Mapping Mortality
plan b reflect on their lifelong mapping practice

Sophia New and Daniel Belasco Rogers

Sophia New and Daniel Belasco Rogers have been working together as the artist duo plan b since 2002 after moving from England to Berlin. Since 2003 (Daniel) and 2007 (Sophia), they have gathered every journey they make, every day with a GPS, a practice they continue to this day. This text was produced on an etherpad collaborative writing platform while Daniel was in Mainz and Sophia was in Berlin in February 2018. They produced the map Every Journey in Berlin 2007-2017 for this article [opens from contents page as an animated GIF]. It shows their traces in Berlin between 2007 and 2017.

Dan (D): My first question is, can you see the blue and red buildup gif?
Sophia (S): Yes and I'm interested in how much it looks like veins—very apt for Livingmaps!

D: So you are arterial blood (red) and I am veins.
S: Bodily images are often so associated with the city.
D: Are people living maps then?

S: I guess it is a symbiosis between the changing places and where we can go and the element of time—maps being a temporal and spatial representation. You once said the buildings and street furniture are the hardware of the city and us fleshy beings are the software aren't we?

D: I was sort of making a pun at the time, talking about accidents where we fall hard against the surfaces of the city (iron lampposts, kerbstones) and hurt ourselves.¹

S: I think your point was that cities often leave their marks on us but how do we leave marks on the city?

D: Wilfried Hou Je Bek also talks about humans as software in reference to his psychogeographic markup language.² Our ‘marks’ are often transient, or made on our own memories, our soft tissue.

S: Do you also mean our GPS marks are transient?
D: Yes, I think of them as soft, not hard.
S: When we materialise them into artworks do they remain hard or become soft?

D: I think of materialisation as hardening. This is also a term that is used in future proofing or security aspects of software development. The tracks are soft, transient, digital, (im)material. Making them granite or acrylic or wool, as we have done, is making them hard, for me, regardless of the actual hardness or softness of the material.

S: We harden our future with materialising seemingly immaterial digital data?
D: I don’t think you can do anything to the future!

S: What about ideas that you look to maps of the past to predict where we will be going?

D: But we are always free to not do the things we did in the past. Or we think we’re free. . .

S: Do you think our mapping practice is freeing? I think a lot of people see it as very restrictive and makes us captive to our GPS devices and you say you can no longer get lost which seems to make you sad as sometimes. It can be a beautiful thing to get lost.

D: Yes, it’s quite hard for me to get lost, independently of whether I have a GPS or not. I’m not sure that has changed much about my ability.

S: Ah, in a way lucky you—I don’t enjoy getting lost much and it can happen easily and can be quite stressful—the mapless GPS devices we have are a small indicator of where I was but not where I need to go. Still thankfully there is good old openstreetmap!

D: Exactly—I consider you lucky. Even though it sometimes messes up your life a bit.

S: I was looking at the watery corner where you do your route to Qigong it is so visible on the map and do you feel it has also had a huge impact on your body too?

D: What do you mean by ‘watery corner’?

S: There is what looks like a defined lake in the bottom left corner of the map. It is clearly a place I do not go to. I like how the places we have both been are dark purply-black as if combined journeys deepen a shared experience. . . or am I being too romantic?

D: I thought the purpose of this is to be romantic! That’s only half a joke. I mean that the knowledge produced by musings / poetry / aesthetic reflection is as valuable as ‘scientific data’. I wanted to ask you a question: You always said you’d do it for a year to find out how you were moving as Ruby, our daughter, was learning to walk. Now you’ve continued for a decade from that initial year, why do you keep going?

S: We also said we’d move to Berlin for a year and we have been here 17 years! But weirdly, I don’t see a reason to stop. I find it oddly more satisfying to see the accumulation defining the place that I live in—it is not the summation of all of my experience in Berlin but it is a portrait of sorts.

D: And so the decision to keep going is actually a decision not to stop?

S: Yes.

D: If the accumulation is a portrait, do you recognise yourself?

S: I now recognise my most frequented places like the W of Wedding in North Berlin—without this practice I would not know its shape well enough. I do not have the bird’s eye perspective ability that you do.

D: Do you think about the W shape you’re making in Wedding on your way from Osloer Strasse or Nauener Platz to the Uferstudios? I mean actually as you’re walking that route?
S: Honestly no, I need the distance from the act of making it. What do we know now by recording our journeys for 10 years? I am repeatedly asked why do you do that?

D: 15 years for me!

S: We often say to have a 'Drawing of our Lives'—now I wonder what difference does it make to call a map a map or a drawing?

D: And what sort of map is the carpet? What I mean is that if we take the same data and rather than represent the geographical relationships, but rather represent when we recorded rather than where. Is that a map? Is that a drawing?

S: I think of it more as a new storage format, only we might need to leave some mode of decoding otherwise it remains enigmatic.

D: Is it not also (or primarily?) a way of visualising / materialising an aspect of the data? Rather than a simple storage format.

S: Yes, and naturally it is embedded with all sorts of aesthetic decisions the monochrome—the wool the method of knotting. But back to the more geographic map is it now a mortality practice? I mean an act of leaving traces till we can no longer move. What I know we both think about a lot is the excess of information we are generating and how we might need to delete stuff. I wonder what the difference is between forgetting and deleting?

D: Forgetting is what humans do, whether they like it or not. Deleting is what you can do with a machine. I guess the ethical question is, should we delete things from stores of data so that we parallel the human 'ability' to forget? There is evidence that forgetting is a necessity, intimately connected to learning. Could there be a right to be forgotten? On the other hand, if someone dies leaving a hard drive with their files on, how do we feel about deleting this? We wouldn't have Kafka's The Trial if his wishes about burning his work had been carried out.

S: I thought about writing software to 'undo' our lines when we die—unwrite them or erase them but is that too much like eradicating someone's existence?

D: I immediately think of what Ruby would think about that: our life's work autodestructing when we die. Wouldn't that be quite traumatic for her? Maybe these traces we leave have some resonance or meaning in a future we currently have no idea about. I'm remembering the Mass-Observation project, started in the 30s and revived in the 80s that was set up to record the general population's thoughts on daily life.

S: I guess that is the problem of tying a mapping practice so clearly to a living practice: they are un-entanglable. Is that a word?

D: The disentanglable practice of life and art?

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1 This was during Daniel's solo performance lecture Unfallen, commissioned by the Arnolfini in 2004
2 In 2003, Wilfried Hou Je Bek was nominated for a software art prize for his 'Generative Psychogeography' project.
3 The map that everyone can edit and use: https://openstreetmap.org
4 The Uferstudios in Berlin is the location (among other institutions) of the HZT, where Sophia has been teaching on the Solo Dance Authorship MA and where plan b regularly give workshops.
5 plan b's latest outcome from the GPS data is a series of carpets they call 'Knotted Time', exhibited at the time of writing in the Villa Merkel gallery in Esslingen, Germany.