

Figuration in Artistic Research Practice

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In his book *The Order of Things* (1989), Michel Foucault defines the 'Classical Age', sandwiched between the Renaissance and Modernity, as an age that believed that it was possible to arrive at a universal order through the naming of things. In such a representational order, things are mapped through their names onto the idealised surface of a 'tableau'. Representational systems of identity and difference have been used in all areas of knowledge, including geography. The *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain* (figs 1 & 2), for example, a surveying project carried out during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mapped – that is, defined – key points of the British Isles in relation to each other.



fig. 1: *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain*, c. 1860

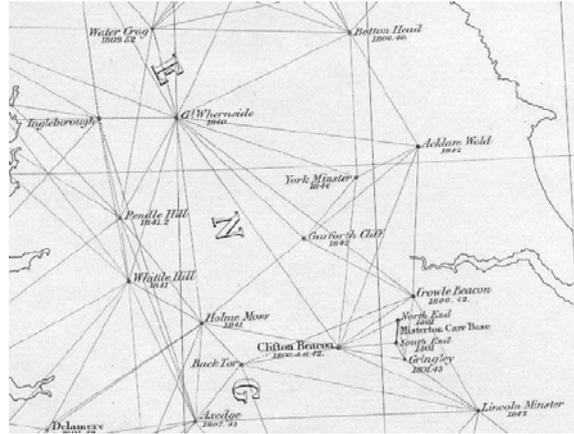


fig. 2. Principal Triangulation of Great Britain, c. 1860, detail

Triangulation is a basic geometric procedure that allows a third point to be constructed from any given two points, provided that the two angles to it are known. (fig.3)

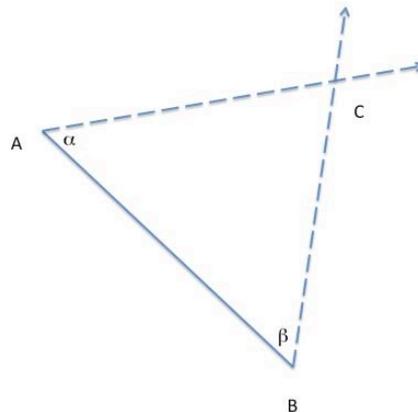


fig. 3: Triangulation

I have used the practice of triangulation in a body of work that led to my book *Paris*, which was published last year by Copy Press. In its main chapters, the book brings together ten drawings made during a residency in Paris. Each drawing represents a different public space in the city of Paris, or rather, the trees that are planted on it. (fig. 4)



fig. 4: Place Roger Prijou-Valjean

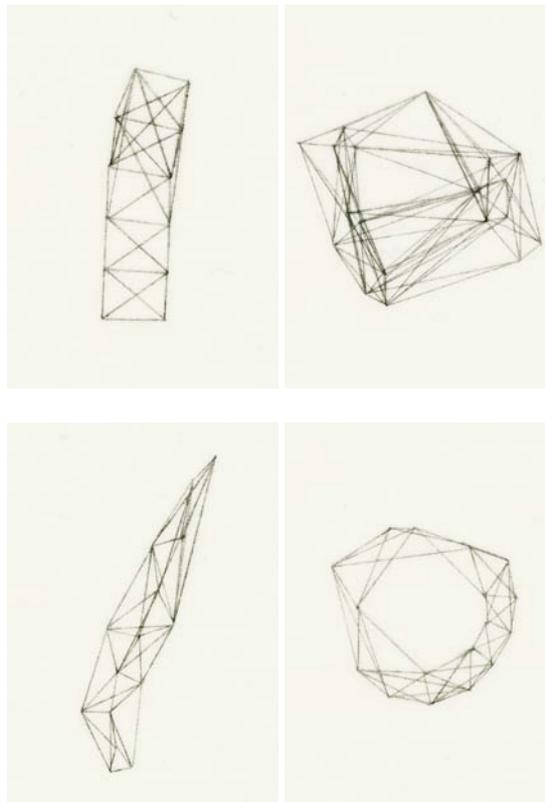


fig. 5: Michael Schwab, *Place Roger Prijou-Valjean, 43–49 Rue de la Glacière, Maison de Solenn, and Place des Vosges, 2006, details*

Using triangulation, I measured the distances between trees, which were used as source data for the drawings. The chapters are: *Place Roger Prijou-Valjean, 43–49*

Rue de la Glacière, Square Avé Maria, Square Henri Cadiou, Rue Piat, Maison de Solenn, Les Jardins de l'Arche, Cours Valmy, Place de l'Île de Sein and Place des Vosges. (fig. 5):

Place Roger Prijou-Valjean was one of the earlier drawings made during this stay in Paris. I lived not far away at the Cité Internationale des Arts. What I like about this drawing is the simplicity with which it starts and the way this simplicity quickly gets out of hand only a few trees into the drawing. The resulting drawing would have been so much clearer if the square did not follow the ever so light turn of the road as it annihilates geometry.

