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**MFA**

THESIS | EXHIBITION

ANDERSON GALLERY SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

## How art knows things

“The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980

“The other wall had an almost metaphysical or medieval aspect. On it in varying colours were markers denoting War, Famine, Riots, Poverty, Prisons. These markers, like those on the opposing wall, steadily multiplied. On neither map was any attention paid to nationalisms or politics.” Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City*, 1969

“A Game, for example, might start from a given astronomical configuration, or from the actual theme of a Bach fugue, or from a sentence out of Leibniz or the Upanishads, and from this theme, depending on the intentions and talents of the player, it could either further explore and elaborate the

initial motif or else enrich its expressiveness by allusions to kindred concepts. Beginners learned how to establish parallels, by means of the Game’s symbols, between a piece of classical music and the formula for some law of nature.” Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, 1943

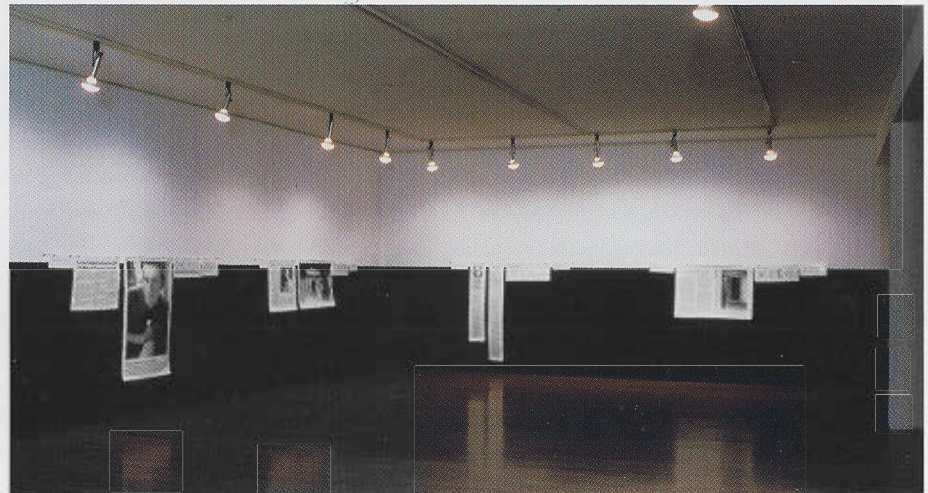
I’ve always found fictions of encompassing knowledge irresistible. The dream of intellectual ecstasy where an impotent amassing of data emerges transformed into *superknowledge*. One recent example would be Mark Lombardi’s conspiracy drawings. A belief surely matured on the boy’s fantasy that *his* stamp collection will be the one that radiates agency outward to comprehend a cruel and indifferent world. Aragon’s observation: “O philately, philately...it is you who take by the hand the child emerging from the enchanted forest...and who transport over the oceans on brightly coloured paper wings those hearts least prepared for the voyage.” And does it matter that this is invariably a masculine ambition? Dispatched in less than two of the novel’s

six-hundred pages, doesn't Doris Lessing's abrupt description of Mark Coldridge's withdrawal into obsessive mapping set it unfavourably against the resilience of Martha Quest who continues brushing against people in the turbulence of the external world? The omnivorous collecting, the mapped data, the constellations of knowledge imagine an order can be assigned to things, even while conceding that such order might be historically contained. The rhizome's mapping is more promiscuous and indeterminate, but still presupposes comprehensible relationships between things as if philately's historical index of engraved images and dated postmarks might have metamorphosed into the accelerated omniscience of Professor X.

In October 1993 Joseph Kosuth installed a selection of works collectively titled "The thing-in-itself is found in its truth through the loss of its immediacy" at Castelli Gallery, New York. Resembling prints drying in a darkroom, clusters of four to six items of text and image were strung on wires

around the gallery at about chest height, printed large and laminated. The walls had been divided horizontally into two bands, white above and black below, such that the clippings were suspended over the black portion. Reading left to right, the items were consistently sequenced. Beginning in each case with a reflection from a philosopher or novelist – Kant, Musil, Simone de Beauvoir, Henry James – the groupings continued with

