths, and make the chance encounters inherent in community life” (McLean and Pollock, 2010, p. 61). Referring to this familiar use of orientation within museums, and to artistic mapping practices, I explored research and visitor pathways, performativity of maps, mapping as a narrative method, and wayfinding as an opening to thinking differently about museum interpretation. Throughout this process the intersection of artistic rendering of maps and research practice through mapping were interrogated for their potential for further understanding about interpretation.

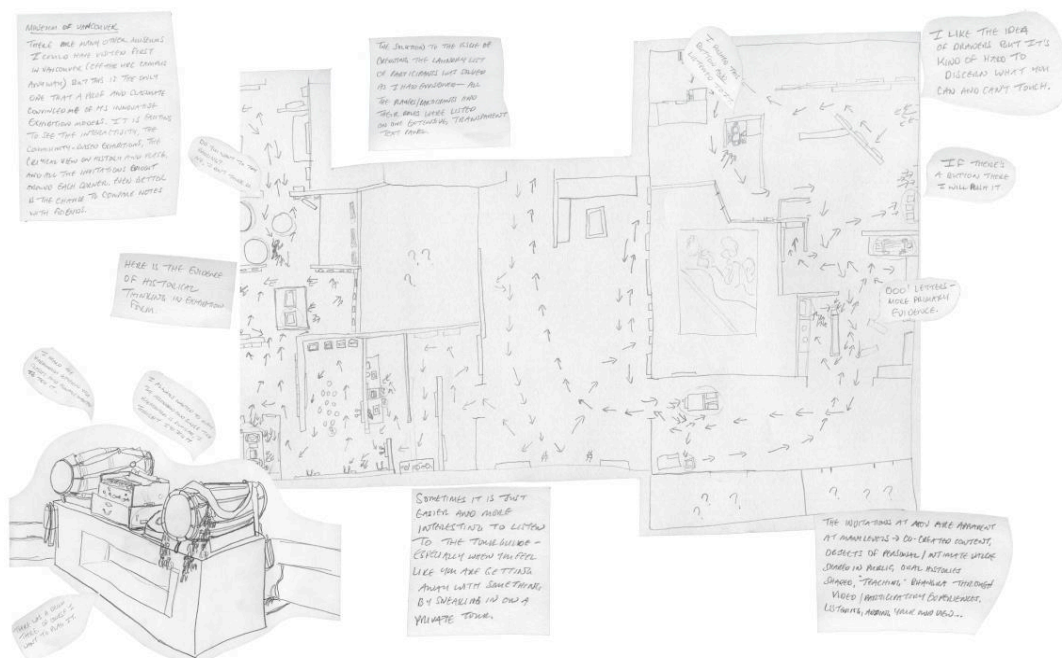


Figure 6. Field notes map of the Museum of Vancouver

Janna Graham (Graham and Jacques, 2005; Graham and Yasin, 2007) describes “lines of desire,” which are the pathways that mark the actual route of visitors or participants in gallery spaces. These pathways “surpass and exceed” (Graham and Jacques, 2005, p. 3), “amend, oppose, and reconfigure” (Graham and Yasin, 2007, p. 159) the expectations of exhibition designers and curators within these spaces. Following the routes I took and connecting my own ‘lines of desire’ allowed me to determine some of the types of invitations that I experienced. Reflecting on the invitations I encountered in one space then opened an understanding of the invitations that were present in other spaces. Tracing my own pathways and lines of desire within these spaces allowed me to further understand the routes, decisions, and reactions of visitors in art museums.

