BARBARA MENELEY
Cartographies for the Next 150
ART GALLERY OF REGINA
to be exact
(a text in response to Barbara Meneley’s exhibition, Cartographies for the Next 150)

One might ask—struck by the floor-to-ceiling masses of paper covering the walls—what kind of place is this? Hundreds of maps are assembled as a collage, so that one depicting Eyebrow, Saskatchewan butts up against others detailing sites in Québec. What kind of place is this? Hundreds of maps are assembled as a collage, so that one might ask—struck by the floor-to-ceiling masses of paper covering the walls—

When first surveying Cartographies for the Next 150, patterns emerge: at “gallery height”, a row of maps juts forward from the wall. Arrays of small, angular cuts perforate these maps. They appear gridlike, yet organic, resembling at the same time computer punch cards and the work of moths. In places the cuts are so profuse and intricate the paper barely holds, buckling in on itself. Upon sustained looking, it appears what is being cut out are infrastructures, names and references. Indeed, Barbara has written, “the information removed varies from map to map, but includes radio towers, prisons, rifle ranges, historic sites, transformer stations, airports, refineries, malls, towns and cities, golf courses, sewage, trailer parks, gas plants, pipelines, gas & oil wells, non-Indigenous names, all map references (nts, lot numbers, highways, lat & long), map legends and orientation info.”

If the density of the cuts demands extended reading, tracing the means by which they were made is a more immediate endeavour. Barbara has used an X-Acto™—a ubiquitous form of utility or hobby knife with a blade set into a pen-like holder—allowing her to cut with editorial precision. Cutting is a method central to modern culture: from the cut-and-splice of film, the found-paper collages of visual art, the “cut-up” methods of literature, to the cut-and-paste techniques of analog graphic design. It is a fine line Barbara is cutting, both materially and conceptually. Her hand-cut process is labourintensive and exacting. Care is taken to remove settler inscriptions with as little disruption as possible to the paper—and by extension, to the land. Here, labour and imagination have the power to make things disappear, leaving cartographies that disorient settler colonial bearings and certainties.

Together, these innumerable cuts catalyse openings: the touch of their sharp edges exposes us to their critical agency. The excess of these cuts—paper fragments removed from the maps and held within glassine packets—rests on a light table, awaiting further consideration. These, as well as a video animating Barbara’s methods, underscore the processual condition of Cartographies for the Next 150. These unsettled cartographies engage an understanding of reconciliation, “not as a means to secure closure—thus fulfilling Canada’s national mythology of progress and inclusion—but rather as a place from which to begin the hard work of rethinking relationships and renegotiating responsibilities…”

Joanne Bristol

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1 According to their website, the GSC has, “played a leading role in exploring the nation.” Currently its, “world-class expertise focuses on the sustainable development of Canada’s mineral, energy and water resources; stewardship of Canada’s environment; management of natural geological and related hazards; and technology innovation.” Available online at http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/science/geology/gsc/171000. (Accessed 14 May 2018).


3 A Latin term meaning ‘nobody’s land’, the concept of terra nullius has been used to rationalize settler state occupation of Indigenous lands.


5 From an email exchange with the artist, 9 May 2018.

6 Of course, forms of paper cutting precede Western modernity: its origins date back to 4th century China, after the invention of paper.

7 This phrase, from scholars Allison Hargreaves and David Jefferess, articulates the necessity for settlers to continue to ask difficult questions about Canada’s colonial legacies and nationalist rhetorics. Allison Hargreaves and David Jefferess, “Always Beginning: Imagining Reconciliation Beyond Inclusion or Loss”, in The Land We Are: Artists & Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation, eds. Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2015), p. 201.
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Catalogue Images:
1. Cartographies for the Next 150 (installation detail), 2018, archival maps, paper
2. Cartographies for the Next 150 work in progress (studio shot), 2018
3. Cartographies for the Next 150 (installation detail), 2018, archival maps, paper, glassine paper