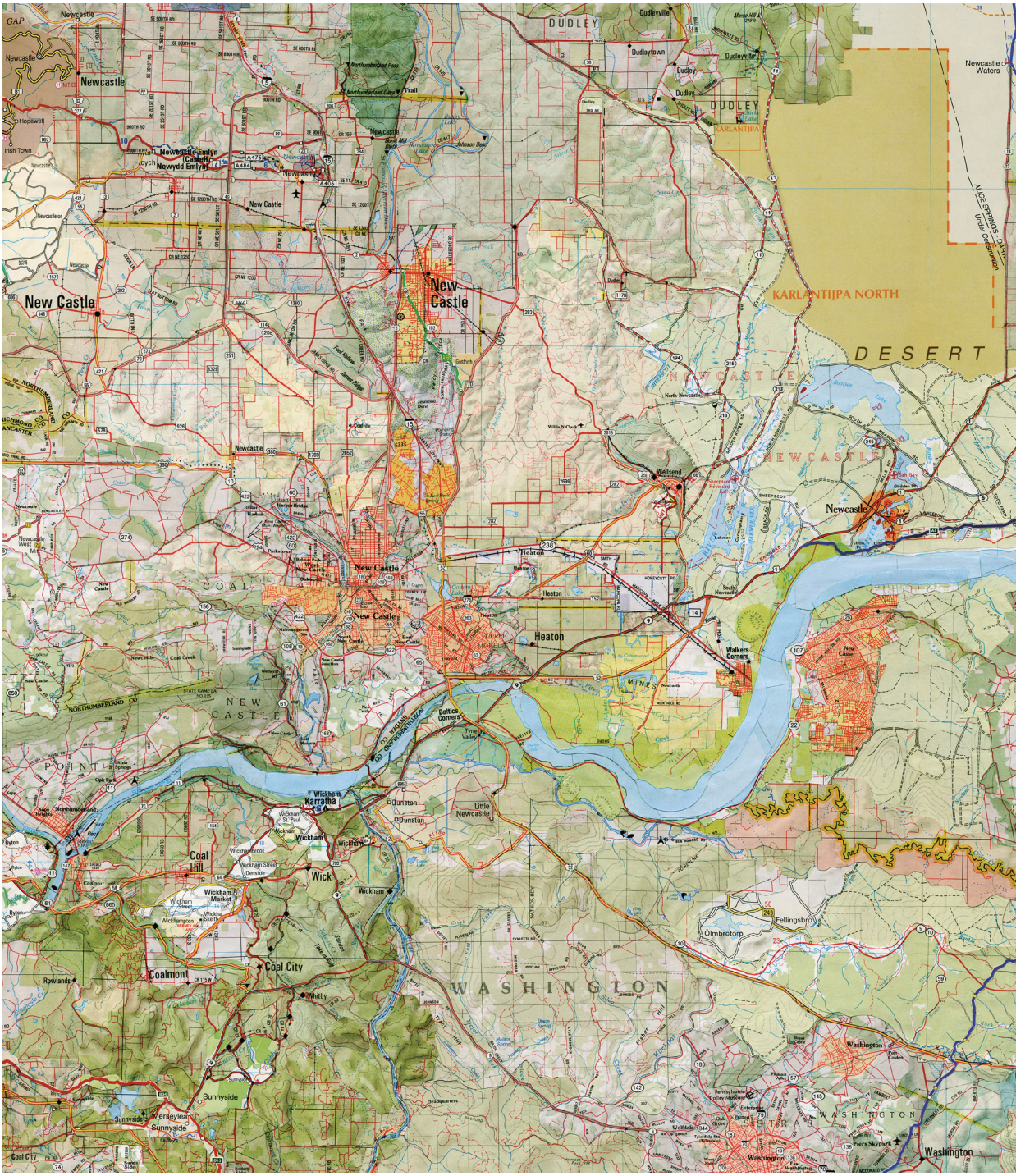
New Castle
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Newcastle
Berwick I.
Hexham I.
Little Barrow Point
Carlisle I.
North East I.
Cape Northumberland
WILSON
Shields
Newcastle-under-Lyme
Louth Bay
Poonindie
Louth I.
North Shields
Lemon
Williamtown
Raymond Terrace
Port Hunter
Newcastle
NEWCASTLE BAY
Newcastle Airport
Nisbett Settlement
Beachlands Estate
Minersville
Shields
NORTH EAST
North East
North East Harbour
Northeast Cove
North East Heights
GRANT CO
SIOUX CO
SUNDERLAND
Kelley Stand
Sunderland
Pinedale
Coal City
Darlington
Tyneham
Broad Bench
Penneshaw
Hog Point
Cape
GATESHEAD
CB-29/67F
ISLAND
NORTHUMBERLAND STRAIT
Middlesboro
Cleveland
CUMBERLAND RIVER