Mapping and the “knowledges it deploys” (Crampton, 2009, p. 840) provided a context in which to register multiple layers of interaction and interpretation taking place in participatory contexts. One of the layers of information created in these maps was a narrative overlay intersecting with the places and moments of invitations to participate in each research site. Noting the “spatialized narrative debris” (Krygier, 2006, p. 44) within each site and locating it within a specific moment allowed for a means of viewing the multiplicity of interactions in each site. Contradictions between anticipated interactions and actual interactions were perceived through noting the site narrative of planning and expectation for certain interactions, and my own visitor narrative of actual interaction. Garoian (2001) explains that this dialogic process “play[s] between the public narratives of the museum and the private narratives of viewers” (p. 239). Associating particular stories to spaces through mapping routes, narrative, space, and experience allows an entry point to locating invitational moments and their uptake or refusal. Artists such as Deb Sokolow and Jake Barton (<http://localprojects.net/>), make clear that in using mapping methods “the key [is] to attach the stories to spaces” (Krygier, 2006, p. 43). These stories were attached through dialogue insets in the physical maps, as well as longer narrative recounting of invitational moments at each site as part of the field notes (Figure 7).

Another characteristic of mapping as a method that I used was tracing the routes followed, rather than designated pathways indicated by the wayfinding markers and spatial designs of each site. As Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock (2010) explain, “wayfinding systems need not direct people along prescribed paths” (p. 61). The drawn and threaded routes indicate the indirect paths that take place within participatory spaces; paths that double back, zigzag, move without linearity, and generally are incapable of being predetermined. Instead, the mapping method utilized was one in which I “appl[ie]d different constraints to create a random path through place, in order to open up hitherto concealed meanings and relations” (Warner, n.d., para. 16). Through embracing the pathways determined by interest and invitation rather than designated spatial design, the types of invitations employed –familiarity, personalization, enthusiasm, playfulness, narrative, sociability, uniqueness, and listening– were revealed. In this way, mapping as a process, and wayfinding as an approach toward understanding a space were more valuable than solely following the official maps and orientation systems of each site. Furthermore, the maps “provide[d] multiple points of access to multiple sites of visitation” (Garoian, 2001, p. 246), highlighting the range of ways that people can experience participatory spaces.

Seven stacks of white copy paper. I look around to regain my bearings – this is not the office copier station, not the supply room, not the local copy shop, this is Luis Camnitzer’s exhibition at the Belkin Art Gallery. Around each corner Camnitzer presents, and re-presents, the familiar in juxtapositions that call the nature of these

objects into question. A single light bulb connected by a spare black cord to a fluorescent light, the cord weighed down in an arc of visual and literal weight, hints at the gravity of the circumstances in which similar lights would be used - perhaps a cubicle of workers processing the seven stacks of copies, more likely a reference to interrogation rooms during the Uruguayan dictatorship. At first appears the familiar: a mirror, or a fan idly blowing a pencil back and forth, or a room full of photocopied placeholders for household objects. These first appearances of the familiar dissolve into unknown territory providing an invitation to enter into conversation with the objects, the political history, the art history, the playful, yet meaningfully fraught, gestures that Camnitzer marks through the everyday, the recognizable.

