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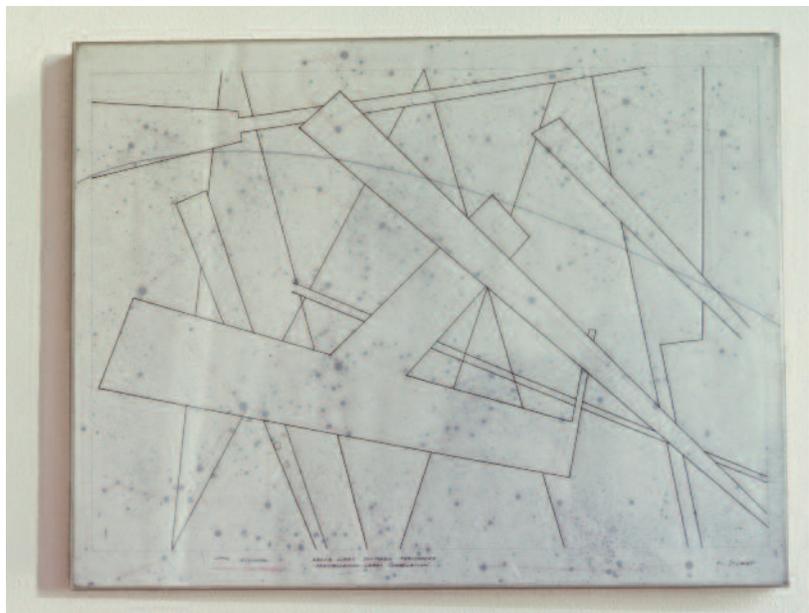


Pl. 1. Michelle Stuart, *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* (1979), permanent land work, 3200 boulders, varying sizes from Hood River starting at foot of Mt. Hood, overall 1000' x 800' approx, circle 100', 4 cairns 5' high. Rowena Plateau, Commissioned by Portland Center for the Visual Arts. © Michelle Stuart.



Pl. 2. Michelle Stuart, *Nazca Lines Star Chart* (1981-82), earth from site, Nazca, Peru, on 100% rag paper, mounted rag board, 120" x 168". Museum of Modern Art, NY.

Pl. 3. Michelle Stuart, *Nazca Lines Southern Hemisphere Constellation Chart Correlation* (1981), pencil, vellum, red, 17" X 22". Museum of Modern Art, NY.



COSMOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORK OF MICHELLE STUART

By Christine Filippone

The web of time... the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embrace every possibility.

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths*

“Sailor ... why are we taking this voyage?” He answered “it is to show the things of this place ... cities built in white limestone with temples hiding idols below deep jungle vines ... the ships that shape passages across the sea fixed by stars and hope.”

—Michelle Stuart, *Voyages*

For the creation of her frottage drawings, handmade books, earthworks and installations conceived from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, Michelle Stuart travelled extensively, visiting indigenous and Pre-Columbian sites throughout the Pacific and the Americas, inspired by the travel of Enlightenment Age explorers. As records of the sites she visited, and of her journeys, she collected stones, pebbles and soil, experimental materials she then incorporated into her work. Recurring themes for the artist include time (both historic and geologic), ecology, and natural biology, all of which may be united under the rubric of cosmology, which, broadly construed, encompasses the origin, structure and evolution of the universe, particularly space, time, causality, and freedom and the role of the individual. Sky charts in the form of stone alignments, constellation maps, and renderings of the night sky figure prominently in Stuart’s work as means used by both Western and indigenous cultures to situate self within the universe and, as noted in the epigraph, to augur more hopeful futures. Her exploratory impulse, nurtured during the height of the Cold War and the burgeoning feminist movement, suggests a feminist revision of the patriarchal narrative of the Enlightenment pathfinder, who, as British navigator James Cook professed, sought to go “farther than any man has been before me, but as far as I think it is possible for a man to go.”¹ The artist’s poetic evocations of the primordial earth and the cosmos undermined the dominance inherent in discovery for discovery’s sake that pits Western over indigenous, and instead questioned the perceived primitivism of indigenous cultures, which, as Stuart revealed, developed equally complex philosophical and abstract

conceptual systems, denoting a common impulse to understand the universe and humankind’s place within it. In her cosmological works, she scrutinized the Western embrace of scientific exploration as a means to order and control, while simultaneously internalizing that impulse in her own voyages through time and space, investigating origins and alternative paths for self and society. This essay examines the development of Stuart’s use of charts and maps, often manifested as grids, as a means to reference the constrictive rationalization of Cold War society, and subject it to critique by evoking alternative cosmologies (ways of being in the world), often indigenous, that suggested more flexible possibilities.

Stuart’s evocation of other times and places served to open new, separate conceptual spaces from whose distance she could critically examine her own. Freely moving through time and space—from the beginnings of universe, earth and biological life, to the era of Enlightenment exploration—Stuart undermined rigid temporal and spatial boundaries born of an Enlightenment Age science that reached its apogee during the first decades of the Cold War, when Stuart matured. Thus, the Age of Enlightenment became for Stuart, at times, a distinct reference to the past, but more often a place-holder for her own time, one characterized by contemporary critics, from Herbert Marcuse to Lewis Mumford, as the culmination of the rigidity and rationalization of the scientific age. Her investigation of agrarian, Neolithic peoples, whose lands and cultures were dominated or assimilated by the West, suggests a critique of scientific rationalism, and at the same time, a reimagining of its tactics, as she, an individual and a woman, appropriated bits and pieces of these lands (a clear violation of the environmentalist’s rule, “leave what you find”) for her own creative, poetic, and decidedly unscientific purposes.

