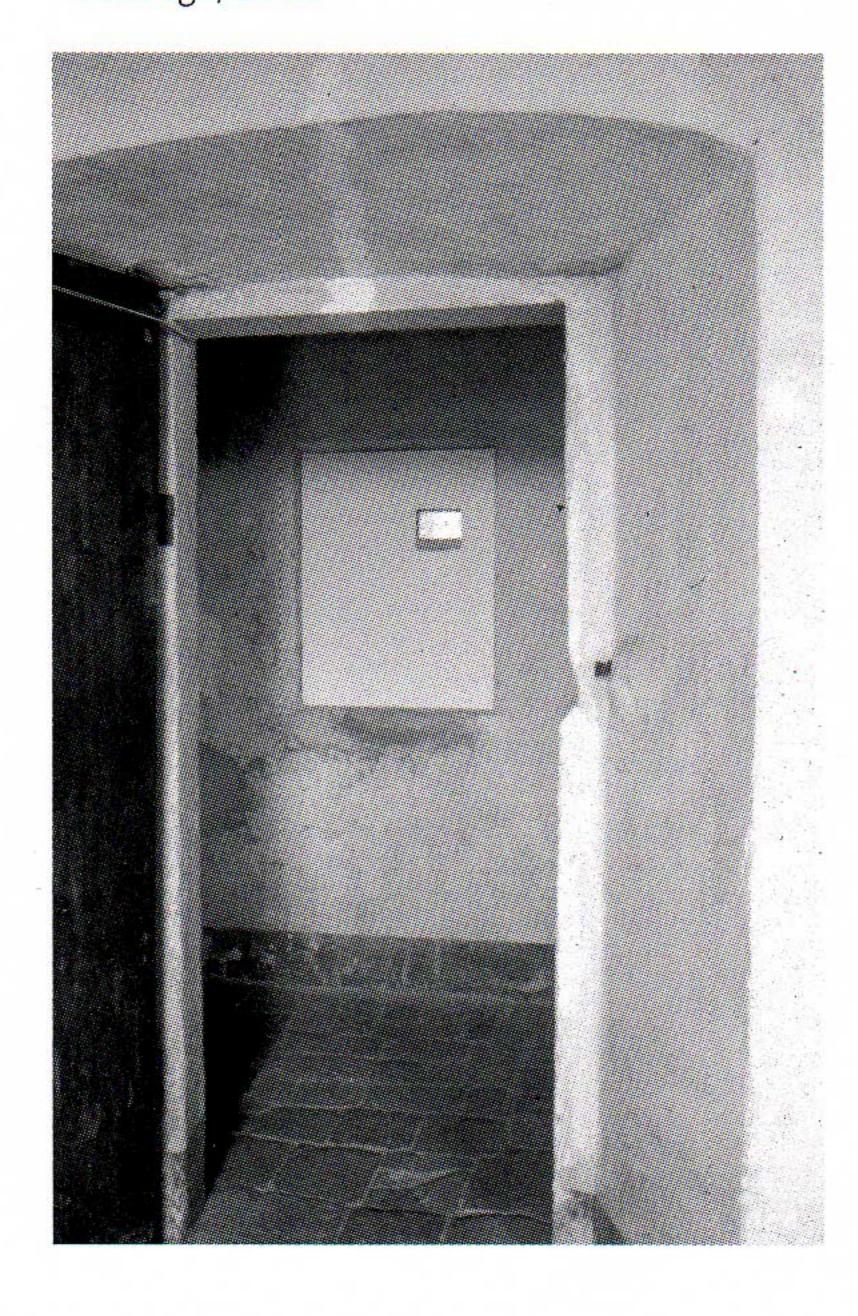# GETTING LOST AND THE LOCALIZED MIND

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IL DELIZIOSO OCCHIO…, 1991
Haha, Castello di Rivara, Rivara, Italy

One of three camera obscuras installed in a medieval castle; in this small room, visitors could hold a postcard-shaped piece of transparent vellum up to a pinhole to create a temporary image of the view outside, and to take as a souvenir.

PREFACE: GETTING LOST ONCE AGAIN

When I wrote "Getting Lost" I was living in San Francisco and I was trying to explain to myself how I had experienced the big shift from Sicily to California. For me getting lost meant being attracted by an unknown place and at the same time feeling the burden of losing my ground. Through the process of going astray, I was experiencing how we are not indifferent to geography, places, architectures, and landscapes. We are molded by light, walls, mountains, and cities and learn how to mold ourselves in new landscapes and streets.