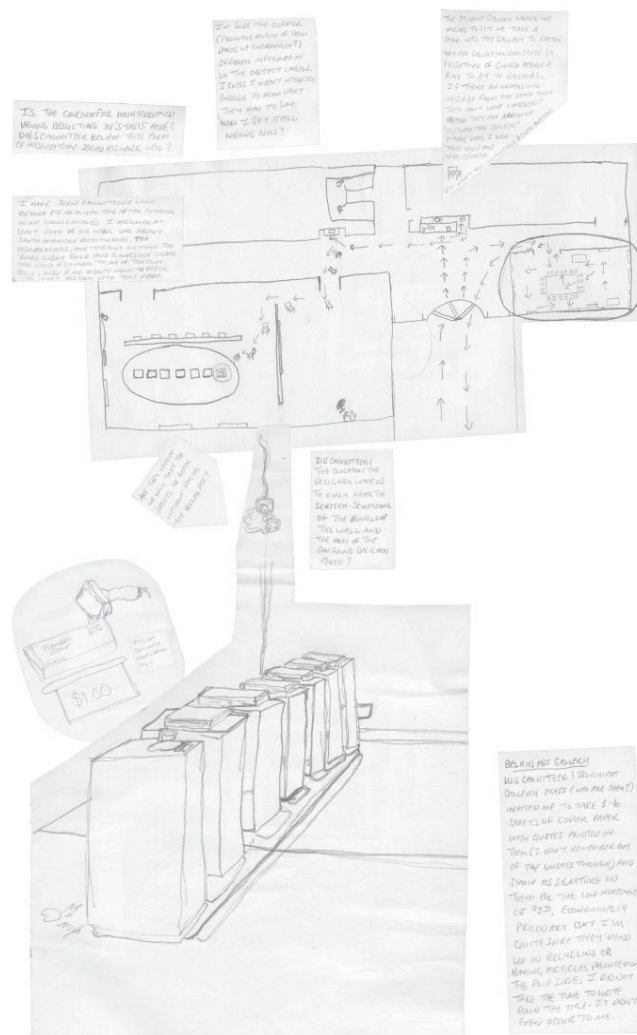


Figure 7. Field notes map of Luis Camnitzer exhibition at Belkin Art Gallery

Shifting

What do we gain from being in front of the works? Attentive looking and experiencing the formal qualities of the work certainly participates in the meaning making process but being in the space is also like entering the exhibition as discourse (Figure 8). This discourse is multilayered: it is both connected to the art market, the socio-political context of the works and the history of art as it has been written in BC. Yet, there are other stories that can be created as we walk through the space. In the background, a detail of War Canoes by Emily Carr: do we concentrate on the adopted art historical discourse (focus on Carr and questions of modernism in art) and/or read her work in relation, in dialogue with the First Nations dance masks displayed in the same room therefore raising issues of politics and representation.



*Figure 8. Art museum educators, Emily Carr, War Canoes, Alert Bay, 1912 (detail).
Exhibition Shore, Forest and Beyond. Art from the Audain Collection*

Taking up Patti Lather's (2007) call for researchers to question "...how might one look for places where things begin to shift via practices that exceed the warrants of our present sense of the possible?" (p. 36), this study was marked by several adjustments in understanding about participatory interpretive practice, as well as the process undertaken during the research. First, given that in a/r/tographic investigations, conducting a study means exploring the "interstitial spaces of art making, researching, and teaching" (Springgay and Irwin, 2008, p. xx) I shifted between these perspectives and processes. Maps were made through artistic processes informed by my understanding of participation due to my background as an educator in order to research the area of participatory interpretation. In addition, I purposefully entered the role of visitor in an attempt to move with, rather than move for, those who create and encounter participatory museum experiences. What was evident in retracing the colored threads that code this research down to one singular point was the movement of action in only one direction (Figure 9). Despite my negotiation and shifting between roles during the research process, the analysis distilled down to a traditional, single-point research perspective. The physical lines created an opportunity to, as Rita Irwin states, "resee [my] experience, to perceive [my] experience again" (Irwin, 2006, p. 79). What I now see is that in order to 'move with,' these lines will need to shift, to surpass and exceed once again, creating a web of experiences, rather than aligning to one singular direction of interpretive, educational, research, or artistic experience.

Shifts also took place in considering how one finds their way within museum spaces. Initially, as I embarked on the study, there existed some sense of correspondence between the anticipated routes laid out by exhibition designers, curators, and educators. While documenting my own pathways though I was prompted to "revisit the world from a different direction" (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 16), to notice the discontinuity between the routes planned and the routes taken. Embracing this "disequilibrium [and] uncertainty" (Barone and Eisner, 2012; p. 16), I began to understand the difference between following a mapped interpretive experience, and finding one's own way in a museum. This process is one in which certainty of actions and reactions are set aside, and instead "knowing as you go" (Chambers, 2008, p.123)² is expected. Therefore frameworks for participatory interpretation revolve around wayfinding, rather than directing interpretation and participation in any particular

