



# The Untimely Closing of *Imaginary Coordinates*: Three Perspectives

*Imaginary Coordinates* is inspired by antique maps of the Holy Land in Spertus' collection. The exhibition juxtaposes these maps with modern and contemporary maps of this region, all of which assert boundaries. It brings these together with objects of material culture and artworks that question national borders, as a way of charting new spaces, fostering conversation, and imagining new communities. (Spertus, 2008)

## Moving from Exhibitable to Unexhibitable

During August 2008 when this edition of the *Exhibitionist* was being finalized, we received word from several sources about the early closing of an exhibition at the Spertus Institute in Chicago. The exhibition was to have run from May 2 to September 7, 2008. Instead, it was closed by its Board of Trustees on June 20, 2008. In a semi-annual publication such as ours, it is rare that we can be so current, so we decided to "hold the presses" for this one, stretching our deadlines and our page limits a bit to include these accounts of a topic in the process of moving from exhibitable to unexhibitable.

There is a wealth of documentation on the web about the closing, but in a nutshell, the exhibition, which received widespread acclaim from the mainstream as well as Jewish media, was found by some groups to be "anti-Israel." A key critic was the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation, which is one of the Museum's funders. This excerpt from the *Chicago Tribune* website (June 21, 2008) highlights some of the issues that led to the closing:

*...Spertus President Howard Sulkin expressed regret that the exhibition caused pain for its core constituents. But he said the concept behind it fit with the evolving*

*mission of the museum. "A willingness to experiment is incorporated right into our core principles, and we see one of our roles as being a place that inspires dialogue on the critical issues of our time," Sulkin said Friday.... Though Sulkin denied any threats were made to withhold financial support from Spertus, he acknowledged that one member of his board, whom he did not identify, threatened to resign if the show stayed open... others said Spertus' glassy new \$55 million building has made them vulnerable to donors' whims. The structure would not have been possible without donors' support, and the Jewish Federation contributes 11 percent or nearly \$1 million of Spertus' operating budget.*

*But Marc Wilcow, an institute trustee for 11 years, said the decision to close the exhibition was not based only on donors' opinions. "We like to encourage people to think about serious subject matters," Wilcow said. "Judging from the response from the community we did cross that line unintentionally. . . . When there is a perception that the state of Israel is not being depicted in a balanced way it creates controversy," he said. "Spertus is not interested in going around and hurting people's feelings."*

Below are three documents that, along with the *Tribune* excerpt above, provide

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a kind of on-the-spot commentary on the unfolding of the crisis. First, we have exhibition curator Rhoda Rosen's statement on the opening of *Imaginary Coordinates*, asserting the newly opened Spertus' intention to "speak to people of all backgrounds and to present a multifaceted Jewish experience to the public." Next, Marc Fischer, of the Chicago-based design firm Temporary Services critiques the early closing of the exhibition in his June 27, 2008 blog. Finally, we publish a letter to the Museum, written in August 2008, by Chicago and New York-based artist Michael Rakowitz. It provides a concrete illustration of Fischer's prediction that the closing will have an impact on future Museum endeavors. The materials gathered for this article present a microcosm of the museum community's struggle with "the unexhibitable": the risks of using edgy material to mark an anniversary; the ideal of encouraging dialogue about what some in the community consider non-discussable; the depressingly familiar buckling under of museum administration in the face of community pressure, especially when at least some of that pressure has financial implications. **The Editor**

***Imaginary Coordinates: excerpts from the Curatorial Statement contained in press materials for the opening of the exhibition on May 2, 2008.***

Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies opened the doors of its new facility on November 29, 2007, adding its much-awaited, unique, contemporary glass facade to the historic street wall on Chicago's Michigan Avenue. When the Spertus Board of Trustees made the decision to remain downtown rather than move to the suburbs, where a large part of the Jewish community of metropolitan Chicago resides; when they

determined not to renovate the institution's aging premises but agreed to a new building with an open, transparent face; and when they adopted a new mission, aiming to speak to people of all backgrounds and to present a multifaceted Jewish experience to the public, they embraced an identity that moved from the parochial toward the civic. This means that, while the starting point continues to be Jewish experience, the institution does not operate from a partisan point of view. Rather, like the other great civic institutions that surround it, the new Spertus provides programming that is not didactic, but rather asks questions and invites discussion....

Nurturing public conversations in a museum is always complex, because access to the past, to objects of material culture, to fine art, and to the beliefs and needs of a diverse body of constituents requires a commitment. Far from merely entertaining, art can be radical and transformative. Also, anniversaries offer a space for reflection. *Imaginary Coordinates* is a reflection that stems from within the community and which derives from caring about this important facet of Jewish identity.

