

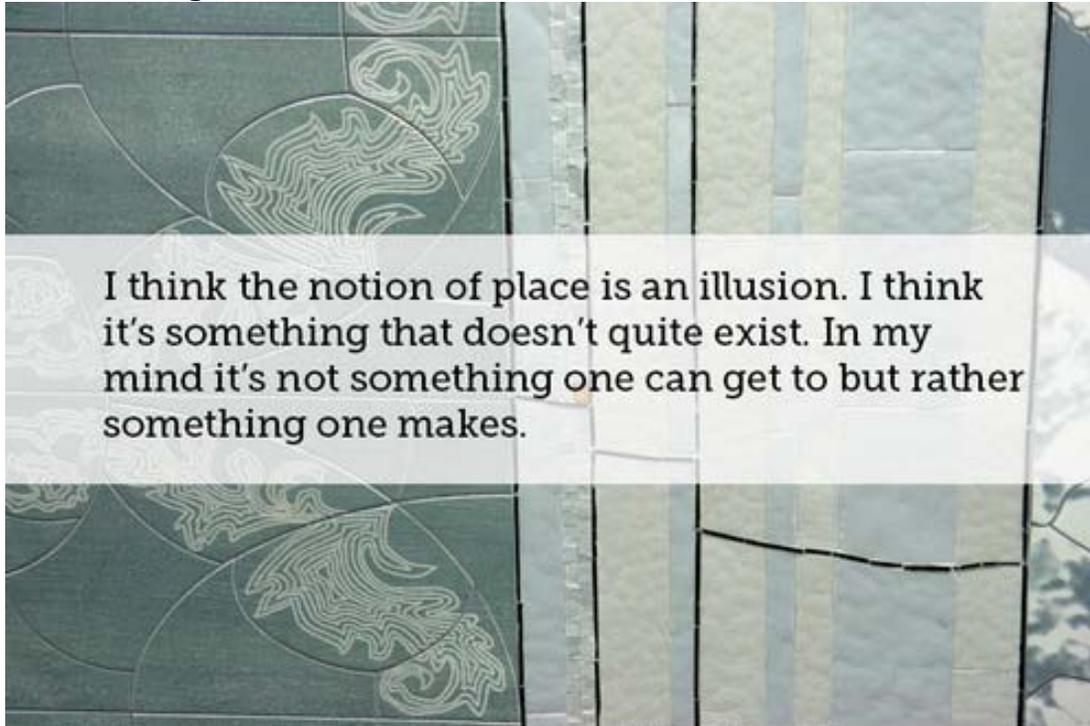
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Laura F. Gibellini, Signature of the artist in the mosaic piece at Fresh Pond Road station, M line, MTA New York City Transit (2013)

Speaking of Place: An Interview with Laura F. Gibellini by Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve

Laura F. Gibellini (AP Faculty) is a New York based artist, originally from Madrid, who teaches the online course Criticism II and serves as a Thesis Advisor. Gibellini received her PhD in Fine Arts from Complutense University of Madrid. Her dissertation *Local and Global Postmodern Paradoxes of Place* and her work are concerned with notions of place within the context of globalization. She produced a small booklet from her dissertation called [*Construyendo un Lugar/ Constructing a Place*](#). In this, as you will see, "place" for her is hardly simple, nor even stable or containable. It is always in transition, a fiction made and remade. As she puts it, "The notion becoming place can help define the way place will be addressed in this text."

The occasion for this interview is the completion of her 3 station project for the New York City MTA on the M line at the Fresh Pond Road, Forest Avenue and Seneca Avenue stations. Here she talks to fellow AP Faculty member **Thyrza Nichols Goodeve** about this project, what a PhD has meant to her art, and her most recent exhibition currently up at the Slowtrack Gallery in Madrid.

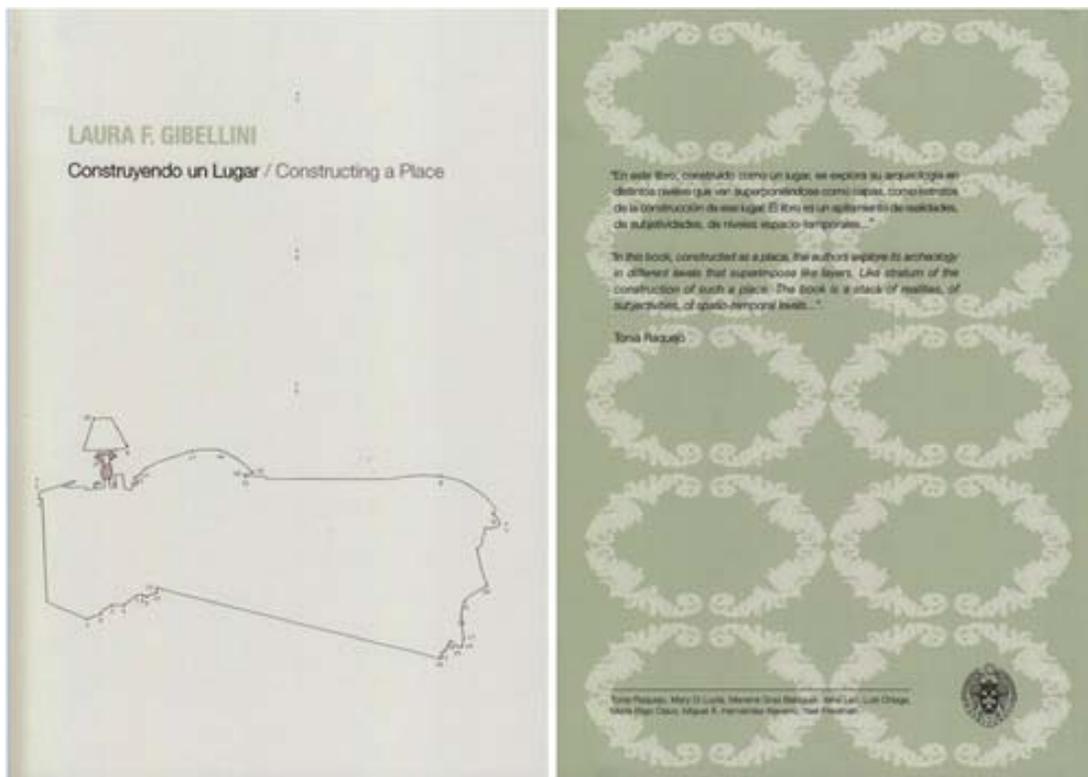
"Space is a doubt: I have constantly to make it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it [...]"

—Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places*. (Quoted on p. 67 of *Construyendo un Lugar/ Constructing a Place* by Laura F. Gibellini.)

TNG: To begin I'd like to start with the last paragraph of your booklet, *Construyendo un Lugar/ Constructing a Place* where you say:

Perhaps there are no longer *places*. Maybe they never existed. There are rather temporary locations, more or less contracted or expanded. Inhabitable spaces that are articulated between reflection and practice, between their geographic boundaries and their indefinite expansion: through (the emotional style of) a territory that is not reachable in any one place at all. This is the paradoxical nature of place I intended to refer to here.

The paradox is it is somehow never attainable, and yet always attainable, like a thread that is held by the points of a stitch but can be removed anytime, a place that as you say, "becomes apprehensible" between the "feasible and the factual."



Madrid: Complutense University, 2011. Edited by Sección Departamental de Historia del Arte, Facultad de Bellas Artes. Palabras de Imágenes Collection. Includes the work of Tonja Raquejo, Mary Di Lucia, Menene Gras Balaguer, Jana Leo, Luis Ortega, María Inigo Clavo and Miguel Ángel Hernández-Navarro. © The authors.

LFG: I think the notion of place is an illusion. I think it's something that doesn't quite exist. In my mind it's not something one can get to but rather something one makes.

TNG: Yet, we do in fact inhabit places in very real concrete ways. We do make homes, some more permanent than others. But for you even this permanent home is never resolved because it is always changing. As you put it, "Place articulates a relationship –between the world conceived in the territory of the self, and the home, and the exteriority that circumscribes this state of being."

LFG: Right, a "place" is never a stable location for me. This has to do with the idea of *becoming*, of *becoming place* as I put it, but also with the distinction, in Spanish, of the words for place and space. Place is *lugar* and space, *espacio*. Space has no coordinates. Whereas place is a place of action, you inhabit it, have a relationship with it. As I said, basically a place doesn't exist until you make it. They are always changing. They are transitional. So I am interested in how you inhabit your home, but how you inhabit the world, how you construct it. My thesis was about the relationship between local and global and the force of the idea of a place and its application.

TNG: What is it about the present time—the time of globalization—that makes such

a discussion of place necessary for you. Or is it merely personal?

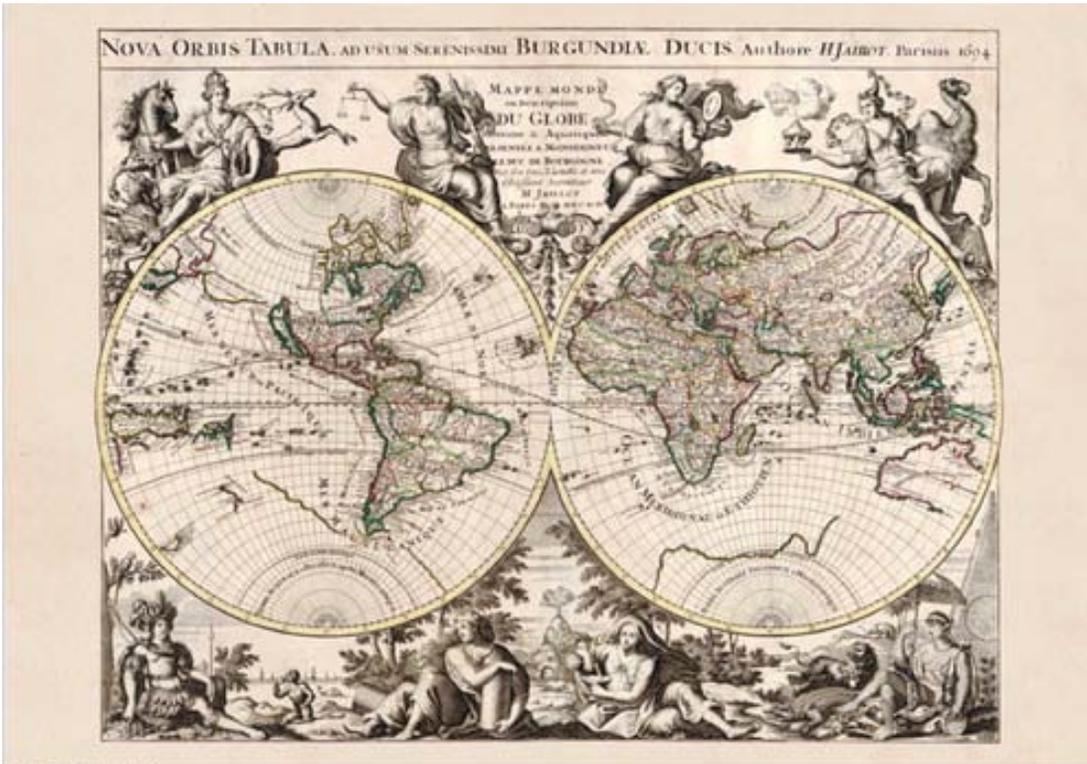
LFG: Well, globalization is all about space and place. It's about the tension between the consideration of the world as a globe and the specific locations that form the world order. But my interest in the idea of place might have to do with my own upbringing.