² Chambers' (2008) curriculum theory of wayfinding also involves "living your geography," and "learning a place by dwelling and traveling in that place" (p. 123). She draws on Claudio Aporta (2003), Tim Ingold (2000), and Béatrice Collignon (2006) in developing this concept. These theories of wayfinding are grounded in Indigenous knowledges of place, therefore, though my taking up of this concept diverges from Chambers' theory, it has been a productive means to dislodge prior conceptions of maps and mapping for this study.

manner. Considering how mapping intersects with finding and making one's way physically, intellectually, interpersonally, and conceptually through a space required a shift in thinking about mapping as a final product toward mapping as a process of finding one's own way within participatory gallery experiences.

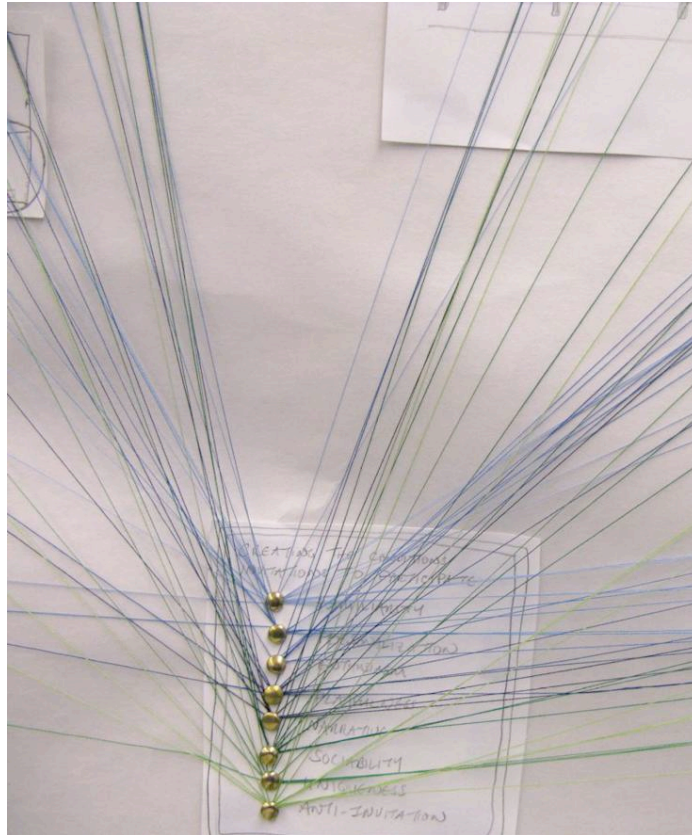


Figure 9. Mapping Invitations to Participate, detail of coding threads, photo courtesy of Heidi May

Potentiality

A colleague wondered why I bothered taking pictures of feet (Figures 10 & 11). I wasn't quite sure at the time; partly for reasons of research ethics, I needed to take some anonymous images but, albeit I could not articulate it at the time, I see now that this picture is very much a visual representation of a meaning making process; it's in the discussion about, with, the work.

As I look at my photographs, I notice a recurring pattern amongst the group of educators in the gallery: most of the time, we form a circle, some kind of unit of

discussion. What is important is happening away from the work, while at the same time being connected and related to it. I realize that my knowing of the exhibition – and what the visitors will experiment – is not simply about knowing facts and concepts about/concerning the works. Ideas and meanings are created around, in between the works. Through relationality, something else is happening.



