

Both of these artists wrote in languages other than their mother tongues, following displacement or exile from their place of birth.

To the question spelled out in large letters in Gonzalez-Foerster's calligram, "What is geography?" several responses may be found. A literal one (appended in small type beneath the question itself): "A description of the earth's surface." Another proposes that "the time came when there was no occasion for geography." More cryptic still is a third, the word "Geography" offset by "and Plays." In this textual realm, topography comes to denote a set of conceptual conditions rather than a location. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari coined the term "a minor literature" to denote a form of writing in which readers enter the work "without being weighted down by the old categories of genres, types, modes, and style."⁷ As literary critic Réda Bensmaïa observes, their concept of a minor literature "permits a reversal: instead of [a] work being related to some preexistent category or literary genre, it will henceforth serve as a *rallying point* or *model* for certain texts and 'bilingual' writing practices that, until now, had to pass through a long purgatory before even being read, much less recognized."⁸ For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka is the exemplary pioneer in this new literary continent, "a continent where reading and writing open up new perspectives, break ground for new avenues of thought, and, above all, wipe out the tracks of an old topography of mind and thought."⁹ The biotopes and chronotopes in Gonzalez-Foerster's dioramas arguably serve a similar function: they become rallying points around which new ways of reading and thinking, conceptualizing and speculating, dreaming and fantasizing, cohere.

Lynne Cooke, Curator at Large, Dia Art Foundation

notes

1. Dioramas were first devised in 1822 by Louis Daguerre, coinventor of the daguerreotype, an early photographic print. Though widely used in history museums of all types, they became particularly popular in natural history museums after curator Frank M. Chapman cultivated the form at the American Museum of Natural History in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
2. It is not irrelevant to this project that science fiction is "still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awards, . . . literary bigots [who] shove [its authors] into the literary ghetto." (Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Hymn to Her," review of *The Year of the Flood*, by Margaret Atwood, *Guardian*, August 29, 2009, p. 5.)
3. See M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84–258.
4. Umberto Eco claims that an "open work" depends on a viewer's freedom to interpret and explore its meaning. (See Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989].)
5. Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co.*, trans. Jonathan Dunne (New York: New Directions, 2004), p. 166.

6. Her projects *De Novo* (2009) for the 53rd Venice Biennale and *Roman de Münster* (2007) for the Skulptur Projekte Münster in 2007 represent two very different responses to this problem.
7. Réda Bensmaïa, foreword to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. xiv.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster was born in 1965 in Strasbourg, France. Among her recent solo exhibitions are projects for the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London (2008); MUSAC Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (2008); Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC, Paris (2007); Kunsthalle Zürich (2004); and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2002). She participated in Making Worlds, the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009), Skulptur Projekte Münster (2007), and Documenta 11, Kassel (2002). She is the recipient of the 2002 Marcel Duchamp Award, Paris; the 1996–97 Mies van der Rohe Award, Krefeld; and the Villa Kujoyama, Kyoto artist residency in 1996–97. In November 2009, she presents, in collaboration with composer Ari Benjamin Meyers, a new performance in New York City as part of Performa 09. Gonzalez-Foerster lives and works in Paris and Rio de Janeiro.

