Art Maps project blog

By Susan Stockwell
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Art Maps was a fascinating project to be a part of. My role was to use the Art Maps web app as a research tool and I made a presentation based on my experiences.

Art Maps links Tate's collection to Google Maps. Information about where particular works were conceived and where things contained within the work are located is displayed in the map. Users are allowed to add factual and anecdotal information over time. So this web site opens up access to the Tate's collection and is a very useful research tool for artists and art historians.

Initially I thought I might have difficulties navigating the site as I'm dyslexic. However it was easy to use and in no time I was sourcing all manner of information and images.

I was particularly excited when I realised that the app enabled me to find the exact viewpoint from which a work was painted. Turner's *The Thames Above Waterloo Bridge*, painted in 1890, is a good example of this. Being able to stand in the same place over 100 years later is a strange and profound experience. It enables you to gain a deeper understanding of what the artist perceived through his own eyes.

Joseph Mallord William Turner
The Thames above Waterloo Bridge circa 1830-5
Oil on canvas
support: 905 x 1210 mm frame: 1138 x 1457 x 82 mm
Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

This enriched relationship between the viewer and the artist led me to think of issues that I have explored in my own work, particularly the distinction between private experience and shared experience.

My *Red Road Artery* series is concerned with this relationship between private and public, inside and outside, the skin that creates the divide and where this boundary is. *South London Arteries* is taken from a bus map of South London where I live and work. I was drawn to the red roads, which resemble the veins and arteries of the body, especially when cut out. This work has a visceral, bodily quality and speaks of 'inner' space.

Susan Stockwell, *Manchester Arteries*, 2012 recycled blankets and embroidery thread 1.8 x 1.5m

Similarly *Manchester Arteries* is based on a map of Manchester from the year I was born. Manchester was the place that I was born and grew up. The piece is drawn out with embroidery thread onto recycled blankets that I inherited from my grandmother. These map works have historical and geographical references, which locate them in the world and make them accessible to others but at the same time they are very much routed in my own personal history.

Susan Stockwell *South London Arteries* 2005 Paper-cut print 330mm x 260mm

Art Maps explores a similar dichotomy between the objective configuration of spatial relationships that is represented by a map and the more subjective experience of 'using' the city. This latter relationship to the city involves a complex layering of personal and collective histories onto the architecture. This is an idea that I have explored before in dresses that I have made out of ordinance survey maps. They are made of many layers and are grafted together to make a map. In a similar way Art Maps is layered and has the potential to become more layered over time with added information, videos, images and links to other apps.

Art Maps is also useful for artists who are interested in the connection between artworks and historical events. I made another piece in the *Red Road Artery* series called *River of Blood*. Here red road maps are formed into the shape of the Thames.

Susan Stockwell, *River of Blood*, vinyl laser-cut, 8 metres wide, at INIVA East London 2010

This piece was inspired by a story I read about Winston Churchill. He was sailing up the Thames with Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 when she referred to it as an "awful, dirty river". Churchill chastised her, by replying that the Thames was the "silver thread of Empire".

This area of research led me to make an installation called *Sail Away* in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in 2013. The boats were made from maps, tickets and paper money from around the world. The boats spilled out onto the Turbine Hall's vast sea of concrete. It was fitting that the installation sat a few metres away from the Thames as it made references to Britain as a shipping nation and its history of trade.

Susan Stockwell, *Sail Away,* mixed media including paper currency notes, travel tickets and maps at Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, 2013

Art Maps proved very useful when looking for information to provide a context for these kinds of pieces. By entering the word 'tea' in the artwork search I found many references to art works that are relevant to the role of tea in London life. For example Sir Nathaniel Dance-Holland's *Tea Party*, which depicts people drinking tea at an 18th century tea party. Tea was the fashionable drink of the day. It was also an extremely important product in the history of Britain's Industrial revolution as well as Britain's trading relationship with China. In fact the money that Britain made through selling Chinese tea largely funded Britain's Industrial revolution, hence Churchill's comment about the Thames being the 'silver thread of empire'. It is interesting to see how the politics of 18th century trade is routed in London's heritage and art.

Finally I was reminded of a performance piece and film that I made in 2007 called *Taking a Line for a Walk*. In this piece I drew a line with white paint around the boundary of Stockwell.


Susan Stockwell *Taking A Line For A Walk* 2002

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This piece was exploring the idea of boundaries and marking a territory. The boundary of Stockwell is hard to define in such a fluid and built up urban area. The result of the performance was a sprayed white line on the ground as if the map of London had imposed itself onto the ground. This piece tried to push the idea that art works might be tied geographically to place.

Through using Art Maps I was happy to find a piece of work by Gunter Demnig called *Blood Trail* that related strongly to this piece. In *Blood Trail*, Denmig walked from the Kunstakademie in Kassel to the Tate in London over a period of 16 days drawing a line in pig's blood on the ground using a line painting machine. He then donated the machine as an artwork to the Tate.
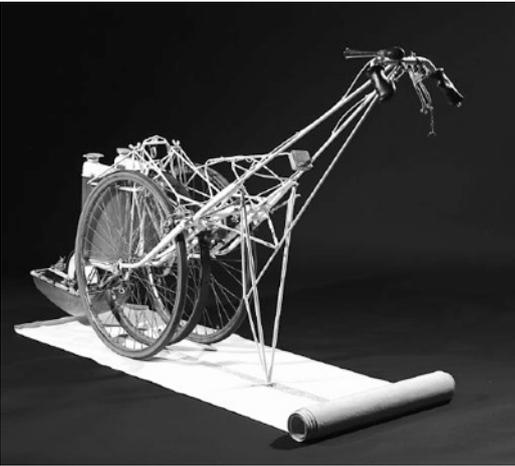
Blood Trail, *Gunter Demnig*, 1981, (Kassel/London)

 I feel that this piece not only relates to my piece *Taking a Line For a Walk*, but also, through the use of blood, relates to my *Red Road Artery* series. Referring to the use of blood in his work Demnig states: 'Blood is the symbol for life, what one inherits. Genetic coding is determined in the blood. In every culture, blood has a very special meaning.'[1]

I realized that these connections between my work and Demnig's aren't coincidental. Place, boundaries and routes, whilst being the language of the geographer are also the spatial metaphors that are employed in descriptions of the trajectories of people's lives. Where we come from and where we are going to are questions that are often framed in terms of a journey through a terrain. Both my *Red Road Artery* series and Demnig's fading line of pig's blood play with this idea.

In conclusion I found Art Maps to be not only a very useful research tool but also an interesting exploration of the importance of 'place' as a way of understanding particular artworks and their social, political and cultural significance. I managed to find examples of works that were very relevant to my practice both in terms of contextualising some of the themes that I have worked with, such as the history of empire, and also in terms of finding contemporary artists who's work relates to my own.

If there is scope to expand Art Maps in the future, I would like to see it locate where art works are held at the present moment. So I could ask "what local public art is situated or which art works are housed in collections near me?"

- 1. asked in a questionnaire on 23rd March 1988