This is the demanding but rewarding vision I have embraced for the book and exhibition *Imaginary Coordinates*, which brings a collection of Holy Land maps into conversation with Israeli and Palestinian contemporary art and material culture, and which is Spertus Museum's contribution to marking the founding of Israel.... In some ways, *Imaginary Coordinates* is a litmus test measuring possible disparity between mission and audience expectations on one hand, and between curatorial intervention and artists' permissions on the other....

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It has been instructive to learn that, even when it seems that certain goals have not been achieved, new contexts and discussions emerge. As Palestinian artists took the bold step of speaking with me, their decisions sometimes shifted as they offered support for the project but not necessarily for the exhibition's locus. Nonetheless, the thought, engagement, and individual connections that preceded the exhibition made their way into the curatorial intervention even when individual works did not. Protecting the incommensurable difference between us while making contacts has been the truly gratifying experience of this curatorial project. I thank all the Israeli and Palestinian artists involved in these conversations: Ayreen Anastas, Yael Bartana, Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir, Sigalit Landau, Enas Muthafar, Michal Rovner, and Shirley Shor...

[Describing one of the early maps in the exhibition ]...Heinrich Bünting gave a clover-leaf shape to his world map, first published in 1581. Each leaf denotes a different continent; Jerusalem lies at the very center of the cloverleaf. The map makes clear that the Holy Land is a floating signifier rather than a real place with specific boundaries....This is why the Holy Land is such a perfect focus for an exhibition about mapping as a culturally constituted practice, rather than as a navigational instrument. These thoughts about mapping could apply equally to maps of any other place, like Prussia, Albania, or the Chechen Republic, all of which have had and/or will have equally shifting boundaries.

However, the Holy Land is appropriate to this initiative, given our context and our holdings, and because, more than any other place, it has been understood as the center of the universe,

a place that diaspora communities settled, and a site in what is commonly referred to as the Middle East. Moreover, it is helpful to bear in mind that there is not only one Holy Land. Tibet, for example, is considered the Holy Land in some Buddhist traditions, as is India.

Holy Land coordinates are truly imaginary. The central understanding that maps have less to do with landscape than with the intention of their makers and that they are produced within socially manufactured contexts is the starting point of this exhibition, whose chief purpose is to explore the limits of mapping; what or who remains absent from the map; and where, if not on the map, this difference might be found and recognized....

An exhibition that takes the Holy Land as its subject owes much to conversations. For their time, kindness, and exchanges, I wish to thank the many leaders of the Jewish and Arab American community organizations of Chicago whose names are too numerous to mention here. **Rhoda Rosen, director of the Spertus Museum and curator of Imaginary Coordinates**

***The Cancellation of Imaginary Coordinates at the Spertus Museum by Marc Fischer***  
***Reprinted with permission from the June 27, 2008 blog of the group Temporary Services.***  
***<http://www.temporaryservices.org/>***

By now, much has already been written about the sudden closing of the exhibition *Imaginary Coordinates* at the Spertus Museum in Chicago. The exhibition, which was to run from May 2-September 7, 2008, was shut down on June 20th by order of Spertus President Howard

Sulkin working in cahoots with Spertus' Board of Directors. This link on Spertus' website provides the basic details of the exhibition: [http://www.spertus.edu/exhibitions/past/imaginary\\_coordinates.php](http://www.spertus.edu/exhibitions/past/imaginary_coordinates.php)

Until it is dismantled and the objects are returned to the artists, lenders and Spertus' own collections, the exhibit will exist as a cultural crime scene. This is made stranger by the fact that the perpetrators are still safely nestled in their offices elsewhere in the building while the exhibition curator, artists, museum employees and countless visitors who hadn't yet seen the show are left betrayed; they are the victims of a private process that has shut out many in order to protect the interests and concerns of a vast minority of Spertus' audience.

How can a museum staff get excited about future exhibitions when they've just had all their hard work pulled out from under them? Will it happen again? What to say to visitors—or artists that might take part in future shows—who will repeatedly ask what happened? The catalog for the exhibition, a typically fine-looking book design by Spertus' own team, has all but disappeared. It has been pulled from display on the museum's online store and copies of the book were hidden inside the building's shop. It is not displayed with its cover facing outward as one would expect, but filed away quietly on a shelf.

Spertus' website explains nothing of what happened to *Imaginary Coordinates*. Already listed under the heading for "Past Exhibitions," the dates have simply been adjusted to reflect the sudden closing on June 20th. There is no explanation why.

