

SuperModels

Maps from the Imagination Machine

In an age where the boundaries between the real and the imaginative are continually subjected to re-evaluation and reformulation, SuperModels attempts to open up the discourse of representation and fantasy to a stage of inquiry in which the fictional takes on the properties of the real and the real assumes a symbolic role in sustaining the imaginary. Between the paradoxical and potentially futile attempts to decipher an authenticity to contemporary living, SuperModels intensifies the debate by presenting a series of works whose primary mandate is to question the collapse of representation and narrative, offering a diversity of positions on the face of the real in an age of proliferating creativity.

Jorge Luis Borges once spoke about a map so large that it covered the entirety of the territory it was intended to describe.¹ This story is much cited by theorists of the postmodern and in particular by the French thinker Jean Baudrillard who will proclaim that when such an event occurs it means that the territory beneath the map, or in his terms *the reality beneath the simulation*, has entirely disappeared – murdered by the map itself.²

We may think that the real persists despite the accuracy of our contemporary maps, but a simple question reveals the fallacy

here: *which real?* No longer is the map simply the size of the territory. In contemporary times, the map is itself much bigger, much more detailed, a magnified map that forever reveals minutia of the territory that it never even knew existed – charting everything from the microscopic to the telescopic, crossing virtual as well as material territory, including myths and imaginings and narratives, from media reports to political campaigns, genetic composition to historic and familial lineage, weather patterns to electromagnetic radiation. In short, we face precisely a map so detailed that one single reality can no longer be invoked as its source. Instead, here we find an excess of realities, a map so precise that it precludes the possibility of any *singular unified perspective*.

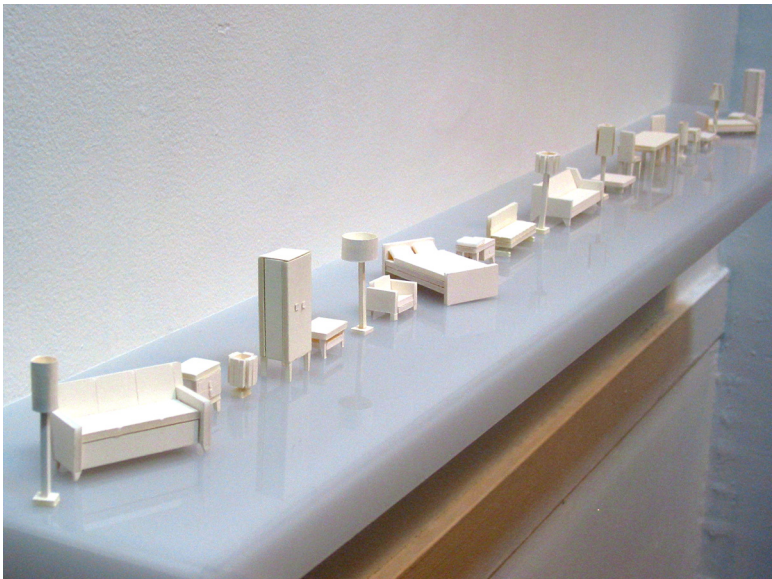
the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to [the] vertigo of interpretation.³

No more singular reality – the fate of contemporary living is that reality itself has become the last and best version of reality TV – collapsed into the daily enactment of myths and stories that allow us to retain a communal connection to the interpretations of others. But in this attempt it is not the vestiges of reality that are mobilized, but something unique to our contemporary times – it is the proliferating imagination that has become the new horizon of interpretive entertainment. The vertigo of interpretation is the necessary effect of perceiving a map that is much more accurate than the simplified territory we use to chart its reference.

Like the iPod which allows for on-demand soundtracks to accompany our cinematic existence, this last and best of reality TV is a purely *imaginative* phenomenon, completed fantasy that is only ever disrupted by the commercial breaks of the media-stream – the reality sales-pitch of the daily news, the vestiges of an imagination that refuses to see itself except as absolute – in short, even TV itself has become a commercial break for the meta-reality of an on-demand fantasy existence.