one or two clippings of recent newspaper stories and a cartoon. They ended each time with a quotation from Kafka whose arcane Homeric voice lent these prosaic news stories a mythic quality. Mostly concerned with economic and political issues, the articles invariably brought grim news back from the front: "Trapped in a Room as Sarajevo Dies" ran one headline alongside the photograph of a man frantically cycling



along what had come to be known in Mostar as sniper alley. A quote from Freud opened another piece: "The polar bear and the tiger cannot fight", followed by an article with the headline "200,000 deaths linked to botched abortions" and then a cartoon showing a personification of the Supreme Court placing a baby in the electric chair — "If on the other hand this unwanted, deprived, uncared for precious little life gives us any trouble...". There was another collection addressing AIDS which centred on the story of John Baldetta, fired from his job as a nursing assistant in Seattle for having "HIV POSITIVE" tattooed on his arm. Elsewhere were news items on ecology "Area 5 times the size of Manhattan vanishes daily" or on Christian fundamentalist prejudice. Kosuth's arrangements cautioned us not to underrate the critical force of wit, effective examples of which could as easily be found in cartoons as in conceptual art or in Kafka. The best of these had to be a Michael Thompson drawing accompanying articles on the lack of any political conscience amongst the

multinationals operating in Burma. Carrying a little boy in his arms as he flies from a window, Peter Pan explains "I'm taking you to a magical Never-never land that is unaffected by events in the real world", to which the child replies "We're going to Wall Street?"

At the time, this show appeared to attract little interest but I found myself enthusiastic for its political pretensions which felt a lot broader and riskier than the identity politics that distinguished Elizabeth Sussman's crucial Whitney Biennial that same year. Kosuth, indeed, explicitly avoided that kind of politics, making no reference to racial issues at a time when the rancour of the Rodney King incident and ensuing riots remained pervasive. Like Mark Coldridge, Kosuth was doing little more than pointing out evidence of things amiss, yet this simple undemonstrative action sent thoughts spinning. With the minimum of determination these slight clusters of appropriations summed up endemic failures, invited us to laugh ruefully at our own

helplessness, and offered insights like sharp knives with which we might arm ourselves. I liked the heteroglossia of rapidly composed journalistic prose set against radically abbreviated witticisms and slow reflections. I felt I was being forced to think without being told what to think and I appreciated the light touch with which Kosuth collected what I took for granted in my everyday life and set it to work. I enjoyed being reminded of those novels I had left behind some twenty years before, thinking now that however delusory those adolescent ambitions to comprehensive knowledge might have been, they nonetheless amounted to something, rather than nothing.

Sticking flags into maps that hung on his study walls, Lessing's character marked the locations of nuclear tests, pollution violations, state torture, and wars in the hope that this enumeration might help him understand what the perpetrators wouldn't. As *The Four-Gated City* reacted to a sense of impending catastrophe during the Cold War with a narrative of desperate intimacies

within the sanctuary of a London house, Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, written from exile in neutral Switzerland, compensated with a narrative of hermetic retreat for the impotence of intellectuals caught up in the mayhem of World War II. A community of male scholars competing in a conceptual *Exquisite Corpse* with players constructing encyclopedic sequences of interrelating ideas (derived from musical composition, mathematical theory, literature, history, and aesthetics) might have anticipated the pinball mapping of a rhizomatic world-picture were Hesse not to have taken it in another, altogether more conventional direction towards "the purest possible synthesis."

Underlying each of these visions, including Kosuth's, is the position that technology is too imbricated with notions of progress and prosperity to serve as a basis for knowledge of its actual social consequences. These instead, must be revealed by the action of imagination on memory. Where Google now lures us into sequences of information both pellucid and dense as

steel wool, the writers, artists, and theorists discussed here use methods familiar to the nineteenth century. In one of his most poignant assemblages, Kosuth showed a photograph of an elderly Muscovite holding the bottle of champagne that was all he had to sell. Next to it the news image of an America Cup winner spraying champagne. In each photograph the bottle was held by its neck, yet while the yachtman's grip appeared forceful the Russian's was delicate. The scale of desperation and luxury legible all the way to one's fingertips. This assemblage had opened with Schopenhauer:

"The first forty years of life give us the text, the next thirty years supply the commentary", and as usual closed with Kafka: "...And yet the fear! How people do always carry their own enemy, however, powerless he is, within themselves."

## Mark Harris

London based artist, writer and curator. Currently a visiting artist at Virginia Commonwealth University.