Stuart’s conjuring of cultures altered by contact with the West was an imaginative and critical strategy common among feminist utopian art created in the wake of the women’s movement.² Political theorist Lucy Sargisson characterizes the function of feminist utopian works as a challenge to existing society, often offering a political critique of patriarchal culture, a subversion of categories and a deconstruction of power roles. Sargisson asserts that temporal or spatial displacement, the creation of other worlds in time or space, is an important strategy of estrangement which permits one to criticize the present.³ These worlds, Sargisson explains, “play speculative, meditative or critical roles rather than instructing as to the

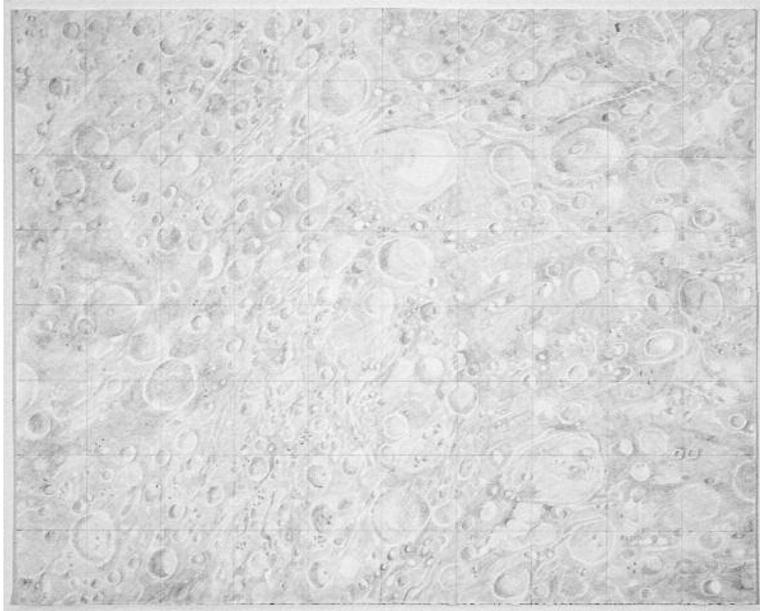


Fig. 1. Michelle Stuart, *Moon 4* (1969), pencil on paper, 15 1/4" x 19".
© Michelle Stuart. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects.

creation of a perfect world."⁴ Feminist utopianism rejects perfect-world utopias, historically associated with modernism,⁵ and instead emphasizes flexibility, process, and change.⁶ Cultural critic Frederic Jameson also argues that utopias and utopianism are valuable at the very least for making us aware of our ideological imprisonment.⁷ Stuart's works, on the surface, seem to retain the deeply rooted notion that exploration, discovery, and mapping are valued emblems of scientific progress; yet her poetic, metaphoric frottages, handmade books, and land works, reliant on the vagaries of unpredictable materials, undermine notions of control implicit in the modern scientific paradigm of Western culture.⁸ In accord with historian Jackson Lears's assertion that chance is part of an artistic "protest against an over-organized society,"⁹ Stuart's work called into question the prominence of rationalism viewed by many contemporary cultural critics as the basis of a patriarchal Cold War society.¹⁰ Stuart's incorporation of star charts suggested a means to reshape what must have seemed to a woman artist maturing in the late 1960s a proscribed, constrictive, and immutable future.¹¹

Stuart's consistent use of compositional grids, natural materials and organic textured surfaces has been variously contextualized by many commentators within contemporaneous movements, including Conceptual Art, Earth Art, Land Art, Post-Minimalism and Feminist art.¹² Lucy Lippard noted the "clear relationship between the female body and Mother Earth in her paper pieces, not only in their physicality, the rhythmic rubbing of the working process, but in the tactile surface that results."¹³ Stuart's hanging wall scrolls demand a phenomenological response from the viewer, who must physically navigate the work, akin to Robert Morris's felt pieces. The artist's books and frottage drawings reference Land Art in their use of natural materials, but also in their relationship to site, establishing a dialectical relationship similar to that of Robert Smithson's non-

sites of the late 1960s. Indeed, Stuart's dialectic extended beyond the gallery and site, often creating very specific relationships between the cultural past and present. Commenting on her rendering of Polynesian pictographs of cows and bison, part of her print series titled *Navigating Coincidence: Reflecting on the Voyages of Captain James Cook*, Stuart explained, "I went to Hawaii, I studied the Polynesian pictographs on rock there.... I wanted to evoke those drawings, to juxtapose Cook with the culture of the Hawaiian people."¹⁴ Rather than "a re-romanticization of the earth—a resurrection of the sublime through an invocation of ancient cultures," as identified by Stephen Westfall,¹⁵ I would suggest that Stuart investigated specific cultures that, while appealing for a seemingly more direct relationship with the earth, offer a distinct temporal space that enabled examination of her own. By juxtaposing these cultures to her own, she offered them to the viewer for dialectic consideration. Illuminating the artist's strategy is the cultural context from which her earliest works derive: the midst of the space race, a quest for national prestige packaged as an opportunity for scientific exploration and discovery.

Stuart's early works evinced a deeply rooted fascination with scientific discovery and the exploration of uncharted frontiers that would persist in her oeuvre. In the late 1960s, she completed a series of drawings based on recent NASA photographs of the lunar surface, including *Moon #4* (1969; Fig.1), a highly detailed, realistic rendering of the craterous surface marked by an array of attenuated, ovoid forms interspersed with meandering furrows, recalling all-over Abstract Expressionist painting as well as microcosmic cell cultures. These works, and I would argue much of Stuart's subsequent production, reflected the Cold War fascination with space flight that defined her generation. The quest for the moon, set in motion by the competition with the Soviets, was launched by President Kennedy in 1961, and accomplished on July 20, 1969. The equation of the Apollo program with colonial acquisition and Enlightenment exploration was made clear by President Kennedy,

We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people... Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, "Because it is there." Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it, and the moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there.¹⁶

Kennedy compared the quest for the moon with both a maiden sea voyage and the summit of the highest mountain, undertaken for the sake of knowledge, adventure, and conquest. Fascination with the new frontier of space in the 1960s revived the traditional Western narrative of exploration, an interest of Stuart's throughout her career. Stuart shared with me the impulse behind these drawings.