I was asking myself why I have always been split by two opposing desires: to belong to some place and to lose myself in unknown countries. The answer has been that this was my way to gain knowledge, my methodology for becoming sensitive to the world outside. What I had written then, years later has been read by the Haha group with the amazement of discovering something familiar.

Haha takes places seriously. Museums, buildings, and sites all have a "discourse" that Haha is able to perceive. There is a dialogue that takes place. Places are taken in dialogue, are provoked to react through unexpected interventions: slight changes, displaced walls, tubes, objects. A pink zeppelin provokes the fragile steadiness of a museum, coins fall from above to distract the public from a big Picasso painting.

The other element we share is the ability to get lost in new places, cities, buildings. Getting lost here is research, developing a dialogue with places that tries to avoid prejudice. The situation, this special time and space, the context becomes the absorbing condition of the artists' work.

Offered lodging, by chance, in a hotel in Santa Barbara that is at the same time a retirement home, Haha decided to investigate the stories and the destinies of the elderly guests. Haha's methodology, like mine, is to pass from getting lost to grounding in a process of back and forth in which subjectivity and places merge. Places are not only spaces but people, and together they produce stories. The attempt to tell these stories is the challenge in both Haha's and my work.

GETTING LOST AND THE LOCALIZED MIND

> There is a spot of mud on your seaward cheek.
>
> – Raymond Firth, "We the Tikopia" (London 1936)

It can happen on the freeway, in a city that we don't know, or even on the way home. It is a frustrating, embarrassing, and at the same time ridiculous experience. We are put in a position of being displaced, misplaced. It shows an ambiguous, vaguely defined, confused relationship with the environment in which we get lost. We suddenly find ourselves without sense of direction, without reference points. We are "here," but "here" doesn't correspond to a "where" we know or would like to be.

An old Hungarian joke tells of two Alpine climbers who get lost in the mountains. One of them takes a map from his bag and consults it. After a while he says to the other climber, "I found it, we're on that mountain over there." The story shows that it is generally impossible for us to lose our cognition of being "here." But knowing that we are here is not all it takes to get oriented.

Getting oriented, like getting lost, is a cultural experience. It is the acquisition, the building, the discovery, or the lack of a network of references. It is an activity we usually share with other people. Or it can put us into a preexistent social and cultural context. There are various ways and degrees of getting lost.

AS IMMERSION INTO THE UNKNOWN

We can get lost in the woods, like the Temne children in Guinea who are sent by their parents into the bush by the edge of the village to collect leaves for wrappings. They know that sometimes "as you walk through the trees you begin to feel queer, your head becomes dizzy, you don't know where you are. You shout for your parents, then they come and find you. This spell, the Temne say, is Aronshon's and nearly all seem to succumb to it at least once in childhood, and some in adulthood too; adults are said to receive a whipping from Aronshon so that they return cut and bruised."[1] This type of getting lost is an immersion in the unknown. The unknown offers apparitions, ambiguities, fright, confusion, danger.

In Brahmanic India, the Sanskrit word *aranya*, which is commonly translated as "forest," is derived from *arana*, "strange," which is in turn related to the Indo-European root *al/ol*, itself the source of the Latin words, *alter*, and *ille*. The aranya, before defining a territory distinguished from the village space by certain material traits (a zone without agriculture, covered with trees), "designates the other of the village."[2]

For the Gourmantche' of Gobinangou in Upper Volta, the idea of *fuali* cannot be translated in terms of physical or geographical reality. "It is over there, far away, always far away." But far away doesn't necessarily mean situated at a great geographical distance. What is far away can be right next to you. Fuali is not a surveyable territory but a space with shifting boundaries, which vary noticeably as a function of time.

> At night the Fuali advances into the village up to the point marked by the habitation's enclosures, sometimes even penetrating its interstices. When the sun is at its zenith, the village territory seems to be dotted with little islands of bush into which it is

dangerous to penetrate. Fuali implies indistinction, the absence of differentiated contours, the elimination of boundaries. Thus at night any space outside of the house tends to turn into "bush"; the way the landscape looks in the raw light of the moon, when things seem to return to a state of indifferentiation is, equally, the bush.