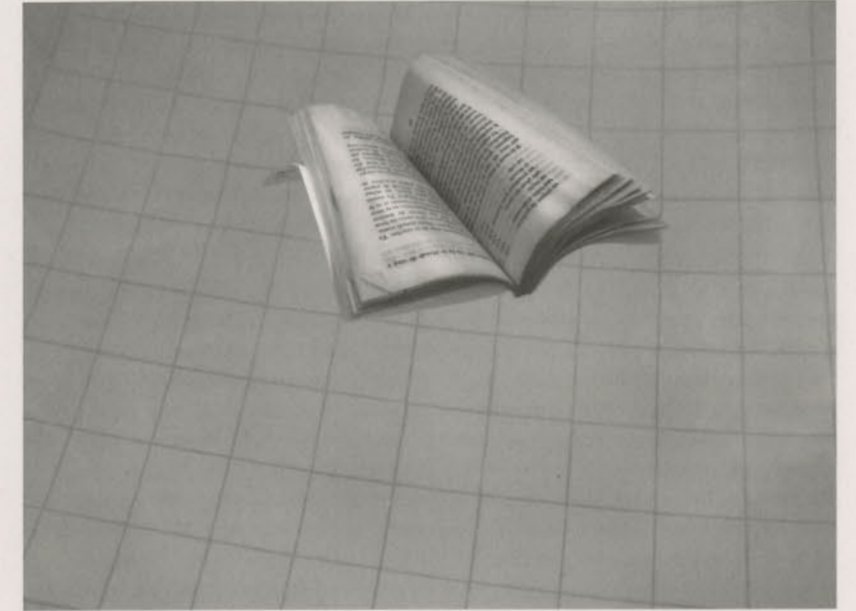
bibliography

- Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster: chronotopes & dioramas*. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2009 (forthcoming).
- Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster: Nocturama*. León: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, 2008.
- Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster: TH.2058*. London: Tate Modern, 2008.
- Theanyspacewhatever*. Ed. Nancy Spector. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2008.
- Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster: Expodrome*. Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC, 2007.
- Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Tropicalisation*. Antwerp: deSingel, and JRP Ringier, Zurich, 2006.

Special thanks to the Hispanic Society of America. This program is generously supported by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; New York City Councilmember Robert Jackson; Etant donnés: The French-American Fund for Contemporary Art (a program of FACE); Kadist Art Foundation; and Erica and Joseph Samuels.

© 2009 Dia Art Foundation

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster
chronotopes & dioramas
September 23, 2008–April 18, 2010



Dia at the Hispanic Society of America
East Building, Audubon Terrace
Broadway between 155th and 156th Streets New York City
212 926 2234 www.diaart.org

Founded at the beginning of the twentieth century by a private patron fascinated by all things Spanish, the Hispanic Society of America focuses on material culture from the Iberian peninsula. Comprising Neolithic artifacts, Renaissance paintings, Baroque embroideries, and much else, this internationally renowned collection covers a broad disciplinary range. The displays devised by its founding patron, Archer Milton Huntington, largely still exist in the building he designed in collaboration with his cousin, the architect Charles Pratt Huntington. These displays include cabinets containing regional decorative art objects and crafts in wood-paneled early twentieth-century galleries and a serried exhibit of mostly medieval and Renaissance locks and hinges.

Developed at approximately the same historical moment as that when Huntington was preparing the objects in his collection for public presentation, dioramas (or "habitat groups," as they are known in museums of natural history) provide museum goers with simulacra of real-life contexts.¹ Natural history museums sponsored field expeditions not only to secure prize specimens around which habitat groups were to be created but also to cull ancillary natural materials, such as plants and rocks, that would provide convincing contexts for the featured animals. By contrast, the field trips that the Hispanic Society fostered in the 1920s and 1930s were primarily ethnographic: the research resulted in a vast archive of documentary photographs, as well as a collection of sundry artifacts—ceramics, textiles, and the like. Dioramas were consequently not in the installation repertoire suited to these collections. Even though they have largely been superseded by contemporary media, notably moving-image technologies, as the preferred means to contextualize a key exhibit—say, that of a rare shark, a monumental gorilla, or a beloved dinosaur—dioramas have recently acquired new significance as a genre, as cultural artifacts in their own right: alongside the invention of new typologies of display, the preservation and restoration of vintage dioramas has become a major responsibility for the older natural history museums.

Although the narrow but exhaustive remit of its founder still shapes its institutional profile, the Hispanic Society has gradually widened its mandate over the past half century. With respect to the Latin American diaspora, it has acquired a number of colonial art works, such as caste paintings, and some textual material that expands its world-class library. But, with few exceptions, the institution's collecting policy has not ventured into the modernist period; those exceptions, which include some copies of works by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, have entered its collections as products of circumstance rather than policy.

During her first visit to the Hispanic Society several years ago, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster gravitated to the library, where she immediately inquired about the society's holdings of twentieth-century literature. Ascertaining that these were meager, she began to speculate on extending the library into the present by means of an annex in the adjacent gallery of the former Museum of the American Indian. Over time, this proposal crystallized into an installation of three dioramas. Each represents a specific climatic and geographical zone of the Americas: the North Atlantic, the desert, and the tropics; each bears traces of previous human habitation in the form of architectural

ruins; each contains a selection of books written by twentieth-century authors who lived or set their works in such locales.

These scenes have been realized by a diorama muralist with a team of technicians who regularly work at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. While they closely correspond to composite photographs depicting each regional site, which the artist produced by melding found imagery, they have also been modeled according to the conventions of this historic genre, using the traditional techniques for such highly mimetic renderings. In lieu of wildlife, however, they take literature as their central subject. And, whereas habitat groups depict what seems an eternal and timeless present, her scenes have been clearly subject to the vicissitudes of history; the abandoned ruins in these landscapes presuppose an earlier era of prosperity. The books too may be read as relics: cover designs and typographies betray the fact that many were printed decades ago; use has left traces on others. States of loss and decay have indelibly shaped these milieus, whereas pristine conditions typify their scientifically researched counterparts. In melding fact and fiction, illusion and actuality, and so referencing both the (real) past and the (supposed) future, Gonzalez-Foerster's variants assume dimensions of science fiction.