Because I'm fascinated by—first of all, I love explorers. I love to read the first people, you know, when they're seeing the world for the first time—a different world. A world that they don't know. I mean, it's hard to do these days. Everybody's been everywhere. But there was a time when the world was an amazing place. That may have provoked the moon drawings.¹⁷

Her delicate moon drawings are essentially topographic studies superimposed by a grid—a device, common to conceptual art of the 1960s, that recurs in her work throughout her career. Some scholars have discussed the role of the grid in Stuart's work as a means of imposing order, thus referencing the scientific impulse to systematize a chaotic world.¹⁸ The grid was often used in early modern star charts to simplify one's reading of the nighttime sky. Its use in her work should be read as a referent to the map as a marker of place, but also as a critique of that Enlightenment impulse, suggesting that the imposition of order on the complexities of nature is a futile endeavor. In *Mare 15* (1972; Fig. 2), eight gridded lunar drawings are contained within fifteen wooden boxes, arranged serially on the wall. The rigidity of the formal grid within each box, and in the overall composition, is undermined by the fluidity of the drawings and by tumbling dark strings, roughly four to ten inches long, which project from the surface and fall gently down, pulled by gravity. Interest in the moon for Stuart was also linked to her strongly held belief in place as a biological determinant, as the most important means of shaping individuals and cultures:

I was really interested in these magnetic forces that came from the moon. Some of those early pieces from the 60s/early 70s, where string came out of drawings of the surface of the moon, were about magnetic forces that influenced us. I think that we are not only determined by our heredity, but, we're determined by forces. People are determined by place. And they're very determined by place. They're *very* determined by place.¹⁹

For Stuart the grid or, alternatively, the map, continues to hold special allure as a tool for evoking a sense of place, from which endemic natural forces help to define the individual.²⁰ While her grids and maps direct us to specific spaces, they also convey a sense of time: "It's the depiction of the passage of time that is the most salient characteristic of my vision... [T]hat started out with an interest in what is visible about time in nature."²¹ Time and space are the coordinates she uses to examine both personal and cultural roots.

Stuart's strongly held belief in the importance of place is closely tied to a search for self, beginning with her ancestral origins. Westfall has indicated that charting and mapping were a preoccupation of Stuart's since her childhood in Los Angeles,

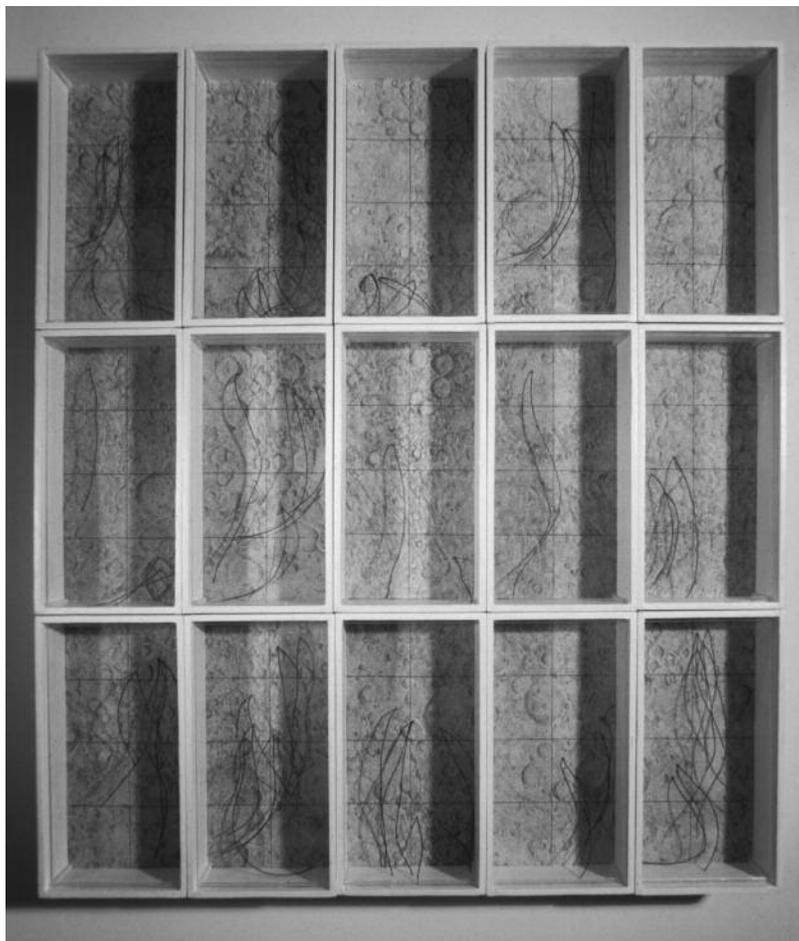


Fig. 2. Michelle Stuart, *Mare 15* (1972), diazo print of moon drawing on paper, red string, sectioned wooden box painted white, with glass window, 25 1/4" x 22 1/4".
© Michelle Stuart. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects.

when she was regaled by the expedition and emigration stories of her ancestors.²² Her maternal relatives journeyed to the African continent, France, and Russia, and her paternal relatives traveled from England, Scotland and Ireland to the South Pacific; her mother emigrated to the U.S. from Switzerland and her father from Australia. As a child, Stuart would listen to stories of her parents' travels and adventures and then locate their destinations on a map.²³ She commented, "There was a big map over the dining room table when I was growing up and my father and mother would refer to it and talk about places and what they were like, because they had both traveled all over the world."²⁴ Her father, at one time a land surveyor for the Department of Water and Power, took Stuart on many of his business trips, further fostering her love of land and travel.²⁵ After formal art training at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles (1951-52), Stuart secured a position with an engineering and architecture firm in Los Angeles doing work for the Army Corps of Engineers as a topographical drafter.²⁶ Stuart's use of maps and grids was connected to her search for her own personal identity: "I must have grown up thinking I was such a mixture of things. I mean, I'm really a mongrel, you know. All of northern Europe lies in these veins. My parents were immigrants. They were



Fig. 3. Michelle Stuart, *Passages: Mesa Verde 15* (1977-79), earth, photographs, Mesa Verde, CO, HMP, photographs, scroll 108" x 59"; stacks 12" x 11" each; photographs 14" x 17" each. © Michelle Stuart. Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects.

from vastly different cultures, I mean totally different."²⁷ Stuart's cartographic work was itself a means to travel; she undertook the position in order to finance a trip to Mexico. The artist's early searches for her own cultural roots awakened in her an interest in other cultures and a concern for the social conditions of others.