This is a very painful situation to observe, perhaps a bit more so for me because I worked at the Spertus Museum from 2000-2003, and know many people who still work there. I can't imagine how dispiriting it must be to remain employed at the site of one of the most misguided measures in museological memory. When New York City's then Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, tried unsuccessfully to shut down the exhibition *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999, the attack came from outside of the institution. What happened at Spertus is unusual, for it is a case of in-house censorship that took place after the exhibit had already opened. Spertus is a private institution, but to have this happen in such a public and ugly manner should create a much-deserved public distrust for years to come. The museum runs the considerable risk of becoming a big gleaming private bauble; a huge, hollow diamond on Michigan Avenue filled with nice shiny things that its board members and President can polish from time to time, while maintaining a safe distance from difficult public discourse, challenging questions, and relationships with anyone not in consensus with the opinions of those in charge of fund-raising efforts and operating budgets.

Museums often plan and work on exhibitions for years and *Imaginary Coordinates* was no exception. It was three years in the making. Three years is a long time to have internal dialogues, to anticipate problems and prepare for them, to seek outside opinions with trusted colleagues or board members and to make changes privately, outside of the public eye. To close an exhibition in mid-flight, through a decision-making process that excluded the curator and artists, is truly shocking. I'm not even sure if there are precedents for an

In my view there were no strictly polemical works in this show, no ideological agenda on the part of the artists and curator, and only the limitless powers of curatorial imagination to fear—for this was a show that ignored traditional boundaries...in order to achieve new perceptual possibilities.

It is unfortunate that this exhibit is poised to be remembered more for its very well publicized and almost universally condemned dismantling, than for its considerable merits as a showcase for curatorial creativity and artistic imagination.

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institution shooting itself in the foot quite like this.

*Imaginary Coordinates* was a carefully considered and meticulously crafted exhibition. It was not provocative in the manner that Steven Nasatir, with his hysterical cries of “anti-Israel,” has unsuccessfully tried to perpetuate in a *Chicago Tribune* article (2008). (Nasatir is president of the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.) The exhibition is evenly split between contemporary art and ancient maps of the Holy Land with compelling bits of material culture and personal effects included in between. Noting that all of the map-makers were male, the exhibition achieves a thoughtful curatorial gender balance by presenting only female artists. The melding of printed maps that are hundreds of years old with works produced as recently as this year is seamless and engaging.

As Temporary Services have long argued, the distinction between art and other forms of human creativity is irrelevant and this exhibition proves this repeatedly. An open book showing an embossed white page—a Braille map of Israel for the blind—speaks to this erasing of categorization between maps and works of art. The varied forms of the many maps on display shift radically in relation to what the maker wished to emphasize; subjectivity abounds in all disciplines, not only in art.

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to fear—for this was a show that ignored traditional boundaries between the classification of objects in order to achieve new perceptual possibilities. It provided many opportunities for dialogue and social exchange—in the form of events, survey/comment forms, and countless tours. For a museum so strongly devoted to Holocaust education, canceling this exhibition was an embarrassing act of in-house intolerance. Unlike *Sensation*—which featured numerous artworks that clearly made ham-fisted, empty and lame attempts to shock and provoke—*Imaginary Coordinates* featured far more subtle and complex works. I spent an hour and a half inside the exhibition on a tour led by Rhoda Rosen and I was still only able to see it in a cursory way. The show is unimaginable without contextual wall labels. The couple works that do feature nudity—a more obvious challenge for some viewers—are presented with care and consideration and visitors are warned of adult content when they step off the elevator.

The cancellation of *Imaginary Coordinates* should cast a dark shadow over the Spertus Institute for many years to come. It is unfortunate that this exhibit is poised to be remembered more for its very well publicized and almost universally condemned dismantling, than for its considerable merits as a showcase for curatorial creativity and artistic imagination. Nonetheless, this act of censorship should not be forgotten and the President and Board of Directors deserve to be publicly shamed for their poor judgment.

**Letter from artist Michael Rakowitz to Staci Boris, Senior Curator at Spertus, refusing an invitation from the Museum to create a new work for an upcoming exhibition**

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August 25, 2008

Dear Staci,

I want to thank you for your recent email inviting me to participate in the Spertus Museum's upcoming **Ground Level Projects**.

It is truly an honor to be invited to produce a work for an institution that showed great courage and ethical clarity in presenting **Imaginary Coordinates**, a landmark exhibition conceived and curated by Spertus Museum Director Rhoda Rosen. The show was positioned as the Spertus' contribution to Chicago's city-wide map festival and brilliantly enlisted cartography as a way of speaking about historical and contemporary representations of the Holy Land. Indeed, this remarkable project, presented by a museum within an Institute of Jewish Studies, endeavored to contextualize these maps along with objects, artifacts, and artworks by both Palestinian and Israeli artists as a way of opening up dialogue. As Rhoda Rosen notes in her preface to the catalogue that accompanied **Imaginary Coordinates**, the "Spertus Museum believes that in the year that commemorates the sixtieth anniversary of Israel, programming should not be sectarian but should hold onto and honor the Spertus Board of Trustees' vision that a Jewish museum can participate in the communal urban fabric of a great city by offering programming that engenders and protects civic dialogue." Bravely, the museum acknowledged that while Israelis and Jews around the world celebrate Israel's anniversary, Palestinians mourn the *Nakba*—the disaster—marking the disappearance of their national identity, their land, the continuing attempt to erase their culture, and their ongoing conflict with Israel. Regardless of one's political opinions, Israel does not exist without the non-existence of Palestine. For once, a Jewish museum—an American one, at that—was not perpetuating the purposeful amnesia and exclusion that seems to pervade the majority of Jewish institutions that I have come to know in my life. You can't imagine how proud this exhibition made me, especially as a new transplant from New York to Chicago.