Science fiction plays a strong role in this French-born artist's imaginary: for example, her complex multimedia piece, *TH.2058* (2008) in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, evoked both a science-fiction film set and the scenography for a theater piece. Tellingly, the types of sci-fi literature to which she is mostly drawn—stories by J. G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick, in particular—posit not fantastical interplanetary worlds inhabited by strange creatures but realms that, while perhaps afflicted by cataclysmic environmental or man-made disasters, are nevertheless recognizable, akin to our own. For Ursula K. Le Guin, a noted exponent of this genre, science fiction "extrapolates imaginatively from current trends and events to a near future that's half prediction, half satire."² Key among the books incarcerated in *chronotopes & dioramas* is Ballard's *Hello America*, published in 1981. Written in the aftermath of the 1970s oil crisis and subsequent economic recession, it limns a twenty-first-century situation in which the United States has voluntarily relinquished its national sovereignty and its citizens have evacuated to Europe and Asia, after a devastating climatic change had brought unrelenting desert to the Eastern part of the country and to the Western half tropical profusion. Though they seem direct, the parallels between Ballard's novel and *chronotopes & dioramas* are fortuitous. Gonzalez-Foerster read the book only after having conceived her piece: it consequently provided not a point of departure but an uncanny confirmation of her ideas.

Together with film and architecture, literature has provided the artist with a lifelong source of stimulation and reference that has variously informed her practice for some two decades. Her more comprehensive exhibitions often include what she terms a *tapis de lecture*, a work that incorporates a carpet onto which have been piled a selection of books, mostly paperbacks and mostly works of fiction and poetry. These autonomous installations offer places for viewers to sit and browse. Even though serious or sustained reading is unlikely in such circumstances, they nonetheless encourage the

audience to reminisce over books read previously and to discover others unfamiliar or untried. In cross-referencing the remembered and the anticipated, ideas and subjects emerge that pertain to issues—be they material, formal, or linguistic—explored in the other exhibits. Even though individual examination of the books in the dioramas at the Hispanic Society is precluded, their classification, combination, and conjunction also stimulates an interweaving of relations, as does the juxtaposition of quotations pulled from them in the topographical calligram that occupies the entrance wall to the exhibition. Unmoored in the gallery like a flying carpet momentarily at rest, the *tapis de lecture* invite unbounded, unstructured speculation; conversely, the dioramas create geohistoricizing sites that frame the play of ideas, what Mikhail Bakhtin might call chronotopes.³ For scene-setting establishes a dialogue between nature and culture in which a nexus of references and allusions is generated from among books borrowed from the Hispanic Society's library—by Adolfo Bioy Casares, Borges, and Mario de Andrade—and purchased, new and used, specifically for this piece in Brazil, Spain, France, New York City, and elsewhere. Alongside several classic modernist texts—by Joseph Conrad, Franz Kafka, and Gertrude Stein—are found others by both acclaimed and little-known post-World War II authors, some living, some deceased. Prompting reflections on national and cultural identity, on imperial and colonialist expansionism, and on the evolution of diasporic voices, her ensemble of books creates an open work (in the sense defined by Umberto Eco)⁴ and so encourages viewers not only to pay attention to the specificities of the context in which a book is framed but also to consider the ways in which such contexts may infiltrate and shape cultural production and, by extension, to attend to the means by which genealogies are constructed—that is, how cultural artifacts are deployed in the construction of subjectivities.

Toward the end of the latest novel by Spanish writer (and friend of Gonzalez-Foerster) Enrique Vila-Matas, the protagonist contends, "One of the more general differences that can be drawn between novelists before and after the Second World War is that those before 1945 tended to possess a culture which informed and shaped their novels, whereas those after this date tend to exhibit a total disinterest in their cultural heritage [apart from] the literary process (which is [inherently self-reflexive])."⁵ While the statement may ring true for a certain strand of postmodern writing, it does not for this selection of recent texts, at least with the inflection of Gonzalez-Foerster's deft curatorial gesture. Beyond refuting reductive self-reflexivity, Gonzalez-Foerster returns to one of her abiding dilemmas: how to respond viably and substantively to a site-specific commission. In repurposing the canonical model of the diorama, she offers a critical and perhaps wry engagement with the dominant notion of the artist working today—that of a nomad, surfing a global matrix, constantly pressured to create works specifically for heterogeneous locales worldwide.⁶ The image that emerges here is that of an artist-author whose work originates in the specifics of a singular context but whose mindset is far from local. Worldliness is not inimical to close identification with region or locality, as the works of Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov corroborate.