Growing up I never really felt at home in Madrid although I was born and grew up there. And this is because my Mom is from Italy and my Dad is from a French mother so neither of them are Spaniards. Because of their European backgrounds, my brother and I were kept on a European schedule so we didn't follow what kids our age were doing. For instance, we went to bed earlier and so were not in the street playing late. We ate early—in Spain people eat at 10 pm. But it became bigger than that. In general, the whole mentality I grew up with, the things that people were interested in never interested me in the same way. I always felt a little bit "out of place." It's only later that I came to realize that this feeling has little to do with the specifics of a location but rather with my own mindset and understanding of my own sense of self.

TNG: Mapping seems to be the key word for you and yet for you the map is a denial or better a fantasy of a territory, at the same that it is supposedly a representation of it. You describe maps as a kind of displacement—because the map "also involves norms and values of social order, not merely geographic ones." I love the way you describe the points, lines and colors of the map as "domesticating" "standardizing" and "conquering a place."

LFG: Yes maps are the representation of a concept, an idea about the world or a particular space, but then you go to the territory and try to make sense of the map and in one way or another there seems to be a gap between representation and reality, as if concept and reality never quite overlap.

TNG: When one looks at the history of maps, one really does see the evolution of various concepts of place based on things like power, colonialism, technology, and so forth. It's always baffled me how they created maps before the airplane or the use of the kinds of technologies we have now.



Map of the World, 1694



Map of the World, 1844



Detail, the 15th and 17th wards, AKA Greenwich Village, ca.1852

LFG: That was the very first thing I was thinking of: how there is a “globe” and then we have a representation of it, a projection, a map that is flat. So of course it’s impossible for the experience of a place and its representation to overlap perfectly. There is a gap there, something that does not quite fit. Any theory about a space, or a territory, that you are going to apply to the “real” world is just never going to make sense.

TNG: So the map is a theory to you.

LFG: Yes. For me the map is a metaphor of the relationship between theory and practice. A map represents an idea about a specific location or place, but maps are also devised for specific purposes. For instance certain maps are used for navigation at sea while others are used in airfare. In all cases, there is a theory that lives in a different realm, occupying an abstract space but then there is the application of that theory onto the territory. When you have to confront the territory or when you apply your ideas to a material entity, there is always an inherent disconnect that I am interested in exploring. It’s like art practice or writing. First you have an idea you want to explore and then, when you work in the studio or put words on a page, all kinds of things happen, all kind of decisions and factors including boredom, affect the practice and its outcome. I think of artworks or writings as ideas projected onto the territory, onto the physicality of the materials and the material world.

TNG: I love this idea of practice as territory and the map as theory, or better thinking of theory as a map rather than as a territory. When you did your PhD you were a practicing artist, right?

LFG: Yes, I studied art, fine arts and then I left school and worked for a couple of years in management, while maintaining my work as an artist. But it just became very exhausting. It was a complicated life to sustain so I thought I should go back to school for a PhD. The University I went to in Madrid has a very strong theory and art history department. They have an avenue where you can get a PhD in the school of Fine Art so my PhD is in Fine Art. My advisor was an art historian, and she was interested like you are, in making, in more than just a written thesis. So my PhD was a weird creature because it was in art but it also involved a great deal of writing.

TNG: Which is similar to what we do in Art Practice. For you your experience was successful. You were able to make art while also pursuing something that was research based and written? And you didn't feel the research and writing was taking away from your work?

LFG: Two things happened. It is true, at a certain point I realized that if I wanted to finish my PhD I could not devote much time to making work. But I didn't have much time for anything else anyway. I mean I didn't have much of a life outside of the thesis work because that is the nature of writing, and the more you get into a particular topic the more you realize there is a certain end to one's research yet at the same time, no particular end. But the importance of the thesis for my own making is essential, and that is very reassuring.

TNG: We deal with this question of reading, writing and research in tandem with making art all the time in this program because so much art today is inspired by more than just art, and it's exhausting. We are inundated by new authors, new readings, new artists, but that is what the art world is today. It is a very complex and overpopulated space. It's the Twitter logic, there's something popping up and disappearing all the time. The question then, is, had you reached a point in your art practice that in order to do the work you are doing now, you felt you needed to spend time doing intense reading and reflection?

