

RIGHT HERE, FAR AWAY

Start here, right where you are. Start where you are: a white walled gallery where the light is also white; a kitchen table where the glasses wear your fingerprints; a restaurant where the chairs scrape, it's late and the check sits like a bird at your elbow. The main character is you, has your name, wears your bag and your haircut. The other character is me: right here, far away.

In your bag is a plan. It takes the form of several maps: a map of your city, the underground map, a gallery map. There is a phone, listing all your friends' numbers, a notebook with small illegible maps of ideas; there is a book which you don't mind being seen reading on the bus. There are your keys, each marking a destination point in your personal map of the city, one for your parents' house, a bike key and the key to a car you no longer own. There is a pen for noting changes of plan, for plotting shortcuts; an iPod for when the city's

music becomes too insistent.

I know all this because I have a similar bag, full of the things I need to navigate the distances I travel, across the city, across the world. I've travelled all this way just to find out it was here, arranged in grids, just as the maps had told me. You've travelled too, far away and in another direction. We have plans to meet; meantime we consult our maps more frequently than watches. There they are, composed and implacable as geometric equations on the page. We have our bags and our plans, we will be okay.



The Distance Plan grew from the idea that acknowledging distance is a way of coming to terms with the future. That the future, like the distance, does not begin and end in a way that can be understood empirically, but is nonetheless something we need to engage with as a reality. Geography is the structure we invented for believing in space and dis-

tance; clocks regulate the present; how are we to start to think about the future? The Distance Plan is a dislocated and cumulative project, engaging artists who in various ways respond to the concept of the future and its challenges as another kind of distance. It is perhaps best understood as a kind of diagram, each artist's work as a linking gesture between today and a living, believable 'soon.' The project has so far involved a series of email and Skype discussions, and includes visual artists, writers, urban planners, poets, environmental scientists and geographers. Here we see it take shape as an exhibition for the first time.

The project began with a conversation around what it means to be far away. Amy Howden-Chapman and I sat at the table talking about how you know you are far away—the email conversations, Skype dates, the way you describe the place you've arrived at to friends in other places. We talked about how you become strategic, sending parcels of the kind you'd like to receive: small publica-

tions, letters, an invitation and a badge from the exhibition opening you weren't there to go to; how you make elaborate plans to be in the same city at the same time.

We talked about how after a while the game of comparisons—the streets here are so narrow compared to home; the buildings are so old; the cheese is orange—loses its savour, and you begin to construct a place somewhere between you, a place not bound by laws of geography or time, where you can talk about people you both know, things you have read in common, exhibitions you have seen, as if you might have just been together, or might be together tomorrow. Being in the same room or even the same time zone is unlikely, and in this knowledge words and things seen have greater currency, anecdotes are offered complete with intricate detail, and you begin speaking of the past and the future as if they were places you might be about to go to.

The future looks different when you are

far away from home. For six months, maybe longer, time pauses and goes quiet: perhaps you have after all slipped out of time and will not ever need to address it again—to buy a house, get insurance or go to the dentist like everyone else. Now is very absorbing. Now is always absorbing, but when you are traveling it gains unprecedented significance. Streets, rain, bread, sleep, train timetables have never been so real; they become symbolic as well as inescapable, take over whole chapters of thought and have an energy all of their own.

And then suddenly you realise you have in fact gone into the future, that you are here—you said you were leaving home and going abroad and now here you are, in the high-skied, people-jammed future. The future has arrived, or you've arrived at it, and there's more of it coming towards you at an alarming rate. Time has passed: the exhibitions have all changed over, it's no longer duffle coat weather and another tax year has begun. You start to worry again. Inside of that

worry is something useful, the recognition that the future is real, and something we need to plan for.



Recently I have been thinking about when the future begins, or when I first started recognising the future as something distinct from now, and from science fiction. The past came first: there were dinosaurs, and that was the mythical past. There was the day the first trees were young, that was the deep past. There were stone tools, bronze and then iron, and that was history. There was the day the Queen was crowned and smiled so much she looked near to breaking, and that was the past. There was the black and white day our mother was young, with long hair the sun leapt from, and that was the recent past, when we started getting old too. And then came the future, and with it everything appeared suddenly more vulnerable, older and smaller. The future was a cardboard diorama, with labels about climate change,

peak oil, acidic oceans, smog and no bees.

I have no map for dealing with this kind of distance, a future that we have been taught is bleak. Conventional maps seem like lines scratched in sands which shift and change. But a plan is possible. Talking at the kitchen table, standing in the gallery's stark light, sitting in a restaurant where the streetlights glance back off the glass, the plan begins. Sometimes it looks like an exhibition.



Traveling home from work on the train I read an article on the Arctic Ocean. It predicts that it will be clear blue sea, all ice melted, within a decade. I remember reading a similar article in 2000 which made the same projection for 2050. It's as if the train itself is eating up the space between now and the future, heedless and off schedule. I think of Steve Kado's work—a vinyl banner with an abstracted view of light hitting the wall of his Toronto apartment—and

of sunlight hitting the white ice shelf, to be bounced back into space rather than warming the dark ocean beneath. The light on the wall in Kado's apartment becomes in my mind a time-keeper, a line across distance, and into the future. I think of the future, white as an empty page at the end of the map book. I think of the future: a small room in which to plan, to observe and look out from. The train arrives; I gather my papers and my bag.

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Edinburgh, UK. 2012