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster

chronotopes & dioramas

September 23, 2008–April 18, 2010

Dia at the Hispanic Society of America

checklist of books

North Atlantic

- Auster, Paul. *Ghosts*. 1986. Reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Casares, A. B. *La invención de Morel*. 1940. Reprint, Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972.*
- Cozarinsky, Edgardo. *Vudú urbano*. 1985. Reprint, Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2007.
- García Lorca, Federico. *Poeta en Nueva York*. 1936. Reprint, Granada: Comares, 2001.
- Kafka, Franz. *Amerika*. 1927. Reprint, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007.
- Sebald, W. G. *Die Ausgewanderten*. 1992. Reprint, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Geography and Plays*. 1922. Reprint, Mineola, New York: Dover, 1999.
- Vila-Matas, Enrique. *Bartleby y compañía*. 2000. Reprint, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2008.

Desert

- Bolaño, Roberto. 2666. 2004. Reprint, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2009.
- Bolaño, Roberto. *Los detectives salvajes*. 1998. Reprint, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2009.
- Borges, J. L. *Ficciones*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones SUR, 1944.*
- Bradbury, Ray. *The Martian Chronicles*. 1946. Reprint, New York: Time, 1963.
- Castaneda, Carlos. *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. 1968. Reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1973.
- Fante, John. *Ask the Dust*. 1939. Reprint, New York: Ecco, 2002.
- Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. New York: Ace Books, 1965.
- Johnson, Dorothy M. *The Hanging Tree*. 1951. Reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1979.
- Scarborough, Dorothy. *The Wind*. 1925. Reprint, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1979.

Tropics

- Andrade, Mário de. *Namoros com a medicina*. 1939. Reprint, Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Itatiaia, 1980.
- Andrade, Mário de. *O movimento Modernista*. Rio de Janeiro: Casa do estudante do Brasil, 1942.*
- Andrade, Mário de. *Os contos de Belazarte*. 1934. Reprint, Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2008.
- Andrade, Oswald de. *A escada*. São Paulo: Globo, 1991.
- Andrade, Oswald de. *Marco Zero I: a revolução melancólica*. São Paulo: Globo, 1991.
- Andrade, Oswald de. *Primiero caderno do aluno de poesia*. 1991. Reprint, São Paulo: Globo, 1994.
- Ballard, J. G. *Hello America*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *Geography III*. 1976. Reprint, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Bowles, Paul. *Up Above the World*. 1966. Reprint, New York: Pocket Books, 1968.
- Brautigan, Richard. *The Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966. 1970. Reprint, London: Vintage, 2002.
- Burroughs, William. *The Naked Lunch*. 1959. Reprint, London: Corgi, 1974.
- Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. Ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles. 1959. Reprint, New York: Grove Press, 2001.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Almayer's Folly*. 1895. Reprint, London: J. M. Dent, 1995.

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1899. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Delany, Samuel. *Babel 17*. 1966. Reprint, New York: Ace Books, 1974.
- Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. 1962. Reprint, New York: Berkley Medallion, 1974.
- Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. 1962. Reprint, New York: Berkley, 1985.
- Dick, Philip K. *Ubik*. 1969. Reprint, New York: Bantam, 1977.
- Gaddis, William. *Carpenter's Gothic*. 1985. Reprint, London: Atlantic Books, 2003.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Pays rêvé, pays réel*. 1985. Reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Word for World is Forest*. 1972. Reprint, New York: Berkley Medallion, 1976.
- Lispector, Clarice. *Água Viva*. 1973. Reprint, Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1998.
- Lispector, Clarice. *A hora da estrela*. 1977. Reprint, Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1998.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation of a Bezar*. 1969. Reprint, London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- Nin, Anaïs. *Delta of Venus: Erotica*. 1969. Reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1983.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. 1965. Reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 2006.
- Smith, Patti. *Babel*. 1974. Reprint, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1978.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Making of Americans*. 1925. Reprint, Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2006.
- Vila-Matas, Enrike. *Historia abreviada de la literatura portátil*. 1985. Reprint, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2007.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slapstick*. 1976. Reprint, New York: Delta, 1977.
- Wurlitzer, Rudolph. *Nog*. 1968. Reprint, Columbus, Ohio: Two Dollar Radio Movement, 2009.

* Collection of the Hispanic Society of America, New York