The root *fua*, from which *fuali* is derived, is opposed in certain contexts to the root *do*, which provides the basis for the word for village, *dogu*. These two roots serve to form a long series of pairs of contrasting terms. The semantic field covered by the root *fua* includes the notion of a space affecting the human body in a specific way: if you stay *fuali-ni* (in the bush) for too long, or find yourself in a certain situation, it is as if you were "emptied," "pumped out," pressed," "flattened," "to the point of evaporation."[3]

Getting lost could mean being outside the limits, off track, cheated by the ambiguities of a place. We are attracted to these limits by the similarities they have with other places that we know, but these suddenly reveal themselves to be unknown when taken outside of the context which is familiar to us:

A knight in a Praguese tale gets lost in a wood. The maze of branches and the darkness of the night confuse him. He wanders for a long time, to no avail. Finally he sees a breach in the forest and a light in the distance. He reaches the light; it is an inn. The innkeeper opens the door and asks him where he is coming from. The knight tells his story. The innkeeper reveals to him that he has been in the Black Forest. The knight dies of fright.

The fear of getting lost is sometimes stronger and more terrifying than the act itself, because it means to be adrift, with none of the security associated with the familiar, with one's orientation in places that are ours, our culture and world. In her famous essay "Balinese Character," Margaret Mead describes how important it is for a Balinese to always know where he is located:

The words for the cardinal points are among the first that a child learns and are used even for the geography of the body. A Balinese will tell you that there is a fly on the West side of your face... Orientation in time, space and status are the essentials of social existence, and the Balinese, although they make very strong spirits for ceremonial occasions, with a few exceptions resist alcohol, because if one drinks one loses one's orientation. Orientation is felt as a protection rather than a straight jacket and its loss provokes extreme anxiety. If one takes a Balinese quickly in a motor car away from his native village so that he loses his bearings, the result may be several hours of illness and a tendency to sleep.[4]

AS A BEGINNING

Then there is getting lost as a condition of beginning. There are many fairy tales about children who get lost in the forest and learn to find their way, utilizing a unique sense in the threatening confusion of the place that surrounds them.

To grow up means, in fact, to become free of the dramatic consequences of getting lost like children in the crowd at a fair, or in the human river of the street. This means learning how to get oriented by oneself, needing no guide to leave behind the meanders and the pitfalls of the surrounding environment. To get out of trouble is to overcome the fear of being terminated by the indifference and dispersion of the place where we are, to find in it our point of reference.

For Andrea, the protagonist of Hugo Von Hoffmansthal's novel *Andrea or the Reunited Ones*, the "forest" is eighteenth-century Venice. The disorientation that Andrea experiences at the passage between adolescence and a new world is made up of *sottoporteghi* and ambiguous *campielli*, the physical features of his everyday environment.

Has he been there before or is he mistaking it for some other place? There are characters that appear and disappear among the *calle*, *pergole*, and enclosed gardens. Andrea must get to know the illusion, the chameleonlike nature of the place, its everlasting deception.

Andrea gets lost in the city and in himself, in his mistaking of dream for reality, but he learns to deal with the slippery, ungraspable density of reality and to give it some order without underestimating its complexity. The maps that he makes of Venice and of reality represent getting oriented in the unknown without denying its power of seduction.

AS ADJUSTMENT TO NEW SURROUNDINGS

Nonetheless, getting lost is a continually latent experience. We spend most of our time conquering, defining, and affirming the buoys around which we move and orient ourselves, the landmarks which enable us to keep from despair in the incognito journey between known but scattered places. The reciprocal side of this experience, the use of this feeling of a possible and imminent danger, is the sense of adventure, "the conquest of space," that gives us new space for our movements, new friends, new places, and extends our mental map. Getting lost in these cases is a condition of beginning, the need and the ground on which to start or to resume getting oriented.

Between getting lost and getting oriented there is a cultural process, the use of external, arbitrary occasions to make them propitious, to make the unknown hospitable, and to become able to settle in it.

Getting oriented could mean, for an individual or a group of people who have recently immigrated to a new city, all the frustrations, failed attempts, acquaintances, long waits, senses of new reality, life preservers made up of people and places. Day by day, it starts as an elementary network—those two or three friends, those street corners, the grocery store, maybe a bar, the first informal approaches of the workplace—and then becomes a more complex net that allows one to recognize and include the remaining unknown sites, parting from and returning to more familiar places.

> Never before our time have so many people been uprooted. Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis is the quintessential experience of our time. That industrialization and capitalism would require such a transport of men on an unprecedented scale and with a new kind of violence was already prophesied by the opening of the slave trade in the sixteenth century. The Western Front in the First World War with its conscripted massed armies was a later confirmation of the same practice of tearing up, assembling, transporting and concentrating in a "no-man's land." Later concentration camps, across the world, followed the logic of the same continuous practice.[5]

To this day these practices can take the name of resettlement or relocation. They are the heavy burden of the survivors, of people who have lost their land. Is it possible for them to find another one to belong to? Or does the process of incorporation mean the loss of their culture? How they will leave their mark on the new land depends on the strength and the degree of freedom of the immigrants. In this sense the immigrant's daily life in a new, unknown city could be compared to an activity of foundation.