LFG: I think that's correct to a certain extent. I couldn't be happier now—what the PhD gave me was the capacity to go deeply into things in a way I couldn't have done otherwise. Yes it can be a dry process but it is also a very fruitful one and for me it was the basis of many things that happened afterward. Of course, if you want

to devote your time and energy to a thesis you have to have a mentor who is the right person. My advisor is by training an art historian but she is also detached from art history as an academic form. You would like her, she is interested in the sublime and Frankenstein and teaches all of that and she is more and more engaged in ecology issues and land art. She works with different approaches and develops projects with her partner, who is a geologist. Her interest in making was fundamental to me.

TNG: What do you think made your thesis different from one written by someone who wasn't an artist?

LFG: Well, I think that artists "think" differently than art historians, for example, because art has its own way of existing and it is a particular mode of thinking. I considered my thesis a place in and of itself. It had its own logic. The most controversial thing about it is that it didn't have conclusions.

TNG: It was about mapping?

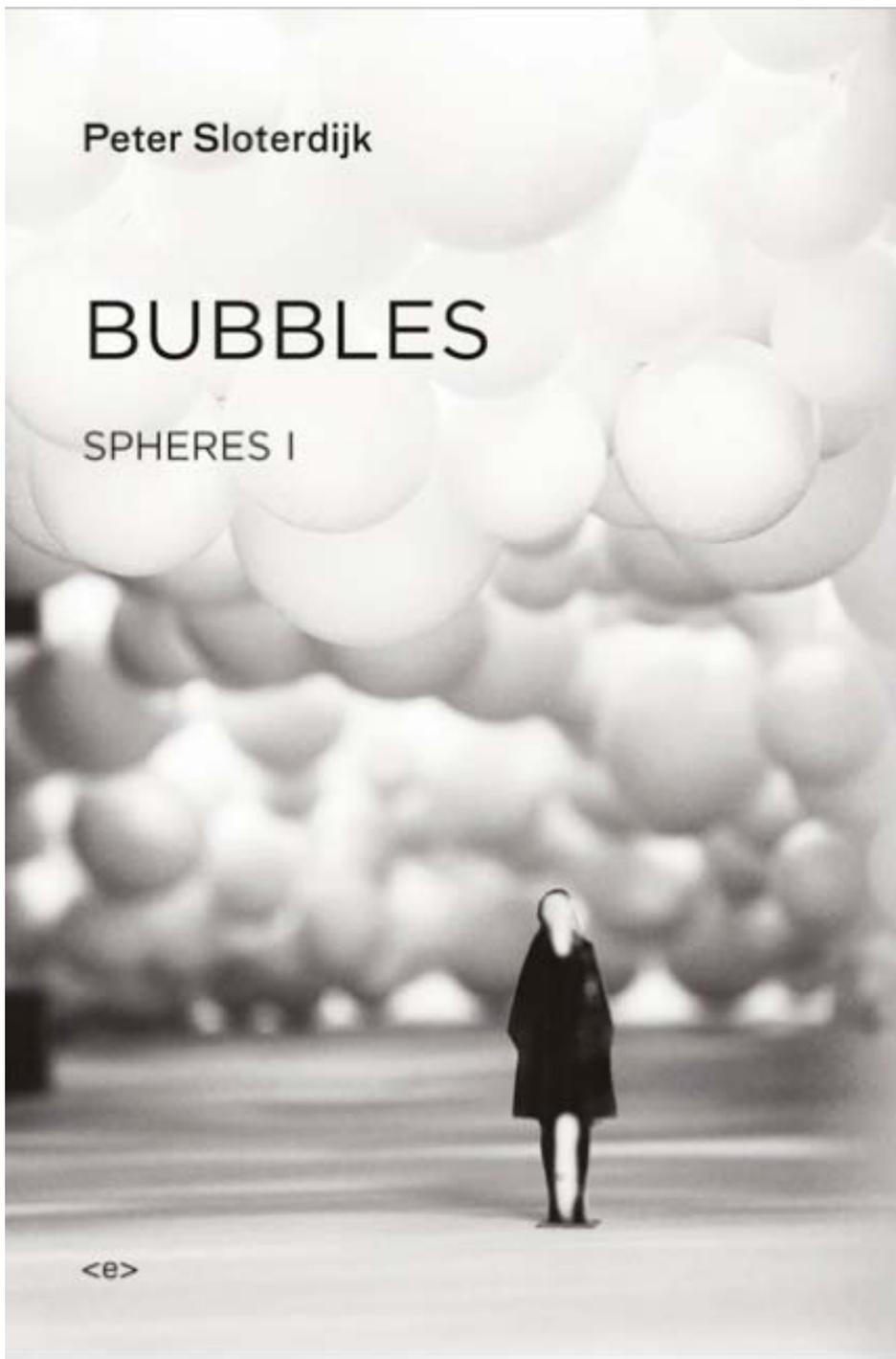
LFG: Exactly it was about mapping some problems that were inherent in what I was thinking about, so there really wasn't a conclusive argument or a thesis to prove—it was an exploration, a mapping.

TNG: Of different places or different definitions?