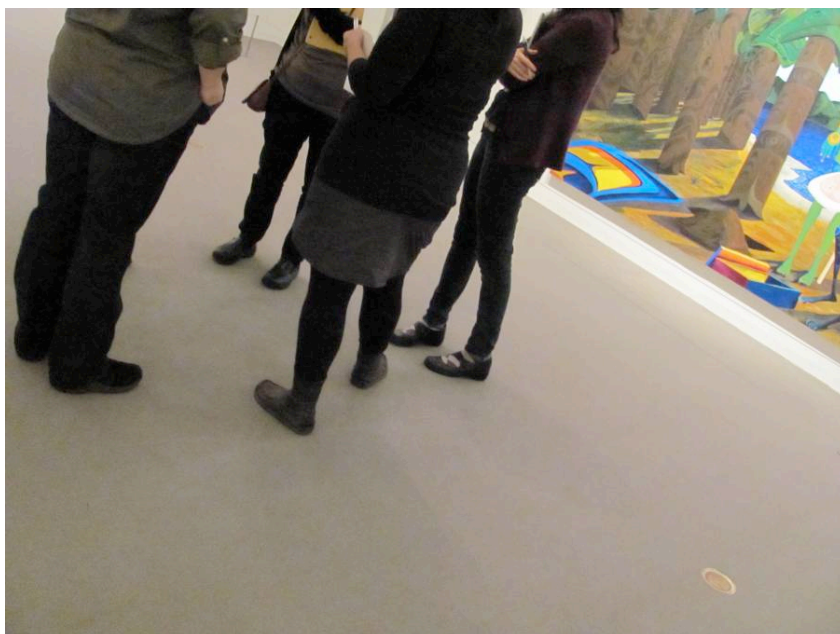
Figures 10 & 11. Art museum educators in conversation and preparing for the exhibition Shore, Forest and Beyond. Art from the Audain Collection

Participatory interpretive processes ultimately require frameworks that allow for a multiplicity of ways of connecting, interacting, reacting, creating, and making meaning. Mapping these points of participation necessitates an open-ended research strategy; it requires flexibility within the research structure. Therefore, this is a study about interpretative strategies that maintain potentiality, and a study undertaken within a belief in the potentiality of bringing research, art, interpretation, and participation in contiguity. Irit Rogoff (2010a) explains that potentiality is “the idea that there might be, within us, endless possibility that we might never be able to bring to successful fruition” (p. 40).

Rather than resulting in paralysis due to an overwhelming amount of options, potentiality allows for a multiplicity of responses, as well as personalized interactions depending on the locations, situations, and the individuals involved. Potentiality means interpretation that can never be known in advance; interpretation that can always be conceived of otherwise (Graham, 2010).

Mapping as a research method made use of potentiality within this inquiry. Mapping as a method “demand[s] processes of investigation and endless curiosity and an impulse towards wonder” (Warner, n.d., para. 4). It is a process that can expand as curiosity annexes new locations, experiences, and interactions to existing mappings. This unfolding allows for connections to be made between the invitational sites experienced. For instance, in this study

about invitations to participate, the invitations multiply if other museums, or other participatory sites, such as land trusts, neighborhood produce markets, libraries, and coffee shops, are mapped. Understandings about invitations to participate accumulate and diverge in endless interpretive possibility. In other words, “no completely accurate and detailed map ever settles the lay of the land; it just begets more maps” (Gieryn, as cited in Rolling, 2004, p. 52). Embracing potentiality in interpretive practice and research about interpretive practice means never expecting to fix these subjects in a singular iteration.



*Figure 12. Art museum educators in conversation, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, **Burying Another Face of Racism on First Nation Soil**, 1997 (detail). Exhibition **Shore, Forest and Beyond**. Art from the Audain Collection*

Dialogue and conversations on/about and beside the works. Looking at my photographs, I notice the constant presence of the works but they are not the sole focus (Figure 12). To ‘know’ the works and the exhibition encompasses the artist’s voice and that of the curator but it inhabits another undefined space outside of the work. Or perhaps, in-between the various disciplinary discourses. Rogoff (2010b) claims that when knowledge is not inserted within an ‘economic’ paradigm, “... it had the possibility of posing questions that combine the known and the imagined, the analytical and the experiential, and which keep stretching the terrain of knowledge so that it is always just beyond the order of what can be conceptualized (p. 4). While I certainly have a strong commitment to disciplinary knowledge, I find it extremely

interesting for museum education to trouble the conventional binary poles of ‘the museum’s voice’ and ‘the autonomy’ of the viewer to thinking in terms of what knowledge ‘does’ and this involves the idea that knowledge should not be conceptualized in terms on ‘possession’ and gain but perceived as movement, as embodied, as happening outside of the object.