Ella Nixon

GLOBAL YET LOCAL:

Reimagining Geographic Space in the Work of Layla Curtis

In 2006 the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne acquired *NewcastleGateshead* (2005) by British artist Layla Curtis. The recto and verso collage was originally commissioned by the arts organisation Locus+ for the regional NewcastleGateshead Festival of Visual Arts (14 September 2005 – 8 January 2006). Overall, 30,000 copies of *NewcastleGateshead* were printed in a double-sided folded leaflet form and distributed to hotels, restaurants, cafes, and cultural venues in North-East England as part of the festival.[1]

The artwork comprises two elements. Firstly, a collage of cuttings from various international maps imposed onto the geographical template of north-east England, but which at first glance resembles a standard regional map. Upon closer inspection its immediate appearance appears misleading – Gateshead is an island off the mouth of the River Tyne and there is a desert in Northumberland. Overall, the map includes several Newcastles, Gatesheads, Washingtons, Monktons, Wallsends, and Heatons, taken from across the globe.

The second element is found on the verso, which resembles an index from a typical tourist map. A blurb describes Newcastle as 'a thriving city offering prime investment opportunities and an unsurpassed quality of life'. The list of 'Regional Highlights' is then collaged with blurbs for places located in Washington, US. The A-Z of locations contains the collaged names from maps containing the namesakes from around the world. It becomes obvious that the list of placenames in the index that include variations of 'Newcastle' are globally sourced.

Through her practice, Curtis disturbs the notion of the scientific or objective map in order to raise self-reflexive questions about the experience of physical space. Cartography – as a systematic practice – produces the visual means to conceptualise and predict experiences of belonging in the physical environment. This paper explores the issues raised by Curtis' work in its public contexts. In particular, its acquisition by the Laing, a regional art gallery in Newcastle, and distribution as a printed leaflet as part

of the NewcastleGateshead public festival, with repercussions for the experience and understanding of what it means to belong in geographic space.

CREATION CONTEXT: MAP OR ARTWORK?

As systematised documents, maps employ and develop established codes and signifiers of space. In this sense, maps can provide a sense of comfort – a tool to understand the relationship between human and space, whilst enabling us to predict our environment. The Italian French cartographer J.L. Lagrange (1779) defined a geographical map as 'a plane figure which represents the surface of the Earth, or part of it'.[2] Lagrange described his work as an extension of the discoveries of mathematicians before him.

Even when conceived in mathematical tradition – for example, with Lagrange describing his theory in response to Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728—77) and Leonhard Euler (1707—83) – maps inevitably constitute one way to represent space without objective closure. To analyse maps as artistic entities draws attention to this gap between representation and reality. The subjective relationship between creator (artist) and document (artwork) is invoked as a process and necessity of production. Claire Reddleman describes how institutional and state-led maps attain the popular status of hegemonic knowledge. In contrast, cartographic art resists hegemonic categorisation by nature of their subjective invocation and presentation.[3] Map as artwork illuminates the relationship between creator, viewer, and document as a subjective interaction, with repercussions for the experience of geographic space.

The contrasting methods of representation employed by Curtis and Lagrange illuminate differing notions of Truth. Lagrange explains map-making in terms of cartographic process – for example, distortion to account for the curved surface of the Earth, which contributes towards a higher level of representation. In contrast, Curtis explores how such cartographic systems generate untruths precisely because of their pursuit or claim towards objective or scientific 'truth', which in turn distort and/or misrepresent experience of place. Two-dimensional diagrams inadequately capture the spheroidal shape of the Earth.

NewcastleGateshead was made according to a multi-staged creative process in order to illuminate the inherent subjectivity behind such claims to scientific representation. Namesakes of places and geographic and cultural markers in North-East England were first discovered, researched, and verified on the internet. Then, Curtis checked the physical size of each place, preferring to include the largest towns and cities for maximum visual impact.[4]

Once the locations had been identified and qualitative data gathered, Curtis purchased the maps from stores, ensuring that the desired place name featured in the index.[5] Back in the studio, an

assistant bookmarked the desired pages and Curtis cut out and collaged the maps onto the geographic template of North-East England. Aesthetic decisions were important in this process. Disparate colours, scales, and symbols from each source challenged the immediate illusion of a standardised map. These differences are especially noticeable in its index. The name 'Rowlands' appears in three different fonts, for example. Honesty about the medium of collage was important for Curtis and is emphasised in the index. The visible edges of the paper create an 'unfinished' look, evidence of this creative statement.