The square sits like a balcony between the road and the residential buildings behind. It appears to be a small local centre mainly for old age pensioners and dogs.

For the first drawings, which I did in Argelès in the south of France, I literally counted the amount of feet that fitted between one tree and another by placing one foot right in front of the other. This was a very slow process during which I often lost count or equilibrium. However, in Paris I had perfected my surveyance: I had built myself a small but helpful tool allowing me to measure the distances between the trees in much more comfort. The new tool was made of wood and resembled an oversized capital 'a'. Flicking the 'a' around with my wrist, just like a sea captain would use a compass on an oceanic map, I could measure distances in paces rather than feet, allowing for a swifter and more precise execution of the measurements. I learned later that a similar device is used by the regimental Sergeant Major to measure the distance taken in a marching step, the distance between the ranks and to layout marker points on a parade ground. Carried only by the regimental Sergeant Major, the device is also an indicator of rank.

It might have been the circumstance of me using a tool that made people believe I was a professional surveyor. A woman, who might have been in her late sixties or even early seventies, sitting on one of the benches scattered between the trees at the back of Place Roger Prijou-

Valjean, asked me if I worked for the council and if the square might be in danger of demolition. A man of similar or the same age, who had seen me from his front window, came across the street and enquired what my motivations might be.

Art makes you interact differently with an environment. When you use a field easel or a camera on a tripod, you mark a spot and stay long enough for this spot to gain prominence. People who see you will always think they know what you are doing, as the tools of your trade will give away as much. However, when the creation of art loses its appearance, and becomes interwoven with the space within which it works, people start wondering. (Schwab 2008: 24f.)

Given the way in which the images are constructed, each drawing can be seen as a map of a particular site. However, the drawings do not look like maps; if anything, they look like images of something seen under a magnifying glass. This was quite deliberate. Proper maps, such as the *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain*, can be used to identify particular places, but all the places appear similar. The drawings in my book, on the other hand, are made to look different, as if something of the site could be captured in the shape of the drawing.

I refer to the drawings as 'figures', a notion that has become increasingly important in my work. In the glossary, we find the following entry for 'figure':

Figure

The drawing proposes a figure that emerges when the site disappears. The site has the potential of becoming a figure through an interrogation by perception, rules and the act of drawing. The figure is able to contain the transformation of a site into a figure; it is the site in transformation. The figure is arrived at by developing a positive expression in the negative space of a site; it is not the negative space taken as positive, not a cast that is taken of the trees. The figure is the realisation of a potential not acknowledged by the site. The drawing is potential to the site, at the same time as the site is potential to the drawing. The figure is the hinge that connects these potentialities. The

drawing can only make real the given by giving a figure through which the potential of the given can be imagined. By understanding the figure we can, back on site, start seeing how the site can transform into a being. This is why the drawings look like they have been made under a microscope. (Schwab 2008: 85)

In his book *Discours/Figure* (2002), Jean-François Lyotard conceptualises three different types of 'figures': (1) The 'image-figure' as figurative representation, such as when opposed to a ground, the most conventional use of the notion of the 'figure' in art theory; (2) the 'form-figure' as the constitutive principle, such as the constellation or the gestalt of a image-figure; it 'is present in the perceptible, it may even be visible, but is in general not seen' (Lyotard, 1984: 57); (3) the 'matrix-figure', which is invisible since it is the differential principle of disruption of the binary relation of the visible and invisible and indeed any binary relation. The matrix-figure's 'formal condition', as Rosalind Krauss says, is a 'rhythm or pulse'. (Krauss, 1988: 65) Writing about the artists of the 'optical unconscious', such as Max Ernst or Marcel Duchamp, she states: 'the pulse they employ is not understood to be structurally distinct from vision but to be at work from deep inside it'. (Krauss, 1996: 217) As a consequence, according to David Carroll, 'each of [the three aspects of the figure] is a complication of the visual nature of the figure'. (Carroll, 1989: 39) Although all types of figures essentially belong together in what Lyotard calls 'the figural', the 'form-figure' and more especially the 'matrix-figure' disrupt simple visibility within representation. In other words, inscribed in visibility is disruptive visuality, which is not of the same visible order.

A map such as the *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain*, is an image that appears to carry its truth in its 'image-figure' – that is, in the triangulated distances between British landmarks. As a map, it is not supposed to be looked at in relation to its form or gestalt – although it can be – nor is it supposed to make accessible what it cannot show: the inscription of concepts into a landscape. The representational idealisation that comes with any map flattens such questions, and only if we were to be overly exact would we question the map's representational reality.

