

Detour or maps for getting lost

From the groundwork to the project, to the cognitive artefact

By Maria Sebregondi

There's a phrase by Walter Benjamin that I've always loved. This is how it goes:

“Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling.”

A “different schooling” and perhaps a special map, too, a sort of counter-map, a map for getting lost. Exactly, maps for getting lost – everything begins with this image concealed in Benjamin's famous phrase. In a certain sense, every invention, every creation, every story, large or small, develops out of a map in which someone has intentionally become lost in a darkness where, at a certain point, something begins to glitter, to speak, to sing, to emit a scent, a flavour, a voice. This is what I call groundwork, a whole – more or less clear and distinct – that leads to the design and the actual piece of work or artwork through a complex and very personal cognitive process. Out of this idea the Detour project developed – its name, its path through people's lives, stories, and places. When Raffaella Guidobono and I came up with this project, we asked one another: what exactly is the map that each of us creates for ourselves in order to get lost among our impressions and notions, just as someone gets lost in a forest – of ideas, barely sketched out concepts, images that have yet to be defined, stories that are still at their very beginning? And so we asked people who have a “different schooling” in various territories of consciousness, in different cities of the imagination, and in different fields of representation, to describe and narrate and recount one of these maps on the blank pages of a notebook. The various maps became journeys, stories, projects, sculptures, etchings, photographs, dreams, and jewel boxes. Each of them plunged into their own forest, got lost, and then found themselves again, bringing back a detail of his or her imaginary world – polished or rough, glittering or dark, through addition or subtraction. The fragmentary detail of each notebook became part of a whole and was placed on display in its own transparent case – protected but accessible, reserved but shared, complete in itself but part of a story – ultimately composing a multidimensional prism. Each visitor was thus able to retrace the steps of the journey of each author, to literally handle it, delicately leafing through the notebook with white-gloved fingers. They rummaged through the mysterious drawers – stirring into motion thoughts, emotions, ideas, creating new maps for getting lost and finding oneself again. All the various notebook fragments added up into a great tapestry which is itself a new map, a new imaginative territory from which to set forth, a small atlas of contemporary creativity. The Detour archive-in-progress, which can also be perused online through hundreds of videos dedicated to each individual notebook, is also, and most importantly, a gift, or rather a network of gifts, to support the lettera27 non-profit foundation and its projects to provide access to knowledge. This notebook-gift, a portable workshop, a small clothes hanger of memory, an accumulator of emotions and storytellers, becomes both a medium and a symbol in a creative and cognitive relay race still to be run through more territories in which we can once again become lost and find ourselves.