VIEWING CONTEXTS: ABOVE AND BELOW THE SURFACE

Once created, *NewcastleGateshead* entered various viewing contexts in printed leaflet form. The wide distribution of NewcastleGateshead enabled different interpretative contexts from the cartographic process of creation.

Print rather than collage, and a pastiche of typical tourist leaflets, the viewer's expectation of *NewcastleGateshead* was contradicted by the message of the medium. The article 'Manic map: Region gains a desert and Gateshead becomes an island' in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* (22 September 2005) exploited this disconnect in order to paint a confused viewing context. One member of the public is quoted stating "If a foreign tourist picked up one of these they would end up totally lost."[6] By decontextualising *NewcastleGateshead* from its viewing context and assessing it as a navigational tool, the article illustrates how sensationalist readings can be mobilised to uphold the notion of map as hegemonic knowledge. Curtis envisioned this trickery of its reception as central to the work. Curtis explains, 'I want people to pick it [*NewcastleGateshead*] up and think it's a map at first, before they realise it is something completely different.'[7] A spokesperson for Locus+, the arts organisation that funded the work, explained, 'We want people to look at it and do a double take. All the information about what it is and where it is going is on the back of the map so people shouldn't be confused.'[8]

Overall, the artwork merges mundane and fantastical content in order to invite questions rather than to produce an immediate conclusion. The 'double take' described by Locus+ depends on the immediate cognition of a map. More than just recognition of it purely as a map, Curtis describes the geographical topography of *NewcastleGateshead* as a 'hook' – a recognisable visual element of the three rivers and slanted coastline.[9] These recognisable elements then juxtapose with the uncanny elements of the collage. The idea of map as subjective document is contained in the gap between expectation and reality, with repercussions for the experience of belonging.

After entering the public domain as a printed leaflet, the original *NewcastleGateshead* collage was acquired by the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Regionality was reiterated to justify the acquisition of *NewcastleGateshead*, whilst also alluding to its deeper themes. Its acquisition document written by the Curator explains:

> 'The proposed purchase is in line with Tyne and Wear Museums collection policy for the Laing Art Gallery which gives priority to the collection "of contemporary art in any medium from the last ten years that reflects developing issues and trends" and "Priority is given to the acquisition of historical and modern fine art of cultural significance in the North East"'.[10]

NewcastleGateshead therefore clearly fulfilled an institutional goal as prior articulated by the regional (Tyne and Wear) Collections Development Policy. Its justification speaks to the persistent civic function envisaged for regional galleries with collecting priorities that reflect systems of geographic ordering.

The importance of the municipality is further embedded within its acquisition process. The Laing purchased *NewcastleGateshead* from Locus+, a local arts organisation founded in 1992 from the foundations of the Basement Group and Projects UK. The organisation's name speaks too of the importance of geography.[11] Place for Locus+ is unrestricted to exact physical or geographic boundaries: 'Based in Newcastle upon Tyne on the north easterly edge of England, small-scale and office-based Locus+ has, like its name, created its own centre as a commissioning agency big on vision, international in scope and with a lot of heart.'[12] In this way, *NewcastleGateshead* resonates with the ethos of Locus+ through its local yet international message.

These connections – both international and local – were embedded within the map itself. Firstly, the systematic gathering of all the Gatesheads, Newcastles, and Washingtons establishes a web of linguistic connections that illuminate colonial histories. Questions arise as to from where certain place names have originated. The desert area called 'Newcastle waters' in Australia, for example, references the Duke of Newcastle (former Secretary for the Colonies). These references implant colonial histories at a regional level. By doing so, the piece provokes questions pertaining to the political histories behind the constructed nature of global geographies and toponomies.

Along with the evocation of colonial legacies and histories, the mixed origins of the names on the map question notions of belonging in geographical space. This is explored often humorously, disrupting the hegemonic notion of map as objective knowledge. 'Coal City', 'Coal Junction', and 'Coal' may indicate local geology

in certain areas of the map, whilst 'Shearer' alludes to the famous Geordie footballer of the same last name. 'Log Pile' could notion to a past observation made by Curtis at the place indicated on the map, or perhaps be included for pure fun. Non-adherence to a 'traditional' cartographic system prevents a singular way to comprehend or predict geography and opens spaces for humour and local references.