Stuart's broader social concerns were inspired by acts of injustice, prompting her to critically examine the causes for unequal treatment and seek redress. In Mexico, Stuart worked with muralist Diego Rivera, whom she admired for his gift as a draftsman coupled with his social consciousness. She explained to me: "I was attracted by somebody that was able to do political work and still be a good artist. There's so few of those people, and I was very attracted to that, because I was political in the sense of being for the downtrodden."²⁸ Stuart's concern for social injustice arose in large part from the plight of the Mexican farm workers, some of whom she painted early in her career. As a member of a girls club in junior high school, she would travel to downtown L.A. to care for the children of working mothers, many of whom were Mexican. She said, "My first little attempts when I was painting were farm workers."²⁹ Similar concerns later prompted Stuart's involvement in the Feminist Art Movement in the early 1970s, when she co-founded the feminist journal *Heresies* with Joyce Kozloff. She

described the origin of *Heresies*: "Joyce Kozloff and I thought of it over the washing machine. We thought about a school and we thought about a magazine. I was for the magazine. We thought we better get some other people involved to broaden the spectrum. So she invited me, I invited Lucy [Lippard]. We invited people we knew to discuss this, and that's how it happened."³⁰ Here again, Stuart's strong belief in social justice led her to search for alternatives to a society that failed to treat its members equally and with dignity.

By the early 1970s, the artist adopted the role of explorer, historically reserved for men, visiting sites, often indigenous, still seeking origins of place and identity, and creating works that functioned as a record of the site and of her presence there. At first she made graphite frottage over materials gathered from these sites, creating a tonally rich textured impression of rock or sand placed under the paper. Rather than the artist's intellect or hand, the earth itself determined the composition: "I chose a spot and I accepted whatever came up. So there's also a kind of randomness that [always] interested me too."³¹ The all-over random indentations, caused by the chunks of earth underneath, thus incorporate an element of chance that undermines the direct imposition of control that is the mark of the scientific age and its Cold War iteration—the strident insertion of a flag on the moon (or a minimalist cube in a gallery)—to claim the site for one's own. Stuart's visit to a site, her careful study of its history, and her process of incorporating its elements into her work all had a transformative effect upon her, just as she, through manipulation of those materials (not to mention her removal of them), enacted a subtle change upon the site.

She wrote about her encounter with the Southwest landscape: "When I traveled through that vast space dreaming about beginnings I was shaping and being shaped by my landscape."³²

One of the first artists to utilize her own handmade paper as a medium in the early 1970s, Stuart also made books reflecting a similar engagement with place. For these works, she embedded organic materials from sites visited into the paper, which became colored by the soil, producing intaglio-like impressions in the paper. She tied the books with cords of hand-woven natural fibers and often incorporated feathers or bones, also obtained from the site, creating an intimate record of the site's history that, as indicated by the tightly wound string, was too vast to be divulged by the typewritten page. She began to title the works for the site from whence the materials came, such as *Passages: Mesa Verde* (1977-79; Fig. 3), which includes not only handmade books, but also a large frottage drawing and photographs of the site taken by the artist. Stuart was enamored with nineteenth century landscape photographs, particularly those by Timothy O'Sullivan, which documented the site as well as the photographer's presence there. The inclusion of photographs taken by the artist was a logical conceptual extension of her connection of self to place. Stuart noted in a contemporaneous interview, "I would put my



Fig. 4 (left). Michelle Stuart, *High Falls* (1975-76), rock indentations and graphite from site (High Falls, NY) on muslin-mounted rag paper, 131" x 61". © Michelle Stuart. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects.

Fig. 5 (top). Michelle Stuart, *Niagara River Gorge Path Relocated* (1975), red Queenston Shale from gorge site, 460' x 62". Temporary land work along the Niagara River at Artpark, Lewiston, NY. © Michelle Stuart.

own history into the book, and the history of the geological site I was working with—I would put earth from the site into the paper pulp itself, and that would be the coloration of the paper. Did the paper attract me because it comes from the earth and returns to it? Sure."³³ Her own history was recorded in both her visit to the site and her hand selection of the organic materials, but also in the very physical process used to create her works.

Stuart incorporated her own body into the large scroll drawings through an often arduous creative process, physically kneading the materials into the surface of the paper.³⁴ The artist's painstaking, repetitive movements, implemented over weeks and months, provided only incidental direction for the materials. In works like *High Falls* (1975-76; Fig. 4) Stuart collected earth from geological sites, breaking down the rocks and pounding them into the surface of long scrolls (131" x 61") of rag paper mounted on muslin, leaving an imprinted memory of those objects. After physically working the materials into a section of the paper, she rolled it and moved to the next section, leaving a sculptural memory of the gathered paper. She then rubbed the powdered remnants of the crushed rock and earth into the rag paper and polished it with the surface of her hand, sometimes adding graphite powder to further burnish the surface, creating a lustrous sheen. The artist's process ensured that the paper retained the memory of her physical process; once installed, the richly textured paper, sculpted into folds, cascaded in voluminous rolls down the surface of the wall and out onto the floor.

Stuart carried the concepts of site and mutual transformation still further in her scroll *Niagara River Gorge*



Fig. 6. Michelle Stuart, *Sheep's Milk and the Cosmos* (1999), wall piece: beeswax, pigments, canvas mounted panels; sculpture: stone, wood, wax; wall 62" x 62"; table 15 1/2" x 14" x 71 3/4". © Michelle Stuart. Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 7. Michelle Stuart, *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* (1979), permanent land work, 3200 boulders, varying sizes from Hood River starting at foot of Mt. Hood, overall 1000' x 800' approx, circle 100', four cairns 5' high. Rowena Plateau, Commissioned by Portland Center for the Visual Arts. © Michelle Stuart.