In-between

In this study, researchable moments took place at sites specifically developed for participation, but also took place in-between those organized moments. “Coming-together” (Rogoff, 2010a, p. 43) and “being together” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 60) are fundamental to participatory practice, therefore, many of the participatory moments took place in between myself, an art object, other visitors, and the site itself. These “relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 42) form participatory interpretation, but require attention to those interactive moments, as well as the permeating spaces and pauses that connect those moments. Moments of participation happened while following a line of desire, which might be in an open space, next to a window, in a discussion while leaving the building, or right in front of a gallery interactive. Following my ‘lines of desire’ allowed me to understand how personal pathways are developed, rather than looking solely to the moments of interaction at designated sites. The participatory waypoints and the space of potentiality in-between were both necessary in developing understandings of where invitations were offered, considered, accepted, and rejected. But, questions remain: How can those spaces in-between be connected in order to further understand how to invite others to participate in interpretive processes? How can lines of desire be split off into multiple other lines to form further understandings about participatory interpretation between various participants? In short, how is the in-between activated in interpretive and research processes?

We are wrapping up after a long meeting. The final tour outline is not complete but we have developed an embodied knowledge of the space. We have a sense of the architectonic of the tour; deciding our movements and travels in space creates a certain narrative and, therefore our curriculum. What knowledge is of most worth is not fixed and absolute. As an animateur, this is no longer the right question for me: knowledge is a process and it emerges in relationality, it activates the relational. Likewise, drawing from Rogoff’s (2010b) need to question what knowledge does; I would argue that the knowledge which is of most worth is not an accumulation of concepts and facts – how ever cleverly organized – but an event triggered in, within and by the work.

I particularly love this last photograph (Figure 13). Some might find it too blurry and

out of focus; what information does it provide about the workings of museum educators and interpretation? Not much besides a strong sense of movement and of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). It doesn't provide sound knowledge. And yet, it made me notice the importance of seeing knowledge as process and as embodied. My initial question 'What knowledge is of most worth?' has not been answered, but complicated and refocused. While being in the gallery space and reflecting on my practice as guide-interpreter, I became deeply aware of the spaces in-between all the knowledge that I have – whether about the art objects or how to engage viewers. As Irwin and Springgay (2008) explain, by folding and exploring in contiguity the visual, artistic and textual elements of my study I did not come up with a definite answer but rather an excess. That excess opens up possibilities for “complexifying the simple and simplifying the complex” (p. xxx).



*Figure 13. Art museum educators walking through the exhibition *Shore, Forest and Beyond*.
Art from the Audain Collection.*

Emerging Understandings

Turning away from expectations for authoritative findings or definitive results, we embrace that our arts-based research “is the conscious pursuit of expressive form in the service of understanding” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 7). Our understandings emerged in the process of

interpreting our own research studies, and continue emerging as we fold these two studies together. The processual threads of our studies about and through interpretative practices were brought together, only to see them disperse again. Holding the belief that the artistic practices we employed did not document, but rather, were eloquent in another way, these practices shifted to reveal at the same moment they shifted to conceal. This uncertainty was embraced, as “[w]e never will know whether what we know is for certain” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 53). Therefore, we turn to concepts that offer generative moments in understanding about museum interpretation and education. Folding, framing, mapping, and shifting happened in-between what was sanctioned as important by other indicators, and thus offered us potentiality to imagine research, to and imagine interpretation that is otherwise.

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