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MENTAL MAPS OF A CONSTRUCTED WORLD

a great misunderstanding

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“Welcome Aboard”, greeted moderator Bertrand Wert as we settled into our seats (rearranged by Bertrand into a welcoming semi circle). Mr. Wert is a researcher in social sciences at the CIR (Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherche) in Brussels, and a proud Obama supporter, as the button on his suit coat proclaimed. “Can we understand each other? Yes we can”, he said. “The last hours have showed us how much we can finally understand each other.”

We began the session by studying an all too recognizable vision- the UN political map of the world, defined, as we are all so familiar with, by clearly drawn lines carving out incongruent shapes of different colors and sizes, supposed designations of differences in language, culture, politics, religion, and of course, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. “Since humanity has to face new type of challenges, such as limited resources and climate change, this type of representation brings us to misunderstandings,” said Mr. Wert. The current model, inherited from Modernity – with the unlimited beliefs in Progress, in Human domination on Nature or the boundless power of science -, enforced the thinking that power has to rule the world and the relation between humans, societies and states. This kind of political map of the world, by mapping the

people mentalities, are actually dividing the world not by conditions of land, but indeed by agreed upon or forced allocations of power. It is actually based on issues of greed and vanity.

So, if we seriously want to tackle the new challenges, how do we, as individuals and as a whole, decide how to share or to use with more consideration and fairness what we collectively have? The question then becomes, is it possible to create and embrace new ways of representing our world following these principles or commitments? In that new condition, how do we imagine the group of people – communities generally organized in nations -, collaborating together for preserving our common heritage and resources? Could this announce the slow despairing of nations and national cultures? Can we look at our earth and the resources it holds in a different way? And what would be the result of that? How arts and culture policies/creativity could participate to these dynamics? Do we have already examples?

Mr. Wert then happily introduced us to the creator of the social model which would be the subject for our next hour and a half’s discussion- Manuela Pfrunder. Ms. Pfrunder is a graphic designer and creator of visual communication from Zurich, who designed a mapping system

which would create complete equality for every person on the planet- a system called “Neotopia”.

“Neotopia” is the vision of a world in which everything has been redistributed to achieve radical equitability. Every person has the same rights and therefore is entitled to claim a just share of the earth’s aggregate resources. But what, then, does each person own? How large an island? How much ice? How many years can we live in luxury? How long do we suffer starvation, and how many years does it take before we can get a new pair of jeans? “Neotopia” gives each of us a plot of land, with exactly the same landscape and resources as every other human being on the planet.

The model is uncompromising in its equal distribution, which includes both natural and sustainable resources such as land and water, as well as manmade supplies such as chocolate, and even distributes social or personal conditions, such as unemployment and malnutrition. In Neotopia, the mainland of your world would look like this:



You are allotted a territory of 291.5m x 291.5m, consisting of 71% water and 29% land. The land is divided into 5 dispersed regions: Forest (90m x 90m), Desert (76m x 76m), Meadow (73m x 73m), Farmland (51m x 51m), Island (41m x 41m) Antarctic Ice (47m x 47m), Urbanized Land (35m x 35m), Arctic ice (21m x 21m), and of course, the rest is water.

Experiences and manmade resources are also divided completely equally, for instance, in Neotopia, you would:

- drink coffee every 60 days
- get a new pair of jeans every 70 years
- be illiterate 100 days a year
- suffer from malnutrition 60 days a year
- and smoke two cigarettes a day, three on weekends

Exactly one 6 billionth of the Earth's resources, as we should all be properly entitled to.

By visiting the website connected with the model (<http://www.neotopia.ch>) you can register for your own land. There is a constantly ticking statistic with the current world population (6691916490), and the number of people who have registered for Neotopia (1614).

Once registering, you have the option of completing a questionnaire, which tells you whether you, as an individual in the real world, are under or over the Neotopia value on things like cigarette and beer consumption, hunger, and clothing purchases, based on worldwide statistics. I was quite amused, and surprised by, undertaking this little task (I, for instance, am over the Neotopian value for coffee consumption, but under the Neotopian value for jean purchases). Once completing the survey, your "fare share" is spread out in front of you, in like Lego blocks of small, proportioned rations, highlighting the harsh reality of the actual distribution of wealth and resources in our real world.

This model of an exactly equal distribution of resources and abilities -and the loss of individuality which comes with it- quickly became a catalyst for a more philosophical discussion on the matter. Some raised concerns that this type of exactly equivalent existence would mean a threat to imagination and creativity. There is no need to travel, or be curious about other cultures because you already know what type of land they have, what music they listen to, what knowledge they possess- it is exactly the same as you. And whatever you may discover or create is instantaneously spread amongst all. On one hand, this could create an entirely peaceful existence for the inhabitants of the earth. There is no reason to be jealous of others, feel greed, or fight to gain more, as according to the system, the equilibrium of resources is an automatic and instantaneous process. It represents a lack not only of need, but of desire- which as many philosophical and religious arguments state is the recipe for a peaceful existence. However, as one attendee brought up, how does one come up with new ideas if everyone is the same? "It is my choice to live with a lesser distribution of wealth," he said "because it is my choice to be an artist."

This system may also represent the end of independence (even though it somehow, by default, encourages separatism). The responsibility connected to individual choice, beyond immediate and personal desires, is highlighted through this system; because each action creates a ripple in a whole which is so interconnected and interdependent, the smallest move causes an immediate and obvious change in the entire world (or, rather, each individual's personal world). Individual choice is no longer an option- the impact of a single action would be too great.

This factor is exactly why the model

was created in the first place; to raise awareness of social and economical balances on a global and local level. It is intended as a research and educational tool for governments, schools, and individuals, to allow for experimentation in social responsibilities, and the expression and discovery of new processes on both a global and local level. From the Neotopia website: "At a time when there is a general feeling towards accepting social responsibilities on a global scale, Neotopia is aimed at helping people realize what the world really is and how to improve personal choices beyond urgent needs, projecting individuals' decisions in the future, reflecting the past and helping to understand the present."

So Mr. Wert then presented the intention of this model, as a direct question to the group. "How do you, as producers, artists, etc. integrate issues of global consciousness and limited sustainability into your work?" The response was initially sheepish, but then discussions of distribution of wealth and resources, on a global level and on a more personal, local level began. Vying for things like government funding, the use of land and structures, and even the use of electricity is often a battle. As artists and workers in the cultural sector, we often seem to fall a little short of receiving "our fair share of the pie". But what does "fair share" mean? Does that mean artists should be allotted the same amount of farmland as someone who makes their living plowing the fields? And if we're speaking of making things fair, do we really want the 100 days of illiteracy we are entitled to? I am sure many would be disappointed to receive a much diminished beer and cigarette supply, in exchange for their chunk of the arctic tundra. It raises questions of equality- does it actually equal fair? Is it right to give everyone the same amount of everything? Is it desired?

Perhaps it is just a great misunderstanding that good equals fair and fair equals equal. However, as Ms. Prufunder's model clearly demonstrates, we are a long way off from living in a society which can properly manage its resources, and has a sense of communal obligation in its individual actions. Questions of equality and physical, moral, and social responsibility and awareness- to the current whole, as well as to the future- are weighty ones indeed. How can we use our power as cultural instigators to encourage more dialog regarding responsible action, fair distribution, and a new representation of our world? It is an important question, and one that should be more often considered, if the weight of this burden lies not just in the hands of policy makers and politicians, but rather, as the Neotopian model would allocate, equally on all of our shoulders.