North Island, where she discovered in a small district museum the names of her paternal grandparents and great grandparents. The museum curator revealed that Stuart's was one of five families who established the town. Knowledgeable in local lore, the curator directed Stuart to her grandmother's grave, which was located by an Anglican Church near a sheep pasture overlooking Bream Bay—originally named by Cook. Finally, at twilight, just as the sheep were returning, Stuart located the graves of her grandmother and great grandmother by, appropriately, making rubbings of the eroded, nearly illegible gravestone markings.³⁸ This singular moment of discovery is recorded in *Sheep's Milk and the Cosmos*. The installation consists of a bench, a simple, low, rectangular granite slab that represents her great grandmother's headstone. On the bench rest five dark brown beeswax bowls, each cradling a

Path Relocated (1975; Fig. 5), installed at Artpark, near Niagara Falls, a work that, as Lippard noted, references the immensity of nineteenth century landscape painting.³⁵ Sheets of muslin-backed rag paper, infused with organic materials from the site, were sewn together and extended 460 feet down the cliff face, the path of the original falls 12,000 years ago.³⁶ The form of the massive scroll, undulating down the surface of the precipitous rock plateau, was determined by the earth strata over which it flowed into the river gorge, linking earth with water. The materials modified the paper with which they were fused, while the superimposition of the scroll on the land temporarily altered the appearance of the site and ultimately its geologic composition. Stuart intended for the paper to disintegrate in situ, thereby completing the correspondence between work and site and manifesting the passage of time, explaining that "its union with the land again would evoke the perception of time and with it our awareness of the continual flow of nature's process."³⁷ By choosing the original location of the falls, recognized for their primordial power, Stuart foregrounded the concept of transformation over time—from origin to the artist's present to the future—fostered by place, but also modifiable by human intervention.

Fascinated with the origins of the earth, Stuart also undertook journeys in search of her own biological beginnings, a process culminating in the work *Sheep's Milk and the Cosmos* (1999; Fig. 6). This work is a record of her successful search for her paternal ancestors in New Zealand, a country whose coasts first were mapped by Captain Cook, seeking to document the transit of Venus across the sun. Inspired by a book of poems left by her father after he passed away, Stuart travelled to New Zealand in the mid-1980s and again in the 1990s in search of an address marked in pale sepia, almost indistinguishably, on the book's cover. Her search led her to a town down the coast of

waxen ram's head immersed in white sheep's milk. Encompassing the ensemble are twenty-five gridded encaustic paintings representing the night sky seen overhead by the artist upon discovery of her great-grandmother's grave. The painting is modulated, black and nebulous around the edges, like the Milky Way itself, and stippled with white stars. Joseph Ruzicka has noted that the vessels of milk represent the mammalian life force, the liquid essence that permits regeneration, the survival over millennia.³⁹ As in her moon drawings, depictions of the heavens for Stuart represent, at once: a compelling and formative force exerted on the individual and on the cultural imagination; the passage of epochal time, as planetary bodies undergo negligible change on a human scale; and a means to chart one's present position and future trajectory. The philosopher Edward Casey has noted that charts in Stuart's work suggest a sense of "...emergent and intangible possibility. As aids to navigation, they tell us where we *might* go, and only rarely where we *must* go."⁴⁰ The work records a rite of passage, Stuart's search for her own formative origins, her reclamation of her past and present, and a forecast of where she is headed. She embarked on her own voyage, similar to Cook's, but utilizing her own star charts to illuminate her course.

The sky chart was an important tool used by Stuart to conjure the priorities and accomplishments of indigenous and Pre-Columbian cultures and juxtapose them with her own. The land work *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns*, 1979 (Fig. 7 and Pl. 1) and her Nazca Lines series of 1981-82, created to track the heavens, prompt consideration of the pervasive need to comprehend one's place on the earth and envisage one's destiny. *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* was built on the Rowena Plateau above the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon. Similar to the Neolithic stone alignments that it references, Stuart's cairns marked the sunrise and sunset on June 21, 1979,



Fig. 8. Michelle Stuart, *Nazca Lines Chart Book* (1982), laminated handmade paper, earth and graphite, overall 11 1/4" x 31" x 2 1/4". © Michelle Stuart. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects.

the summer solstice in the northern hemisphere and the winter solstice in the southern hemisphere. To create the work, the artist arranged 3,400 stones (13 tons of rock) in a radial pattern, six lines emanating from a central cairn at equal angles, circumscribed by a stone circle 100 feet in diameter. At the terminus of three of the radials, were small stone circles.⁴¹ Completing the remaining three radials, which extended beyond the circle, were additional cairns built from round stones Stuart found in the river at the base of Mount Hood forty miles south.⁴² The stones were chosen in part to connote the ritual passage of time. The artist explained in a poetic text intended to accompany the work that the stones were meant "both to contrast with the dark indigenous basalt and to bring the mountain to the river ... a form of ritual passage ... the transition of spring to summer ... marked by water." The site itself embodied transition for the indigenous people that once dwelled there: "the place where the sun meets the rain."⁴³ Referencing the early nineteenth century Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Coast, Stuart also recalled in her text that the land's end of the Oregon Trail and the subsequent raft journey undertaken by Lewis and Clark had begun somewhere between the Hood River and the city of Dalles. Underneath the artist's central cairn, she buried rocks from Native American sites, "stones from Guatemala, New Jersey, Scandinavia and England," along with the Taoist poems of Han Shan of the Tang Dynasty and one by Rudyard Kipling.⁴⁴ These rocks, procured and relocated by the artist, are referents of the geographical locations and indigenous cultures from whence they came. Stuart recounted in her exhibition text: "Solstice...this cycle in time patterned by time ... rocks ... records from native American sites are buried under the central cairn ... a poem by Han-Shan ... a line from Kipling's Song to Mithras the Sun God ... 'many roads thou hath fashioned: all of them lead to the light.'" ⁴⁵ The artist's reference to many roads leading to the light poetically suggests many

