

**A place of
which we
know no
certainty**



Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, 2012 - ongoing, Photographs and documentation, Courtesy of the artist

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)

*A place of which we know
no certainty*

June 5 - July 18, 2014

Artists:

Laura Fitzgerald, Laura F. Gibellini, Alex Hartley,
Jordan Loepky-Kolesnik and Axel Töpfer

Curator:

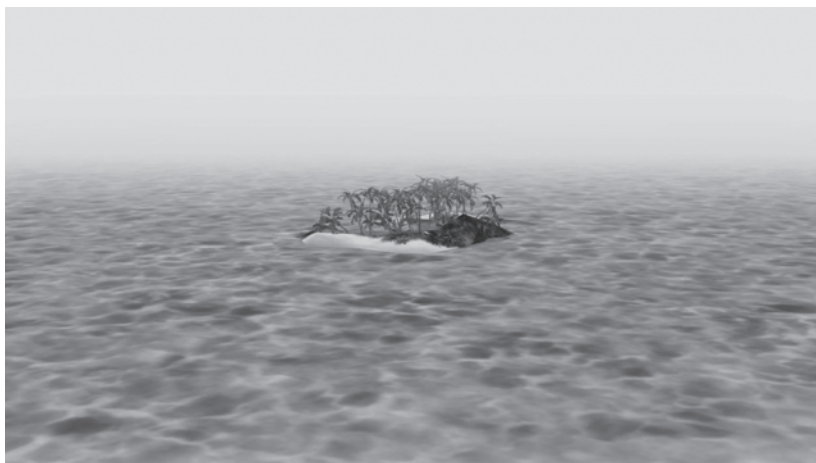
Peta Rake

Foreword

The artists included in *A place of which we know no certainty* consider nonexistent places often in relation to digital cartography. The exhibition is curated by Peta Rake, recipient of ISCP's 2014 Curator Award. This award was established in 2010 for participants in selected curatorial studies programs to organize a group exhibition at ISCP, and it is a response to the lack of opportunities for emerging curators to present institutional exhibitions in New York City.

I would like to thank Peta for making this thoughtful exhibition and accompanying text a reality in a short period of time. This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous participation of the included artists: ISCP alumni Laura F. Gibellini and Axel Töpfer, as well as Alex Hartley, Jordan Loeppky-Kolesnik and Laura Fitzgerald. I am grateful for the dedication of the ISCP staff including Shinnie Kim, Programs Manager; Eric Bees, Programs Associate; and Roberto Jamora, Facilities Assistant. Lastly, Peta and I extend our appreciation to Kay Burns, Suzanne Rackover and Conrad Sweatman.

Kari Conte, Director of Programs and Exhibitions



Jordan Loeppky-Kolesnik, *Sandy Island New Caledonia*, 2012, Animation, 3:00 min., Courtesy of the artist



Axel Töpfer, *Laboratory of Visibility Hy Brasil*, ongoing, Journals, Courtesy of the artist

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

—Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658 In, *On Exactitude in Science*, Jorge Luis Borges (1946)

Sandy Island, New Caledonia doesn't exist. First charted off the east coast of Australia by James Cook in 1774, Sandy Island was found on maps as late as 2012 until a surveyor ship passed through the area where the island was deemed to exist – finding no trace. Quickly removed from Google and National Geographic maps, it was officially 'undiscovered,' joining the ranks of other nonexistent, phantom islands.

The alleged existence of Sandy Island was assumed to be the result of human error. However, some wondered whether an act of 'cartographic entrapment' was to blame. The practice of falsifying the existence of islands and other cartographic landmarks is commonplace, but largely denied by mapmakers. Formally called a "trap street," the purpose of such fictitious entries is to identify plagiarism among mapmakers, who, if caught red-handed would naturally struggle to explain the inclusion in their maps. Documented traps not only include counterfeit islands, but also fictional settlements, paper towns, misrepresented streets and mountains with the wrong elevations.

Cartographic deception has by no means ended with the rise of technologically advanced GPS mapping systems, relied on by Google Maps as well as many others. Indeed, technology is increasingly to blame for erroneous entries on circulated maps. An interesting example occurred in July 2013, when the remote island of Jura located off the coast of Scotland suddenly disappeared from Google Maps; the 200 residents and local herd of deer apparently had been consumed by the Atlantic. The only trace of the island was the main road of Jura floating in the pixelated online ocean. Rising sea levels were not to blame, as Ryan Jacobs outlines in his article in *The Atlantic*, stating that "its odd disappearance [was] merely a product of a data glitch" somewhere in one of Google's giant computer servers.

