

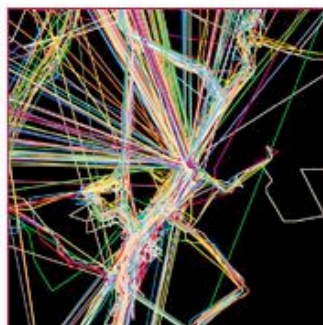
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*GPS Diary, GPS Erasure, GPS Miró, by Thorsten Knaub
(United Kingdom/Spain), 2003-2007*

DRAWING IN THE EMPTINESS OF SPACE

by [Pau Waelder](#)

Thorsten Knaub wakes up early and prepares for his daily routine: he looks at the map of the island, decides where to go that day, fills his backpack with food, water and some equipment. On top of the bag, he fixes the antenna that connects to the GPS tracking unit he keeps in a pocket attached to his belt. This device uses the Global



Positioning System to determine his location by receiving the microwave signals sent by nearby medium Earth orbit satellites and calculating his position. Using information provided by at least three of these satellites and the method of trilateration, the small, phone-sized machine obtains and stores the geographical coordinates of Knaub's exact location on the planet, the spot where he stands. As he moves, new coordinates are generated: one dot after another, a line will form, describing the path of his movements. For the moment, the line exists only in the mind of this artist, who is carefully planning his route in order to fulfil his objective: to erase the island of Sa Dragonera.

During 2003, Thorsten Knaub performed an artistic project that consisted of recording his daily movements by means of a GPS device. After testing several periods of time (a week, a month) he decided to develop the project during the course of a whole year. Knaub took with him the tracking unit as he moved around the city carrying out his usual activities, were they work or leisure, and even when he stayed home. The set of coordinates stored by the device was then transferred to a custom designed computer application that located each point on a map of the city and connected each dot with a straight line. The result was a graph that represented his movements for each day. A walk around his neighbourhood became a fragile line outlining the layout of the streets. A trip on the underground became a straight line between the station where he got on and where he got off, as the satellite connection was lost underground. Titled *GPS Diary 1*, the project intended to connect the high-tech, surveillance network of GPS satellites to the daily routine of an individual, and at the same time to question the difference between everyday life and artistic activity. On the press release, Knaub describes the work as a "dehumanised and detached form

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of the diary, rendered by a remote technology orbiting 12,000 miles above the earth" **2**. This year long routine resulted in a large print in which all the lines are put together over a black background, thus eliminating specific geographical references **3**, a colourful bundle of lines that spread from the central point of his home in London. Other locations that the artist visited that year, such as Erlangen, Berlin or Barcelona, are not included in this image but can be consulted in the online archive in which the route for each day is shown separately. As Knaub weaves on the terrain of the city with the sinuous threads of his daily activities, he reminds us that our actions and movements are not without consequences nor anonymous, as the same technology that allows us to communicate and facilitates our movements can be used for surveillance and control. The two most prominent information networks in our society, the Internet and the Global Position System, were both originated by the U.S. Department of Defense for tactical operations. They were later on adopted by civil society for other uses, which are now an integral part of our daily life, thus becoming even more pervasive. As we browse through Knaub's archive, we are experiencing a voyeuristic interest in obtaining as much information as possible of his journeys, in fact of his intimacy, as if we were reading the pages of a personal diary or looking at the preliminary sketches of a painter. Yet surveillance is but one aspect of this work, in which the artist is "drawing" with his own body on the terrain he has chosen as his canvas.

Following this first project, Knaub performed a second intervention in the urban environment. In *GPS Erasure* **4**, the artist uses the same technology to explore the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London, but this time instead of adding, he subtracts from the shape of this urban area, which is known to be the most densely populated in the United Kingdom. By walking along its streets and squares, Knaub progressively erased the image of the Borough as it was represented on the screen of the computer, a blue block over a white background. The consistency of this area, which is defined by its borders, is questioned as the framework of the streets is revealed, cut into little pieces and projected onto other areas beyond the map. The resulting image can be interpreted both as the disintegration of the area or as the neighbourhood being stitched together by these numerous threads that cover most of its surface. In any case, a network of connections is revealed, in contrast to the apparent unity of the Borough as single entity. As in *GPS Diary*, Knaub has created this abstract image by carrying out an industrious physical task, which is totally absent in the final artwork and can only be imagined by the viewer.