It is clear to us today that no map can ever be exact, but this is only partially the issue. What, in the context of the present argument, matters more is the fact that the *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain*, claiming to be a true representation of the British Isles, does not question the way in which it negotiates truth *as an image*; that is, the representational simplicity with which it foregrounds accuracy. This point may be familiar from discussions around photography, which has also been said to ‘speak’ the truth due to the mechanical nature of its apparatus.

The map, just like a photograph, is an elaborate construction that results in a ‘naturally’ truthful image. As Jacques Rancière demonstrates using the example of Roland Barthes, it is not a question of deciding whether one focuses on the ‘semiologist’s’ position (*Mythologies* [1957] (Barthes 1993) or *The Rhetoric of the Image* [1964] (Barthes 1978)) or the more ‘natural’ position (*Camera Lucida* [1980] (Barthes 1993)); it is rather a question that challenges us to think of the two contradictory elements together in the image as ‘raw material presence and ... as discourse encoding a history’ (Rancière 2007: 11), or more generally, as ‘a product identical with something not produced’. (Rancière 2004: 23)

Rancière, just like Foucault, sees a historic shift away from the representational order – or ‘regime’, as Rancière calls it – into the modern, aesthetic regime of the arts (Rancière 2004: 22), where images obtain a certain autonomy as the result of such inner, double workings. Rancière sees images in the aesthetic regime of the arts as ‘pensive’ – that is, actively thinking – due to the fact that ‘the aesthetic regime ... destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating [their] singularity’. (Rancière 2004: 23) In other words, images in the aesthetic regime of the arts produce a thought from within themselves, i.e. without reference to another world that they double.

An image looked at as a map, such as the *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain*, refers back to the triangulated British countryside, but it can be looked at as an image in its own right; that is to say, aesthetically. Artistically, however, we can engage with such images to heighten their aesthetic character and to question the operators within the image and the quality of truth that they produce. A drawing like *Place Roger Prijou-Valjean* is a map, but what the map is of is not

necessarily clear. Even as we wonder what the figure shows, we know that the drawing identifies something while it creates for us the something it identifies. More than being represented, what the drawing shows is brought to life.

The reason for the essential dissemblance that Rancière detects in images in the aesthetic regime of the arts lies in their surplus of life, with which they escape representation. Looked at as representation only – that is, as a precise image-maps – *Place Roger Prijou-Valjean* would let us down, while in the dubiousness of its representation the drawing can project a thought. Functions of dissemblance rather than representational errors are important in order for images to *work*.



fig. 8: Fra Angelico, *Noli Me Tangere*, c. 1438–50, detail

Although looking at pre-modern work, Georges Didi-Huberman's book on *Fra Angelico* (1995) attempts to explain imperfections in some of his frescos not as the results of a minor hand, such as an assistant of the artist, but as purposely introduced disturbances that could spin off a thought, 'helping a believer visually to move away from the visible'. (Didi-Huberman 1995: 224) (figs 8–10) As Didi-

Huberman says, 'this problematic of *dissemblance* [has] to be called *figuration*, inasmuch as Fra Angelico himself must have termed *figurae* all those zones of blotches he liked to spread across his work. For as late as the fifteenth century, "figures" signified the reverse of what we understand by the term today. Today, everyone understands that to figure a thing means to represent the visible aspect of the thing. For Fra Angelico and the religious thinkers of his entourage, however, it meant rather to take one's distance from the aspect, to *displace* it, to take a detour away from resemblance and designation.' (Didi-Huberman 1995: 3) And further: '[T]he primary virtue of dissemblance consists of imitating, not the aspect but the process.' (Didi-Huberman 1995: 96)

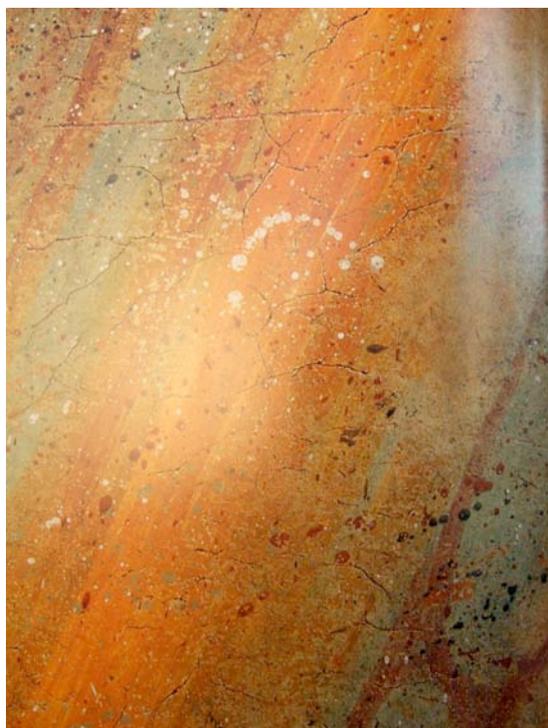


fig. 9: Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows*, c. 1438–50, detail