Funnily enough, Jura is also the location where George Orwell retreated to write *1984*, and surely he "would find amusement, if not great irony in this. The island where he wrote about a dystopian government that manipulates reality, has accidentally disappeared by technology."¹ Jura has since been reinstated on the map but the fixing of a seemingly simple glitch is a complicated process whereby an automated software system must be updated manually, and the source code altered to ensure the mistake doesn't pop-up elsewhere. What is intriguing is that these glitches – misaligned coordinates, misspelled names etc. – will most likely exist forever, repeating and procreating in code: their permanency indicative of the subjectivity of how maps are made regardless of technology. Writer and technologist, James Bridle problematizes this in the Fall 2012 issue of *Cabinet*:

...what happens when these false places are overlaid on real ones through acquisition or aggregation or intention, algorithmic or otherwise? Ultimately, it is possible to peer through the layers of data and geography to see vistas that should not be possible. These places exist not as physical locations but as accumulations of data, of imagery, of files in file systems somewhere, accessible to the imagination if not to the pedestrian.²

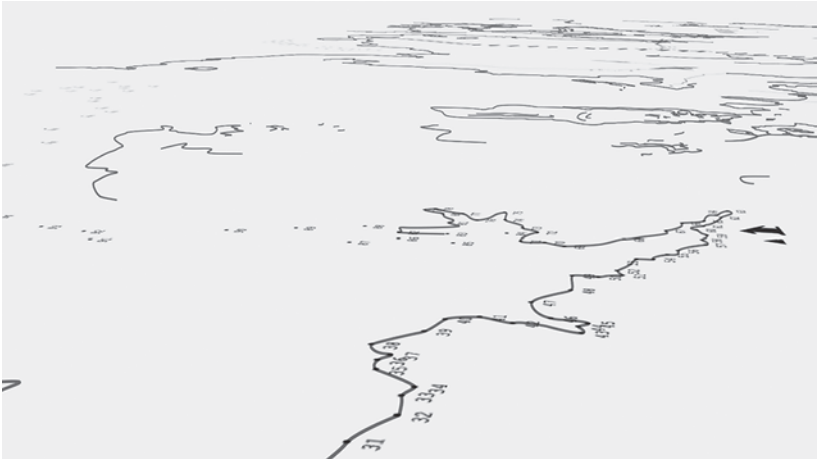
While all such examples of deceptiveness in maps can be a source of curiosity, cartographic misrepresentation can assume more insidious forms. Recently *The Guardian Online* published a crowd-sourcing article about the gaps on the Google Maps for Africa.³ Questioning Google's assertion that 'they are on the never-ending quest for the perfect map,' *The Guardian Online* noted that many omissions exist in Google's topology of the continent. These errors are almost definitely the product of residual gaps in cartographic documentation – which remains perennially reliant on old, historical records as well as new mapping technologies. However, it is an unfortunate reality that, for one reason or another, Africa is profoundly and inaccurately under-sized in most widely circulated maps, more so than any other

¹Jacobs, Ryan, "A Lost Scottish Island, George Orwell, and the Future of Maps" *The Atlantic Online*, 2013. Accessed May 20, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/a-lost-scottish-island-george-orwell-and-the-future-of-maps/278037/>

²Bridle, James, 2012 "Trap Streets" In, *Cabinet* 47 (2012): Fall, accessed May 20, 2014. <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/47/bridle.php>

³Shearlaw, Maeve, "Mapping Africa: can you help us fill in the gaps?," *The Guardian Online*, 2014. Accessed May 20, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/04/mapping-africa-can-you-help-us-fill-in-the-gaps>



Laura F. Gibellini, *Study for (a) Landscape*, Animation, 3:57 min., Courtesy of the artist

continent.⁴ It might be tempting to infer that some deep-seated prejudice underpins such a misrepresentation, but at the very least such inadequacies illustrate the political weight of representation on maps. The optimistic solution proposed by *The Guardian Online* to Google's 'immappancy' of Africa would seem ultimately to embrace this reality yet in a democratic spirit: they invited readers, rather than experts, to help re-build a postcolonial map of Africa themselves.

A vast atlas of glitches and misrepresentation on maps exist both in reality and in literature, yet, only some are mentioned here. This exhibition, *A place of which we know no certainty* brings together several artists, separated by oceans, tributaries and borders, all of whom connect intangible locales with their projects.

