

From April to May 2014, Rozalinda Borcila and Brian Holmes developed a research device called "Foreign Trade Zone: A People's Consultancy," in the metropolitan region of Chicago. It consisted of a map room in ThreeWalls Gallery, a program of workshops and learning walks, and an extensive website.
<http://southwestcorridornorthwestpassage.org>

The "Foreign Trade Zone: A People's Consultancy" project grew out of a shared interest in Chicago's ballooning logistics industry, the people who work for it, and its crucial but often forgotten role in constituting the daily life of neoliberal society. It also grew out of a shared desire to develop a broader and more useful kind of cultural practice, not subordinated to the imperatives of the specialized art circuit, but instead, able to engage with global issues and also with local communities directly affected by them. The title, "Foreign Trade Zone," refers to a legal device dating back to the 1930s that treats designated areas, in or adjacent to ports, as foreign territory for customs purposes. Over time, "in or adjacent to" has come to mean with a sixty-mile radius or a ninety-minute drives from a grantor authority that may not be anywhere near water! FTZs bring the free trade of the open seas onto dry land, thereby contributing to the relentless dismantling of all laws that aim to safeguard social and ecological reproduction on a particular territory. We wanted to ask questions about this process, beyond the Foreign Trade Zones themselves, and to consult with whoever would get involved or care to answer. For that we needed our own device, not legal and entrepreneurial, but cultural and social.

The long-term work in Chicago, however, has let us go much more deeply into our subject than any professional speciality, whether or artistic or academic, would normally allow. What we've really been exploring are the colonial framings and historical transformations of an industrial development corridor that grew up around an indigenous portage route and a settler transportation project (the Illinois & Michigan Canal, completed in 1848).

The notion of path dependency, borrowed from economic history, has helped us to understand this whole process of aggregation, where each preceding phase of development tends to condition, channel, guide and limit the successive phases. Path dependency doesn't just mean that "stuff goes where stuff is." It means that the historical conditions under which technologies and organizational forms emerge will continue to exert an often decisive influence on their development going forward, even after fairly radical breaks like the shift from canal to railroad to highway. Such shifts are additive, with lots of carry-over, in terms of culture as well as technology. So it turns out that we're all more or less patho-dependent: on colonialism, on large-scale agriculture, on industry, on finance, and on the relent-

less logistical drive to organize transport and distribution for both commercial and political expansionism.

Yet there was a world here before Chicago, before the canals and railroads, before the flow of the local rivers was reversed to carry both sewage and industrial waste away from the drinking water of Lake Michigan. And the interesting thing about a path is its difference from a rational concept, a dialectical logic, or any other sort of finalizing representation. A path unfolds in space as well as time, so you can always walk it again, from either end and in whatever direction, asking questions as you go, meeting the people that inhabit that pathway, sensing its distant pasts and its incipient transformations, picking through its ruins and imagining its futures. A path is a means to an end, but it's also a set of abandoned destinations, possible bifurcations and potentials still open on the ground, where everything about the ways things are can be reiterated and replayed. A pathway is exactly the place where you can experience the map becoming the territory again.

To make this pathfinding experience into a social activity we sent out open calls for a number of learning walks. Each time, a group comes together, sharing feelings, observations and knowledge as the walk unfolds. A walk is an experiment in perception, multiplied by interaction, conversation and the circulation of trans-generational memories. While actually moving through the land whose historical changes we've tried to map out, we often used the appearance or re-emergence of wetlands as a cue to the presence of worlds before Chicago and forces of nature that resist total instrumentalization.

We've been walking this pathway for two hundred years, but at the same time, as artist/activist John Jordan insists, "we have never been here before." We've never had to deal as a species with the consequences of the path that we've been walking. How to replay this story? How to open up more beneficial conversations about so-called "development" at local, national, continental and global scales? How to actually change the gears of industry? In short, what kind of politics, activism and/or "cultural activity" is adequate for the Anthropocene?

- Brian Holmes