What this means is simple. No longer are we bound by a “reality principle,” for reality itself changes shape according to the maps used to perceive it. Instead, contemporary experience is informed by exactly the opposite, a *fictional principle* that is itself merely an attempt to access a shapeshifting world that refuses to be bound by a singular interpretive identification.

*a mapping of perception;
a mapping of perspective;
and, ultimately, a mapping of the imagination.*



Chris Gillespie. *Chair, Coffee Table, Lamp, etc.*
Installation view. Mixed Media, 2006

Consider the works of **Chris Gillespie** whose foamcore furniture reads less as architectural maquette and more as interior design for paper dolls. Or is it something more? Perhaps a literal *line* of furniture, in both the formal and commercial senses.⁴ Neither

functional nor non-functional, these works resist even the very references they suggest – a dysfunctional show-room of warped-scale cut-outs. And why not? We all wear different sizes of shirts and shoes, so why not furniture built to phantom scales as well? An ergonomics of corporeal feng shui, set on a shelf that is also a stage, and a stage whose shelf-life betrays precisely the *projected expectations* of brand-name design.

Here the vertigo of expectation confronts the pre-emptive imagination.

Consider **Steven Rayner's** narrative piece “Hovering,” which is much more than a mere illustration of interpretive possibility. Instead it is perhaps the most explicit example of a vertigo of the real, and its partner in the vertigo of the imaginary. And in this spirit, read “Hovering” as a vertigo of the inverse sort – not the dizzying fear of heights one encounters in *looking down*, but the dizziness of *possibilities* one encounters in acknowledging the reality of the imagination. Here the multiplicity of maps, from train tracks to freeways to the migration paths of deer and coyotes, coalesce and interweave. And the resultant narrative texture is neither purely industrial nor purely natural, but a strange fusion of the two, set to its own uniquely referential soundtrack. *I love you for what you are not*. Not, in other words, real. Much more poignant is the love of fictions and imaginings, stories that fade like the city in Rayner's rear-view mirror, but which are never more present than when they are gone.

The vertigo of absence is the sign of emergent imagination.

Consider the installation of **Tim van Wijk**, the “Right of Way” which reads much like a golf course turned power line. Here it is precisely no longer even the real that is imagined, but a lost nature, *a nature betrayed by the culture of human imaginative construction*. Here the vertigo of corporeal experience dictates not only a “right of way” but further imposes itself as the only “right

way.” And what emerges seems to be an ethical conjecture that would have us believe that the artifice of cultural construction is devoid of its imaginary specters. Instead it is precisely the power line turned marionette that subsumes not only the natural and the real, but the whole of a culture which sees itself as exempt from the fantasy of industrialization. When our meat and vegetables come from the supermarket rather than from the earth and when nature is rendered largely a vacation destination for time between “real” living, we encounter ourselves not only technologically extended but literally re-positioned.

The vertigo of “assisted living” for a reality that has abandoned its imagination machines.⁵



Tim van Wijk. *Right of Way*.
Installation view. Mixed Media, 2002



Toni Hafkenscheid. *Train + Gun, Hope B.C.*
Colour Photograph, 2003

Consider the works of **Toni Hafkenscheid**, whose images photographically intervene into the realities they capture, rendering each scene as a paradoxical diorama of itself. Here, the photographic document betrays the realities it represents. No more photographic *proof*, these images suggest exactly the opposite. The document-as-model like the map before it, breathes with imaginative life – an invocation much more in line with story-telling than with verification. And lest it be argued that here, at least, the images are real, might we not cite the works of Hafkenscheid as an instance in which the nuances of the map reveal so much more than the simple territory photographed? In the first place, this perhaps occurs with the works of Hafkenscheid in the same way as with all photographic images – representations that extrude a certain portion of reality, revealing an isolated and

de-contextualized representation as well as what might be called an imaginative, interpretive dimensionality. Only in the case of Hafkenschied this imaginative dimension is not by any means *projected* onto the document itself. Rather, here it has become its own language of mapping; a pre-emptive focal strike that brings with it an acutely *aesthetic* sensibility.