⁴D, G, "The true true size of Africa," *The Economist*, 2010. Accessed May 21, 2014.
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2010/11/cartography>

Considering the Sandy Island case specifically, Montreal-based Jordan Loepky-Kolesnik's *Sandy Island / New Caledonia* (2012) addresses the documented trap street in his animation of a disappearing oceanic atoll. Looped as if to repeat forever, the GIF-style animation bounces back and forth from a horizon-less empty ocean, zooming and retreating from an island that appears in the haze. The aerial view is similar of a search-and-rescue plane, scanning the sea for traces of wreckage. Loepky-Kolesnik's animation is reminiscent of a mirage, implementing doubt and uncertainty in the eyes of the viewer; a panoptic visualization of a cartographic mishap. Its aesthetic draws on dated styles of Internet graphics from the 1990s, suggesting that the animation is an artifact of a past decade when Sandy Island still lived in the world of Google Maps.

Artist and theorist Laura F. Gibellini's practice largely concerns place and what it means to inhabit the world. Particularly concerned with the emergence of specific places in the interstice between ideal and factual gestures, Gibellini's animated film *Study for (a) Landscape: Madrid—New York* (2011) is autobiographical in intent. Based between Madrid and New York, Gibellini's animation travels along a set of numbers and symbols – the lines of which speed up and multiply as the film progresses. Synced to several tracks that are reminiscent of Morse code, a familiar summer hum of cicada's in the early evening, and a telephone dial tone, lines form across the digital landscapes she has mapped. Similar to Loepky-Kolesnik's aerial view, the effect in Gibellini's study is almost disorienting, the topology emptied entirely of landscape. Like James Bridle's suggestion that these algorithmic "places exist not as physical locations but as accumulations of data, of imagery, of files in file systems somewhere, accessible to the imagination if not to the pedestrian," *Study for (a) Landscape* distorts the intent of a map to assist in the travel from point A to point B, so that the journey is confounded by the topology itself.

Confounding distortions are also found in the myth of Hy Brasil, or *Brasil* among several other variants. Said to lie in the Atlantic Ocean west of Ireland, not too far from the aforementioned island of Jura, Hy Brasil is a phantom island entrenched in Irish folklore, permanently cloaked in mist, except for one day every seven years, when it became visible but still unreachable. Its roots are similar to other lost and mythical islands of the Atlantic, such as Atlantis, Saint Brendan's Island or the Isle of Mayda.⁵ Two works in the exhibition speak to Hy Brasil not to unveil it, but rather to perpetuate it. Laura Fitzgerald's film *Hy-Brasil* sees Fitzgerald herself broadcasting a strange news reportage from the mysterious isle, about an artist who has disappeared from a fictional artist residency. The film's documentary aesthetic, feels like it has washed ashore and that in watching it you have stumbled upon the only contact with this island to date; an apparent functioning community, inhabited and sophisticated enough to televise its own goings-on. Hy Brasil is also seemingly established enough to host the research station *The Laboratory of Visibility Hy Brasil*, a fictional collaborative project by artist Axel Töpfer who 'works on the island' and produces the magazine *Hy-Brasil*.

Close by, in 2012, an arctic island traveled south through international waters for the coasts of England. At the helm of the floating landmass, was Devon-based artist Alex Hartley. This was the outcome of a search for 'a land on which no human had ever stood,' a place unmarked by everything that comes with statehood: people, government, ideology, war. Through this project, Hartley would become the first 'citizen' of a nation "Nowhereisland" that now claims 23,000 others – an imagined utopia of "global citizens, with citizenship open to all," with the island as its symbolic territory. The artist found and adopted his early citizens after docking the island for intervals at several stops along the coast of the UK, where he invited locals across its borders. At each location, he also displayed in a portable 'Embassy' a vast archive of literature, ephemera, materials, maps, and other objects speaking to the potential uncharted spaces across the globe. *Nowhereisland* provides a counterpoint to the other works featured in this exhibition, in that the island conjured by

⁵Drye, William, "Atlantis—True Story or Cautionary Tale?," *National Geographic*, 2012. Accessed May 20, 2014. <http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/archaeology/atlantis/>

Hartley really does exist but is unrepresented on any circulated map, whereas the inverse is true of the others. The ontological status of Hartley's island-nation is perhaps the most ambiguous of all, eluding a fixed place and constituted largely by imagination. *Nowhereisland* suggests Foucault's concept of the heterotopia – a space of transient utopia for which Foucault once claimed that a floating "ship as an example par excellence." It seems worth noting however, that there is a cosmopolitan spirit to Hartley's work that sets it in contrast to the tendencies of Foucault, and counters its subtext of pessimism about modernity. The exhibition features a post-iteration of Hartley's *Nowhereisland* project. Shown for the first time outside of Europe, *Nowhereisland* exists in the exhibition in a condensed manner; specific pieces of ephemera, photographs, letters, and objects from its 'Embassy' have traveled to the island of Manhattan, New York to summarize the project.