It is naturally difficult to utilise Didi-Huberman's work on Fra Angelico for a description of images in the aesthetic regime of art, but the link may be permissible if one focuses on what that link brackets. Images from both the pre- and post-representational regimes (the ethical and the aesthetic regimes according to Rancière) will have to show ways in which their non-representational elements positively contribute to the meaning of the work,

since they would otherwise be nothing but bad representations. The notion of the 'figure', which may have been limited to mean 'figurative representation', can thus be re-approached as a productive thinking process between visibility and invisibility. Just like the blotches in Fra Angelico's work, the outline with which the figure intersects the image-ground allows for the production of a thought, which would *as thought* be lost if it were identified representationally.



fig. 10: Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c. 1438–50, detail

The strength of the image as map lies precisely in its ability to identify all points of its ground, cutting through their potential dissemblance. The strength of the image as figure, on the other hand, lies in an intellectual activation that does not require foreclosure in an explanation of *what* it is. Both modes, however, utilise triangulation, albeit in a different sense. While for the map a distance within the visible is set up that allows for the triangulation and identification of another, visible point, the distance in the figure is between the visible and the invisible, which 'identifies' not a visible point but an active process or thought that, as Heidegger would say, 'opens up a world'. (Heidegger 1993: 168)

The notion of 'triangulation' has also been used to describe research methodologies in the social sciences. Here, triangulation is meant to identify a subject matter from two or more 'angles', making it possible to utilise difference

productively within research work. For example, in a collaborative setting, each researcher can give his own account of, say, a square in the city of Paris. Although it is clear that with a limited amount of researchers not all possible accounts will be given and that the data will remain incomplete, it is understood that all accounts add to the understanding of the square. This is the case because the subject matter of the research (the square) remains identified across accounts. The difference between accounts only becomes productive for the development of an understanding if an underlying identity of the subject matter is assumed. This assumption is highly problematic, however, because in triangulation a point is identified only *after* the process is applied and not before. Assuming the identity of the subject matter before triangulation not only defies the purpose (of its identification), but also creates a tautological structure, where the 'triangulation' rhetorically repeats an identity without adding anything to it.

To take an example from the methodological discussions around artistic research, in his paper *Learning from Experience* (2004), Michael A.R. Biggs claims that tacit knowledge needs to share with explicit knowledge an experiential content, i.e. a subject matter, should the idea of practice-based research as defined by the AHRC make sense. Because both an artifact and a piece of writing can represent the same content, they are both seen as valid forms with which to investigate that content. Such a position, as Biggs rightly says, is possible only because 'the problem of experiential content [is translated] into one of representation'. (Biggs 2004: 10) In other words, Biggs gives an explanation of how artistic research is possible from a representational perspective, where triangulation – that is, the drawing of an image-map – is possible.

If, however, the representational regime of the arts is replaced by an aesthetic regime, such rationale loses relevance because it would mistake the artwork for a representational structure when in fact it is an aesthetic one. From this vantage point, the particular irrelevance of artistic research for the wider art world could be explained, because both are out of step with the procedures with which they respectively negotiate truth. If we want to give contemporary relevance to artistic research, our methodologies cannot disregard what makes the work *work* within an aesthetic regime of the arts.

The representational regime of the arts does not differ from the aesthetic regime in respect to the importance of meaning; meaning is central to both. The relation of meaning to visibility, however, is what keeps the regimes apart. If the figure is the result of a triangulation between the visible and the invisible, its identity cannot simply be visible. Equally, however, it cannot be simply invisible, which means its identity must be invested within the differential procedure that the figure sets up. If difference is used in the image-map to construct an identity that seems to exist without the process of differentiation (in the case of the *Principal Triangulation of Great Britain* this is chiefly the identity of the nation), the image-figure includes differentiation in its own identity.

The so called 'practical' and 'theoretical' components of a research project, rather than claiming identical subject matter, which both can represent, need to be engaged in a differential interrelation through which they produce a particular, aesthetic type of identity. It is thus not the identical content that needs to be assumed in order for meaning to emerge, but the differential process. Here we may say that some differential processes produce genuine thought, whilst others produce little or nothing. It is clear, however, that from this vantage point neither 'practice' nor 'theory' can rightfully pre-exist this relation; that is, what each is can only be negotiated through the work. A drawing such as *Place Roger Prijou-Valjean* is invested with and in text to a degree where its identity as a visual work of art has to be questioned. Only through the differentiation installed by research can it be made to become a figure.

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