AS IF IT WERE POSSIBLE

Getting lost intentionally today becomes more difficult. In a world in which the natural environment is being invaded and substituted by the built, the unknown moves farther and farther away, toward the ungraspable. Traveling and its modern mythology can be seen today in the overwhelming number of travel agencies and the amount of literature offering a cheap and hopeless attempt at getting lost. The promise of traveling to exotic places has turned getting lost into a commodity affected by the laws of the market, that is, a scarce commodity to be bought at an increasingly high price.

This started with the Western colonization of Asia and Africa. It is the journey as imagination, discovery, and exploration of "virgin lands," "far away cultures and peoples." It is Africa, Asia, or the Americas seen through the eyes of Western civilization anxious to lose its own tracks. It continues today in the last frontier of Rondonia, the "virgin part of Amazonia" where a new generation of colonists are chasing after their new world.

This kind of travel, in the history of mentalities, in the history of the last fifty years, and in personal histories, heads toward an extinction. Anything new is left out of reach. Everything has been channeled in known directions by explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, travelers, tourists, and photographers. One can always track down the way home.

As Socrates once said about someone who was unable to enjoy his travels: "Of course; he is always taking himself with him."[16] To "take ourselves with us" means colonizing with our presence every step of our journey. To know new places corresponds in this century with denying their difference. This is not the same as the gesture of the founder, who was asking for a conciliation with the preexistent. He was negotiating with the "powers" of a place that was new to him. Getting lost has become impossible because we overwhelm the place where we stop or settle with our order; it is not the result of a long, prudent, sometimes cautious interaction. Today's traveler, as full of amazement as he might be, can usually only fake getting lost. He doesn't fit into any of the roles that could make it possible. He is becoming less and less a "stranger," that is, someone who understands that he must be accepted by the hospitality of the inhabitants, and is aware of the risks of his or her anomalous identity. Those who don't play the role of the stranger are "tourists," destroyers. But "traveling" still owes its hidden fascination to the meaning of the journey for the *homo viator* of the Middle Ages,[17] for the pilgrim in every traditional culture, for the "enchanted traveler."

For them the journey is in itself a "sense," because it is oriented, has a destination, and is an introduction to the terrestrial condition of provisionality, the ultimate impossibility of imposing our own settlement order onto the general order of things and of the cosmos.

The mere fact of spatial separation from the familiar and habitual is an example of this. It may, in various cultures have punitive, purificatory, expiatory, cognitive, instructional, therapeutic,

transformative, and many other facets, aspects and functions. But basically the process and state of liminality represents at once a negation of many, though not all, of the features of preliminal social structure and an affirmation of another order of things and relations.

AS TAX COLLECTORS

The conflict between locality and its invasion by a new kind of traveler who is unable to get lost takes us to another category of getting lost. The municipal officials of Paris, before the drawing up of the "Plan of City Limits" in 1728, were often unable to find their way in the intrigue of the street life, of the empasses, cul de sacs, courts, stairs, rooms, barracks. Every *arrondissement* represented a Babel in itself, in which one who didn't belong to that specific neighborhood could easily get lost.[19]

"The Courts of Miracles" was a term used for the densely inhabited parts of the city. The crowd was made up of inhabitants more than of residents. They managed the inner life of the neighborhood with a mixture of crafts and local exchanges, of conflicts and solidarities, of local production and transformation of goods. This texture was subsistence-oriented and brought with it a strong sense of its defensible boundaries. To enter these areas without the inhabitants or against their will could be difficult.

When the Plan was drawn up in 1728, the municipality attempted to clean out the intrigue of the arrondissement, to make the city easier for public officials to manage, to wipe out all the obstructions in the streets—the provisional shelters, the blankets, baskets, tents. The tax collectors could enter the neighborhoods without fear only if its inner life was tamed. For this reason the municipal policies included the closing of all doors after sunset, the numbering of every house, and the labeling of every street. Only after this operation was complete could the map of the city be useful for their control.

These measures introduced a new kind of external orientation while denying the inner orientation of the inhabitants. Until then, in most European cities the orientation was not topographical but relativistic. In Dante's Florence[20] and in the preindustrial Florentine territory until 1785, one could orient oneself according to the names of the *canti*. These were focal points, as were *loggias*, lamps, tabernacles, the houses of the important families, and the main shops, particularly the pharmacies. The names of the canti were to be used to designate the streets when they were labeled in 1785. The houses were not numbered until 1808. To find an address meant to find and ask some inhabitant of the *contrada* for directions. Asking was part of the role of the stranger, the foreigner. The same conception still exists today in Japan with the notion of *fudo*,[21] which represents a range, a social and spatial domain with unitary characteristics.