In September 2007, following an invitation to the group exhibition *Metapaisatges* (metalandscape) **5** at the Pilar i Joan Miró Foundation in Palma de Mallorca (Spain), Thorsten Knaub developed two site specific projects for the island of Mallorca. The first intervention took place on the island of Sa Dragonera **6**, a nature reserve close to the western end of Mallorca. This small island was bought by a construction company, which intended to build an urbanisation in the 1970s, but after an intense ecological campaign it was finally declared nature reserve. The access to the island is now restricted: visitors can only walk along several marked paths and cannot stay overnight. Knaub was granted a special permission to perambulate all the areas of the island in order to perform his project. Based upon his previous intervention, *GPS Erasure (Sa Dragonera)* **7** also consists in erasing a silhouette of the terrain, but this time the work incorporates a different meaning. The shape is in this case determined not by historical and administrative boundaries, but by the physical geography itself. The island being a nature reserve, the act of walking on it out of the paths becomes an aggression to the natural environment, and thus this erasure entails ecological issues, as it represents in an abstract form the damage that the mere presence of man inflicts upon nature.

(going back and forth on a particular area, in order to cover all of its surface), as well as to divide the island into smaller pieces. Not constrained by a grid of streets, yet limited by the natural conditions of the terrain, the artist carried out his movements in a manner that incorporated a sort of gesture. The project evolved as a dialogue (or a fight) between the artist and the island, demanding as in previous works a considerable physical effort. The weather conditions finally prevented Knaub from fulfilling his task, the work being in fact much more expressive in its relatively unfinished state.

For *GPS Miró 8*, his second intervention on Mallorca, Thorsten Knaub chose a new approach to the uses of GPS technology by establishing a connection between the city of Palma and the work of Joan Miró. The Catalan artist visited the island since he was a child, and settled in 1956 in a house near Palma, where he remained until his death in 1983. There he produced most of his artworks, and also kept several notebooks on which he drew many preliminary sketches, which show that the artist's work was not as spontaneous as may appear, but rather the result of a thoughtful process. Inspired by the drawings in Miró's *Catalan Notebooks*, Knaub reproduced several characters and elements of the mironian iconography on a street map of Palma. He then walked along the pre-defined routes carrying the GPS receiver, thus creating the drawings by moving around the city. Over a period of three days, Knaub visited several areas of Palma using the city as a canvas. This led to another revealing aspect of the work, which is the fact that by using this method, the artist bypasses the usual circulation of the urban area, in the sense that his movements neither match those of a tourist nor those of a citizen. A *flâneur* with a particular plan, Knaub extracts from the metropolis its potential to become the expression of an artistic imagination. Miró himself prefigured this idea in a note he wrote on his sketchbook *Une femme*, from 1940: "if you lack material to work with, go to the beach and draw with a stick in the sand, draw on the dry earth with a line of piss, make a drawing of the song of the birds in the emptiness of space, the noise of the water and of the wind and of the wheel on a cart, and the song of the insects. All of this may then be swept away by the wind, the water, but have the conviction that all these pure realisations of my spirit will influence, by magic and miracle, the spirit of other men." ⁹

In these locative media projects, Thorsten Knaub uses the network of satellites, distant and invisible to us, to reveal aspects of our relation with the environment. His work is performed outdoors, in those places that used to be out of the reach of communication networks. Places that are now invaded by ubiquitous technology, which shapes our perception of space and our social behaviour. The result of these experiences is presented online to a viewer who will see the work from the point of view of the satellite: a distant, abstract picture that can only be completed by imagining the process that led to it. Using Joan Miró's words, we can say that Thorsten Knaub draws "in the emptiness of space" and that, although the traces of his activity are swept away by the wind and the rain, a testimony of his gigantic compositions remains on the screen of the computer, our window to a world outside we so usually ignore.

Notes

- 1** : Thorsten Knaub, [GPS Diary](#), 2003-2005. ↗
- 2** : Thorsten Knaub, Press Release for [GPS Diary](#). ↗
- 3** : Although the print is abstract in form, the artist demands that it is always displayed horizontally, orienting the image towards the North. ↗
- 4** : Thorsten Knaub, [GPS Erasure](#), 2006. ↗
- 5** : Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca, [Metapaisatges](#), 5/10/2007-6/1/2008. Curated by Pau Waelder. ↗
- 6** : Consell de Mallorca, [Sa Dragonera](#). ↗
- 7** : Thorsten Knaub, [GPS Erasure \(Sa Dragonera\)](#), 2007. ↗
- 8** : Thorsten Knaub, [GPS Miró](#), 2007. ↗
- 9** : Joan Miró, [Cuadernos catalanes](#). Barcelona, Ed. Polígrafa, 1980. p. 128. ↗

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