LFG: Definitions... The title was *Local and Global Postmodern Paradoxes of Place*. It relates to this conversation we are having here. It started with the question, "what is a place?" and it focused on the relationship between the local and the global realm.

TNG: Could you give me some specific authors or concepts you were dealing with?

LFG: One of the big influences was Peter Sloterdijk's *Spheres*, where he deals with forms of existence and their organization as spherical entities from the little cell to the cosmos, and the set of relationships they establish and that constitute our world order. I also grappled with artworks from the fall of the Berlin wall onward.



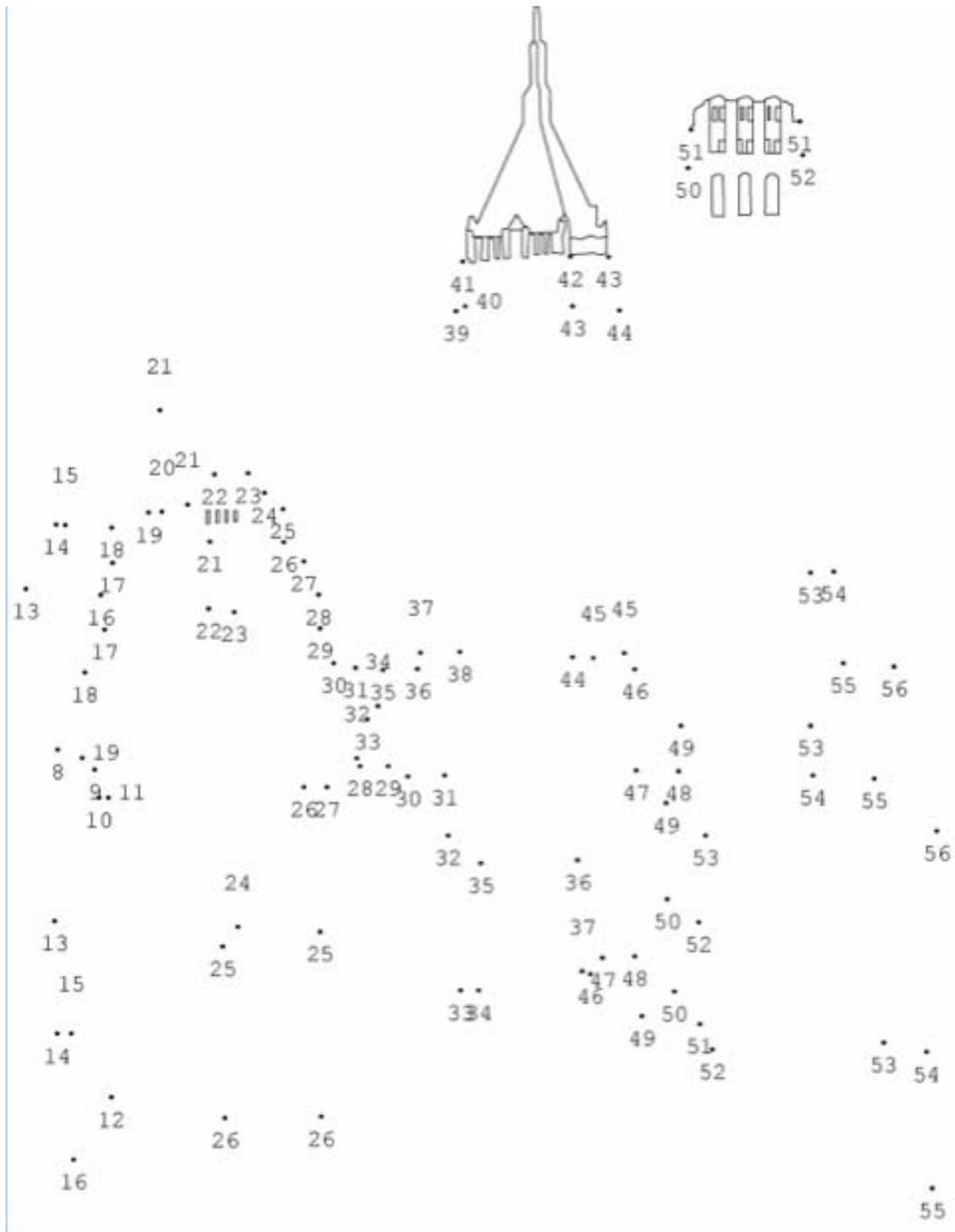
Peter Sloterdijk, Spheres Volume I, Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2011.

TNG: Was Bachelard a part of it?

LFG: A little, especially at the beginning of the process but I am really not that interested in the exploration of memory, or childhood, or even in the experience of a poetic space. I was thinking differently than that.

TNG: Could you talk about the piece you did for [JAR](#) (*Journal for Artistic*

Research) where you have a line drawing and then numbers?



LFG: This image as presented here was part of a text derived from my investigations on the nature of place. *JAR* offers an online platform to explore what they call "artistic research" where, due to the technological constitution of the site, text, audio, video, slides, images—everything interacts in a very interesting way. The drawing belongs to a series called *NYC Panorama*. I took 25 buildings of NYC and did a follow-the-dot schema.

TNG: Are we supposed to follow the dots? Is there a key? If we drew a line between the dots would we see a place emerge? Where am I? Is this in a gallery? Or what is it? What am I seeing? What do the numbers reference?

