No man is an island

Palm Jumeirah is a human-made archipelago jutting out of the coastline of Dubai. The vision of government-owned real estate developers Nakheel Properties, the construction of Palm Jumeirah began in 2001 and the island's first residents moved in in 2007. Built out of sand dredged from the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf, from an aerial view, Palm Jumeirah takes the form of a 17-frond palm tree with a halo-like crescent hovering over the top. Home to high-end residential and commercial developments and the Palm Monorail, which whizzes holiday-makers and leisure-seekers to their resort or mall of choice, Palm Jumeirah is the first of three planned islands adding 520 kilometres of (mostly) private coastline to the city.

Just north of Palm Jumeirah is another feat of human engineering, still under construction. The World is a collection of 300 sand islands built in the shape of a warped world map, where Australia and New Zealand lie somewhere due east of Malaysia and north of Madagascar.

While Dubai's human-made islands are some of the largest in the world, practices of island-building and land reclamation aren't extraordinary, isolated phenomena. The act of constructing territory can be seen in strategies of military expansion, urban development and nation-building across continents, from Singapore to Florida, the Netherlands to the South China Sea. In Shanghai, Palm Jumeirah's architects, Florida-based Helman Hurley Charvat Peacock/Architects, Inc., have completed designs for a similar mixed-use residential resort community. The Shanghai Fish is a two-square kilometre fish-shaped, earth-sculpted water form with ambitions of becoming as iconic as its palm tree predecessor.

These kinds of stylised topographies might seem excessive, even amusing, when imagined from afar. Yet the rhetoric of newness surrounding manufactured landmarks, and the cities which their images represent, is not so distant. Nor is the urgent need to acknowledge and understand the historical and political contexts, the power dynamics at play, in making and marking space.

In his reflection on Dubai's recent strategies for place-making, writer and curator Shumon Basar identifies a set of 12 conditions for urban 'non-places' looking to market their way to becoming new global cities, a listicle on how to build "Cities from Zero"[1]. He notes:

1. Be geographically remote
2. Already possess significant wealth
3. The future city should be envisioned from above
4. Your natural climate is no barrier to the ecologies you can create
5. People love "History"
6. A city should consist of many cities, villages, and worlds
7. Invite the super-rich to visit and move-in first
8. Architecture must be skin deep (and that's not superficial thinking)
9. Install an alternative to participatory democracy
10. Designate controlled zones of exceptional liberalism
11. Import an endless supply of labourers and service class from abroad
12. Rebuild the world only better than it ever was

The future city should be envisioned from above.

When viewed from an embodied position in the landscape of Dubai's coastline Palm Jumeirah's distinctive palm tree form is indistinguishable. The island's 17-frond identity (said to be visible from the moon) is indebted entirely to the proliferation of its own satellite image. This god's eye view, first the domain of its architects, is now accessible to broadening publics through the circulation of its image online.

Eugenia Lim's 1:2000 reconstruction of Palm Jumeirah, Artificial Islands (Interior Archipelago), is mediated by Google searches of its image in aerial view and the artist's ongoing research into manufactured landmarks, the conditions under which they are built (by who and who for?) and the
human impacts of globalisation. To install the work, Lim engaged local workers remunerated at the average daily rate of a Dubai construction worker (53 UAE dirhams or $19 Australian dollars).

Concerned with the complex ecologies in which major landmarks like Palm Jumeirah are embedded, Lim seeks to understand some of the problematics of grand-gestures of urban place-making: who is included and who is excluded from the global city status that they seek to represent?

In contrast to Palm Jumeirah's awe-inspiring image, Artificial Islands (Interior Archipelago) is a modest, human-scale installation experienced at ground-level. This scaling down challenges perceptions of distance between the artificial landform and its audience, an experiential reminder that in the Age of Anthropocene, the environment has been profoundly and irreversibly altered by humans. Artificial ecologies are the new normal.

With Lim's planting of a flag declaring 'GRAVITY OVERPOWERS ME', Artificial Islands (Interior Archipelago) conflates the personal with the geopolitical, art-making with island-building. Returning to the gold emergency blanket material that appeared in her Yellow Peril and Shelter (2015) works, Lim's territory is symbolically claimed with a quote from Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975), who disappeared while attempting to cross the Atlantic in a sailboat, as part of a triptych titled In Search of the Miraculous.

Ader, like Joseph Beuys and Robert Smithson, are among the many ‘heroic’ male figures from the Euroamerican art canon – a circle of institutionally endorsed influences working across performance, installation and land art. The mythologies surrounding these artists’ life and work are at once points of interest and tension for Lim. While she connects her practice with these lineages, Lim is cognisant of the relative absence of woman artist-heroes from art history.

The territory Lim occupies with Artificial Islands (Interior Archipelago) is a dual historical and spatial intervention, as Lim self-consciously positions herself as artist-hero of her own indoor ‘earthwork’. By reconstructing a singular monument of an island she has never visited, Lim confronts both the relative invisibility of woman artists in art history and the speculative future-rhetoric surrounding artificial ecologies (that already exist).

Artificial Islands (Interior Archipelago) is a meditation on the constant cycle of reclaiming, remoulding and reevaluating territory, both physical and art historical. In making and marking space, Lim's work challenges perceptions of distance, isolation, and the false binary between the natural and artificial – reminding us that we are all connected through flows of images, ideas, objects and capital – but also, by apparatuses of power and structures of history that aren't always so visible.

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