Indeed, this remarkable project... endeavored to contextualize these maps along with objects, artifacts, and artworks by both Palestinian and Israeli artists as a way of opening up dialogue.

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My grandparents fled Baghdad in 1946 for political reasons. I grew up hearing my grandmother recount stories of Baghdad, a remembrance of home lost that no doubt resonates with the stories of Palestinians who recall homes in Lod or Akko. As Jews, my grandparents' lives became increasingly difficult as the tide of politics turned and the British Mandate grew closer and closer to becoming a reality. Their land was confiscated, assets were taken and their lives changed forever. In some ways, a good forever. In many ways, a sad forever. My grandparents spoke Arabic, and traditional foods during the holidays were kubba, mashi, arouk, etc. They were Jews, but they were Iraqis, until they were told they could no longer be Iraqi. Recently, looking through old photographs, I came across several of my grandfather wearing a keffiyeh. It reinforced for me that we were actually Arabs. Arab Jews. An impossible marriage of two vocabulary words I have been fighting to reinstate into the world as a reality.

This term—Arab Jew—existed in the world until 1948. I am not interested in the arguments and accusations about who is responsible for which exodus and who suffered at whose hand and when. But this was another act of cultural erasure, of disappearance with which I am intimate.

The existence of the state of Israel could not be possible without a choreography of historical narratives that do not always intersect with truth. *A land without a people for a people without a land*, for one. And it was thus so important to me that the Spertus was taking this very brave step, presenting objects and information that was not manipulative of its audience or didactic but actually in a very sophisticated way asked questions of the viewer by presenting critical works from both sides.

I have produced work in the social and public sphere long enough to have developed a strong commitment to amplifying people, circumstances, and conditions that have been made invisible or silent. I do this in the hope that visibility within the frame of cultural production can interrupt history, as Walter Benjamin might have said. It is therefore with a heavy heart that I must decline your invitation to exhibit a new work at the Spertus Museum. On June 20th, when Spertus President Howard Sulkin closed *Imaginary Coordinates*, bowing to political pressure from the Spertus's Board of Trustees, the transparent building that houses the museum became a building that has barricaded any possibility of discourse. Once again, an American museum has succumbed to the forces of selective amnesia and censorship, taking a partisan position that conflates Jewish identity with Zionism. I cannot allow for my work, my beliefs or the ideas I support to become appropriated and compromised by an institution that is serving the interests of those who seek to erase culture and memory. I will not be complicit with lies nor with silence.

Rhoda Rosen took a great risk in her endeavor to present *Imaginary Coordinates* at the Spertus. Her careful and sensitive research yielded discussions and agreements with many Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian artists, many of whom suspended their participation in the boycott of Israeli and pro-Israeli institutions to lend artwork for this exhibition. She also hosted several community-building events with Chicago-based Jewish leaders and groups, the majority of whom expressed enthusiastic

support for the exhibition. Her efforts are trivialized by the following statements from Sulkin:

“Spertus is an institution that takes risks and seeks to inspire discussion on the critical issues of our time. When you take risks, you learn things. In this case we came to realize that parts of the exhibition were not in keeping with aspects of our mission as a Jewish institution and did not belong at Spertus.”

To President Sulkin I would suggest that nothing is more in keeping with your mission as a Jewish institution than to refuse to forget. Every Jewish institution that I have known has displayed the Hebrew inscription “zchor.” Remember. And as a Jew, I cannot support a Zionist position—or institution—because of what it forgets.

Again, Staci, I want to thank you and all at the Spertus who thought to nominate me for this project. I am truly grateful for your support and interest in my work. But I believe that what an artist refuses is sometimes more important than that which he or she agrees to. While not enough, the contribution I make in building the world I dream of is comprised in the work I do and the work I choose to not do. This is perhaps better expressed in the words of the late Tawfiq Ziad, a Palestinian poet and the former mayor of Nazareth.

*I never carried a rifle  
On my shoulder  
Or pulled a trigger.  
All I have  
Is a flute's melody  
A brush to paint my dreams,  
A bottle of ink.  
All I have  
Is unshakeable faith  
And an infinite love  
For my people in pain.*

With warmest regards to you and Rhoda,

Michael 

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