LFG: It's a drawing. And if you follow the numbers and the dots you are able to complete the image of the building. I am very interested in how these minimal elements— lines, dots (and colors) define an image, or create a place.

TNG: But on the web site there is interaction so it could be web art.

LFG: That's interesting.

TNG: It almost works better than as a discrete drawing since it makes your point about place as movement, change, i.e., *making* a place.

LFG: That's in the nature of the platform, *JAR*. But something I've come to terms with about my art is that it is never about the piece. It's always about the next piece, or about the process, or about the work as a whole... so it's an ongoing thinking process that never ends. You make something that opens up problems and then you go to the next. I went to a talk at Cooper Union with Francis Alÿs the other day and he said, "When the work is done it is done." And I try to get into this mentality because for me specific artworks make sense in the context of a particular sequence of thought. Once that is finished the piece is a mere residue.

TNG: Which brings us to the MTA subway station project. When did it go up and where?



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LFG: It was finished on December 31, 2013 and it is at three stations along the M line: Fresh Pond Road, Forest Avenue and Seneca Avenue stations.

TNG: How did it evolve?

LFG: When I was selected for the project they brought all the finalists in and showed us the stations and the neighborhood. They set out very specific parameters such as there would be a total of twelve laminated glass windows and a mosaic mural.

TNG: So your task was to fill the windows?

LFG: I actually had to develop a project for three adjacent stations that would work as a whole but also as individual pieces, and in two very different media, mosaic and glass (none of which I had worked with before). The first piece depicts an interior space that is a bedroom (that is based on a real one). This is the starting point of the project.

TNG: I'm curious how you made the selection. What was it about that bedroom in particular that made you choose it for the mosaic?

LFG: Because it was old fashioned and speaks to everyone.

TNG: And a private space?

LFG: Yes, a private space that occupies a public one. But the image in the mosaic has different elements that link it to the exterior too. There is a wallpaper in the background that comes from a series of wallpaper patterns that I developed some time ago and that derive from maps. So the map is in there. There are also trees and patterns from nature. And there is a window.

TNG: Does the map have any relation to anything in particular? The map is of what?

LFG: It's a pattern made as if it were a map but it isn't based on any actual location. The colors do come from a real map of the Adirondack area. This appears in the background and then there are these trees and vegetable life that enter into the room. So it is an interior space that is an exterior one at the same time. This was the mosaic. The next two stations had hanging clothes on the windows. I have been interested in the way clotheslines represent the interior dimension of a life projected outside.

TNG: And New York City used to be covered with clotheslines. That's what the Ashcan school painted – like John Sloan's 1912 "A Woman's Work."



John Sloan, *A Woman At Work*, 1912

The curator was very smart to give you three so the passenger on the subway sees the iteration of your ideas of interior and exterior NYC places.

LFG: Right. People still hang clothes out there. And the fact they are windows means you can see the actual landscape of New York City in the background through the image.

TNG: For most people subways are not cozy but about being thrust into the public, into the heart of the city. So the image of these domestic spaces creates a place for

people to reimagine themselves back into a private world –one they might either have just left or will return to at the end of the day.

LFG: Yes I was trying to give a sense almost of inside out—what is exterior, what is interior—this is a dichotomy that has always interested me.

TNG: It makes me think of those projects of Acconci Studio that are all about mixing up the interior and interior in quite funny ways. The Philadelphia International Airport for instance.



Acconci Studio, Flying Floors for the Main Ticketing Pavilion, Terminal B, Philadelphia International Airport, photo by Mimi Cheng

Or his early piece, *Instant House* (1980)



Image courtesy of Acconci Studio

But in terms of your subway pieces, the permanence must be a bit overwhelming. It's kind of a revenge against what all your other work has been about. These are strategic locations, places that may shift in perspective as the viewer moves in the subway but ultimately they are static, permanent, and do not change.

LFG: Well it does change (to a certain extent)... based on the time of day the light changes and so do the windows... But yes, I am ambivalent about that aspect. What was hard for me when I started working on the project was its permanence. My work has always been about impermanence or about the ideas, not so much about the material piece itself, and then all of sudden I am asked to do something that will last and that people will see everyday. I felt a great sense of responsibility. Now I feel better because I think the project belongs to its location but I am glad I don't have to take that subway everyday.

TNG: I guess the question to end with then is will this change the nature of your work from this point on?

LFG: Well the next thing that happened was a show at a gallery in Madrid. The basis of that project was the subway installation. I wanted to find a way to bring it inside the gallery but also to link it to other new pieces.