Finally, the exhibition includes a display of artists' books, literature and maps as documents to further elucidate upon the existence of these phenomena – trap streets, cartographic inaccuracies and the subjectivity of the way the world is drawn and understood – and its interpretation by artists.

In the one-paragraph story by Jorge Luis Borges, the epitaph of this essay and impetus for Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) the author describes an imagined map that had "the scale of a mile to the mile." In Borges fictional Empire, cartographers built an impressive map so detailed that it was the size of all the lands in which they ruled. As the Empire began to wane, animals and nomadic peoples began to inhabit the outer borders of the map. As the map fell into disrepair, and all that was left of the Empire was gone, the map remained as a ruin, dilapidated and forgotten across the landscape; lingering as an illusion of Imperialism, but also as a physical reality for peoples who were displaced and stateless due to the demise of the Kingdom.

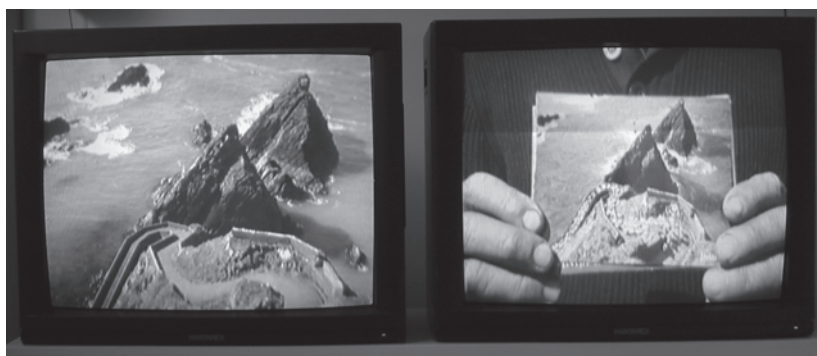
Decades later, Baudrillard resurrects Borges' map to allegorize the "precession of simulacra" in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). His treatise concerning representation and reality through signs and symbols, states that *Simulacra* are copies that depict things that either had no reality to begin with, or that no longer have an original. In referring to Borges' story, Baudrillard elucidates that the 'simulated' copy (the map) had superseded the original Empire itself and that it was the inverse – that the map had come to precede the borders of the Kingdom.

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory... it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire but our own: The desert of the real itself.⁶

The map therefore is lived-upon and maintained by people as a simulation of a place that has fallen into representation – a pageantry of reality. This strange allegory of an imagined territory from Borges lends to his other literary works that feature instances of paper-towns, including "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertiu" in *Labyrinths* (1947).⁷ In this story, the fictitious encyclopedic entry of the country of *Uqbar* is discovered. Borges, the narrator, is led through a bibliographical maze attempting to verify the reality or unreality of *Uqbar*. It is from this story of geographic ambiguity that the exhibition *A place of which we know no certainty* takes its departure. An altered, but borrowed line from Borges became the impetus for interrogating maps and less representative forms by artists, by connecting intangible locations that emphasize the strangeness of our geopolitical boundaries. By dismantling the idea of 'place' through myths and fakes of spectral atolls and adrift arctic islands, the artworks included in the exhibition expand upon statelessness, citizenship and the hopeful possibility of the 'unchartered' in contemporary culture.

⁶Baudrillard, Jean, "The Precession of the Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

⁷Other famous examples include Jules Verne's trilogy *The Mysterious Island* or the *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi.



Laura Fitzgerald, *Hy-Brasil*, 2013, Two-Channel video, 16:00 min., Courtesy of the artist, special thanks to Michael Fitzgerald and Roddy Canas

Peta Rake is an independent curator and writer and holds a Master's Degree in Curatorial Practice from California College of the Arts. Currently, she is the Curatorial Assistant at Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre, Canada and is the former archive assistant at Steven Leiber Archive, San Francisco. Rake has curated exhibitions at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art San Francisco, Oakland Museum of California, Luggage Store Gallery, and Live Worms San Francisco. She contributes regularly to *C Magazine*, and her writing has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *Fillip*, *San Francisco Arts Quarterly* and *Rearviews*.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *A place of which we know no certainty* at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), June 5 - July 18, 2014

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Published by the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)
Printed by Ideal Graphics, NY

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ISCP is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

ISBN 978-0-9855741-8-5

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This exhibition has been made possible thanks to the support of:
The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Brooklyn Arts Council, Department of Cultural Affairs, Greenwich Collection, National Endowment for the Arts, and New York State Council on the Arts.