Roland Barthes, in his book *The Empire of Signs*,[22] recounts his experience of getting oriented in Japan. In the absence of addresses as we know them, the inhabitants have an incredibly accurate ability to give directions with drawings and sketches. The predominance of an "areolar" conception of the city's space, as if it were constituted of different contiguous villages and the margins among them, corresponds to the Paris described by Rabelais.[23]
It was a city full of many different activities performed in its open spaces as well as in unlocked rooms, markets, fairs, feasts; senses were confronted with animals, screams, odors, fights, games, bloody or healing activities, tricks, household goods, fruit and fishes, and

laundry drying. All the activity made rapid passage through the neighborhood impossible. This kind of city life clogged any attempt at crossing and kept in check any external intervention by the police or army. In Paris, after the decision of the municipality to label the streets, the inhabitants of the arrondissement resisted the measure, lynching and stoning public officials for more than twenty years.[24] This kind of city presented a terror for the new state municipalities of Europe after the French Revolution, such as in London, where alleys and narrow streets, corners and sidewalks were to be the ground for Victorian fantasies—mystery stories of thieves and killers hiding themselves in caches and under trapdoors.[25] Or it could be San Francisco's Chinatown at the beginning of the last century, a mixture of real and fantasized inner-city life with the mythical underground galleries of three or more floors, opium dens, and all sorts of illegal traffic.[26] It is against this terrible dominance of the "locality" that the first urban policies were directed. Their purpose was to wipe out the city of its inhabitants, allowing only disciplined residents to remain. This policy was applied through demolitions, evictions, destructions of courts, cul de sacs, and winding streets, and the unveiling of the exclusive domains of the locality with their suspected threat to hygiene, propriety, and public morality.[27] Cities were forced to stop being intricate, tangled forests in which foreigners get lost.

AS TOTAL DEMOLITION

Locality is a form of belonging to a place. The place which is ours belongs to us and we belong to it.[28] "If a man says he comes from Akenfield he knows he's telling someone from another part of the neighborhood a good deal more than this. Anything from his appearance to his politics could be involved."[29]

This belonging is ensured by the sharing of a mental map stretched over the territory, to which everyone makes their contribution, either maintaining or confirming it or modifying some part of it. This way of defining space contains in itself the process and the collective motivations of the settlement. If it is wiped out, the culture of the inhabitants of that locality cannot be recovered.

The denial of locality can be applied to the most recent category of getting lost. A classical example is that of the Bororo culture, a tribe in Brazilian Amazonia.

> In the circular village layout, clans of the Exerae moiety occupy specified positions in the northern crescent, and those of Tugarege moiety are placed opposite in the southern portion. But inside the men's house, which is "the axis of the categorical order which relates men to men, nature, and deities," the relative positions of the moieties are reversed, thus expressing "the fundamental tenet of this order, that through ritual men become transformed into creatures antithetical to their usual social selves, into members of the other moiety."[30]

The whole symbolism is embedded and expressed in the spatial layout of the village. When the Salesian Missionaries arrived, they decided that in order to penetrate the Bororo culture and make the Christian message available to them, it was essential to unhinge their spatial system.[31] They reordered the Bororo huts into parallel lines. The effect was surprising. The Bororo lost their cultural orientation, they felt lost. They were no longer able to recall the

complex symbolic system of inversions of their social organization. Their culture had been physically erased.

AS SWISS DISEASE

What Ernesto DeMartino calls "territorial anguish" are the consequences of a cultural system menaced by not being in its spatial configuration.[32] For the southern Italian peasant of the 1950s as well as for the "Balinese character," it could happen that "if one takes him in a motor car away from his native village"—such that he loses sight of his *campanile*—the result could be an extreme anxiety. This state of being *spaesato*, spaced out, is mainly a result of the anguish created by the threatened loss of his own world. In 1678, a Swiss medical student named Johannes Hofer defined this kind of state as a disease and named it *Schweizerkrankheit*, "Swiss disease," because it was affecting the Swiss emigrants and exiles. The symptoms were "insomnia, anorexia, palpitations, and a persistent homesickness." Only since 1774 has this term been used for the disease, otherwise known as "nostalgia," to define these symptoms for people other than the Swiss.[33] Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, physicians claimed that this disease could cause the death of a patient if he wasn't able to return home.[34]

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