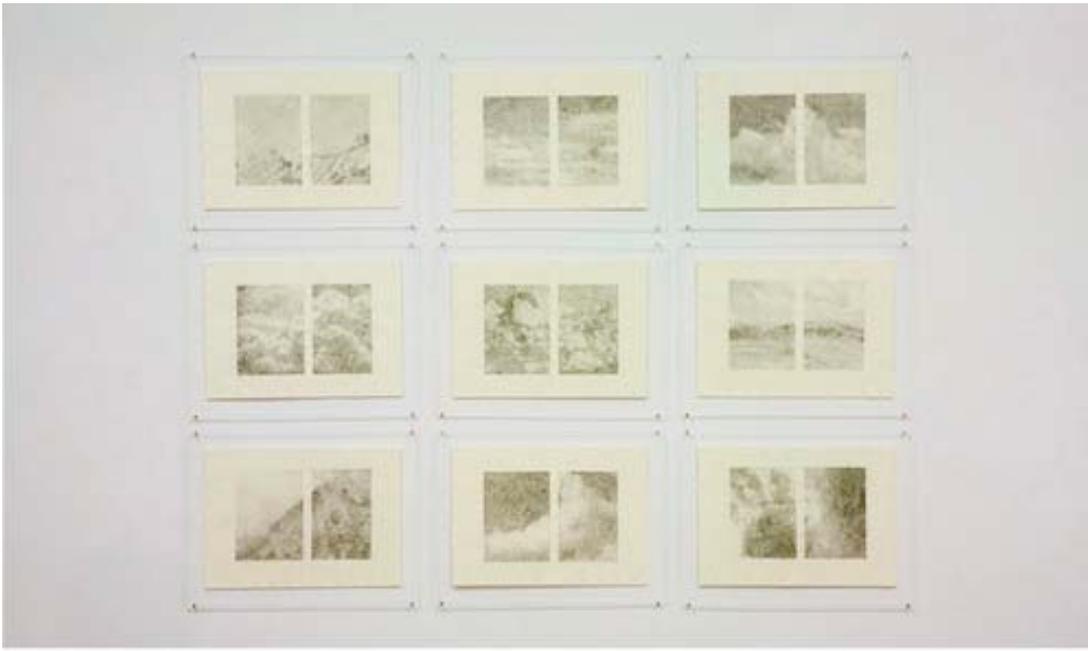


De Rerum Natura, exhibition view, 2014

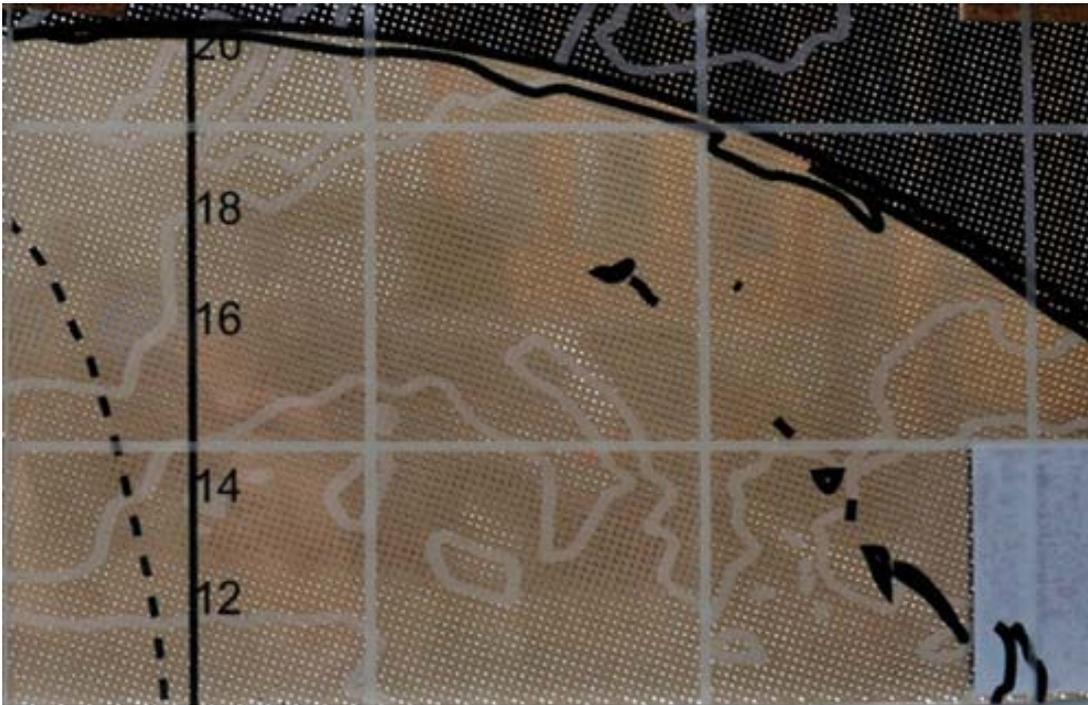


De Rerum Natura, exhibition view, 2014

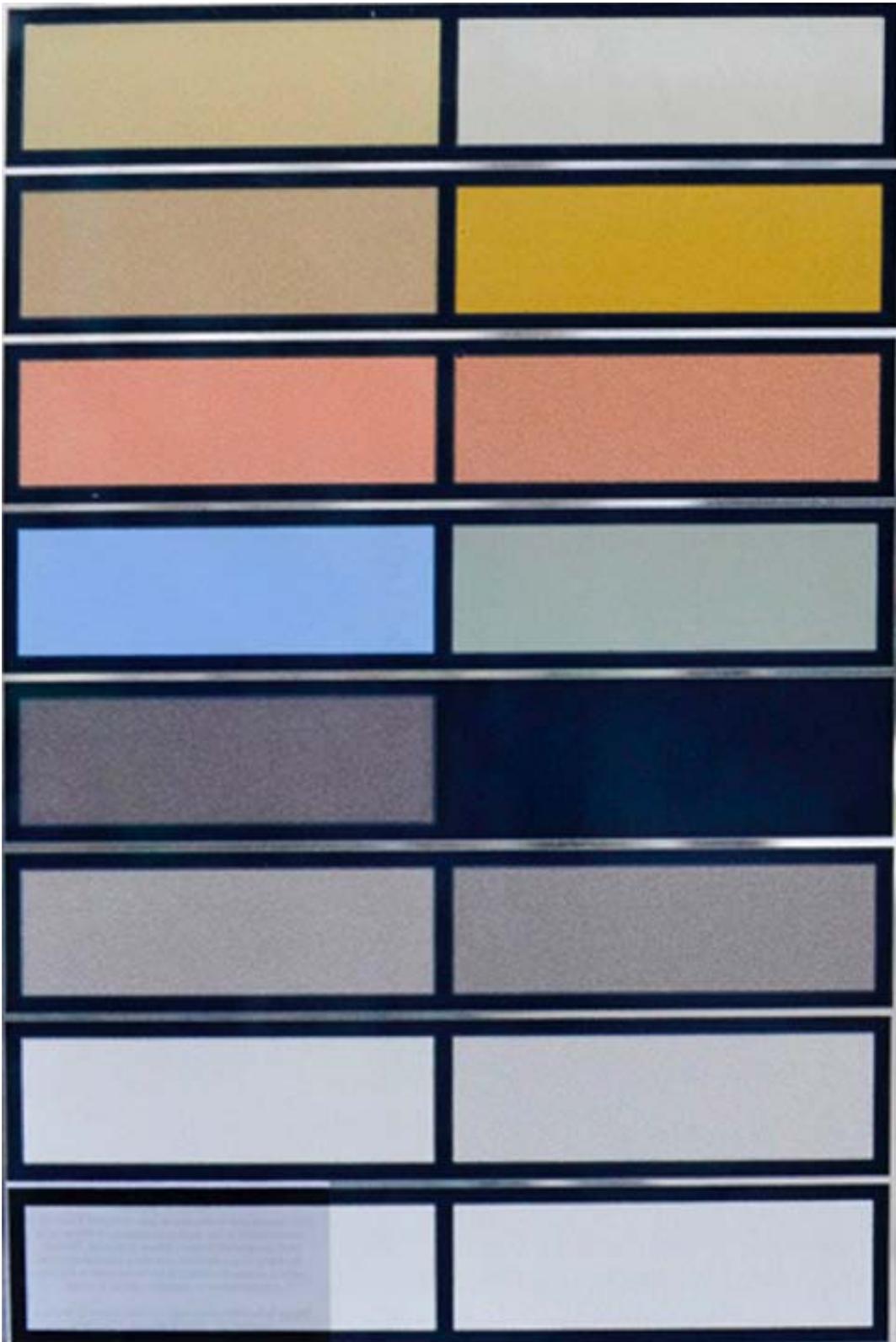
What you see in the background is a print, and the glass pieces are based on the subway project, it's the same type of glass. I was interested once again in the idea and how it is translated into the paper, into a window. How it exists in NYC but can also exist elsewhere. Added to the windows is an image of clouds in the background that relate to more recent projects (the subway piece was developed over more than a year and by the time it was completed my mind was somewhere else). Recently I did a whole series of drawing of rocks and clouds that were also shown in Madrid.



Cumulus Panorama, 2014



Key to the Artworks (De Rerum Natura), 2014



Key to the Artworks (De Rerum Natura), 2014

I was interested in the representation of nature, in the same way I was interested in the clothesline as the representation of a life, this hanging life represented in the

clothes. What you see in this piece are both clouds and rocks rendered as a collection of dots. But it is hard to tell which one is which—because in essence they are the same thing, with a similar shape. My idea for this show was to explore representation, and the “nature of things” and the “things in nature” (hence the title). I included some pieces that I called “Key to the Artworks” that refer once more to maps, measurement systems, schemes of colors—the color in the glass and so on.