The vertigo of focal mapping for a reality betrayed by its own imagination.



Duncan MacKenzie. *The World's Largest Zombie Group Hug*.
Mixed Media, 2004

Consider the works of **Duncan MacKenzie**, which present and represent precisely a modeled real, a narrative and imaginative reality that is not in competition with an objective world-map because it never cared to *mistake* itself as real in the first place.

Instead, here the nuances of imaginative rendering emerge in full force – a zombie group hug for those beyond the deadly clutches of sanctioned or political voice. Zombies because here the stage of simulation has entirely receded into its own immortal fantasy; not born again, but *undead* – a premature burial of multiplicity that escapes its fate by acknowledging the inherently morbid humour in all things imaginary. Like the forest that has ironically fallen over – we know the adage about a single tree falling, but what sound might an entire forest make? Here the coyote's howl becomes indistinguishable from the hyena's laugh – werewolf cries that reinforce the fact that we have all, already been bitten. Here, finally, the death march of the real is replaced by the *imaginary horizons* of contemporary living.

Here the vertigo of interpretation becomes, inevitably, an interpretation of vertigo.

Consequently, consider that what all the artists in *SuperModels* have in common is precisely a mapping of the imaginary, a poignant articulation of exactly that space where reality and fantasy no longer reside in contradiction. Instead, here we find the vast expanse of the imaginary opening up, erupting into visual and narrative forms, rendered with much more detail than reality could ever hope to contain.

It may, however, seem ironic to speak of a map much larger than the territory it describes when we are surrounded by miniatures and representations that are uniformly much smaller than their real-world counterparts. Let me attempt to explain. One might, for example, find such a map in the micro-imaging of molecules or insects – representations that reveal aspects of the real that are imperceptible to the human sensorium. The question, however, is *where* do such details exist if not in the human encounter with the real? And how can we attribute reality to something that is ultimately un-experiencable except through the mediation of represented form?

Might we not here suggest that the molecular exists largely in the minds of those who believe in it? Like God, like the moon, like morals and philosophy in general, these abstract elements of reality find presence only in representation – and it is only secondarily that we encounter them in experience itself. In other words, the reality of such phenomena is to exist in the map itself rather than in the world of accidental possibilities – one does not stumble into the molecular.

And here, no less than before, we find imaginative representations – objects and images that begin the task of mapping precisely the imagination of those creative minds behind the scenes. Not properly models, these are perhaps better described as meta-models – supermodels of a reality and an imagination that are no longer in competition with one another but have fused and melded together, their only conditions being that they no longer believe in a sanctioned or static reality.

One might end here by remembering the words of Friedrich Nietzsche who predicted the end of the real long before Borges or postmodernism entered the picture. For Nietzsche, this demise was a result of the over qualification of reality – and for a humanity that had become bound by precisely its maps of behavioral sanction, Nietzsche proposed the Superman.⁶ For us, in contemporary times, the situation is exactly the reverse. Realities enter and fade, intensify and erupt, and for the multiple realities that have now grown beyond any possible ability to represent (let alone qualify), we bring you *SuperModels*, maps from the imagination machines of contemporary culture-makers.

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Notes

1. Cf. Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, Andrew Hurley, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) p. 325.
2. Jean Baudrillard, "The Murder of the Real," in *The Vital Illusion*, Julia Witwer, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) p. 63.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) p. 16.
4. Thanks to Steven Rayner for this insightful play on words.
5. Thanks to Doug Jarvis for this provocative analogy.
6. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth," in *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) pp. 50-51, and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1961) pp. 40-43.