



Gerhard Marx, *Laminate Landscape 1*, 2018. Reconfigured Map fragments on Acrylic-Polyurethane Ground and Canvas, 60 x 50 cm

## Imagined Topographies: Gerhard Marx's 'Ecstatic Archive'

Gerhard Marx

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It was mathematician Alfred Korzybski who first introduced the idea that the map is not the territory, at a conference in New Orleans in 1931. Since then Korzybski's idea, which was intended to apply to the discrepancies and the always just-out-of-reach match between models of reality and the reality they represent, has become part of our common reference when regarding any kind of link between an image of a thing and the thing itself. In the work of Gerhard Marx and in particular with regard to his ongoing obsession with physical maps – dissected, reconfigured and patiently pushed into Escher-like works of impossible perspective – it's the territory that's impossible to imagine beyond the frames of the old maps that constitute his impressively crafted, aesthetically appealing work.

Marx has always been a studious and careful interrogator of the relationship between his materials and his aesthetic and 'Ecstatic Archive' his new show at Goodman Gallery Johannesburg offers a sometimes familiar but also developing engagement with a material that in the digital age is no longer functional but rather an aesthetic curiosity of an easy to forget time when maps were things that people used for not just cartographical but political ends.

Working from two archives, which Marx has been culling from over the last two years – a collection of decommissioned geographic, geological and political maps spanning two centuries, rescued from the pulp pile by the artist, and a second set of outdated maps donated to him by people who didn't need them anymore but knew of his obsession – 'Ecstatic Archives' presents a series of thoughtful, playful and conceptually layered deconstructions of the authority of the map as indicator of any kind of real markers of actual territory.



Gerhard Marx, *Shelter Topography (to build a cave)*, 2018. Reconfigured Map fragments on Acrylic-Polyurethane Ground and Canvas, 180 x 220 cm

Marx's reimaginings are not strictly maps – in that they do not reconstitute old maps into new maps so much as retain something of the physicality of maps in their construction. A work like *Shelter Topography (to build a cave)* offers a skillful execution of the three-dimensional aspects of an imagined topography while also invoking the folds, creases and crumpled nature of a large piece of paper – echoed in the show's single sculpture *Nearfar Object*, which renders this crumpled paper aesthetic in three dimensions in painted white wood. However there is more than simple technical mastery on display here – it's clear that Marx's work through its careful construction and its relationship between what is shown and what it is made from forces us to ask questions about what maps are for, what they have been used for and to whose benefit.

If, as Benedict Anderson famously argued, the idea of the nation state – once seemingly facing an insurmountable intellectual challenge, now more entrenched than ever in the age of globalisation, the refugee crisis and Brexit – is nothing more than imagined community of falsely constructed ideas about who we are and they are not, then maps are guilty of having contributed to this. They reflect the prejudices of their makers and have helped to restrict the freedoms of subjugated peoples through their designation of boundaries, which keep some in and others out: here be civilised people, there be savages and somewhere over there is the edge of the world; unknown, unpopulated and unwanted.

Marx's gleefully clever geometrically impressive reinventions – particularly the more colourful and squiggly, almost comic book works that make up his *Distant* series – are the logical, if seemingly expressionist, celebration of a way to approach the allegedly implacable authority of maps. By taking traditional elements from maps – the red lines of roads, the black lines indicating scales and other topographical elements and using them as design elements outside of their original context and intention – Marx offers us a vision of the possibilities of aesthetic critique of the deeply ingrained and too easily accepted politics of maps through the simple tool of expressive play.

Globalisation has pushed us all closer in the virtual realm, so why not push things together in new ways when it comes to representing an idea of the new psychological and emotional territory that might need mapping in the future? Marx's work offers visions of a future as imagined through a discarded but highly charged and significant marker of its past; no longer able to rely on the certainties of its markers of apparent objective authority. The birds-eye-view, the scale, the key – all are useless as far as their original purpose is concerned, but all are useful in the creation of the artist's intellectually curious and aesthetically sound investigation of ideas about where we might go and where we have come from that also speak to the excitement and ecstasy of the process of making the work.



Gerhard Marx, *Ecstatic Archive*.  
Installation view: Goodman Gallery,  
Johannesburg, 2019.

The maps may never be the territory but they certainly can be used to create a new territory beyond anything that we in this age of uncertainty and confusion could ever hope to imagine.

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