TNG: It seems like your work is becoming less ephemeral.

LFG: Well, perhaps. Still when people ask me what I do I always say drawing because drawing is what I am doing all the time. And for me it is similar to thinking. I recently did a piece in Knoxville that is a drawing of the contour of Tennessee as an extended line. It comes from a series where I have all the countries of the world represented as a line. It’s interesting, when I was in Tennessee I had to drive everywhere and I don’t have a smart phone so whenever I had to go anywhere I drew a small map of how to get there. And that is so important to me. I have to do that, otherwise I have no sense of a place. It is about the practice of the territory, the experience of it, the drawing of it. The drawing is like thinking for me—the place where the thinking and the doing are connected. And, by the way, I can never follow a map.



Study for USA. A line, 2014

TNG: That's hysterical—you like maps precisely because you can't follow them?!

LFG: Right. I can't follow them because they do not overlap with the territory for me.

TNG: Unless *you* make it.

LFG: That's right, unless I make it, or draw it.

"every place has a hole through which it threatens to fall, where it is at risk of losing it's identity, a crack through which its nature and spirit escape and penetrates the putrid air ..."

—Jose Luis Pardo, *A cualquier cosa llaman arte*, (Free Translation. Quoted on page 67 of *Construyendo un Lugar/ Constructing a Place*)

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