Curtis' personal humour, which is present in the piece, is rooted in her own upbringing in North-East England. Her experience enables a deeper resonance with local geographical perceptions of place. Curtis describes the Island of Gateshead in the context of inter-city competition. She also alludes to this competition in the title of the artwork itself – *NewcastleGateshead* – and the two cities' frequent inability to define themselves as distinct entities despite the rivalry felt between them. The Island of Gateshead is imagined in this context as an independent entity. Therefore, local knowledge enables alternative and/or extended understandings of certain facets of the map. Traditional cartographic systems – promising an objective and universal model – erode in the face of artistic creation.

CONCLUSION

NewcastleGateshead aims at disrupting ideas of local identity, challenging representational truths, and spotlighting global issues. Its acquisition by the Laing also allows for reflection on how this, and other such works, function beyond just the meaning the artist intended and that which is interpreted by the viewer. Curtis highlights the potential of regional galleries to envisage complex local and international geographic identities.[13] In this context, regional galleries – such as the Laing, with its policy of collecting "art of cultural significance in the North East" and art that "reflects developing issues and trends" – enable visitors to apprehend changing conceptions of space. The acquisition of *NewcastleGateshead* illuminates the potentiality of regional galleries as hubs for belonging, especially in the context of collections' development policies that straddle the local but increasingly globalised world.

Curtis' artistic fascination with place – whether expressed through her map artworks, or other creative engagements such as parallel webcam displays of multiple locations across the world – provokes questions about how we can belong.[14] *NewcastleGateshead* both plots North-East England in its relationship to the world, whilst allowing for personal interpretations of and responses to place. It straddles between order – the recognisable geographic coastline that resonates with the local gallery public – and disorder, the unexpected feeling of unsettled and unpredictable space, to speak to our inability to chart the world and the inevitable insecurity that results.[15] *NewcastleGateshead* (2006) – as part of the exhibition at the Laing entitled 'Belonging' (July – December 2024) – encapsulates the potential of regional galleries to cultivate notions of how to belong in the global yet local world, and the potential of visual systems to manifest these experiences.

ENDNOTES

[1] Thirty-five signed limited-edition prints were produced in addition to the 30,000 leaflets. The Laing Art Gallery contains the original collage.

[2] J.L. Lagrange, *Sur la construction des cartes géographiques. Nouveaux mémoires de l'Académie royale des sciences et des belles-lettres de Berlin*, 1779, trans. Vincent Alberge and Athanase Papadopoulos, pp. 161 - 210

[3] Claire Reddleman, *Cartographic Abstraction: Mapping Practices in Contemporary Art* (PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2015), p. 13

[4] Online conversation with Layla Curtis (12 February 2024).

[5] Some maps were unavailable in-store in the UK; for example, Curtis recalls how the map featuring Gateshead Island (found off the coast of Canada) had to have it shipped from Canada.

[6] Paul Murphy quoted in Gareth Deighan, 'Manic map: Region gains a desert and Gateshead becomes an island', *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* (22 September 2005).

[7] Layla Curtis quoted in ibid.

[8] John Bewley quoted in ibid.

[9] Online conversation with Layla Curtis (12 February 2024).

[10] 'Acquisition Form' originated by Julie Milne. Dated 10 January 2006. Laing Art Gallery Archive.

[11] Jon Bewley interviewed by Paul Bonaventura, 'It's about Energy, Identity, Independence and Belief…' in Jonty Tarbuck and Matt Hearn (eds.), *This Will Not Happen Without You: From the Collective Archive of The Basement Group, Projects UK and Locus +* (1977-2007) (Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, 2007), p. 24.

[12] Helen Cadwallader in ibid., p. 142.

[13] This is also a method used by Curtis in *The United Kingdom of Japan* (1999) and *Cab Routes: One Week in London* (2001). See Andrew Brown, 'Creative Commons'.

[14] See description of *Antipodes* (2013) in Andrew Brown, 'Creative Commons'.

[15] Jeremy Miller discusses this in relation to *The United European Union and World State*. See Jeremy Miller, 'Message in a Bottle From Ramsgate to The Chatham Islands' in leaflet to accompany exhibition at Droit House [http://locative.articule.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/JMillarEssay.pdf].