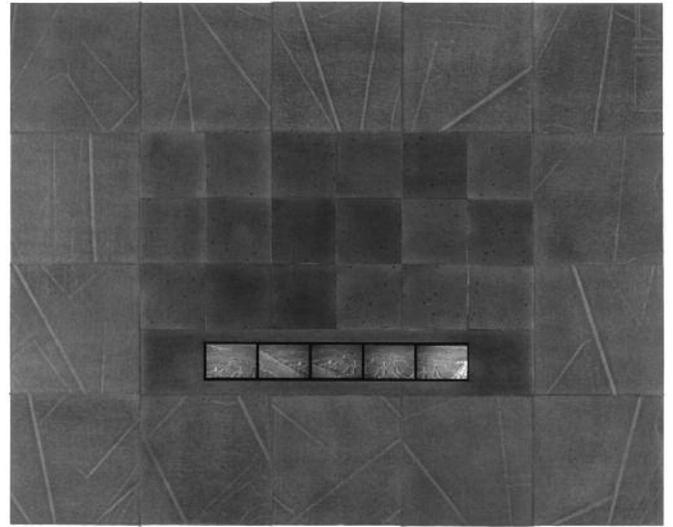


Fig. 9. Michelle Stuart, *Nazca Series: Southern Hemisphere Star Chart II* (1981), earth from site, black and white photographs, graphite, mounted on rag paper, 32" x 40". © Michelle Stuart. Courtesy the artist and Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects.

possible paths to an optimistic future evoked by the trajectories of all of the indigenous cultures alluded to in the work, all truncated in the name of Western exploration and conquest. Using the sun and moon as guiding forces, *Stone Alignments/ Solstice Cairns* juxtaposed the antecedent Native American cultures with the artist's contemporary moment, June 21, 1979, when she marked the solstice. The passage of time, evident in her early frottage drawings, here becomes more specific—marking particular cultural and historical references.

In her Nazca series, Stuart incorporated elements at once place-specific and time- transcendent, including the abstract lines carved by the ancient people native to the Nazca region. *Nazca Lines Star Chart* (1981-82; Pl. 2), *Nazca Lines Southern Hemisphere Constellation Chart Correlation* (1981; Pl. 3), *Nazca Lines Chart Book* (1982; Fig. 8), and *Nazca Series: Southern Hemisphere Star Chart II* (1981; Fig. 9), all resulted from her very

powerful encounter with the famed Nazca site, located in the desert between the towns of Nazca and Palpa on the Pampas de Jumana in southeastern Peru. The four works were conceived as related: all contain the same line pattern, adapted by the artist from those etched into the surface of the Nazca plain nearly two millennia ago. The abstract pattern, which the artist believed derived from star charts, comprises trapezoids, palimpsests, and intersecting diagonals, as well as contour lines incised arrow-straight for miles across valley floors, hills and crevices.⁴⁶

Nazca Lines Star Chart (Pl. 2) bears the imprint of the artist's own adaptation of the Nazca Lines, consisting of three triangular shapes, like the legs of a compass, intersecting one another, and superimposed by polygonal shapes entering from the lower right at a dramatic diagonal. To create this expansive (10' x 14') work, Stuart first etched lines with a very thin new pencil into 12" x 12" sheets of heavy rag paper backed with muslin. Avoiding the incised lines, she then rubbed earth from the site, richly translucent from quartz in the soil, so vigorously into the surface of the paper that her hands began to bleed. The paper became abraded from the rubbing so that the earth literally amalgamated with the paper, synthesizing the two materials, as well as the artist's blood. She then assembled the 12" x 12" sheets into groups of four attached to 24" x 24" archival board and compiled these together to form the final piece composed in her familiar Cartesian grid, connoting the imposition of scientific order on a much older, less rigid, more poetic means of charting the universe utilizing the natural earth as substrate.

Nazca Lines Southern Hemisphere Constellation Chart Correlation (Pl. 3) again employs the artist's adaptation of the Nazca Lines in an integrated series of drawings that recreates the process by which the people of the Nazca developed their cosmology. The work consists of three separate drawings on semi-transparent vellum overlaid so that each drawing visually relates to the others. The most graphic of the three drawings contains Stuart's pattern of the Nazca Lines, identical to those in *Nazca Lines Star Chart*. Discernable through this top layer is the second drawing depicting in pale gray the stars that populate the skies of the southern hemisphere viewable from the Nazca plateau. The third drawing contains geometric shapes rendered in red that, when overlaid with the southern stars, form constellations. The red contours connecting the stars to one another also serve to relate these distant balls of plasma, once known to the people of the Nazca Plateau, to the abstract patterns they carved into the desert floor. The red shapes of Stuart's southern constellations intersect with her Nazca lines, forming an abstract, visual relationship between the heavens and the indigenous earthwork. Thus, these three abstract drawings together form a star chart, conceptually related to *Nazca Lines Star Chart*, which integrates the map of the cosmos with soil from the site. These two works evoke a culture native to that soil, one that charted the heavens to define its relationship to the skies and what they portended. According to the artist, the earth drawing *Nazca Lines Star Chart* and *Nazca Lines Southern Hemisphere Constellation Chart Correlation* "are an edition philosophically—the big one needs the little one to

function... They walk together."⁴⁷ The smaller drawing that includes the southern constellations is the referent for the earth drawing: the Nazca Lines refer to southern skies and are incomplete without them.

Also depicting the boundlessness of the heavens is *Nazca Lines Chart Book* (Fig. 8), but here in a tripartite form akin to an altar piece and rendered as a book, thus revealing the Western impulse to contain and rationalize all knowledge of the universe. By rendering the charted stars as a book, Stuart pointed to the folly of restricting to finite form the infinity of information they contain. The pale gray surface of the central section suggests an open book bisected by a spine revealing two pages depicting the now familiar Nazca lines. The covers of the flanking books reveal the southern stars emanating from a bituminous sky. All three rectangular pieces are made of laminated paper, which the artist treated as a woodblock; using a sharp woodsman's blade, she repeatedly carved slits into the edges to create the appearance of pages. The book, however, is closed, because, as the artist explained, within the book is the secret of the lines, which nobody knows.⁴⁸ The book conceals a mystery that has not yet been solved by modern, rational means.

