

Géographie multiscalaire

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MULTISCALAR GEOGRAPHY

In geography, the term “multiscalar” refers to methods of analyzing a single site according to multiple scales (local, regional, global, etc.). The idea of multiscalarity suggests that, on its own, every perspective on reality has its limitations. Consequently, in order to truly understand what we’re looking at, we sometimes need the “big picture”, while at other times, a zoom-in or close-up is necessary. Multiscalarity also conjures up the idea that containing everything in one field of vision is always clouded by the not-so-distant threat of no longer being able to see.

Questions of scale and perspective are not new in Catherine Sylvain’s work. In her 2001 project, *Sur la terre, sous le ciel*, she invites visitors to climb a ladder into an oversized dress, and thus gain a new point of view on the exhibition. In the case of *Petites détresses humaines* (2004), viewers, obliged to stick their heads through holes in a double ceiling in order to closely

view a world of tiny figurines, are unable to move away from them and regain the perspective and scale of the human body. Conversely, in *Géographie multiscalaire*, our point of view on the works is not fixed—we retain the conventional freedom of the viewer, able to move around the work unhindered, discovering it from whatever angle we see fit. However, determining a “normal” position, a point of view from which the work is visible in its entirety, seems to now have become impossible. From afar, we are indeed able to observe the landscape of small dots that form a mass and trace out trajectories on the blank walls. However, as we get closer, we discover a wide array of tiny figures grouped together into several vague tableaux. This abstract scene reveals a vast reality that, from afar, is entirely invisible, a complex world made up of countless tiny beings, walking, falling, interacting.

Here, we have in a sense two artworks, or rather, one single artwork embodying the passage between two different scales. It is thus not so much a matter of contemplating an object as such, but rather one of participating in this transition; not necessarily becoming absorbed in what we observe, but rather reflecting on the conditions of this observation, which is to say, the distance between observer and observed. In this sense, scale is not a question of dimension, but one of relationship. To vary scale is to become aware that the size of objects is always determined by the spaces we occupy. It is becoming sensitive to one’s own topographic position, and the positions we adopt in order to observe.

This state of affairs is as easy to understand as it is to forget: we have only to turn on a screen to find ourselves far from home, able to see anything and everything, despite the irreducibility of geographic position. This omniscient, delocalized gaze produces a proximity effect with respect that which is distant from us, an effect that philosopher Günther Anders called “familiarization”. Television and computers give us the impression of having an intimate connection with distant realities, of being “friends with the entire planet and universe”.¹ We can thus perhaps think of *Géographie multiscalaire* as an operation of distancing ourselves from this ostensible familiarization, a restitution of farness challenging the illusion that a point of view can encompass everything, without loss. The installation indeed restores the appearance

of distance to that which is actually distant, which is to say, the unknown—these groupings of dots are organized according to laws we can’t understand. In this sense, we find ourselves before this abstract landscape like a scientist faced with a newly discovered phenomenon, a phenomenon still strange and foreign to them.

In order to fully take in this expansive drawing, we have to give up our customary disembodied and delocalized bird’s-eye perspective, and get in close to these figures, adopt their scale. In sum, we have to agree to live among them. It is only then that we can truly put ourselves in their shoes, imagine their situation, understand their interactions. Because, as Anders states, from a distant, outside point of view, “no genuine fraternity is possible, no pantheism, no love for what is distant, no ‘empathy’, even”.² Seeing everything, in the end, amounts to feeling nothing.

In this sense, the transition from macro to micro perspective in *Géographie multiscalaire* is not a mere blow-up or zoom-in allowing us to perceive realities too small to be visible from afar. There is more within this movement: a leap into a new reality, a new unit of measure, or rather, a leaving behind of all units of measure. By sharing a space and forming an intimacy with these tiny ceramic entities, we are able to feel the interactions and tensions between them, we are able to guess at the meaning behind their sideways glances, their pleas, answered or ignored. These distances are no longer calculated in centimetres, but in stories and emotions. Here, the relationships between figures transform neutral surface into a complex weave of invisible interconnections, despite the separation of distance.³ What’s more, in uncovering the tensions that animate each small group, our gaze can continue this process of perpetual intertwining. In this way, by leaving behind the bird’s eye view, by coming back to the ground plane, we are able to discover a geography woven from intersubjective relationships, a geography on human scale.⁴

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translation: Simon Brown

1- Günther Anders, *L’obsolescence de l’homme (tome 2)*, Paris, Éditions des Nuisances, 2011, p. 140. Cf. Jean Vioulac, *Approche de la criticité*, Paris, Puf, 2018, p. 250. Also translated as *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence* (Tr. Christopher John Müller), Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

2- Günther Anders, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

3- Sylvain also explored these invisible connections between people in her 2002 project, *Objets relationnels*.

4- cf. Edmund Husserl, *La terre ne se meut pas*, Paris, Minuit, 1989, p. 26-27. An English translation is found in *Shorter Works* (Ed. P. McCormick), U. of Notre Dame Press, 1981.