Created by a process similar to *Nazca Lines Star Chart*, the lines of Stuart's *Nazca Series: Southern Hemisphere Star Chart II* (Fig. 9) were first etched into the paper and rubbed with earth, and then assembled into grid form; but this work also contains a modern means of documenting place.⁴⁹ The etched outer squares surround a smaller, much darker, interior quadrangle, also comprising paper fused with earth from the site; and inlaid toward the bottom center of this smaller field are five aerial photographs of the site taken by the artist from an airplane. The reprisal of the use of photographs seen in *Passages: Mesa Verde*, here much more integrated, introduces yet another means of knowing, of recording the world that specifically references modernity. The photographs force an abrupt collision between this distant cultural past, referenced literally by the soil and symbolically by pattern, and the present day. Like *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns*, which pointedly documented the artist's presence during the 1979 solstice, the photographs contained in *Southern Hemisphere Star Chart II* also mark a specific but passing moment experienced by the artist. Just as the earth from the site, fused with the paper, provides evidence of place as well as the artist's process, the photographs achieve a similar end. Each photograph is an interruption—one moment isolated from millennia, capturing a past record of the southern skies, the Nazca Lines, in a contemporary document.

In the Nazca series, Stuart compared two cultures in their impulse to chart and record. Like later Western explorers, once dominant cultures like Inca, Maya, and the people of the Nazca sought to map their skies, creating sophisticated astronomical observatories and star charts, impressive accomplishments that did not in themselves enable these cultures to endure. Such a reading challenges notions of scientific progress and American exceptionalism, questioning the belief that modern American culture is permanent and inviolable. These works are critical of domination inherent in

scientific exploration, with its emphasis on charting, mapping, and thereby controlling, a process which served to destroy or assimilate the cultural identity of many indigenous populations located, mapped, and ultimately controlled. Creating correspondences between cultures begs the question of Western superiority. The unpredictable ways in which cultures meld, and the sparks elicited from their convergence, suggests that the grinding, mechanistic nature of technological society need not endure, and that alternative, more inclusive futures may, in fact, prevail.

Stuart's newest work *Trajectory of Evolutionary Correspondences* (2010; front cover) retains the photograph as scientific record and the grid as a reference to the imposition of order, and yet it reverses course from the heavens to delve into the microcosm of biological life. The work includes photographs taken from scientific treatises as well as the artist's own pictures capturing the transformation of life in a sequence marking the passage of time on an evolutionary scale. The vessels, similar to the autobiographical wax vessels in *Sheep's Milk and the Cosmos*, suggest origins. Life force for the artist, whether emanating from earth or sky, shapes life, from the vastness of the Nazca Plateau to the microcosm of the insect.

Stuart's interest in the depiction of time derived in part from the fiction of writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose short stories dealing with nonlinear conceptions of time and the preponderance of information proliferating into infinity were of great interest to the artist.⁵⁰ For example, in Borges's short story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, a Chinese nobleman purports to build a great labyrinth in which all men would become lost. Presumed to have died before completing the structure, he left only a set of manuscripts of inconsistent and circumlocutory narrative. In the preface to the first of these he wrote, "I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths,"⁵¹ revealing that the manuscript *was* the labyrinth, and the forking paths occurred in time, not in space. Borges's story suggests that when we make a choice, we do not limit our possibilities, but instead we choose all futures simultaneously and move forward in each timeline, creating many diverse futures, which themselves fork and proliferate. The notion of a limitless open future undermines the closed and circumscribed nature of Cold War society,⁵² and is common in feminist utopian works, which are by nature open-ended, resisting closed, perfect-world utopias. Feminist utopianism, a historical response to the constriction and rigidity of Cold War society, is rooted in the idea that the classic, previsualized, perfect-world utopias historically determined by men are in fact a nightmare for women. Modeling her explorations on the scientific investigations of an earlier era, Stuart embarked on voyages seeking the origins of self and cultural identity, and the transformation of both through the process of discovery. These works, which revealed the transformative role of natural forces endemic to place operating over geologic time, subverted the closely held Western idea that the imposition of scientific control would play a lasting role in shaping individual or culture. In her sound track to her 1981 installation *Correspondences*, evoking the cultural correspondences between Mayan culture and her

own, Stuart commented on the freedom of the traveler whose quest is without boundary:

Who is the traveler ... the traveler is whomever we decide ... we give the traveler his identity ... he goes where we imagine because the traveler is within ... we impose our territory on the map of the traveler ... when correspondences are made the passage is insured. The traveler, then ... is the sailor...he embodies the dreamer beneath the white eye of night...the sea's horizon is the awesome edge of the unproven beyond ... without boundary...the sailor ...the most fateful of men ... traveler by moon as well as sun in a voyage dawning with caprice ... the vessel ... his vessel ... drawing a nebulous line across water ... the form of which is erased by the act itself.⁵³

In these feminist utopian works, Stuart embodied the explorer, at once internalizing the impulse for conquest, which serves to close boundaries, and subjecting it to critical examination by presenting alternative cosmologies, new conceptual spaces, allowing artist and viewer to imagine new paths for self and society. ●

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Notes

1. James Shepherd Cook, *Captain Cook's Journal: First Voyage Round the World* (Forgotten Books, 2008), 331.
2. Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism, Women and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996). Sargisson developed her theory of feminist utopianism after close analysis of numerous literary works by women authors written in the 1970s and 1980s.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. *Ibid.*, 20.
5. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London & New York: Verso, 2005), xi. Jameson wrote that this concept of utopia "betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect, reluctant subjects." Jameson asserted that during the Cold War utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism.
6. Lucy Sargisson encouraged a notion of utopianism that imagined an achievable goal, but one rooted in the process itself. Sargisson's theory of feminist utopianism relies heavily on Ernst Bloch's notion of utopia as process articulated in his three volume opus *The Principle of Hope*, originally published in 1959 as *The Principle of Utopia*. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*. 3 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch summarized the functions of utopia as follows: "protest against the status quo; the anticipation of the possibilities of radical change"; and the insistence on their realization, found in Alain Martineau and Herbert Marcuse, *Herbert Marcuse's Utopia* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1986), 81.
7. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, ii.
8. Gerrit Henry, "Michelle Stuart: Navigating Coincidence," *Print Collector's Newsletter*, vol. 13, no. 6 (Jan.-Feb., 1988), 195. Henry discusses the importance of chance in Stuart's artistic process.

9. Jackson Lears, "Out of Control: Art and Accident in a Managerial Age," in Joan Marter, ed., *Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963* (Newark: Newark Museum, and New Brunswick & London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1999), 49.
10. The critique of mechanism or technological rationalism in Western, and especially American society is essentially the primary topic of each of the following books: Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 1964; Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 1964; Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, 1967; Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, 1969.
11. Christine Filippone, "Science, Technology and Utopias in the Work of Contemporary Women Artists," (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2009). I argued that Sargisson's feminist utopianism, heretofore applied only to literary works of the 1970s and 1980s, was equally applicable to visual art of this period; also that these feminist utopias criticize associations of perfect-world utopias with technological and scientific progress, and re-imagine these forms of knowledge and practice that historically excluded women, as integral to a new, less-restrictive social order in which both genders contribute equally to an ongoing process that works to change the present rather than program a future.
12. See for example, Susan Heineman, Review, *Artforum*, vol. 13, no.10 (Summer, 1975): 74-75; Susan Stoops, "Michelle Stuart: A Personal Archaeology," i, vol. 14, no. 2 (Winter, 1994): 18; Stephen Westfall, "Melancholy Mapping," *Art in America* (Feb. 1987): 107; April Kingsley, Review, *Art in America*, vol. 62, no. 3 (1974): 111.
13. Lucy Lippard, "A New Landscape Art," MS. (April, 1977). Reproduced in "Michelle Stuart's Reading in Time," *Michelle Stuart: The Elements 1973-79* (New York: Fawbush Gallery, 1992), n.p.
14. Henry, "Michelle Stuart: Navigating Coincidence," 195.
15. Westfall, "Melancholy Mapping," 107.
16. President John F. Kennedy, "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort, Houston, TX. Sept. 12, 1962. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03SpaceEffort09121962.htm>. (Accessed August 13, 2010)
17. Interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
18. Stoops, "Michelle Stuart: A Personal Archaeology," 19. Stoops discusses the role of the grid in Stuart's work as a means of applying a unifying law or order.
19. Interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
20. Carey Lovelace, "Michelle Stuart's Silent Gardens," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 63, no. 1 (Sept. 1988): 78. Lovelace comments that Stuart "was interested in the moon not only as a symbol, but as something exerting invisible forces on our lives."
21. Ibid.
22. Westfall, "Melancholy Mapping," 106-07. Henry has also suggested in reference to her 1988 suite of prints *Navigating Coincidences*, that her use of the grid was a means to "intensify the cartographic illusion." Henry, "Michelle Stuart: Navigating Coincidence," 195.
23. Stoops, "Michelle Stuart: A Personal Archaeology," 17.
24. Corinne Robins, "Michelle Stuart: The Mapping of Myth and Time," *Arts Magazine*, 51.4 (Dec. 1976): 83.
25. Many authors have indicated that Stuart's father was an engineer. Stuart corrected the record in our interview. Her father was a businessman who, having lost his import-export business during the Depression, subsequently secured a position with the Department of Water and Power, surveying the acquisition of land for electricity and water. He was also a soldier who served in three wars, including WWII, in which he served as a colonel. Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
26. Stoops, "Michelle Stuart: A Personal Archaeology," 17. Stoops has noted that her work as a cartographer might have activated her subsequent use of map forms or grids.
27. Interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
28. Ibid. Stuart also noted that her interest in social justice may have been inspired by Ben Shahn's *Sacco and Vanzetti* series. She recounted, "I got very interested in what I thought was an injustice."
29. Interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
30. Ibid. Joyce Kozloff relates the origins of *Heresies* similarly. "Transcript of Interview with Joyce Kozloff," Interviewed by Lynn Hershman, May 14, 2006. New York, NY. Stanford Digital Collections. <http://lib.stanford.edu/women-art-revolution/transcript-interview-joyce-kozloff>. (Accessed August 7, 2010.)
31. Frederick Ted Castle, "To Reify the Earth," in *Voyages* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1985), 62.
32. Stoops, "Michelle Stuart: A Personal Archaeology," 20.
33. Gerrit Henry, "Paper in Transition," *Print Collector's Newsletter*, vol. 10, no. 3, (July-August, 1979): 85.
34. Lovelace, "Michelle Stuart's Silent Gardens," 78. Lovelace comments on the corollary between the theme of time and the laborious creation process involved in Stuart's work.
35. Lippard, "Michelle Stuart's Reading in Time," n.p.
36. Lawrence Alloway, "Michelle Stuart," in *Voyages* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1985), 50.
37. Michelle Stuart, in Sharon Edelman, ed., *Artpark: The Program in Visual Arts* (Lewiston, NY: Artpark, 1976), 122.
38. Interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
39. Joseph Ruzicka, "Essential Light: The Skies of Michelle Stuart," *Art in America*, 88.6 (June 2000): 86.
40. Edward Casey, *Earth Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* (London and Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005), 69.
41. Alloway asserts that *Solstice Cairns* was linear in conception. See Alloway, "Michelle Stuart," 52. Stuart created what she believed to be an abstract, probably mathematical diagram, a record of the thinking of indigenous culture.
42. Mount Hood is located 60 miles from Mount St. Helens, which erupted calamitously less than one year after *Stone Alignments* was completed.
43. Michelle Stuart, "Then," in *Voyages* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1985), 14.
44. Tom Sandqvist, "Stratas in Time," *Voyages* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1985), 58.
45. Stuart, "Then," 14.
46. Alloway, "Michelle Stuart," 52.
47. Telephone conversation with the artist, August 21, 2010.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid. This work, at one time stored in a building that flooded, is no longer extant.
50. Interview with the artist, New York, NY, April 30, 2008.
51. Jorge Luis Borges, *Jorge Luis Borges: Labyrinths & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates, (New York: New Directions, 1964), 26.
52. Paul Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America, Inside Technology*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
53. Michelle Stuart, Script for stereo audio sound track of *Correspondences*, in *Voyages* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1985), 17.